

FROM THE CONTINUUM OF RECIPROCITIES
TO THE MULTIPLICITY OF PERSPECTIVES.
PROBLEMATISING SAHLINS' TRIAD INTO ANIMIST ONTOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

Sahlins proposed a tripartite classification of reciprocities mostly sustained with ethnographic data of hunter-gatherer societies but non-human persons, vital agents in their lifeworlds, were omitted. Extensive anthropological literature tested the viability of Sahlins' model, sometimes facing successful integration but often confronted as inherently problematic. The present proposal aims to revisit those critiques and literature that moved away to fully embrace non-human persons into the analysis. These ethnographic theories postulate the capacity of a person to take on the appearance and viewpoint of another being, apprehending reality from distinct points of view which is characteristic of animist ontologies. Rejecting, on the first instance, the idea of the continuum of reciprocities ordered in concentric circles allows us to take into consideration the concept of perspectivism. In that light, actors involved take on a fluid and ever-emerging place in the world to direct their activities in interchangeable and relational statuses of predator and prey. Perspectivism acknowledges shifts in the ever-changing animist world and the multiplicity of interpretations it produces, for example, over the thin division between sharing and theft (irreconcilable opposites in Sahlins' argument). The aim is to think about affinities and divergences between the diverse perspectives of human-animal sociality and Sahlins scale of reciprocities.

Keywords: Reciprocity, Perspectivism, Animism, Hunting, Sharing.
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INTRODUCTION

Sahlins' *Sociology of Primitive Exchange* suggested a strategy to study primitive economics equating social distance and moral attitudes. The tri-

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partite classification of reciprocities was sustained by ethnographic knowledge of pastoralist, horticulturist societies and – relevant for this essay – hunter-gatherers, but non-human persons, vital agents in their lifeworlds, were omitted. Exchange is conceived in a continuum of reciprocities that cut across concentric circles of sociality, ranging from the positive and moral extreme of the close kinship, to a negative extreme at the maximum social distance. Circles are organised around an actor that mediates social life through objects (or objectified actors) extracted from nature. Hunter-gatherers, the “original affluent society” [2017 (1972): 1], can abundantly fulfil their limited needs and nourish the flux of reciprocities at its best, usually producing generalised scenarios. But what happens when we apply Sahlins’ schema into a nature populated by other subjects that one must to deal with?

During the last three decades the distinction between nature and culture has been subjected to critique (Descola 1996, 2005; Viveiros de Castro 2015; Ingold 2000b). The dichotomy has been questioned, among others, by so-called ‘animist’ hunting peoples of Amazonia and the Circumpolar North (In this essay, I will focus on northern perspectivist collectives). Other subjectivities – spirits, animals and plants – inhabit the world; thus, animism is “an ontology which postulates the social character of relations between humans and nonhumans: the space between nature and society is itself social” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 232). Social relations are not limited to humans, of more distant or close kin, but to all beings in the environment who share the same interiority – the soul. In such a world, hunting is not foraging for food as Sahlins thought, but there is the necessity to deal with a dense and shifting social network of multipolar relations in which entities are endowed with interiority, intentionality and agency (Descola 2005: 333). The environment “is saturated with personal powers” (Ingold 2000a: 66) of which one has to engage if wants to get food to his or her mouth. Animism, then, is the full realisation of what Mauss called [2015 (1925): 147], and Descola theorised (2005: 336-364), a “traffic of souls”.

In animist ontologies “to take on the appearance and viewpoint of another being is one of the key aspects of being a person” (Willerslev 2007: 2). That is the possibility to imagine themselves as other and others like themselves; every element belonging to the whole can be interchanged with another (Pedersen 2001: 116). This permeability of being is reminiscent of mythical times, a ontological confusion of continuous subjectivity and communication. But nowadays, although animals possess the same interiority, communication is more challenging as they perceive different things because their bodies are different from ours (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 257). That is, beings do not see subjects from a different perspective, rather perspective – originated with the body – create subjects; the body as the great

differentiator. Points of view are potential subjects, which interrelate and come into being within a relational scheme. But in these relations, there is no predominant centre of interpretation, as we shall see below, but a multiplicity of perceptions. It is not always clear who is who, and who does what, “which makes it difficult, in fact impossible, to specify whether we are dealing with phenomena of hunting or herding, sharing or thieving, and above all, animals or spirits” (Willerslev 2012: 351). Not only the ontological approach enables us to remove the centrality of the given actor but allows us to rethink (who should be) the main actor in each transaction. In that confusing world, Willerslev argues (2007), selves must balance between the risky potentiality of becoming another through extreme similarity (metamorphosis) and the asocial condition of staying as themselves (extreme differentiation). A middle point (mimesis) enables partial identifications and allows action.

Moreover, the act of hunting and killing animals is not a mundane economic activity of food procurement to secure livelihood, but an act of regeneration and circulation of vital force between humans and non-humans (Ingold 2000b: 114). Although animal “bodies may die, their inner vitality either continues its existence in another place or is reborn” (Nadasdy 2007: 29). Energy and fertility constantly circulate among beings, and in that world, “the hunter’s predatory activity becomes [...] a life-giving activity, for without the killings the animals would fail to reproduce” (Willerslev 2007: 35). Ingold argues that “the regeneration of the lifeworld depends upon the maintenance of balance in the reciprocal give-and-take of vital force” (2000b: 123). Transactions should remain balanced in the animist social whole (Pedersen 2001: 416) founded by regenerative cycles.

More recently, Sahlins himself [2017 (1972)], echoing Clastres’ words [1989 (1972)], has demanded a ‘Copernican revolution’ in anthropology. Clastres used this expression to criticise the representation of ‘the other’ by their absence, and rallied against the theorisation of the Other by revolving around Western metaphysics. To solve the ethnocentric bias, the anthropologist needs to take people’s viewpoints seriously; avoiding drawing on presumed deficiencies, compared with western standards, to be their explanation [Clastres 1989 (1972): 20]. Sahlins’ Copernican revolution entails a perspective shift from human society as the centre of a universe onto which it projects its own forms, to the ethnographic realities of people’s dependence on encompassing life-giving and death-dealing powers [Sahlins 2017 (1972): 168]. The two conceptualisations go hand by hand. While the former abandon western conceptual centrality for describing others, the latter, having done this previous job, takes seriously that in certain societies humans are not alone, neither are the centre of life, but other intentional persons populate the world. Examined from that perspective, if Sahlins

rewrote the essay on the primitive exchange today, he would probably add other-than-human persons into the analysis. What I am presenting here is not a critique of a classical essay written fifty years ago that intended – self aware of its limitations – to give “some suggestions about the interplay in primitive communities between forms, material conditions, and social relations of exchange” [Sahlins 2017 (1972): 168]. But an experiment, combining Sahlins’ triad of reciprocities and recent ontological theories, to explore compatibilities and incompatibilities.

Before moving on, we should ask ourselves if reciprocity is still a useful concept, or obscures the understanding of relationships. The late David Graeber argued that nowadays, reciprocity “can mean almost anything. It is very close to meaningless” (2001: 217). But at the time of *Stone Age Economics* publication reciprocity was regarded (by most) as a universal norm, the principle organising social life. Inspired by Malinowski’s classification of “gifts, payments, and commercial transactions” (1978: 136-146) Sahlins envisioned reciprocity as a moral “continuum of forms” [2017 (1972): 173]. In the *Argonauts* all exchanges are ranked “positive and negative in a moral sense” [Sahlins 2017 (1972): 173]: On the positive end of the spectrum there is the self-explanatory and, at the same time, the polemical concept of the ‘free gift’ or ‘pure gift’ (cf. Parry 1986; Laidlaw 2000; Retsikas 2016); at the other end, “trade, pure and simple” (*gimwali*) which is motivated by need, economic profit and mutual agreement done with individuals of other communities; the rest are in between, mediated by custom that work on different scales: household, kin, village, inter-village, and kula communities (1978: 146). A few years later, Malinowski (1926) abandoned the sharp lexicon of ‘pure’ or ‘free gift’, and ‘real’ or ‘simple barter’ in favour of the all-encompassing notion of reciprocity. Stating that classifying each and every transaction he was “obviously committing a mistake”; falling “into the error [...] of tearing the act out of its context, of not taking a sufficiently long view of the chain of transactions” (1926: 13). Thus, reciprocity regulating “all the manifold activities of economic order [...] on a well-assessed give-and-take, always mentally ticked off and in the long run balanced” (1926: 9) and “benefiting both sides equally” (1926: 13). Reciprocity was a perfect match for the synchronic interest in the functional and regularities that create social harmony, solving the problem of the ‘free gift’ and favouring a model of balanced and dyadic reciprocity. A structural-functionalist dogma that eclipsed for a long time the analysis of unconditional giving and taking (Parry 1986: 454).

Sahlins’ *Sociology of Primitive Exchange* aimed to establish a dialogue between the language of reciprocity and a moral classification, unveiling the continuum in which reciprocity works [2017 (1972): 174]. He draws a parallelism between the continuum of transactions and intervals of so-

ciality: kinship distance and the immediacy, equivalence, and expectation of returns are correlated [2017 (1972): 173]. Moreover, the classification aimed to be an expansion of Malinowski's terms into a generalist model applicable to all 'primitive societies' (Weiner 1980: 75). The proposed triad of generalised, balanced and negative reciprocities, form a continuum that crisscrosses the concentric circles of kinship distance. There are a few main characteristics. The material side of the transaction is the main motivation of negative reciprocity, rendering the other devoid of personality, while generalised reciprocity, in an inverse manner, represses the material pursuit in favour of the social. While actions on the former are directed to seizure in favour of utilitarian advantage, the latter emphasises an altruistic character. On both the flow is unidirectional and generates no counter-obligation, that is, there is no stipulation of time, quantity or quality of the return. This indefiniteness is characterised by a matter of self-interest in the first, and of necessity and possibility in the second. The returns are contingent, and the obligation is not clearly marked nor sanctioned. Balanced reciprocity belongs to a middle situation where distinct material and social interests flow both ways, and return is expected and equivalent. Balanced reciprocity is the ideal type reciprocity that everybody has in mind, a perfect, dyadic balance between two actors, but Sahlins argues that is inherently unstable. Relations between people can be disrupted by a failure to reciprocate within limited time and equivalence, breaking the distinct harmonic interests into opposite ones. But it can also create relationships between distant parties that tend to build trust and confidence, reducing social distance, and so increasing more generalised future dealings. Sahlins opens the possibility of oscillation through the idea that exchanges can promote trust or mistrust, proximity or distancing. Does everything depend on social distance? What animism and perspectivism show is that social distance is not a fixed schema, but malleable and manipulable.

1. ANIMISM AND RECIPROCITY

Some authors have found in Sahlins' continuum a valuable framework to locate human-animal 'animist' relationships. Nadasdy (2003, 2007) argues that even though Kluane First Nation human-animal relations are social, this is not to say that humans interact with animals the same way they do with humans. Likewise, relations are moulded and sustained by the performance of appropriate rules of behaviour founded in the principle of reciprocity (2003: 85). But while inter-humans ties are governed by strong generalised reciprocity (e.g. the sharing of hunting meat among villagers) bonds between humans and other-than-human persons are balanced in

nature (2007: 30). Human-animal relations are a composed mix of social and material interest, reciprocity and domination, debts and obligations. Hunting is a long-term and balanced reciprocal exchange between agentive animals who give themselves; and hunters who respectfully¹ and non-violently take them, incurring a debt that must be repaid through ritual practice (2007: 25). The difference between generalised and balanced reciprocities is the difference between relations among humans and relations with other persons, respectively. Differentiation of reciprocities, Nadasdy argues (2007: 31-37), emphasises the fact that the former is not a projection of the latter, but a relation in its own terms. In other words, human-animal (balanced) relations are not a metaphor arising from inter-human relationships (generalised), but they *exist* because animals *are* people. The definition does not render Sahlin's continuum problematic but instead backs the correlation of social distance and reciprocity.

Ingold, in a similar vein, observes human-animal relationships in terms of sustained interactions in which hunting is "a working basis for mutuality and coexistence" (2000a: 69). The article *From trust to domination* (2000a) proposes the notion of 'trust' as a peculiar combination of autonomy and dependency, in which the idea of success "depends on personal relationships built up and maintained with animal powers through the history of previous hunts" (2000a: 67). Not only hunting requires engaging with a plethora of intentional beings, but trust also entails an element of risk contingent on the animal's volition in which the hunter can only hope for its collaboration (2000a: 70). Ingold's concept of 'trust' replaces Nadasdy's contractual obligation, intrinsic to the balanced model. But in *Totemism, animism and the depiction of animals* Ingold argues that if trust is broken it carries "the threat of equally violent retribution in the future" (2000b: 122). Then, if prerogatives of the 'good hunt' are transgressed, the altruistic and unconditional giving (trust) decay into balanced reciprocity of retribution in Ingold's model, and balanced reciprocity into negative reciprocity of taking in Nadasdy's model?

¹ The concept of human-animal respect is largely treated by Nadasdy (2003) among the Kluane First Nation of the Yukon. He argues that for Kluane people "to respect animals is to live up to one's responsibilities and obligations within a set of reciprocal social relations with other-than-human people" (p. 102). This includes the following points: (1) do not talk (or even think) badly about animals and appropriately thank animals when they give themselves to the hunter (p. 89); (2) do not kill an animal if meat is not needed and only kill an animal if it offers itself. That includes the prohibition to 'bother' or 'play' with an animal, and the urge to kill animals quickly with a minimum of suffering (p. 89); (3) the proper treatment of animals remains, placing bones in a stipulated manner in order to let animals return (p. 90); (4) do not waste their meat or kill excessively (p. 91); (5) and, organize ritual feasts with their meat and observe food taboos in order to ensure their return (p. 91). Ingold, speaking for the Cree, summarises respect as emphasis "on the careful and prudent use of resources and on the avoidance of waste" (INGOLD 2000a: 67).

Sahlins' idea of the inherently unstable character of balanced reciprocity [2017 (1972): 206], always tending to the extremes can be seen in animist relationships. On the one hand, Nadasdy's model human-animal relationships can only descend into negative reciprocity (generalised reciprocity is the exclusive realm of humans) in which animals overcome the hunter (2007: 28). Is mandatory to comply with the first Maussian obligation of accepting the animal's body, thus, committing to a debt that must be repaid. Or else he or she runs *the risk of punishment*, rather arbitrary, in which "the offended animal may extract spiritual retribution by causing the hunter to lose his or her luck in hunting, or may cause misfortune, sickness, or even death" (2007: 28). Ingold (2000), on the other hand, argues that "[a]nimals give life to humans, but humans should receive only what is offered [...]. For otherwise the animals, seeking *equally violent recompense*, would be turned from life-givers to life-takers" (2000b: 123, emphasis added). Infringement of contractual debts and "specific and direct obligations" (Nadasdy 2007: 30), in the former, precipitates to an unruly relationship (a retribution ranging from losing luck in hunting to death), while in the latter, the negation of mandatory procedures turns into a tit for tat. Albeit they might be talking about different conceptions of what hunting means among different arctic and subarctic communities – Nadasdy theorisation is grounded on the Kluane people, and Ingold takes examples from the Cree and the Inuit – allow me to take those claims as analogous theorisations of a similar act. In both, if hunters fail to behave according to stipulated respect or trust, the soul of the prey may become a powerful predator, running the risk to transform, taking Ingold example, a gentle caribou into a frightening predator. The hunter, then, witnesses how "the skin and fur covering of its head has been pulled back to reveal wolf-like visage" a situation where the hunter is "left wondering who, in fact, is hunting whom" (2000b: 122). And to move on, we must clarify first the characteristics of the "highly transformational world" of perspectivism (Rivière 1994: 256, cited in Viveiros de Castro 2015: 198).

The "fundamental dimension of perspectival inversions refers to the relative and relational statuses of predator and prey" (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 203). The personhood of each participant is determined by the relational context in which one is placed and experienced (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 262). In other words, the transition from a prey to a predator (in relation to the hunter) is expressed by the metamorphosed body; the relation between them changes not because their soul has changed, but their bodies (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 275). This changing of clothes is not a mere disguise; it is rather an instrument that endows new affects and capacities, distinctive dispositions for action and perception (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 278). The encounter can be lethal for the hunter who, now, overpowered

by the nonhuman subjectivity, becomes a prey in the eyes of the wolf (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 290). The potential reversibility blurs our understanding. We now see a predator hunting a prey, not a hunter frightened by a transformed caribou. Have they become, then, different subjects? Can we include the transformability of the subjects within the norms of reciprocity based on the perspective emerging from the individual that Sahlins proposed?

The shifting points of view question the ‘already given’ and single-actor of Sahlins’ concentric circles. Beings involved in the animist ontology take on a fluid and ever-emerging place in the world to direct their activities, in interchangeable relational statuses. The hunter used to be our familiar point of departure, but now it is displaced by the overpowering agency of his predator. The point of departure to relate with others is whoever takes the point of view of ‘I’; who has enough power to preserve his own reflexivity. Willerslev (2007) argues that engagement in the animist world requires a ‘depth reflexivity’ against the dissolution of the self, “a certain withholding or non-giving of the self” (Willerslev 2007: 12). Otherwise encounters with alien bodies may objectify the hunter, becoming ‘it’. If a subject becomes ‘it’, the encounter cannot be narrated by him or her any more. On those encounters “*you* must assert your point of view: when you say that you, too, are a person, what you really mean is that you are the ‘I,’ you are the person, not the other. ‘I, too, am a person’ means: I am the real person here” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 290, original emphasis). Relations are a power game of absorbing otherness, and power is reached by changing viewpoints while keeping being “I”. Take the opening example of Kohn’s *How Forest Think*:

Juanicu warned me, ‘Sleep faceup! If a jaguar comes he’ll see you can look back at him and he won’t bother you. If you sleep facedown he’ll think you’re *aicha* [prey; lit., “meat” in Quichua] and he’ll attack’. If a jaguar sees you as a being capable of looking back – a self like himself, a *you* – he’ll leave you alone. But if he should come to see you as prey – an *it* – you may well become dead meat (2013: 1, original emphasis).

This is a clear example of what defines a person, the capability to ‘stare back’ from a point of view that we are able to preserve. Reflexivity is a powerful resource in front of the continuous threat of being objectified (and no longer being *in a relation*) or being absorbed into another community (and no longer being *in that relation*).

The concept of a transgression answered by retribution is familiar with negative reciprocity being “the most impersonal sort of exchange” [Sahlins 2017 (1972): 177]. But, this time, we are not dealing with a relation between subjects through objects, but of subjects becoming objects in the eyes of

more powerful subjects (seeing the other basically as no one, devoid of personality, just a body to take). Such powerful beings are usually seen (if they can be seen at all) as spirits which do not really “hunt for souls, [...] [they] never actually see souls. They see ‘meat’” (Willerslev 2011: 517). The dead caribou, without the bodily clothing, might appear as a spirit ready to take vengeance to punish humans who have exceeded their limits.

So, in relation to Sahlins model it is possible to argue that fellow humans participate in a generalised sphere, animals in the balanced, and spirits in the negative? In the next section I review some authors that have confronted the continuum and argued for unidirectional schemas, that nonetheless allow individuals to move around a dense and shifting network of multipolar relations (Descola 2005: 333) and generate multiple interpretations emerging simultaneously from existing perspectives.

2. FROM ALTRUISM TO DEMAND

Knight (2012) has criticised Ingold’s proposal of animal-human relationships based on trust. He considers that the Spirit participation is obscured by excessively emphasising the “amicable” (Ingold 2000a: 69) dyadic bond between hunter and prey. Knight argues that one-to-one long-term reciprocity is not between the hunter and the hunted, but a relationship with the Spirit. Not solely comprehended in terms of retribution, one must maintain a stable alliance with the Spirit since it has a one-to-many association with animals. The Spirit becomes the target of the hunter’s petitionings to share (Knight 2012: 337). “Individual animal lives are expendable because what it matters is the existence of the class of animals; the spirit shares with the hunter the whole category of animals it controls”. (Knight 2012: 338) And even though the interests of the tutelary spirits might clash with hunters, the hunter is empowered to invoke a sharing ethic – the principle of ‘recipient entitlement’ in particular – as leverage (Knight 2012: 339). This proposal, thus, argues to shift the balanced approach into a unidirectional relation.

Citing Jochelson (1926) account of the Yukaghir, Sahlins [2017 (1972): 193] found a remarkable *richesse oblige* in ‘primitive societies’. That is, the ‘difference in affluence’ compels the ‘richer’ to share with the ‘poor’. And “if the affluent do not play the game, they ordinarily can be forced to disgorge” [2017 (1972): 193]. Seen from that point of view, although conflicting interests, the relation could be judged in generalised terms. Sahlins continues arguing that among hunter-gatherers accumulation is regarded morally intolerable and dysfunctional; thus continuous sharing is enforced within the local community pushing it to the point that the

“gathering [of] wealth, indeed, is often that of giving it away” (Sahlins 2017: 194).

It has already been said that the idea of the environment being alive and forming part of human kin is common to gatherer-hunters. For the Mbuti, Mosko (1987) argues, the ‘forest’ is a core cultural concept involving numerous kinship metaphors, such as ‘father’ or ‘grand-parent’. The ‘forest’ is an active and integrated participant in the collective, seen by Bird-David, as a primary metaphor which entails the view of the “environment as giving” (1990: 194). ‘Forest’ is not something ‘out there’ – that responds mechanically and people opportunistically collect what they find, like in Sahlins’ theory of original affluence [2017 (1972): 1-37] – but defined with kinship categories, one must engage with, and behaves “like a parent; it provides food unconditionally to its children” (Bird-David 1990: 190; cf. Descola 1996: 257). Sahlins writes that patterns of paternalism are “a common metaphor of primitive chieftainship” in which “dues and duties fall to both sides, both high and low have their claims” [2017 (1972): 187]. In those terms, father-child relationship, social inequality is compatible with the organisation of economic equality sustained by overcrowding generosity.

Allow me to introduce an contemporary example from the Yukagirs:

When the *sovkhos* (state farm) of Verkhne Kolymensk disbanded in 1991 [...] Nikolai Shalugin was elected head of Nelemnoye’s *obshchina* [rural community], Teki Odulok, and put in charge of an abundance of tractors, cars, snowmobiles, and horses. The *obshchina* organization was originally intended as a village-based cooperative of hunters and fishermen, which over time would develop into a local organ of indigenous self-rule. [...] In Nelemnoye, however, things took a different turn. Instead of regarding the possessions of the *obshchina* as collective property, people saw them as Shalugin’s private possessions, and in accordance with Yukaghir practice, they turned up and demanded that he share his goods with them. What is more, it was not only his usual group of close relatives who put forward their claims. Practically everyone in Nelemnoye maintained that they were somehow related to him and claimed that he was therefore obliged to share with them. The poor man saw no option but to comply with the many demands. [...] When representatives of the Sakha government turned up in Nelemnoye in 1997 and saw that the village’s *obshchina*, rather than being a profitable economic enterprise, was in a state of bankruptcy, completely divested of all its former technology and resources, they accused Shalugin of corruption. However, he was never arrested because the police could find no proof that he had been using the community’s assets to accumulate personal wealth. In fact, Shalugin found himself obliged to give away most of his own private belongings, such as his guns, television, and snowmobile, in order to comply with the many ‘sharing’ demands, and had thereby become one of the poorest people in the village (Willerslev 2007: 41-42).

Transactions look different from the point of view one is looking,² even those between humans. When the delegation from the Sakha Republic returned to Nelemnoye we should imagine that they encountered a flagrant case of corruption. The state arrested and accused Shalugin. Although Sahlins didn't analyse the economics of modern states such as the soviet planned economy, and even less its collapse and the emergence of post-socialist "kleptocracies" (Grubačić 2010: 69), this could be portrayed, in Sahlins words, as "to get something for nothing" [2017 (1972): 177]. Yakutsk's bureaucrats perceived that the chief and the people Nelemnoye were making profit of post-soviet times. Things "seemed not as a gift that someone gave out but as something that was just laying out there for free. These were social relations of 'wild' privatisation, which here as elsewhere in Russia were often described as 'grabitization' (*prikhvatizatsiia*)" (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017: 33).

The head of Nelemnoye's *obshchina* surely saw things differently. He was pushed by incessant claims of relatedness by villagers to give away the material abundance that he was responsible for. Willerslev points out that kinship networks, "rather than being finite and fixed, are highly manipulable and constantly changing" (2007: 42). Relatedness was claimed with the head of the *obshchina* as "[r]eciprocity is inclined toward the generalized pole by close kinship" [Sahlins 2017 (1972): 178]. Kinship, even though organised in a concentric manner around the ego, can be modified through individual agency for the sake of acquiring and entitlements to push claims. But, in a Western society, the fact of performing closeness could be seen as an action lingering toward the negative extreme as people took and gave nothing in return. Were they opportunists trying to get as much as possible for free? The interpretation could vary depending on the framework we apply. Willerslev and many others [Clastres 1989 (1972): 30; Peterson 1993; Woodburn 1982] argue that the idiom of sharing, among the Yukaghirs in particular and hunter-gatherers in general, is a social imperative. "Individuals who possess goods for which they appear to have no immediate need are under the greatest pressure to give them up, and they must do so without expecting anything in return" (Willerslev 2007: 42). Equating sharing, or generalized reciprocity, and altruistic giving is an error, even though voluntary sharing takes place, for the most part, gifts are neither spontaneous but a request that can be constructed both rude

² To make my point clear, here I am not referring to perspective in the multi-naturalist sense in which things do not look different from the point of view one is looking, but they are different worlds. Here I am just referring to different conceptions emerging from diverse groups of people: the bureaucrats from Sakha Republic, the head of the *obshchina* and the villagers of Nelemnoye.

and dominating (Peterson 1993: 869; Nadasdy 2007: 33; Descola 2005: 358). Mauss [2015 (1925)] already saw some gift-giving relations as competitive, and even adversarial.

“Yukaghirs acknowledge leadership, the authority of their leaders rests not in acquiring and holding personal wealth, but in giving it away” (Willerslev 2007: 42). In that context, says Willerslev, people saw collective property as being part of Shalugin private possessions. But it is possible to speculate with another kind of ‘property’ which Fausto (2014) finds characteristic of animist ontologies. He argues – focused in the amazonian context – that asymmetrical relations of mastery or ownership permeate all interactions. Masters, or what Knight calls Spirits, are the controllers, protectors and responsible for the well being of other-than-human persons and things. Spirits “live in a world of abundance, and people expect that if they do not behave as predators they will behave as providers” (Fausto 2014: 39). Being the head of a post-collectivised farm was equivalent as being, in non-human terms, the Spirit of a class of animals. Like the ‘forest’ as core cultural concept that reverberates social organisation, the *sovkhos* “the primary unit of Soviet society” (Humphrey 2002: 25) are domains of abundance, each with its own master, a field of possibility to push demands or infringe their limits in order to secure a livelihood (Fausto 2014: 35). The *sovkhos* is not a metaphor of the spirits or vice versa, but, in Descola’s conceptualization, sharing is a general relational schema that comes to structure the ethos of a collective (2005: 321). As I explain below, sharing is not included into the category of generalised reciprocity and practised at a close distance, but a whole distinct economic system explicitly rejecting the idea of reciprocity (Bird-David 1990: 195).

South Indian horticulturalists Mullu Kurumba, neighbours of gatherer-hunter Nayaka, recognise that the effectiveness of growth in nature is intrinsically bounded with the power of ancestral patrilineal ties that tie them in a web of reciprocity and debt. While for the Nayaka, sharing does not entail any obligation nor a mystical notion of a return; transactions are conducted solely in terms of giving and requests to be given (Bird-David 1990: 191). Contrary to the economy of living-and-dead among horticulturalists, animist societies do not transform dead people into ancestors but treat the dead as fundamentally other to the living: to die is to pass to the “other side” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 270). There is no unpayable debt owed by the living to the dead, except of considering themselves to be ‘debtors’ of the latter with regard to their conditions of existence, e.g., reproduction, tools, memory (Descola 2005: 329). Neither “animals are sacrificed to the deity in order that it will then fill their meat with grace and so too the humans when they consume it” (Descola 2005: 328). Rather life and death are different points of view along a cycle, and hunting is a renew-

ing practice that motions “a fixed pool of souls that simply go round and round in an endless cycle [...] [in which,] no life can ever be lost or entirely destroyed” (Willerslev 2007: 32). Taking this stance as a point of departure Willerslev nuances Bird-David model of unconditional and vertical sharing arguing for a counter-perspective, in which demand sharing roles might switch if there is a shift in the balance. “[I]f the wealth divide between the two agencies somehow becomes altered, their roles as donor and recipient might switch so it is the spirit that becomes entitled to demand” (2007: 45). In other words, Spirit’s counter-predation is neither balanced nor negative reciprocity but reversed demand sharing as hunter accumulates far too many (dead) souls.

3. TAKING SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES

The reversibility of sharing roles is a source of anxiety among hunters, because

they can never be certain about the intention of the animal master-spirits in providing them with good hunting luck. Are the spirits simply fulfilling their moral obligation as ‘parents’ to share [...], or are they about to trick them into the position of ‘donors’ (Willerslev 2007: 47).

The anxiety may be defeated by seducing an animal to give itself without having any relationship with the master spirit, an action that Willerslev theorizes through mimesis. Yet Sahlins would classify this as negative reciprocity, as is to get something for nothing, occurring at the maximum social distance. But, otherwise, “the hunter must emphatically project himself into their agencies, even to the point where the boundaries between them are blurred, and they become of the same kind” (Willerslev 2007: 47). In this manner, a hunter is capable of bringing the animal home and away from the spirit.

How, then, can we conceive the dissociation between the animal and the Spirit? Knight (2012) commentary falls short in recognising hunter-spirit complexity, creating another dyad. His objection of Ingold’s ‘trust’ is mostly sustained by the inexistent spatiotemporal grounds in which a hunter is allowed to know its prey, being the relation with the abstract and spiritual the only viable long term interaction. This approach dismisses pre-hunt relations which entail a careful observation to dreams, post-hunt rituals, and patterns of meat distribution. Challenging this, Fausto argumentation conceives a master as a “topology [that] involves an interplay between singularity and multiplicity: the owner is a plural singularity, containing

other singularities within himself” (2014: 32). There can be no simple opposition between meat and the spirit; the “former is no more distributed among discrete individuals than the latter is pinned to an abstract category” (Ingold 2014: 26). To put a simple example, when Jochelson asked a Koryak man about the difference between sea and its spirit, he replied “We say, ‘sea’ and ‘owner of the sea’: it is just the same (1926: 30, cited in Willerslev 2012: 351).

Fausto further contends that “[t]he asymmetry of the ownership relation is often conceived as a form of encompassment, expressed as a relation between container and contained. For example, the masters of animals usually keep their ‘children’ in an enclosure, releasing them slowly to be hunted by humans” (2014: 303). Caribou migrations, among the Innu of Nitassinan, are controlled by a spirit master (the Caribou-Man) that behaves as a herdsman. The spirit, argues Descola (2005), is the medium of attributing particular intentionality to a plurality of behaviour patterns. The caribou spirit dwells in a cavern that allows to keep and protect the herd from predatory animals/hunters. From this closet-like place the spirit sends out animals on their migrations, previously decided which animals and how many of them are given to particular hunters. The souls of dead caribou are reincorporated into the cave again as new animals, which will be sent out to the hunters on another occasion. Hunters can intercede with the Caribou-Man, begging him to spare some more animals (Descola 2005: 367). The spirit not only protects the herd but also kills animals for its ‘own consumption’; the spirit is a hunter and guardian at the same time. Like human herders kill their domestic animals and protect them from wild predators, the spirit “kill and eat game while protecting it from human predators” (Descola 1996: 258).

As spirits own large amounts of herds, the mechanism of demand sharing has the function of levelling, but

every primitive organization has its breaking-point, or at least it’s turning-point. Every one might see the time when cooperation is overwhelmed by the scale of disaster and chicanery becomes the order of the day. [...] People who helped each other in normal times and through the first stages of disaster display now indifference to each others’ plight, if they do not exacerbate a mutual downfall by guile, haggle, and theft [Sahlins 2017 (1972): 196].

The rapid descent from sharing to negative reciprocity, from trust to domination, is acted upon by the shaman trying to counter-effect, without being seen, the refusal of the master spirits to feed humans (spirit hiding animals is the most common cause of bad luck in hunting). In those cases, hunters can break the interplay between the multiplicity of the spirit and

the singularity of the animal, recognising a triad of actors: spirit, animal and hunter. It is not strange, then, that “from the spirit perspective, hunters are seen as predatory wolves thieving” (Willerslev 2012: 351).

Shamans can take up a powerful point of view, enabling them to control a portion of the animal stock to the human-community interest in times of bad luck. “[S]hamanic practice is essentially about eliminating human suffering, whether in the form of bad hunting luck, hunger, or disease” (Willerslev 2007: 138). Shamans can manage specific relations between humans and non-humans, transiting through various perspectives and enabling meaningful communication between them, while assuming a convenient point of view without losing their condition as humans (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 269). The *a'lma* – Yukaghir’ family shaman – can attract prey animals without the component of intentional surrender. Instead, it is a process of mere coercion in which the shaman dominates an animal and ‘ties him up’ so that the hunters could go and kill it with ease (Willerslev 2007: 128). (Although this resource is not usually employed because it contradicts the principle of trust, and so, becoming a ‘sinful act’ in which animals are dominated and acted upon). On the one hand, shamans become powerful spiritual beings and the invisibility that this grant means inedibility (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 270). On the other, other spirits have the power to unveil violations and interferences in their domains and take retribution (Willerslev 2007: 92). Hunters try to hide up the act through “various tactics of displacement and substitution to cover up the fact that they are the ones responsible for their prey’s violent death” (Willerslev 2007: 129). “Yukaghir and Eveny myths are full of stories of how every aspect of violence in hunting must be relegated to absolute silence” (Willerslev *et al.* 2014: 9). Avoiding to talk about the killing, abstaining from eating oneself prey, blindfolding the prey, using euphemisms, among many other are techniques of hiding that killing had taken place.

Invisibility – hiding actions and shamanism by extension – allows anti-social behaviour; the lack of visibility keeps away potential claims. In addition to that, when demand sharing is the moral rule refusing to show what one has is a synonym of refusal to give and thus should be an action resting at the negative extreme. Defying both: the master spirit who encloses and hides the animals; and the shaman, now a predatory animal in the eyes of the Spirit hides his or her actions of taking and devouring animals. But we can not say that those actions, even with the characteristic secrecy in which are carried out, rest on the absolute negative extreme of the continuum. Distances are playful between the closeness of persuasion, and the displacement of the invisible. For example, “Eveny hunters must never say ‘I killed a bear’ but use coded euphemisms such as ‘I obtained a child’” (Willerslev *et al.* 2014: 9). It is not strange that the Siberian transition from hunting to

pastoralist societies is explained through perspectivism (Ingold 2015: 25). Humans replace the master (the spiritual pastoralist) and shift into a dominant toward animals creating their own herd. Just as the shaman “who ‘play pastoralist’ with the herds, seeking to dominate them by mystical means” (Ingold 2015: 25-26), pastoralists become masters themselves through the principle of domination, but also, and protection.

CONCLUSION

The main intention of this essay was not to put forward a new interpretation of Sahlin’s strategy for studying so-called primitive economics, neither to solve theoretical problems regarding the developing field of ‘sharing’, ‘new animism’ and ‘perspectivism’. But to present how the recent debates of human-animal sociality can relate to Sahlins’ model.

Sahlins’ notion of concentric circles aimed to integrate and deliver the meaningful idea that economies can handle contradiction and different possibilities within. It is not only, as Sahlins rightfully agreed with Mauss, that all possibilities always coexist inside any society, but that all options can emerge simultaneously depending on which point of view is apprehended. Not everything is engulfed within social distance. Points of view, in the perspectivist worlds, define the subject and its position toward the others. These are malleable and manipulable by one own agency, but also within the potential threat that other powerful non-human agencies overcome human intentionality. And while actors must be able to deal with them, the relational field of perspectivism makes it complex to guess who is relating with whom from a non-engaged point of view, that of the anthropologist, and which intentions they carry. Moreover, engaged positions are not intrinsic but relational, and none of the participants has the full picture. Still, just the perspective of her or his own world, thus, there is no predominant nor intrinsic centre of interpretation but a multiplicity of possible diagnoses. A story of tricking an animal to offer himself and hiding it from the master, but afterwards treating its body with respect, hoping for its rebirth and sharing the meat around the village, contains multiple perspectives: the prey and the predator, the human and the spirit, the alive and the death.

Authors such as Nadasdy are comfortable with theorising reciprocity, placing the accent on the animals’ agency ‘giving themselves.’ The giver makes the first step, and the relational field is already configured: rules, obligations and a balance in the exchange. Mauss’ three obligations are easily seen in the transaction: (1) the animal *gives* itself voluntarily; (2) hunter *accepts* the gifts, and rituals practised post-mortem have the function of

thanksgiving; (3) humans reciprocate praying for the soul of the animal, aiming their *return* to life. Thus, in the Kluane world, the idioms of reciprocity can be applied: the relation between the human and the other-than-human person is one-to-one, animals are regarded as distant kin, obligations and debts arbitrate their association. Thus their relationship is balanced. But the centrality of Sahlins' continuum is incompatible, or at least hard to identify, among other ever-changing and profoundly transformational worlds of circumpolar hunting. In such worlds, generalised giving is not done at a near distance but by entitlement concerning moral rules, and while a return may happen, there is no obligation for it, and hunters try to disguise their actions as much as they can to overcome their anxiety produced by these confusing transactions.

Most authors have found demand sharing as a substitute for reciprocity in hunter societies. Demand sharing places agency on the taker (the other side of the 'gift'), asserting its moral nature or claiming need, and the potential giver falls into a negative anti-social position if he refuses to give away, rather than one of altruism, more characteristic of generalised reciprocity. Taking and sharing emphasises the unidirectionality while reciprocity always comes into a give-and-take. If we were to use the language of reciprocity – witnessing how sides can play tricks, place claims of entitlement, and act in a hidden way – we could argue that the performance of negative exchange is to avoid, but at the same time force generalised reciprocity. Reciprocities overlap one another and render the conceptualisation dubious and confusing. Sophisticated analysis, such as Descola (2005) modes of attachment, present the idea that, in each collective (including both human and other-non-humans), there are dominant relational modes of integration that conform, with a mixture of others, an ethos of the collective. Reciprocity, or exchange model, then, might be not useful for 'all primitive societies', but just for those who aim to complete an integrated closed system of debts and obligations.

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