

Proportional Holism

Joking the Cosmos Into the Right Shape in North Asia

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Holism has had a pretty bad press in anthropology for some time now. To be sure, every now and then, there are isolated attempts at reintroducing the concept, most recently in an edited volume on *Holistic Anthropology*, which aims at integrating the “human sciences” into a “new holism of evolving life forms” (Parkin and Ulijaszek 2007). Yet, such attempts tend to be curiously apologetic – certainly, one does not detect much enthusiasm about the concept of holism in Parkin and Ulijaszek’s book, where it is reduced to a purely heuristic tool with no theoretical purchase. As they put it, as long it is merely taken to be “no more than an odd-job word, [holism] can enjoy a short moment of interrogation and revelation before it is returned to the banality of meaning too many things” (2007: xiii).

But perhaps it is possible to convey a more upbeat message about the future of holism as an analytical concept. Based on fieldwork among two indigenous peoples in northern Asia, this chapter introduces the concept of *proportional holism*, understood as the ongoing apportioning of different assemblages of humans and nonhumans into the right shape. Rather than being a heuristic tool anthropologists use to make sense of their data, holism emerges as a particular social practice that can be identified in different settings around the world, and that can be made the object of ethnographic description, analysis, and comparison like all other practices. To study holism anthropologically is to explore the culturally specific work actors do for their cosmos to retain its proportions.

Studying holism as an empirical phenomenon requires sensitivity to the different conceptualizations of wholes held by different people, as well as to the sometimes surprising practices by which such wholes are perceived to hold together. As we show in what follows, *joking* is one such holistic practice in the context of North Asian indigenous societies. More precisely, we argue, joking relationships with the spirits of dead ancestors and wild animals serve to actualize these entities in ritual and everyday situations, while at the same time providing them with an irreducible virtual dimension. In that sense, the work of joking as a holistic practice is to balance between otherwise singular wholes. Acts of

rude joking during Mongolian shamanic rituals and Siberian elk hunts keep necessary cosmological distances intact by holding the parallel realities of visible human and nonhuman bodies and of invisible human and nonhuman souls in simultaneous view.

From Totalitarian Holism to Proportional Holism

If by holism one understands the perfect integration of discrete elements into a single all-encompassing whole, which was how the concept was used at the heyday of anthropological modernism (Parkin 2007: 2–3), then the concept term is clearly of limited merit. The problem with this traditional anthropological concept of holism is twofold.¹ Not only are the external relations between different wholes left unaccounted for, but also there is a problem with the conceptualization of the internal relationships within each whole between its parts. In the first case, the problem is one of too little connection (“every culture is unique”); in the second, it is one of too much connection (“cultures are homogeneous”). Against this backdrop, we can only agree with Tim Ingold that, for the concept of holism to have any theoretical purchase, it is necessary “to dissociate [it] from a concern with wholes. Holism is one thing, totalisation quite another, and [the] argument for holism [must be] ... an argument against totalisation” (2007: 209). But precisely how does one go about being holistic while also avoiding the pitfalls of totalitarian holism, which leads one to “bolt together components of being ... that should never have been carved out in the first place” (2007: 209)?

One possible answer may be found in the writings of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern, who, along with other influential Melanesianists, have demonstrated the “fractal” properties of different social entities (bodies, persons, clans, landscapes) in the Papua New Guinean Highlands and elsewhere (Wagner 1991; Strathern 2004; Gell 1998; Mosko and Damon 2005). Now, like Ingold, it does not seem to be Strathern’s intention to do away with the concept of holism as such. Rather, her more restricted agenda is to criticize the common Euro-Western assumption that social forms exist as single wholes (the singular one) or multiple parts (the plural many). Thus “Melanesian” wholes are not totalities, in the sense of explicate orderings of discrete, autonomous parts, which are integrated into singular and unified totalities. Rather, holism here amounts to an implicate order in Bohm’s sense (1983), which is made visible through different “aesthetic forms” which highlight certain relations at the expense of others (Strathern 1988). Here, holism is not about the integration of finite units into a single whole; rather, we may speak of self-scaling wholes, where analogous relationships are replicated across different scales following a “holographic” logic (Wagner 1991). As Wagner suggests in his seminal article on Daribi kinship, all relationships

are basically analogous because all incorporate the essence of human solicitude that we call “relating.” Every particular “kind” of relationship exemplifies in some particular way, and comprises a (“metonymic”) part of a potential *whole*, a totality of which the aggregate of all the kinds of relationship represents a homologue. Each particular kind of relationship, since it incorporates the underlying context of relational solicitude, can be seen as an (“metaphorical”) analogue of each kind of relationship. (1977: 624)

The concepts of holism entertained by our North Asian informants come much closer to these fractal “Melanesian” wholes than to the “Euro-American” totalities discussed. For the Darhad pastoralists of Northern Mongolia studied by Pedersen, as much as for the Siberian Yukaghir hunters studied by Willerslev, the cosmos is not a perfectly integrated whole consisting of smooth and well-oiled parts, which, in principle, add up.² On the contrary, these indigenous ontologies are perforated by gaps, voids, and holes as much as they are glued together by connections, relations, and wholes (Pedersen 2007b). This is also where these North Asian w(holes) differ from their Melanesian holographic counterparts. Due, perhaps, to their half-empty (or could we say “hollowgraphic”) nature of the cosmos, the aesthetic forms of Darhad pastoralists and Yukaghir hunters lack the self-evident proportionality widely associated with Melanesian aesthetic forms, where questions of discontinuity and instability sometimes seem to be sidelined at the expense of questions about continuity and stability (cf. Robbins 2007). Because of their characteristic lack of ontological fullness, both Darhad and Yukaghir conceptualizations of the cosmos come across as more flexible and dynamic, while also comprising more friction and heterogeneity, than the neat cosmologies of, say, Wagner’s Daribi informants. This might explain why these North Asian cosmologies are felt to be in need of constant maintenance work. Not only are numerous rituals performed for the world to remain in place, but also there is an unspoken rule that new techniques constantly need to be invented to keep humans and non-humans sufficiently detached from one another.

All this begs the question of whether the “Melanesian” concept of fractal holism represents a sufficiently radical alternative to the traditional anthropological concept of totalitarian holism. Alberto Corsín-Jiménez has recently observed that “the trouble with the Melanesian model is that it is ... assumed that people always relate in the same fashion.... A full model of proportional sociality ... is one that takes into account the different ways in which people inflect and qualify their relationships. Proportional sociality tells us the factors by which the stretching out of the social takes place” (2007: 193–4). Notwithstanding whether this is a fair depiction or not,³ Corsín-Jiménez’s work opens up for the cross-cultural study of practices of apportionment, which “unlike relations, which only tell you *how* to disaggregate ... tell you *what* to disaggregate into” (2007: 187).

Our notion of proportional holism is strongly inspired by Corsín-Jiménez’s notion of proportional sociality. Both terms refer to the work people need to do

to ensure that “things do not get out of proportion” (2007: 186) – a sort of ontological labor, which involves not only how relations are made as well as unmade (and how the same processes also make and unmake people), but also the question of *what* relations (and what kinds of people) thus come into being. In our two case studies below, we discuss in some detail how people in Mongolia and Siberia go about doing, and maintaining, their wholes. More precisely, we examine two concrete ethnographic situations – a Darhad shamanic ritual and a Yukaghir bear hunt – where the right balance of proximity and distance in the relationship between human and spirits was not given beforehand, but only became established through acts of joking by which the cosmos was apportioned in a certain way.

But why speak of joking as a distinct holistic practice in the first place? At first glance, joking and holism seem to be unlikely bedfellows, at least if one subscribes to the prevalent “romantic notion that jokes are inherently disordering and disorganising phenomena” (Seizer 1997: 62). However, while this link between joking and disorder remains popular among anthropologists and philosophers (Douglas 1968; Koestler 1964; Morreall 1983), it has always competed with an alternative interpretation of joking, which posits it to be central for the reproduction of social order. The best-known example of this is Radcliffe-Brown’s work on “joking relationships” (1952a, 1952b), which he saw as institutions designated for “establishing and maintaining social equilibrium” (1952a: 108).

As is well known, the concept of holism held by Radcliffe-Brown and many of his structural-functionalist peers was hair-raisingly totalitarian: no attempt was made to identify potentially conflicting interests in the societies under study, let alone to account for the possibility of social or cultural change, for the founding gesture of functionalism was exactly to bracket off all questions of this kind. However, we believe that the time is ripe for offering a new reading of Radcliffe-Brown’s theory of joking relationships, one which retains the original focus on joking as a proportionally holistic practice, while doing away with its overly functionalist bias. After all, it is worth remembering that Radcliffe-Brown emphasized that the “continual expression of social disjunction” constitutes an “essential part” of life, which is precisely why he saw joking to be a means by which people are able to keep an appropriate distance. As Radcliffe-Brown elaborated (in characteristically terse prose),

In any fixed relations between the members of ... groups the separateness of the groups must be recognized. It is precisely this separateness which is not merely recognised but emphasised when a joking relationship is established. The show of hostility, the perpetual disrespect, is a continual expression of the social disjunction which is an essential part of the whole structural situation, but over which, without destroying or even weakening it, there is provided the social conjunction of friendliness and mutual aid. The theory that is here put forward, therefore, is that [joking relationships] are modes of organising a definite and stable system of social behaviour in which conjunctive and disjunctive components ... are maintained and combined. (1952a: 95)

As we see it, Radcliffe-Brown's key insight was not the well-known idea that joking relationships maintain order, but the equally central proposition that such relations at the same time *keep too much order at bay*. According to this interpretation of joking relationships, then, the acts of "perpetual disrespect" between African kinsmen described by Radcliffe-Brown and others are apportionings – holistic gestures by which the world is kept in a dynamic state of measured disorder as different actors try to carve out a fragile balance of proximities and distances from an evolving totality of relations.

According to Corsín-Jiménez, "It is the confusion of not knowing how and which orders of knowledge have to be made commensurable ... that makes social life continuously re-dimension itself" (2007: 192). In his analysis, the goal of this ongoing redimensioning is human well-being. As we intend to demonstrate in the two following case studies, similar questions of "social mathematics" – the size and scale of the social, its ratios, and its proportions – also underwrite animist practices in Northern Asia. Joking relationships between humans and spirits are holistic practices, which Darhads and Yukaghirs perform for the cosmos to take its right shape. Crucially, the worlds which people are working so hard to retain are not unified and stable wholes. Instead, they are "proportional wholes": fragile and fleeting assemblages of humans and nonhumans in a state of measured disorder, where heterogeneous relations and entities continually must be reapportioned into fragile balance, which hovers dangerously, or playfully, between too much integration (as in totalitarian holism) and too much disintegration (as in postmodernist fragmentation). Peoples' joking with the spirits keeps the cosmos bifurcated into incongruous realms, and enables them to partake simultaneously in these parallel domains of life. As such, these practices reveal the need to combine worship with disrespect, sharing with theft – along with other holistic aesthetics of conjunction and disjunction – in the human engagement with nonhuman others, so as to continuously establish the right degree of coexistence and friction between disparate worlds.

Humor in Darhad Mongolian Shamanic Ritual

Our first case study concerns the Darhads, a Mongolian-speaking people of pastoralists and hunters, whose heartland is the remote Shishged Depression of northwestern Mongolia. Although they have a long Buddhist tradition (for more than two centuries until the 1921 revolution, the Shishged valley and its inhabitants comprised the largest ecclesiastical estate in Mongolia's Buddhist church), the Darhads are famous for two things: their supposedly strong shamanic abilities and associated propensities for cursing, and their supposedly superior sense of humor. Both stereotypes have been widely internalized by the Darhads themselves, who today use them to identity and differentiate between new types of persons and collectivities in the context of postsocialist "transition" (Pedersen 2007c).

There is a lot of joking in contemporary Darhad shamanism. Not only do certain shamanic spirits (*ongod*) joke with the shaman and the audience during possession rituals, but jokes are also sometimes used to invoke the spirits. In both cases, crude sarcasm and racy humor intersect with esoteric intricacies of shamanic cosmology, and a pristine space of holistic analysis is laid bare. For it is clear that joking does a certain job, has certain effects, on the shamanic “whole.” Joking is imbued with occult efficacy, and understanding its nature takes us to the heart of Darhad shamanism. Thus laughter is the very substance of certain spirits, which are as ephemeral yet persistent as the flow of gossip in the community. These are the so-called gossip spirits, which, according to the late female shaman Nadmid Udgan, “always act in a funny way” and “just love revealing peoples’ most intimate secrets in curing ceremonies.” Indeed, the intimate link between shamanism and humor in the contemporary Darhad context is not only played out when certain spirits make fun of humans. As we shall see in the following example, joking is also sometimes used by humans to invoke the spirits (*ongod*) from their transcendental abode, the so-called skies (*tenger*).

Once, when Pedersen participated in a curing ritual (*zasal*) conducted by Nadmid Udgan, humor and joking were called upon in what looked like a rather desperate attempt to attract the spirits’ attention. The ritual had at this point already lasted for more than an hour; yet, the first spirit was still to make its appearance. This was the famous *ongon* known as the Father of Harmai, which is considered among the most powerful (*hünd*, literally “heavy”) of the Darhad shamanic spirits. Patiently, the shaman had gone through her extensive repertoire of praises, prayers, and invocations, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the attention of the audience had slowly drifted away; some had even fallen asleep. But, suddenly, the ritual séance took a new turn as Nadmid Udgan’s “interpreter” (*helmerch*) – an old woman from a neighboring household, who was a distant relative of the shaman – grabbed a bottle of vodka from the altar in the sacred north side of the yurt (*hoimor*), and, whilst overgenerously splashing its contents over her possessed master, bellowed, “Why are you not arriving? We are offering you vodka to drink, cigarettes to smoke! What is the matter with you?”

The audience was laughing. A moment later, the Father of Harmai entered (*orgoh*) Nadmid Udgan’s body, as witnessed by her animalistic grunting and eerie laughter (both well-known signs of possession). It was time for the first client to be cured (*zasah*), and the level of excitement went up one further notch. New logs were added to the fire, slumbering relatives were awoken from their dreams, and everyone stared intently at the drumming shaman in their midst. Communicated through the fragile, yet strangely insisting voice of Nadmid Udgan, the room now became filled up with the occult message, which everyone in the audience had been waiting for – the actual “words uttered” (*heldeg üg*) by the spirit itself. At this point in the curing ritual, it is usually the interpreter’s responsibility to determine who in the audience a given spirit is calling for, as well as what is needed in order to cure this person, for it is deemed impossible for ordinary people to decipher the

garbled and archaic words of the *ongod*. On this particular occasion, however, everyone seemed to understand that this person was the interpreter herself. Yet, she vehemently refused to comply with the Father of Harmai's request, and this breach of conduct set off a new sequence of funny events. "What is this? What are you calling *me* for? I won't do it!" the interpreter protested to the *ongon* in a mock-serious voice. At last, after a series of abuses and sarcastic remarks, she reluctantly accepted the *ongon's* call by kneeling down in front of Nadmid Udgan. Following a probing with the shaman's drumstick, her body was found to contain "bad stuff" (*muu yum*). Yet, she did not – as clients normally would – bow her head in silent anticipation of the shaman's healing blows with her whip (which are understood to transport people's "bad stuff" to the drum). Instead she retorted angrily, "Ouch! That hurts? Hey! – Stop it, enough of this!" which in turn made the shaman hide behind the drum, as if shy. This sparked another roar of laughter. Then, an abrupt change in Nadmid Udgan's composure signaled the spirit's departure (*gargah*), and the interpreter returned to the crowd.

What, then, was the point of this debasement of the shamanic spirit, if there was a point at all? Notice, first of all, the striking difference between the present case from Northern Asia and the comparable South Asian case, as discussed by Bruce Kapferer in his celebrated study of demon exorcism in Sri Lanka (1991). According to Kapferer, comedy plays a crucial role in the "disambiguation process" by which the "cosmic order" is returned to "its essential unity" as an outcome of the exorcism ritual (1991: 177). Exorcism is all about bringing back the demons to their proper, inferior position within the cosmic hierarchy by facilitating their re-encompassment by the deities. This happens because the ritual use of comedy makes the demons appear monstrous – and, therefore, hilarious – in the eyes of the audience and the patient being healed. People are liberated from the yoke of the demons as their laughter dispels evil to an unreal state of "make-believe" (1991: 315–25).

Now, while this analysis seems to make a lot sense in the Sinhalese context, it does not work very well when it comes to North Asian shamanism. It would, indeed, be rather strange if the joking in Darhad shamanic rituals were all about interpolating doubt into an overarching ritual and performative framework of "let-believe" (*pace* Kapferer 1991). In fact, it seems to be exactly the other way around. Thus the effect of comedy in the Darhad shamanic ritual described above was to make the "demons" (shamanic spirits) come to life, as opposed to ritually "killing them," as is the case in Sri Lanka (1991). From the point of view of the interpreter and the rest of the audience, adding a frame of "make-believe" to the ritual did something that the previous frame of "let-believe" (prayers, incantations) had not been able to, namely, making the spirits appear in the shaman's body so people could interact with them. Far from reducing the influence of the spirits, as in Sinhalese exorcism, joking in Darhad shamanism thus seems to render the shamanic spirits more influential. In that sense, the Nadmid Udgan's "interpreter" acted as more than a mere translator in the above ritual.⁴ In fact, she emerges as a

conjurer in her own right, a sort of substitute shaman, who deployed humor and joking in order to stretch out or apportion the shamanic cosmos in a certain way.

Joking as Spiritual Apportioning

Our point is not that the Darhad shamanic spirits are somehow more real (let alone less real) until they are joked with. Rather, we contend, the reality of spirits is the premise (as opposed to the outcome) of the joking relationships at hand. The problem, then, is not whether the spirits exist, but *how* they exist. This is supported by the fact that different spirits are not equally “ready-to-hand” (Willerslev 2004b), just as different kinds of persons have different mastery of them. In fact, shamans and laypeople seem to entertain quite different ideas of what an *ongon* is (Humphrey 1996). For the shamans, the spirits exist in an ontological continuum: they are always potentially present inasmuch as they may be accessed through prayers at any given time. Conversely, the laymen’s relationship with the spirits is one of ontological rupture: either the spirits are here in the form of an invasive possession of peoples’ bodies (*biye*) or souls (*süns*), or they are not here. This difference showed in the above ritual, which, from the point of view of the audience, began with a boring sequence of invocations, during which the shamanic spirits were not perceived to be present (they were “up there” in the skies). This was followed by a much more exciting period of possession, when the spirit was understood to be “down here” (insofar as he had taken abode in the shaman’s body).

In addition to this differentiation between shamans and laymen, there is an equally clear pecking order between the shamanic spirits. Thus “gossip spirits” are “light” (*hüngün*), whereas ancestral spirits (like Father of Harmai) are “heavy” (*hünd*). Unlike the former, which both like to joke and be joked with, the latter must be treated with the utmost respect; indeed, it is highly dangerous to laugh at “heavy spirits,” just as they never joke with humans. Moreover, whereas “light” spirits are generally easy to invoke, the others can be much more difficult. As a Darhad shamaness once told Caroline Pegg, it may be necessary to invoke the spirits “more than one hundred times before they come” (2001: 133). Indeed, according to Bumochir Dulam, Mongolian shamans “change the meaning of song invocations when spirits do not come. They slowly change into coaxing.” (2001: 17).

Is that what the “interpreter’s” (judging from the audience’s hysterical laughter) shockingly rude debasement of the Father of Harmai in the aforementioned ritual was all about? To answer this question, it is useful to briefly return to Bruce Kapferer’s study of Sinhalese exorcism. According to Kapferer (1991), the “transformation of the demonic” from a fearful state of unity to a laughable one of fragmentation is accomplished by means of different comical forms (dance, song, masks). Thus, as the exorcism rite proceeds, “[T]he demon’s shape in appearance is [made] homologous with the form of the comedy which preceded its entry. [The demon]

represents in himself the inconsistency of the comic and its revelation of contradiction” (Kapferer 1991: 303). Now, if the first part of the Darhad shamanic ritual discussed above established a bridge between two contradictory ideas of what a spirit is – a distal transcendental entity residing up in “the skies,” and a much more immanent soul moving in and out of the shaman’s body – was this not precisely because the “interpreter’s” jokes made the Father of Harmai “homologous with the form of the comedy which preceded its entry”?

We suggest that joking in Darhad possession rituals involves the appropriation of one aesthetic form to elicit another, homologous aesthetic form, namely, in the specific case at hand, the invocation of the shamanic spirit Father of Harmai in its most immanent manifestation through the equally worldly phenomenon of humor. If joking thus emerges as a distinct shamanic modality – an occult technique with different properties than other occult techniques like prayer and sacrifice – then this is because it is imbued with the capacity to mold the cosmos in a particular way. After all, that is precisely what seems to have happened in the above ritual: the “interpreter’s” jokes played the role of a sort of occult leveling mechanism by means of which the Father of Harmai was momentarily *put down* from his elevated position in “the skies.” However, this should not be understood as a conventional carnivalesque event, where humor and laughter serve to undermine dominant power structures (e.g., Mbembe 1992). The interpreter’s joking with the spirit put the latter down, yes; but the particular debasement at hand did not simply involve a sociological deflation of the Father of Harmai’s rank within the cosmic pecking order; it also gave rise to an ontological actualization as this spirit was suddenly forced to materialize from his transcendental abode in “the skies.”

Darhad shamanic joking, then, is about making relations that differentiate – it is about continually making nonhumans on par with humans, without, for that reason, pretending that the two belong to one realm, as if the world added up to a single whole.⁵ In that sense, the play with contrasting ontologies that we have explored in this first case study – between respecting and upholding hierarchies and yet simultaneously mocking and collapsing them, and between taking spirits seriously and at the same time teasing them – allows for an ongoing escape from the always lurking dangers of holistic totalization. More precisely, these and possibly other joking practices emerge as proportional practices in Corsín-Jiménez’s sense (2007) – as technologies for apportioning a given totality of relations into its proper shapes and sizes, in ways that call to mind to the practices of “permitted disrespect” described by Radcliffe-Brown and other structural-functionalist students of joking relationships. In both African kinship systems and North Asian animist cosmologies, the “conjunctive and disjunctive components” of relations are continually recombined so that a fragile balance between proximity and distance is kept intact. Thus, among the Darhads of Mongolia and possibly elsewhere in North Asia, joking is not a matter of relativizing the cosmos by creating reflexive distance to it. Rather, it is about securing the world’s distance to itself through ongoing acts of spiritual apportioning.

Ridiculing the Spirits: The Role of Humor in Yukaghir Hunting Animism

Let us move to the boreal forest and tundra of northeastern Siberia, which is the home of the Yukaghirs, a tiny group of Paleo-Siberian hunters living along the tributaries of the Upper Kolyma River. Besides having survived centuries of demographic decline, the people are remarkable in having maintained an economy based largely on hunting. This condition has taken a further step after the collapse of the state farm in 1991, when people for the most part returned to a pure subsistence-based lifestyle. Due to the paramount importance of hunting, and despite all the vicissitudes of Sovietization, the Yukaghirs have maintained animistic beliefs in “spirit owners,” who are said to control the prey animals and release them in a certain number as food to hunters if they follow the proper rules of conduct. The Yukaghirs, then, do not see the supernatural as a level of reality separate from nature. To them, the spirits are inhabitants of the same world as humans and animals, and they are experienced, at least in certain situations, as being just as real (Willerslev 2007).

In this respect, the brown bear is of particular significance. Not because its meat is especially important in the subsistence economy of the Yukaghirs, who live mainly from hunting the elk, but because the bear is believed to be loaded with an unsurpassed spiritual potency. As Ingold has stated with regard to the attitude of circumpolar peoples toward the bear, and which also holds true for the Yukaghirs, “Every individual bear ranks in his own right as being on a par with the animal masters, indeed he may ... *be* [equivalent with] a master” (1986: 257; emphasis in original). The fact that the bear, of all the animals, is singled out as being especially powerful is perhaps most clearly reflected in the elaborate ritual treatment of its carcass after it has been killed. Hunters generally try to make out the whole affair as an unfortunate accident, for which they are not to be blamed. They will bow their heads in humility before the dead animal and say, “Grandfather, who did this to you? A Russian killed you.” Before removing its skin, they will blindfold it or poke its eyes out while croaking like a raven. This will persuade the bear that it was a bird that blinded it. Moreover, while skinning the bear, they will say, “Grandfather, you must feel warm. Let us take off your coat.” Having removed its flesh, the hunters then deposit its cleared bones on a raised platform as the Yukaghirs used to do with an honored deceased relative. If the ritual is violated, all sorts of terrible misfortunes are said to be sparked off. Thus, Yukaghir myths and other narratives are crammed with stories about hunters who fail to obey the ritual prescriptions and as a result lose their hunting prowess, so that the entire camp staves to death. Likewise, other narratives describe how some disobedient hunter is violently killed by a relative of the dead bear that seeks blood revenge for its “murder” (Zukova et al. 1989; Spiridonov 1996 [1930]).

It is exactly because of these strict rules of etiquette governing the bear hunt that the following observation made by Willerslev comes as a rather shocking

surprise. He was out hunting together with two Yukaghirs, an elderly and a younger hunter, and they had succeeded in killing a big bear. While the elderly hunter was poking out its eyes with his knife and croaking like a raven as custom prescribes, the younger one, who was standing a few meters away, shouted to the bear, "Grandfather don't be fooled, it is a man, Vasili Afanasivich, who killed you and he is now blinding you!" At first the elderly hunter doing the butchering stood stock-still as if he was in shock, but then he looked at his younger partner and they both began laughing ecstatically as if the whole ritual endeavor was one big joke. Then the elderly hunter said to the younger one, "Stop fooling around and go and make a platform for the grandfather's bones." However, he sounded by no means disturbed. Quite the opposite, in fact: he was still laughing while giving the order. The only really disturbed person was Willerslev, who saw the episode as posing a serious threat to his whole research agenda, which was to "take animism seriously" (see Willerslev 2007). The hunter's joke and their ridiculing of the ritual event suggested that underlying the Yukaghir animistic cosmology was a force of laughter, of ironic distance, of making fun of the spirits. How could Willerslev as an anthropologist take the spirits seriously, when not even the animists themselves did so?

Willerslev experienced several incidents of this kind of ridiculing the spirits. At one time, for example, an old hunting leader was making an offering to his helping-spirit, which is customary before an upcoming hunt. However, while throwing tobacco, tea, and vodka into the fire, he shouted, "Give me prey, your bitch!" Everyone present doubled up with laughter. Likewise, a group of hunters once took a small plastic doll, bought in the local village shop, and started feeding it with fat and blood. While bowing their heads before the doll, which to everyone's mind was obviously a false idol with no spiritual dispositions whatsoever, they exclaimed sarcastically, "*Khoziain* [Rus. 'spirit-master'] needs feeding." Now, direct questioning about such apparent breaches of etiquette often proved fruitless. One hunter simply replied, "We are just having fun," while another one came up with a slightly more elaborate answer: "We make jokes about *Khoziain* because we are his friends. Without laughter, there will be no luck. Laughing is compulsory to the game of hunting."

So what conclusion should we draw from this? Should we say that the Yukaghirs have lost faith in their ancient animist ideology as a result of the longstanding Russian and Soviet impact on their modes of thinking – implying that their joking about the spirits reflects an increasing lack of belief in them? Or should we adopt a more structural(ist) perspective, and consider such joking to be a way of maintaining a grand cosmological alliance between the human and the nonhuman realms, in the manner of Roberta Hamayon (1990)? We think neither is the case. Instead, we turn to the Marxist-inspired scholar of postmodernist (and late socialist) discourse Slavoj Žižek (1989) for inspiration. Ideology in its conventional Marxist sense, Žižek asserts, "consists in the very fact that the people 'do not know what they are doing,' that they have a false representation of the social reality to which they belong" (1989: 31). Clearly, this does not apply to the Yukaghirs, as they

maintain an ironic distance toward their official animist cosmology along with its requirements of treating the spirits with extreme respect. Indeed, it is exactly the discordance between this prescribed ceremonial rhetoric of marked respect and the hunters' practices of deception and manipulation that the jokes expose and that make them funny. Even so, after a good laugh, the hunters always insist upon keeping to the official rhetoric and they continue to behave according to the prescribed rules of ritual conduct. Thus, the formula proposed by Žižek for the workings of ideology in the cynical and hyper-self-reflexive milieu of postmodernism seems to fit the Yukaghirs as well: "They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (1989: 29).⁶ The Yukaghirs, therefore, are not really naïve animists in the sense of blindly believing in the authority of the spirits. Rather, they know very well that in conducting their ritual activities, they are following an illusion. Still they do not renounce it, but continue to do it even so.

But if the Yukaghirs are no hapless victims of false consciousness, but are fully aware of the disparity between the rhetoric of spiritual authority and their actual practices toward these entities, then we must ask what the importance of this gap is. In addressing this question, we need to discuss the key principle governing the Yukaghir hunting economy, which is the principle of "sharing."

The Impossibility of Sharing

The Yukaghir distribution of resources follows in many respects a traditional hunter-gatherer economic model of sharing in that they run what Nicolas Peterson (1993) has described as a "demand sharing" principle. This implies that people are expected to make claims on other people's possessions and those who possess more than they can immediately consume or use are expected to give it up without expectation of repayment. This principle of sharing affects virtually everything from trade goods, such as cigarettes and fuel, to knowledge about how to hunt, but it applies most forcefully to the distribution of meat: "I eat, you eat. I have nothing, you have nothing, we all share of one pot," the Yukaghirs say (Willerslev 2007: 39). The important point for our argument, however, is that Yukaghir hunters engage with the nonhuman world of animal spirits in much the same way as they engage with other humans, namely, through the principle of demand sharing. Thus, in the forest, hunters will ask – even demand – the spiritual owners to share their stock of prey with them in much the same way as they do with fellow humans who possess resources beyond their immediate needs. They will, for example, address the spirits of the rivers and places where they hunt by saying, "Grandfather, your children are hungry and poor. Feed us as you have fed us before!"

In this sense, their animist cosmology could be interpreted as an integrated system, an all-embracing cosmic principle based in sharing. This is in fact the argument proposed by Nurit Bird-David (1990, 1992) in her study of how hunter-gatherers

relate to their natural environments. Thus, she proposes that for the Nayaka of southern India, the Batek of Malaysia, and the Mbuti of Zaire, the forest is regarded as a “parent,” who gives them food in overabundance without expecting anything in return – what she labels the “giving environment” (Bird-David 1992: 28). The trouble is that Bird-David, in proposing this argument, assumes that the hunting rhetoric of these hunter-gatherers faithfully “matches” their activity of hunting. As such, she assumes that she can look through their words to the actuality they point to, as if words and deeds could be mapped onto one another in a simple one-to-one correspondence. But they can’t – for if they could, we would have aligned these hunter-gatherers with something akin to a cultural “death wish,” for surely a society that hunts by simply waiting for the forest to “feed” them, without making any preparations or taking any effort, would not survive long. What this points to, is that the Yukaghirs’ rhetoric about the forest being a “generous parent” is not meant to be taken too literally. Rather, it is a sophisticated means of spirit manipulation, which is an inherent, and even necessary, part of the Yukagir hunting animism.

This becomes evident when we realize that a paradox is built into the moral economy of sharing, which makes it risky – lethal, in fact – to take the principle of unconditional giving at face value. We have already seen that in a sharing economy, people have the right to demand that those who possess goods beyond their immediate needs to give them up. With regard to the hunter–spirit relationship, this means that, as long as an animal spirit possesses prey in plenty, the hunter is entitled to demand the spirit to share its animal resources with him, and the spirit for its part is obliged to comply with the hunter’s demands. However, if the wealth divide between the two agencies becomes displaced, their respective roles as donor and recipient will be inverted and the spirit will now be entitled to demand the hunter to share his resources with it, and it will assert its claim by striking him with sickness and death.⁷ What this points to, then, is that the condition of truly radical sharing with the animal spirits is ultimately unsustainable and indeed self-destructive as it sooner or later ends with the roles of donor and recipient being reversed, so that the human hunters fall prey to the spirits of their animal prey.⁸

The hunters’ response is to transform the sharing relationship with the spirits into a “play of dirty tricks” (Rus. *pákostit’*), which effectively means turning the hunt into a game of “sexual seduction” by inducing in the animal spirit an illusion of a lustful play (Willerslev 2007: 89–118).⁹ The feelings of sexual lust evoked in the spirit are then extended to its physical counterpart, the animal, which the next morning, when the hunter goes out in search for prey, will run toward him and “give itself up” to him in the expectation of experiencing a climax of sexual excitement (Willerslev 2007: 89–118). However, after the killing of the animal, its spirit will realize that what it took to be lustful play was in fact a brutal murder, and it will seek revenge accordingly. The hunter, therefore, must cover up the fact that he was the one responsible for the animal’s death. We have already described this procedure in relation to the bear ritual, where hunters by means of various tactics of

displacement and substitution will seek to direct the anger of the animal spirit against non-Yukaghirs, humans and nonhumans alike. As a result, the hunter himself will not appear to have taken anything from the spirit, at least not formally, and no sharing relation was therefore ever established between the two. This in turn rules out the spirit's right to demand the hunter's soul. In this way, hunters seek to maximize benefit at the spirit's expense, while avoiding the risk of falling into the position of potential donor. This corresponds in effect to what Marshall Sahlins (1972: 195) has called "theft," which he characterizes as "the attempt to get something for nothing," and which he argues to be "the most impersonal sort of exchange [that] ranges through various degrees of cunning, guile, stealth, and violence."

Creating Discrepancy Through Laughter

Radcliffe-Brown saw joking relationships as a particular way of ordering relationships, which combine attachment, or "conjunction," with separation, or "disjunction," between social agencies (1952a: 98). Thus, joking relationships represent the very "contrary" or "polar opposite" of "extreme respect" and "avoidance" (1952b: 106). Nonetheless, he asserted that the two are often co-present, as the Chinese *Yin* and *Yang* symbolism in which two opposites are required to make a unity or harmony. Relations of joking and respect do, in this sense, add up to a whole, yet it is a whole defined by irreducible differences – what Radcliffe-Brown called "unity in duality" (1952b: 115).

In line with this argument, we propose that Yukaghir hunting animism is characterized by a similar "unity of duality" as the morally negative reality of "theft" is co-present with the morally positive reality of "sharing." The first reality is "official" and emphasizes the ethos not only of unconditional giving, but also of marked respect and interpersonal dependency between the human and spiritual realms. In the other, parallel reality, the hunter is engaged in thievery, with its own moral codex of seduction, trickery, and even murder. While the two realities are essentially opposed, they nevertheless occur in one and the same social space, which is why it makes sense to say that both realities are equally animist (for animism is not restricted to an official sphere, but encompasses all aspects of Yukaghir life). Contrary to the functionalist underpinnings of Radcliffe-Brown's theory, the two realities – the dimension of sharing and the dimension of theft – are, therefore, *not* and should *never* be collapsed into a unified whole. An essential element of noncoincidence between the two must always be kept in place, and is kept in place, because it is exactly due to this disparity between the official rhetoric and the practical actions of hunters that they know the illusion of their own cosmological economy of sharing. Indeed, it is this very "fission" within Yukaghir hunting animism that allows hunters to be the bearers of firm cosmological beliefs in the demand-sharing principle without absolutely coinciding with them.

Let there be no misunderstanding. We do not mean to suggest that through joking, hunters question the reality of the existence of spirits as do the Singhalese, whose “laughter dispels [the spirits] to an unreal state of ‘make-believe’” (Kapferer 1991: 315–25). Rather, their joking reveals that they do not take the authority of the spirits as seriously as they usually say they do or their mythology tells them to do. Joking and other types of ridiculing discourses about spirits play a prominent role in the everyday life of hunters, not because they entail resistance to or subversion of the dominant cosmological values of the sharing economy. To celebrate hunters’ ridiculing of spirits as some deliberate last-ditch resistance to ideological domination would be to miss the point entirely. Virtually all Yukaghirs ascribe to the demand-sharing principle and regard it as both immutable and morally just. However, they are well aware that this system or indeed whole must never become a pervasive totality of force. For the Yukaghirs such a condition of totalizing holism would ultimately stand for “death” as it would give the spirits the moral right to “consume” them in a series of divine predatory attacks. To avoid this, hunters must constantly steer a difficult course between parallel realities by transcending the animist rhetoric through equally animistic forms of seduction and deception, while also maintaining morally positive relations of sharing with the animal spirits. In this, the ongoing ridiculing of the spirits plays a key role, for it reminds hunters not to “read” the complex of myths, beliefs, and rituals too literally, but instead to carve out a parallel space of their own at the right angle, so to speak, from the moral discourse of respect.

Conclusion

Numerous books on North Asia’s indigenous peoples have presented them as victims of dominant political, economical, and cultural forces that have uprooted their livelihoods and cosmologies. Indeed, the prevailing sensation that the animist cosmos is at the verge of losing its shape, and that certain apportioning acts must be performed to prevent this from happening, could be seen as a result of the fact that these groups were for 50 years subjects of state socialist polities that ridiculed, banned, and often penalized the “superstitious” beliefs and practices we discussed in the two case studies.

However, the trouble with this line of thinking – at least when pursued with too vigorous a sense of conviction in terms of its own explanatory superiority – is that it risks falling into the very same totalizing trap as the structural-functionalists once did. While the “large” societal transformations of the postsocialist transition evidently have an impact on the cosmological ideas and practices of “small” indigenous peoples like the Darhads and the Yukaghir, our concern in this chapter has not been to describe the interplay between these two scales by “holistically” collapsing them one onto each other. Instead of addressing whether the animist cosmos should represent a “whole” or a “part” in our construction of an analytical context,

our concern has been what these people are doing for the world to assume the shape and size they find fit. Instead of trying to answer the moot question of whether our analytical models are (and should be) holistic or not, we have focused on the question of whether, and if so how, different ethnographic subjects perform *holism* as a distinct social practice. In this sense, what we have done in this chapter has itself been an act of (analytical) apportioning – a comparative account of two proportional wholes and how people do these, as opposed to the wholes (or parts) envisioned by anthropology and the holism performed by us.

As we have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, joking constitutes an important (albeit surely not the only) proportional holistic practice in the Northern Asian context. When Darhads and Yukaghirs make fun with the spirits, this should not be understood as acts of enlightened resistance, whereby they seek to liberate themselves from hegemonic yokes of domination. Quite the opposite, in fact: both the Darhads and the Yukaghirs consciously inscribe themselves at the center of their animist worlds, without any wish of breaking out from them. Their aim is not to resist, but to actualize the spirit, which cannot function properly (elicit effects) through forms of totalization, but only through forms of separation. As our two case studies have showed, joking relationships thus keep the animist cosmos bifurcated into parallel domains, enabling people to partake simultaneously in incongruous economies. Peoples' playful relationships toward their cosmological rules allow for an escape from the latent dangers of totalization by invoking alternative scenarios that maintain the balance between too much and too little integration, which is what animism is all about.

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Notes

- 1 By the traditional concept of "holism," we refer to how the term was deployed during the heyday of anthropological modernism between World War I and the mid-1970s (Parkin 2007: 2–3), namely, as the perfect integration of discrete parts into one encompassing whole. As has been pointed out by its many critics (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Olwig and Hastrup 1997), this concept of holism conveys the image of discrete units marked by stable and well-defined boundaries, which are qualitatively different and mutually independent, just like different "cultures" were once said to be.
- 2 See Pedersen (2001, 2007a, 2007c), Willerslev (2004, 2007), Holbraad and Willerslev (2007), Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev (2007), and Willerslev and Pedersen (2008).



- 3 Marilyn Strathern, for one, seems to be left unscathed from this critique. Thus, *Partial Connections* (2004) might be described as an attempt toward reflexive holism – an “experiment with the apportioning of ‘size’ in a deliberate manner” (Strathern 2004: xxix), which undermines the distinction between things and scales to challenge the conventions of anthropological analysis and ethnographic description, whether deemed holistic or not (see Holbraad and Pedersen forthcoming).
- 4 Incidentally, the term *helmerch*, in addition to meaning “interpreter,” is also used to denote the matchmakers who, supposedly, played a vital role at the traditional Mongolian wedding. Apparently, each side was here represented by a *helmerch*, who would perform a “dialogue ... not carried on in normal conversation, but in a highly developed art of spontaneous poetry. The bride’s speaker trie[d] to make it difficult for the groom’s spokesman by changing rhyme and meter. This, in turn, [was] matched and followed at every poetic turn by the spokesman of the groom” (Jagchid and Hyer 1979: 84). According to Wasilewski (1983), who identifies the role of the *helmerch* as that of a typical trickster, “[T]he illusion [which the matchmaker] establishes by means of quick words – whereby he appears similar to the prestidigitator or magician – will be recognised as deception. The Mongolian matchmakers are cheat[ing] during the wedding and the result of their actions – leading the bride toward her married status – is thus understood as betrayal” (51).
- 5 According to Hamayon, “Shamanism supposes being on equal footing with the spirits... [S]uch attitudes are contrary to the aloofness and respectful submission to God required in world religions. Transcendence precludes direct contact, identification and imitation, all of which amount to denying it” (1992: 19–20). This, however, is not to say that spirits are *like* humans. As Urgunge Onon recalled from his childhood in Manchuria, the shamanic spirits (*barkan*) “were not ‘higher’ than human beings, just different.” For, as he said, “if you ask me whether *barkans* were higher than human beings that’s almost like asking if a horse is higher than a cow, or a cow higher than a horse; they are just entirely different” (Humphrey 1996: 191). In the same way, one could rhetorically state, Darhad shamanic spirits must also be “entirely different from” people, for if they were not, why then have an “interpreter” at all?
- 6 Zizek dismisses the classical Marxist notion of ideology as “false consciousness.” To him, the very objects of study are those everyday ironic narratives, which are formed largely outside the control of a society’s dominant ideology, and which embody significant beliefs and practices at odds with it. This is not to say that Zizek denies that dominant ideologies exist; but he questions that they are an important means for lending cohesion and stability to a society, because such ruling ideologies are often internally fissured and contrary and usually quite unsuccessful in fully shaping the consciousness of their subordinates.
- 7 Indeed, we find this fearful reversal of roles described again and again in Yukaghir narratives, where it is told that a spirit out of “love” for a particular hunter makes him take all the prey offered (Willerslev 2007: 44–7). As a result, he comes to stand out as accumulating a surplus of animal souls, which in turn gives the spirit the right to go and kill him and drag his soul back to its dwelling place as its “spouse.”
- 8 To the critical reader, this might appear to be more like an act of “reciprocity” than “sharing.” However, as has been argued elsewhere, sharing and reciprocity are not necessarily manifestly different forms of exchange, as many writers of hunter-gatherers would have it (see, e.g., Bird-David 1990, 1992; Woodburn 1998: 50; Gell 1992: 152), but



are rather “reversibles” that contain or eclipse the other within (Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev 2007: 533).

- 9 Thus, before an upcoming hunt, hunters will undergo a long process of “dehumanization” in which their bodies are transformed in the image of prey. This involves going to the sauna the evening before the hunt, where they will wipe themselves with dry whisks from birch trees. Hunters say that the prey recognizes the attractive smell of birch and does not flee, but comes closer to them. Likewise, a hunter must abstain from sex altogether before undertaking a hunting trip. This is partly to avoid a human stench on his body, but also because his sexual attention should be directed toward the animal’s spirit, which is visited by his soul (Yuk. *ayibii*) during his nightly dreams in order for the two to have sexual intercourse.

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