

Nagy, Zoltán: Medvék, vadászok, történetek. A medve és az ember a Vaszjugán mentén [Bears, Hunters, Stories. Bears and Humans along the Vasyugan River].

Budapest – Pécs. PTE Néprajz – Kulturális Antropológia
Tanszék – L'Harmattan. 2021. 203. ISBN 978-963-414-803-6

CSABA MÉSZÁROS* 

Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary

BOOK REVIEW

Published online: February 12, 2024

© 2023 The Author(s)



The study of the relationship between humans and animals has become increasingly important in the anthropological study of Siberian peoples over the past two decades, and this shift in emphasis is set to continue. However, the epistemology and methodology of the consideration of animals, and non-human agents in general, in anthropology (a discipline whose very name suggests that it is essentially a human-centered field) have yet to be appropriately articulated.

In ethnographic and anthropological scholarship, animals and plants have long appeared in the literature not in their own right, as active agents, but in terms of their relationship to humans, and typically as subordinate to human beings and human (agri)culture. I am thinking here not only of detailed descriptions of forms of subsistence and the painstaking enumeration of hunting, fishing, and animal husbandry techniques, but also of the fact that, in the study of folkloric texts and beliefs, animals have usually conveyed or represented a sociocultural message — something that belongs fundamentally to the human world.

In this respect, three significant developments took place in the anthropological study of Siberia at the turn of the millennium. Firstly, the ontological turn introduced a methodological and epistemological shift and a new approach to anthropology; secondly, increasingly tangible environmental degradation in Siberia has affected research on non-human entities; and finally,

* Corresponding author. E-mail: meszaros.csaba@abtk.hu

the vulnerable and eroding life-worlds of marginalized communities have resulted in a slight change in research focus. All three developments have played a role in how animals and non-human agents have emerged from their subordinate role to occupy an increasingly central position in works on Siberian life-worlds.

Zoltán Nagy's book offers a new contribution to the contemporary anthropological context in these three respects, each of which deserves brief consideration.

1. The methodology of ontological anthropology, which emerged primarily in Amazonia, has begun to permeate Siberian research in the last two decades. This is no coincidence. The classification of animate and inanimate entities in a way that differs from European classification, and the recognition and acknowledgment of their human-like qualities, was already a well-known phenomenon not only in the traditional culture of the Siberian peoples but also in Siberian literature before the turn of the century. The fact that this approach has gained prominence in analytical anthropological works since the turn of the millennium shows that fieldworkers increasingly understand the value and significance of local ontological systems. Consequently, there is now a new methodological toolkit to help anthropologists explore and describe alternative ontotypological systems.

Today, a significant number of anthropological texts on Siberia examine the diversity of human-animal relations, the relationship between domestic and wild animals, animal emotions, human traits in animals, and even the animality of humans. The dense web that emerges from the diversity of interspecies relationships does not allow for a human-centered approach. There is no better illustration of this than the present volume by Zoltán Nagy.

2. A no less important factor is the continuous degradation and destruction of the Siberian ecosystem. It is not only the melting of the permafrost and the increasing frequency and scale of forest fires that pose a growing challenge to local lifeforms but also the ever more pronounced expansion of industrial and economic infrastructure. Local lifeforms are less and less able to adapt to the rapid environmental changes, and it is becoming increasingly clear to anthropologists working in the field in Siberia that the environment is not a permanent (or merely very slowly changing) backdrop to cultural and social processes but is, in many cases, the main actor. This also calls for a juxtapositional analysis of human and non-human beings as an integral part of the landscape.

3. Research into the local life-worlds that collapsed after perestroika and the disintegration of Soviet society keenly highlighted the fact that Siberia was less and less a territory to be conquered and subjugated by the state. Instead, it was becoming an essential and irreplaceable resource for local communities abandoned by the state and in many ways forced into self-sufficiency. The practices, skills, and knowledge derived from local perceptions of the environment gradually emerged as a valuable asset, and what this knowledge referred to became increasingly important for local people and for researchers describing local communities.

This threefold context forms the primary interpretative framework for the book of Zoltán Nagy on bears and humans along the Vasyugan river. As is generally the case in anthropology, the quality of the fieldwork and the value of the human relationships established by the researcher in the field are particularly important in this volume. In this respect, the volume is comparable to few other works in the field of Hungarian Siberian studies. It can undoubtedly be ranked among the best Obugristic research and shows particular sensitivity in its descriptions of tiny ethnographic details. The extensive quotations, dialogues, and case studies reveal the author's comprehensive knowledge of the area and his in-depth fieldwork, while also providing an



insight into his delicate relationship with the local population. I would not hesitate to recommend this book to anthropologists and researchers, while at the same time it offers an accessible account of an authentic world to any reader eager to discover more about the bears and peoples of the Vasyugan river.

But the volume clearly offers far more than this. The detailed case studies and collected materials it contains are truly valuable precisely because the author provides a fascinating and innovative interpretative framework. I suggested above that this framework (and theoretical background) is new in terms of Hungarian anthropological scholarship in three aspects. However, before I consider these three aspects, it is essential to point out that the juxtaposition of animals and humans is not equally well represented in Siberian studies. While in some cases, such as the Evenks, Altay Turks, or Sakha, this approach has become quite common, it has yet to be fully adopted in the study of the Khanty and Gilyak. This is all the more puzzling since it is precisely these two groups for which we have excellent descriptions of highly stratified human–animal relationships from very early on, particularly in terms of the study of the profane and sacred role of the bear. The richness and detail offered in the literature have obscured the reassessment of bear–human relationships in these communities, too, as a worthwhile research target.

It is precisely in terms of this rich research and scholarly literature that the theoretical framework through which Zoltán Nagy presents the relationship between the profane and sacred status and appearance of the bear acquires its significance. Going beyond the traditional approach of ethnographic descriptions of the Khanty, the author makes no attempt to draw a sharp distinction between the sacred and profane worlds. The bear is a bear, whether it is a protagonist in narrative stories and belief legends or an actor in a real-life encounter. Nor are the attributes and personality traits attributed to the bear divided rigidly into the sacred and profane spheres. They are closely interlinked, despite appearing in texts of different genres.

On reading the bear narratives of local hunters, one becomes aware that the “profane” qualities of the bear in such stories are not as profane as one might expect when contrasted with sacred texts and spheres. The extraordinarily subtle and detailed local descriptions of bears reveal that the animal’s human abilities, emotions, and way of thinking endow it with a kind of everyday “sacrality.” The richness of the bear narratives and the innovative analytical framework create, for the first time, the possibility to dissolve the boundary between the profane and the sacred spheres — a boundary that was drawn far more sharply in earlier research among the Khanty. Such scholarly attempts to eliminate the border between the profane and the sacred are particularly instructive and have been demonstrated in anthropological research re-examining the social life of basic concepts in the ethnology of religion (such as the *mana* or *taboo*).

Another significant contribution made by this volume is the author’s phenomenological approach to interpreting emotions. It is clear from the book that talking about bears and encounters with bears requires significant emotional involvement on the part of both the locals and the researcher, and the precise definition of these emotions is already the subject of research and exploration in Zoltán Nagy’s approach. The presence and linguistic representation of emotions is not a self-evident question for the author. He starts from the premise that emotions are culturally embedded, marked, and learned, thus they cannot be spoken about in general terms. Putting our culturally embedded emotions into parentheses is the first step in exploring what a local hunter thinks about fear or courage. A phenomenological understanding of the cultural embeddedness of emotions provides an opportunity to gain a more profound insight



into the mindset of community members and makes a significant contribution to the study of local practices. The volume also opens an important pathway for further studies in this field in Hungarian.

Finally, the extensive appendix at the end of the volume is highly instructive. There are many lessons to be learned from the description of the internal dynamics of an entire (100-minute-long) conversation that tracks changes in topic, the activity of the participants and their varying degrees of engagement, and the (primarily unsuccessful) attempts at conversation management by the fieldworker. This innovative and fresh perspective on fieldwork further enhances the value of the volume.

In summary, although the title of Zoltán Nagy's book promises readers an insight into bears, hunting, and hunting stories, the volume offers far more than that. It explores a well-known, traditional topic in ethnography from a new perspective and using an innovative methodology. Behind the detailed ethnographic descriptions, there is a solid methodological background and a highly elaborate theoretical framework. The questioning of the interpretative framework of the profane and the sacred, and the denormalization of the dichotomous approach of the research tradition, in fact lead to the restoration and normalization of the Khanty lifeways.

The author also opens up a fresh discursive field for the interpretation of local emotions. He has taken the first (and most difficult) step in Hungarian anthropology in this direction, and by so doing invites other researchers to uncover further interpretations and contexts. Is bear-specific fear different from other fears? In what way? How do personal attitudes and personality traits depend on emotions? The author does not introduce these innovative approaches by comprehensively questioning and rejecting earlier research paradigms. Instead, he seeks to forge a link, create a common field of interpretation, and enable a crossover between the different paradigms of Siberian studies. Readers who may be more familiar with traditional interpretative contexts are thus made to feel at home with the material and the novel interpretative framework.

Open Access statement. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes - if any - are indicated. (SID_1)

