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Cultures of Reciprocity and Cultures of Control in the Circumpolar North

ABSTRACT This article surveys different cultures of engagement between people, animals, and the landscape across the circumpolar Arctic. Through ethnographic examples the article describes offering rituals and placings in several Arctic contexts in the light of the emphasis they place on affirming personhood. Similarly, rituals of management and regulation are described in the terms of how they strive to create predictability and control. The article tries to mediate this contrast by examining “architectural” examples of co-operation and co-domestication between humans, animals and landscapes. The article concludes with a reflection on how the themes of “origins” and “animal rights” further reconstruct these dichotomies.

KEYWORDS Human-animal relationships, circumpolar, reciprocity, management, animal rights, domestication

The Arctic is seldom viewed as a realm of culture. Clothed in stereotypes of its pristineness, harshness, and peripheralness, it is in general seen as a resource from which industrialised and managed forms of economy can grow. This stereotype of primeval emptiness and potentiality stands in stark contrast to the metaphors and images of people who live in Arctic landscapes. In kind acknowledgement of the invitation of the Faculty of Arts to prepare an essay on “Understanding North” to honour Umeå’s status as a City of Culture, this chapter reviews the anthropology of the engagements that Northerners have with their landscapes, and the animals around them, as a form of culture. Through this optic I hope to dispel these common stereotypes and contribute to a new way of understanding relationships in this rich region.

Idioms of Culture

As is well known in anthropology and literature studies, the concept of culture holds a variety of often contradictory definitions (Williams 1983). Within anthropology it is often associated with an ontological divide within which certain objects and entities are defined as unchangingly “natural,” and others as artificially “cultural.” These dualisms of “nature vs. culture” often permeate the way that urban dwellers view the world around them, and subtly shape the way that they approach landscapes. The Arctic, thus, is often constructed as a natural domain. The settlers and indigenous peoples living there are either passive hostages of the elements or brave conquerors who eke out a livelihood in difficult circumstances. Rarely is the region portrayed as a hot-spot of political and industrial intrigue: an arena where superpowers compete for military superiority or large corporations map new forms of property relationships on its mountains or seabeds. These implied dualisms de-politicize relationships and create a type of an anti-politics machine (Ferguson 1990).

The stark dualisms applied to the Arctic are ironic in the sense that many of the local idioms used by people—settlers and indigenous peoples alike—are extremely relational and indeed serve as models within anthropology and philosophy of a new type of ontology where human action blends into the action of other sentient beings (Venkatesan 2010). At the very birth of the discipline of anthropology, the way that Arctic indigenous peoples attributed wilfulness and morality to spirits, rocks, and animals was classified (and partly denigrated) as “animism” (Tylor 1871; Bird-David *et al.* 1999). This term has come a full circle now standing as a sign post for categories which mediate relationships and deconstruct dualities (Harvey 2005; Ingold 2000). The very personalized rituals of respect for the environment which one can observe among Arctic hunters and reindeer herders stand for

much more than the ethical actions of perceptive individuals. Running parallel to the discourse of Arctic development, and anti-political rhetoric of progress, is a growing concern that places and animals be treated properly. The sentience felt to be in spaces, creatures, and people feeds into a broader ecological imperative which inspires citizens far from Arctic shores to engage in advocacy to conserve and protect.

Within this set of approaches to Arctic places, there is also an important subset of relationships on which I would like to place my emphasis. This is the issue of human-animal relationships. As with the Nature-Culture duality, the opposition between the “wild” and the “domestic” is again one of the primary markers of what is often held to be human and what is held to be barbaric. Full human beings are often thought to have control over the beasts around them in line with an ancient idea of hierarchy in biological forms (Lovejoy [1936] 1960). It is curious that in Arctic places the animals which give life and sustenance are thought to be “not quite domestic” (Vigne 2011). The reindeer are seen to be at an incipient form of domestication where they are not quite penned or regulated. Similarly Arctic dogs are seen to occupy a grey area between wild and domestic forms. Here I am interested in exploring this quality of incipient “not-quite-ness” that is read into what are rather complex relationships. By exploring this complexity, I wish to map out a way to understand the North in a more active and nuanced fashion and, in turn, put some distance from these old stereotypes that are hallmarks of the way the region is viewed.

Cultures of Control

Although one might easily be critical of stark stereotypes in the perception of Arctic landscapes, the fact remains that they enlist large groups of people in ways that structure the world around us. The “culture of control” that is most commonly invoked in human-animal relationships is the relationship of domestication where the taming of the animal is associated with “breaking” its will, or controlling its reproductive cycle, and thereby the very physical form of its body. The link of this form of domination was clearly described by Gordon Childe as the “Neolithic revolution” (Childe 1928) whereby human beings escaped the tyranny of nature by inscribing predictability and efficiency in his relationships with animals. Among Arctic herders, this idea has been most aptly captured by Tim Ingold in one of his earlier books where he observed that “what is lacking in mutual sympathy is made up through [...] physical force in the form of the lasso, whip, tether or hobble” (Ingold 1980: 96) (Fig. 1). This powerful and crisp idea had a great effect on the study of Northern cultures framing several generations of archaeological research into the beginning of Northern culture framed



Fig. 1. Early summer antler trimming, Bazarnaia River, Zabaikalskii Krai. Photo: David G. Anderson.

as the first appearance of harnesses and hobbles. It also distracted attention from the more subtle ways that herd animals and people work together or show concern for each other.

Similar cultures of control are evident in the management of relationships with animals that evoke fear or horror. Circumpolar debates on predator control are a perfect example of how issues of management and control

grow out of stark opposition of wild and tame types. A strong example of this is wolf predation. Wolves are an archetypal species to which great resourcefulness and intelligence are attributed but which often stand as a polar opposite to a cultured environment (Anderson 1986). People in different parts of the Arctic approach wolves in different ways. The Scandinavian debates are extremely polarized with both state and conservationist lobbies arguing for the protection of the “last remaining” wolves which often cause hardship for indigenous Sami reindeer herders (Torp & Sikku 2004; Beach 2003). Here an ethnopolitical divide structures the debate wherein different segments of national societies argue for the right to set quotas and control the populations of these animals. The heart of this argument is which segment is “closer” to the landscapes which need regulating. In other regions, such as in the Northern Yukon, indigenous people struggle over the moral implications of industrial-technical methods for controlling wolf populations (Nadasdy 2011; Van Lanen *et al.* 2012). Here wildlife managers, in a bid to avoid angering conservationists, have opted for an expensive veterinary technique of sterilizing female wolves (instead of killing them). This intervention is seen by Gwich’in and other elders not only as disrespectful to the animal, but also as a dangerous contradiction to local traditions of building relationships with wolves. Knowledgeable elders draw attention to the important role that dominant female wolves play in creating wolf societies by maintaining hierarchies and controlling reproduction within the pack. Medico-veterinary interventions disrupt this social role and lead ironically to a chaotic reaction within wolf society where individual animals can assert their own interests in the forced abdication of the dominant animal. By contrast, these local hunters argue that wolf societies need to be cared for and cultivated, not exterminated.

Cultures of Reciprocity

The documented excesses of cultures of control traditionally lead to their dualistic opposite—the alternate strategy of cultures of reciprocity. Although as I will address below this dualism is also suspect, the contrast is useful to understand the range of models nested within the circumpolar North.

In Northern ethnography *reciprocity* is a key term occupying a place within the anthropological canon similar to that of the word *culture*. Reciprocity signals the reciprocal exchange of gifts or tokens of respect. It is closely linked to kinship relationships, and all forms of human attention that express symbolic closeness, fragility, or respect. Traditionally, Northern models of reciprocity are signalled through “offerings” or “placings”—the deliberate gifting of food or valuable trade items (shotgun shells, items of

clothing) to visible or non-visible entities on the land. Some of the traditional Siberian rituals are the most colourful where, for example, a foetus from a pregnant reindeer perhaps accidentally slaughtered will be hung in a tree as a “gift to the taiga” (Fig. 2). Similarly upon travelling into a new watershed a thread with coloured fabric will be hung on a tree as a token of respect to the spirit-masters which control relationships in the new region (Fig. 3). A common circumpolar ritual is the gifting of food or alcohol to the fire “feeding the fire.” These small acts of respect may seem far removed from sober collection of statistical data in the debate on climate change, but in their own highly personalized way they point to a culture of attention to the opportunities that the land has to offer. Common to many Northern



Fig. 2. The gift of a reindeer foetus to the tundra, Khantaiskoe Ozero, Taimyr. Photo: David G. Anderson.

places is a sort of reduction or super-imposition of small local acts onto global problems. Thus ritual gifting signifies a global relationship of balance and respect.

These cultures of respect can also be read back into the examples of dominating human-animal relationships in the previous section. As suggested, in many regions of the North the best practice in predator management is not the extermination and control over the bodily form of the predator, but a deep understanding of how to allow the predators the space to develop their own social norms and limitations of their activity. Similarly, the so-called “breaking” of an animal to allow it to be harnessed or



Fig. 3. A threaded set of fabrics gifted to the tundra, Khantaiskoe Ozero, Taimyr. Photo: David G. Anderson.

directed is usually balanced with a fine understanding of the needs of that animal. Herders know that a starved and insecure animal can never be relied upon to perform work within a human-animal social community. Therefore the herders offer security (part of which is protection from predators), access to food, and protection from other threats such as blood-sucking insects. Through a mutual respect of animal and human (and often other co-resident animals like dogs) a type of transspecies social understanding is created whereby the actions of each are balanced within a greater collectivity. Here the trading of protection for service is the type of reciprocity which guarantees this balance.

Between Trust and Domination

The division of evocative action in human-animal relationships into two types has been widely expressed as a contrast between “trust” and “domination” again in one of the most widely cited works by Tim Ingold (Ingold 1994). His evocative contrast between hunting societies, who cultivate relationships of respect with prey animals and thus encounter the animals they rely upon, and herding societies, which use the threat of pain and constraints to enforce action, has both set the research agenda for Northern societies as well as a recent backlash against it (Oma 2010; Donahoe 2012; Knight 2012). Most commentators now shy away from this crisp clean contrast and look upon mediating examples of human and animal action that are neither/nor or both trusting and dominating.



Fig. 4. Training a reindeer for saddle, Amudisy, Zabaikalskii Krai. Photo: David G. Anderson.

Within the arena of reindeer domestication this allows us to expand our focus from the primal images of how herders encounter their stocks. As described above, there is an almost archetypal image of human intention dominating the domestic animal as one skilful herder uses force to break an animal into submission (Fig. 4). Force is always a part of these relationships, but these episodes of direct confrontation between the canny herder and the docile herd animal are short and far less characteristic of the everyday relationship between these beings. What is far more common is a quality I would describe as an architecture of relationships. This can be the use of physical structures to collect or even confine animals. Or it can also be the identification of special places in the landscape that both animals and people crave. In this case the physical setting drives people and animals into a co-existence creating a mutual interest in creating a common life together.

To understand how these architectures work we have to redirect our gaze from the primal confrontation between a lasso-bearing man and an animal to the environment surrounding them. The most visible structure in reindeer husbandry is the enclosure often called a corral. From a distance these structures look prison-like—they are made up of parallel rows of logs and have gates which are often tied shut. The animals look confined within them. However, these enclosures often are built in various different styles which correspond to various types of encumbered action.

Within archaeology, one of the classic structures is the milking corral—a



Fig. 5. Milking Corral, Nechera River, Irkutsk Oblast'. Photo: David G. Anderson.

relatively small enclosure which is used to separate calves from their mothers for a short period of time to allow the mothers to build up a reserve of milk which can then be harvested (Fig. 5) (Aronsson 1991). This intimacy between herder and animal is often cited as one of the first stages in domestication and one that leaves a significant material signature on the land which can be dated and organized into an evolutionary scheme. The milking corral itself is confining, and the animals are often tethered. However the structure is also made enticing often with a soothing smudge fire or even fodder brought down from the forest for the animals. The animals spend a short time within the structure before being released, only to be enticed and summoned again.

Another type of structure among taiga Evenki reindeer herders is a marshalling corral (Fig. 6). This is a much larger often imposing structure built over a significant period of time through the labour of up to a dozen men. Its size is calculated to allow enough room for a small herd to circulate, since the intention is not to confine or imprison but to structure the motions of the animals so that they can be inspected, and if necessary caught. The reindeer are also enticed into these structures with the promise of salt and smoke. Often a herder will sing to attract the herd. Once within the marshalling corral the animals might be left to their own devices so that they become accustomed to the sounds of the camp and the smells of the people. Or, if necessary, two or three men will select reindeer and, taking advantage of the enclosure, relatively effortlessly catch them. To create a space where people and reindeer can interact requires foresight into the range of space that makes a herd feel comfortable. The alternate version—a structure too large or too small—could in fact be dangerous in that it would encourage a herd to bolt or would require a far too costly regime of monitoring and repair.

The last type of architecture is a type of built structure which does not at first glance seem built at all. Most herders take advantage of ethnoecological sites—special types of plant communities or windswept places which attract animals (Johnson & Hunn 2009). These can be grass meadows which may be coveted, or even be especially maintained, through a regime of spring-time burning. They could be ice-patches which protect the herd from insects, or a windy escarpment. These sites, which at first glance look “natural” are often subject to generations of care making them ecological artefacts—an important mediating type of site that is neither natural nor cultural (Anderson *et al.* 2014). These landscape oriented ecofacts can be described as special places where people and animals encounter each other and learn to co-exist. Often, they are given special names in local languages which confound traditional botanical or geological categories in that they present a mix of different qualities (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6. Marshalling corral, Amudisy, Zabaikalskii Krai. Photo: David G. Anderson.



Fig. 7. A reindeer meadow at Lake Tolondo, Irkutsk Oblast'. Photo: David G. Anderson.

The example of architectures of domestication makes it easier to speak of relations between trust and domination, and indeed to leave behind these two stark opposites. Enclosures, or windblown ice-patches, both attract and confine, protect and release. They provide potentials or certain affordances which allow relationships to be built. They of course also have their own intrinsic qualities. Some places can be “good” (Johnson 2000) while others

might be subject to denigration over time. Most importantly they distract attention from the relations that tie together two sentient individual creatures—herder and animal—and instead look at groups of practices and qualities that combine together to create an ecology of domestication.

Origins and Entangled Futures

Once one replaces stark dichotomies with relational categories like that of animal architecture, it becomes an interesting experiment to re-examine some of the other fundamental categories in the same set. The idea of there being cultures of reciprocity, or cultures of control, is often linked very directly to strong narratives of progress and evolution. In the study of domestication there is a great emphasis on the search for the “first” domestic dog or the “first” domestic reindeer—an idea which then anchors a behaviour in time and space and then allows one to classify other parts of the world as being “ahead of” or “behind.” This arrangement of skill and region is generally only successful if there is a single parameter that can be used to classify. Thus, often harnesses or other tools of domination become markers of economic control rather than, say, the skilful use of biotic communities or the timing of ones movements in order to encounter animals on habitual paths. With this classificatory intuition, it often becomes difficult to identify relationships which may not use tools of domination—such as in the observation and respect of the internal structure of wolf society. The search for origin points collapses skill and intuition into a narrow path which extends equally into the past as into the future. The future indeed becomes shaped by the potentials or lost potentials of the past. Thus, although reindeer husbandry has a long history in Eurasia, one can often read or hear commentary about the “collapse” or the “end” of reindeer husbandry as tundra herdsman re-adjust their stocks to new economic conditions (Anderson 2006).

The anticipated structure of time itself can also be a common stereotype which deafens one to the way that Arctic communities may structure their lives. In many cases, northerners can use different senses of time, such as among Northern Dene where Euro-American assumptions are reversed in that the future anticipated by the community predetermines how the past is invited to speak (Legat 2012). One of my favourite old time stories which was shared with me years ago by Mr William Nerysoo in the Gwich'in community of Ft. McPherson demonstrates this relational quality of time and how future and past become intertwined (Gwich'in & Ritter 1976). It is known as the Story of Shiltee Rock and it addresses the topic of how young people come of age, how the landscape shapes human and animal relationships, and how politics and history are intertwined.

In a setting such as this there is no place to share the full story, and indeed these stories are often retold to contribute to a specific context—and this will be my telling. The story tells of a time long ago when a family was searching for caribou as they moved upstream along the Peel River. The grandmother sent two boys and their dogs up into the mountains to search for caribou. Meanwhile she stayed with her granddaughter who was coming of age as her body changed into that of a woman's body. For most northern Dene, a woman's first menstruation was an honoured and fearful time and required that the woman seclude herself in a narrow high tent-like garment. The girl was instructed by her grandmother not to look out. However, when she heard her brothers returning with the dogs she could not resist peeking out from under the hood. The brothers and the dogs were immediately frozen into rock, and the Shiltee Rock stands today as a memorial to her curiosity and the timelessness of these family relationships (Fig. 8).

However the story continues. When William Nerysoo told the story he drew my attention to the fragments of rock that surround the monument. In the Old Time story these are said to be fragments of bannock (unleavened bread) which fell out of the dog packs. With his characteristic curiosity and a smile in his eye he asked how could it be that they were making bannock many hundreds of years before the first European explorers reached the banks of the Peel River. And indeed I return to think about this paradox on and off over the now 25 years since I first heard the story. There are many ways to explain this paradox, but in this case I like to think of this detail as a type of “prophecy narrative” (Fienup-Riordan 1990) where the

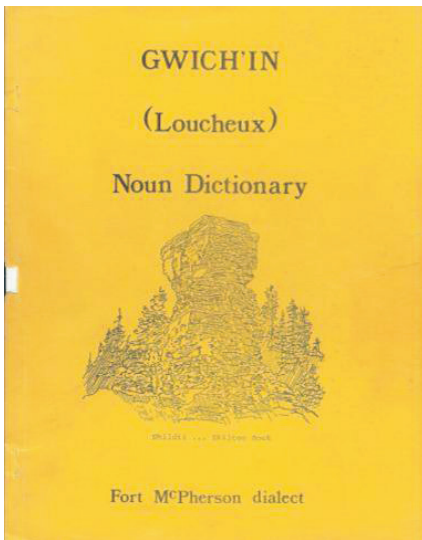


Fig. 8. Shiltee Rock, Peel River, Gwich'in Settlement Area.

difficult times brought by colonialism are already always incorporated into the past of the people struggling with them. The adaptation of flour-based products as a facilitator to overland travel is one of the more positive aspects of fur-trade society. It demonstrates a culture of reciprocity where a product grown and worked in one part of the globe is incorporated to increase the well-being of people in another (and similarly the furs exchanged provide warmth and comfort to those far away). The petrified bannock bread in the legend stands for a sense of wealth and resilience which looks both ways from the past into the future. Resilient trade relationships feed directly into a resilient way of understanding relationships within the family, and with the animals (the dogs and caribou) that support that family. The fact that in a strict time line the story must have preceded the bannock distracts from the eternal image of landscape well-ordered. The question of origins—of which relationship came first—distracts from the question of what a proper relationship should look like.

With this example of a future entangled with the past it is tempting to look back on stories of evolutionary time lines and the compact predictable futures that they promise. When speaking to hunters or herders about their dogs, or their reindeer, they generally see their bodies and forms as part of a work-in-progress. One animal might have more wolf or wild reindeer in it. Another might be passive, or lazy. However most taiga people have imagination to see how these qualities can grow into new qualities which are not necessarily predicted by what has come before. The key intuition in this form of husbandry is an imagination for potentiality and desirable futures. In that light the material that comes forward from the past is manipulated and selected so that it grows in the right direction to prepare the desired result.

Conclusion. Ethnographies of Tameness

Upon surveying the rich relations that Northerners have with their environment and the animals that support them it seems odd that at any time we assumed that domestication was dominating (Tsing 2013). This begs the question perhaps of ethnographies of tameness—of what exact relationships are seen as properly cultured or properly within the realm of human society. The classic examples are household pets—so-called “companion species” (Haraway 2008). Here the themes of co-perception and mutual understanding are closely linked with anthropomorphism—of attributing human features to the animals which depend on us. It is striking when we survey the circumpolar North that there are different types of “tameness” accepted just as with the idea that free ranging wild animals might express social relationships. For many Northern hunters, the idea that a dog would

need to be coddled and fed would be a strange and unseemly behaviour to encourage. For many, dogs are seen to be fiercely independent, proud and intelligent beings with the right to their own autonomy. To capture this contrast, and in place of a conclusion, it would be an interesting project to investigate exactly what our expectations are in companion species and to question how these models from within urban societies speak perhaps more clearly than the stereotypes that we map onto Northern societies.

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