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# Relational Epistemology, Immediacy, and Conservation: Or, What Do the Nayaka Try to Conserve?

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## Abstract

In this paper we ask whether and in what way Animism relates to conservation, with focus on one group, the Nayaka of South India. We argue that in order to pursue this question one must first recognize the immediate quality of Nayaka Animism as well as some important aspects in their relational epistemology (Bird-David 1999a, 2006). Our analysis shows that Nayaka are not committed to conserve their environment. Their concern lies mainly with keeping good relations with specific co-dwellers in the shared environment in ways and for reasons which we explore in the paper. This concern has indeed some conservationist effects, but as a byproduct. Our analysis also shows a valuable *way-of-knowing*, as much as the nowadays appreciated *'indigenous knowledge'*. These arguments are supported by Nayaka ethnography, and are further clarified by a preliminary heuristic comparison between the model which can be identified from the ethnography and the model which informs an ambitious international program for biodiversity conservation which is implemented in the Nilgiris of South India, where the Nayaka live.

## *Introduction*

In this paper we address a common stereotype of 'animist hunter-gatherers', which prevails among students and policy makers concerned with biodiversity conservation in protected areas. Put in exaggerated terms, it is that:

a. They revere the spirits whom they perceive to populate their environment.
b. Their religions render them conservationists, albeit in their own exotic idioms and ways.

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c. Their ancient traditions going back thousands of years generated an invaluable 'indigenous knowledge' that must be preserved.

We seek to introduce recent anthropological insights on Animism into the discussion of indigenous conservation, and meanwhile develop these insights further. We focus on a particular indigenous community, the Nayaka,[1] who live in the Nilgiris of South India. This mountainous area was chosen in 1980 to be India's first biosphere reserve under the *Man and the Biosphere* program (MAB) launched by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The gist of our argument is that the *immediate horizon of animistic worldviews* has not yet been paid its due attention in the anthropological discussion; by immediacy, as shown below, we mean concern with what can be directly and personally engaged with (see Bird-David 1994a). By recognizing the dimension of immediacy, it is possible to examine more subtly the ways in which Animism and conservation overlap and differ as cultural models.

It should be emphasized that we focus on those aspects of Nayaka beliefs and practices that can be read in Western terms as conservationist. Nayaka increasingly engage in other activities that can be read, to the contrary, as non-conservationist, whether when working for outside employers or on their own, the discussion of which is outside the scope of this article. Our concern here is to probe seemingly conservationist Nayaka practices, in order to differentiate between them and the agenda of MAB, regarding this agenda as a specific but influential variant of the great diversity of Western senses of conservation. First, we state below our theoretical argument concerning Animism, and introduce our ethnographic case, which together we have studied for more than 25 years. Then, we illustrate our argument by our respective ethnographies. Lastly, we elucidate Nayaka Animism by means of a comparison with the Western conservation model which is expressed through the MAB program.

## *The Argument and the Case: Relational Epistemology, Immediacy, and Nayaka*

'Animism' classically reified indigenous ideas and practices which were seen as manifestations of a form of religion that concerned itself with a belief in spirits who populate the natural world. Recent work re-read

1. For a detailed introduction to the Nayaka, see Bird-David 1989, 1994b. See also Bird-David 1999b.

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afresh the same indigenous ideas and practices as manifestations of non-dualistic, holistic understandings of the environment (e.g. Bird-David 1990, 1992, 1999a; Descola 1992, 1994, 1996; Harvey 2005; Ingold 2000; Stringer 1999; Viveros de Castro 1998; but see also Hallowell 1955). For hunting and gathering societies, in particular, it has been argued that these practices and ideas amount to a 'relational epistemology' (Bird-David 1999a), which privileges relational ways of knowing-and-being-in-the-environment. It has been further argued that these ideas and practices express valid understandings of the environment, from which Western scientists can learn (Ingold 2000; Merculieff 1994).

The new work has been partly motivated and afforded by late twentieth-century awakening to the relative cultural stance of the dualist Cartesian distinction between 'subjects' and 'objects', and between 'culture' and 'nature'. This realization partly freed the 'animist problem' from the terms which helped to create it. In these dualist terms, indigenous people figured as people who curiously impute to 'objects' that which *by definition* only 'subjects' uniquely and exclusively have, namely, life, personhood, volition, intention, and sociality. By recognizing the cultural specificity of these framing terms, students were able richly to map the indigenous holistic understandings of an undivided world in terms of overarching indigenous notions of personhood, subjectivity, life, and relations. They explored the indigenous trans-species notions, for example, of 'personhood', which cuts across the modern dualistic object/subject and nature/culture divides, and how *within* such overarching notions of 'personhood', distinctions are drawn between diverse kinds, for example, between human–person, elephant–person, tree–person, hill–person, and so on.

Developing this research, we argue in this paper that in describing indigenous cosmoses as 'full of subjects', in juxtaposition to a modern one 'full of objects', studies exorcise Cartesian subject/object dualism from the indigenous cosmos. Yet, in the same breath, these studies re-situate this dualism *between* the indigenous and the modern cosmoses. To the extent that studies describe indigenous *universes* of interrelated *subjects*, they are still tethered to a modern concern with a *total* universe, and to an overarching formal category, 'the subject', as a means for mapping its diversity. We maintain that substituting ontological 'persons' (or 'relations' or 'subjectivities') for ontological 'things' is crucial, yet not sufficient for understanding indigenous senses of the environment. A twofold move is required which, like the move of the Knight in a chess game, involves both this substitution and, simultaneously, a shift from universal to immediate horizons of attention. This is not a new argument. Bird-David (1999a) mentioned it as part of her conceptualization

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of 'relational epistemology'. But it has drowned in the rest of the argument, and it needs to be drawn out. In some sense, the argument is integral to Ingold's thesis that personhood in these views arises within, and is the locus of, fields of relations. One can read from this thesis that personhood is contingent on, and so restricted to, the horizons of corporeal being-with others. But too often even this thesis is read in a generalizing and totalizing way to suggest a *universe* of relations everywhere and everywhen.

We set out to elucidate the immediate aspect of Nayaka relational epistemology through ethnographic examples that are drawn from our cumulative work with them for over a quarter of a century. The Nayaka are forest-dwellers, who live in the Wynaad area of the Nilgiris hills, in South India, in the border-area of Tamil Nadu, Kernataka, and Kerala. They were first studied by Bird-David during 1978 and 1979, followed by brief revisits in 1989 and 2001. Naveh studied them during 2003 and 2004, following a preliminary visit in 2001. These Nayaka traditionally subsisted on gathering and hunting, which they combined with trade in minor forest produce, then, with wage work, and nowadays, increasingly, with cultivation and animal husbandry. At the same time, they have been involved in clearing forest tracts whether as casual wage laborers for agricultural neighbors and corporate plantations or, increasingly, for themselves in order to make their own small tea and coffee plantations. Yet, Naveh found out that the relational animistic epistemology, which Bird-David observed in the late 1970s, has survived the economic diversification in many contexts of Nayaka life.

The Nayaka live in an area which adds a comparative analytical edge to our ethnographic case. As mentioned, the Nilgiris were India's first biosphere reserve under the ambitious MAB program launched by UNESCO in the early 1970s. From its inception, MAB was international and interdisciplinary in its very nature. Furthermore, it was geared to practical as well as academic concerns. In 1995, MAB was substantially revised with the adoption of the 1995 Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves. Its revised aims included enhancement of global networking between biosphere reserves around the world, and incorporation into its work of all levels of government, NGOs, the private sector, and citizens. Its revised aims also included enhanced attention to local livelihoods, local social, economic and cultural conditions, and local indigenous knowledge.[2] In 1979 the MAB concept came into practice in India with the establishment of the Indian MAB Committee. In 1986, the Nilgiris became the first designated biosphere reserve in India (Siroli Shekhar

2. See www.unesco.org/mab/mabProg, accessed 10 December 2006.

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2001). It now ranks among the 25 globally identified biodiversity hotspots (Daniels 2006). It is described in the MAB directory[3] as the habitat for probably the largest South Indian populations of tigers (*Panthera tigris*), elephants (*Elephas maximus*) and other large mammals. Furthermore, the MAB directory commends it for being the habitat of 'the only surviving hunter-gatherers of the Indian subcontinent, the Cholanaikans who concentrate in the Nilambur area'. The Cholanaikans are closely related to the Nayaka on whom we focus: one of Naveh's fieldwork sites was inhabited by people of both Cholanaikans and KattuNayaka origins, both of whom are referred to in our study as Nayaka.

In order to elucidate the immediate aspect in Nayaka relational epistemology through our ethnography, we tease out its salient features, at the end of the paper, by comparing 'relational epistemology' and 'biodiversity conservation' as 'cultural models'. By 'cultural models', cognitive anthropologists mean cognitive structures that help people organize and process information about the world around them, and attribute meaning and significance to events and experiences. We use the term 'cognitive models' in a weaker sense, to refer to cognitive structures which help us—writers and readers—organize, process, and understand information about the Nayaka and the MAB worlds in focus. We comparatively refer to the 'conservation' model as a heuristic means for showing that immediacy is cardinal, crucial, and characteristic of the Nayaka 'relational epistemology' model.

## *Expressions of Immediacy in Nayaka Engagement with Super-persons*[4]

*Devaru* is a notion by which late 1970s Nayaka referred to some beings in their environment in certain situations. One can translate *devaru* as 'gods' or 'idols'.[5] In these senses, 'devaru' (or, in some places, 'deva') is used by Nayaka's Hindu neighbors, and, since the 1990s, increasingly by Nayaka themselves. One can translate 'devaru', instead, as 'supernatural beings', 'animistic beings', or 'super-persons' (Bird-David 1999a), keeping more closely to the Nayaka traditional sense, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, and to some degree still today, especially in the context of trance gatherings (see Bird-David 1990). All of these translations, to some

3. See www2.unesco.org/mab/br/brdir/directory 2/12/06.

4. The discussion in this section is largely based on Bird-David's 1978–79 fieldwork.

5. *Devaru* is used by Kanada-speaking neighbors in the sense of 'gods' and 'idols'.

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extent, conceal the immediate, relational aspect of *devaru*. The *devaru* are perceived by Nayaka not so much in essentialistic terms as entities of this or that natural kind, but more as coevals and, in some cases, even as relatives of diverse kinds. They are considered as other-than-human persons, with whom Nayaka communicate and share, and who constitute with Nayaka a joint local 'family' (*sonta*) (see Bird-David 2004).

Elephants—whose relatively large population in the Nilgiris is one of the stated attractions of this area in MAB's terms—provide an illuminating example. Late 1970s Nayaka described some elephants as *devaru*. They did not apply this word to all the elephants in the world, nor to all those who lived in the Nilgiris, or even just in their own parts thereof, the Nilgiri-Wynnad. In other words, Nayaka did not use *devaru* for the class at large, that is, for all the elephants everywhere and everywhen because of their assumed, shared, inert 'elephantness'. Rather, Nayaka used the word for specific elephants, in particular situations, examples of which are given below. These examples demonstrate that these situations are characterized by immediacy not just in the physical sense of close distance, but in a social-phenomenological one, as well. Immediacy in the latter sense refers to a certain way of being-together that can be described as coevalness, to use Fabian's term (Fabian 1983).

A 50 year old Nayaka man, Chathen, related that during the night he had seen an *anna-devaru* (*anna* meaning elephant) 'walking harmlessly' between the houses. The fact that the elephant had not destroyed any of the houses, as could have been expected, and as had often happened before and after this particular event, led Chathen to refer to that elephant as *devaru*. This elephant's behavior was relatively unusual, compared with other elephants known to Nayaka. Its unusual behavior was read as an expression of the kind of care which one would show towards people one is close to, whom one is concerned not to hurt and live amicably alongside. This elephant's behavior was explicitly contrasted with the behavior of two other elephants that in a previous incident trampled two huts in a neighboring Nayaka settlement, luckily not injuring any Nayaka, who happened to be away that night. The offending elephants, on the latter occasion, were not referred to as *anna-devaru*.

In another case, a younger Nayaka man, aged 35, a keen honey collector, related how during a foray in the forest he encountered an *anna-devaru*. The *anna-devaru* passed by Chellan, and 'looked straight into his eyes'. Chellan explained that this was how he knew that he met a *devaru*-elephant. He surmised from the elephant's behavior that the elephant knew him, and communicated with him nonverbally. Chellan appreciated the care and concern shown by the elephant. It can be seen that Nayaka identified *devaru* in situations which, in their terms, were

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expressive of care and consideration. In observer's terms, inspired by Gibson's work (1979), these situations are relatively unusual events, involving what can be constructed in our analytical terms as mutuality, responsibility, and responsiveness.

When intimate engagement is preempted by circumstances, as in the next example, the elephant is not regarded as a *devaru*. Its *devaru*-ness, in other words, is contingent on the engagement with it, and is concluded *after* this fact. Its *devaru*-ness is not innate to its nature. One Nayaka man named Kungan once took Bird-David along on a gathering expedition. They were not far away from the hamlet when Kungan heard an elephant in the direction they were aiming for. He quickly led Bird-David back to the hamlet, aborting the intended foray in order to preempt potential risk. Kungan did not come close to the elephant; he could not have known what the encounter would be like; he referred to the far away elephant as *anna*, not as *anna-devaru*. The *lack* of mutual engagement with that elephant, in this case, precluded from the outset the kind of relatedness which could have constituted *this* elephant (at *that* moment) as *devaru*.

It should be mentioned that the word *devaru* was not used only for elephants in the forest, but also for other certain 'non-sentient things' in Cartesian terms. To give an example, a Nayaka woman, Devi (age 40), related how she had been digging deep down for roots in the forest when, suddenly, 'this *devaru* came towards her'. She was pointing to a particular stone when she told this story. The stone stood next to several other similar stones on a small mud platform in the village. Devi continued to tell that after 'this *devaru* came towards her' she brought it to the hamlet 'to live' with them.

The concept of *devaru* was commonly used in the context of public trance gatherings, which are described at length elsewhere (Bird-David 1996, 1999a). In these gatherings, the meanings of *devaru* are explicated more clearly, helping us further to tease out the extended use of this concept in such incidences as just described. These incidences take place outside the particular time–space frame of the trance gathering, but in Nayaka terms they are continuous with it. Nayaka do not draw a dichotomy between the ritual and everyday life. During these gatherings, trance performers fall into a trance, and through them a diversity of 'persons' in altered states make themselves present, including local *devaru* (animistic persons). Attendant Nayaka engage in conversation with them, day and night. The conversation is highly personal, informal, and friendly, including joking, teasing, bargaining, and so on. In its idiomatic structure, it resembles the demand-sharing discourse which is characteristic of Nayaka relatives (and of 'hunter-gatherers' generally) (see Bird-David 1990).

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A recurring theme in the conversation between Nayaka and their other-than-human visitors is certain illnesses and other misfortunes, called *batha*, which Nayaka request their visitors to cure and protect them from. These illnesses, in the Nayaka view, are symptoms of disrupted relations in the Nayaka world: among Nayaka themselves, between Nayaka and the *devaru*, and, to some extent, even among the *devaru* themselves. The perceived cause, diagnosis, and treatment of *batha*, as described in detail elsewhere (Bird-David 2004), show that Nayaka are primarily concerned with keeping and restoring communication and good relations with the other-than-human dwellers, at all times. Harming or just hurting the feelings of other beings in the forest, knowingly or unknowingly, beyond what is inevitable in procuring means of subsistence from the forest, may result in problems to the offender or his/her relatives. The results can spread in ripples throughout the whole forest community of both humans and other-than-humans.

In this section, we have described the relatively unusual situations in which Nayaka engaged with forest interlocutors and other-than-human beings, who they frame as *devaru*. But how do they perceive and engage with other forest creatures, whom they encounter in the forest, or who arrive at their houses? Put more specifically, how do they perceive and engage with, say, the elephants whom they encounter, but whom they do not describe as *anna-devaru*? In his fieldwork, Naveh investigated this question, and we therefore turn to Nayaka in the early 2000s in order to pursue it.

### *Expressions of Immediacy in Nayaka Engagement with Forest Fauna and Flora*[6]

In MAB's terms, the Nayaka habitat is, among other things, unique for possibly having the largest South Indian population of *Elephas maximus* (elephant) (see above). This means that it has probably the largest number of elephants in the Nilgiris region; a number which is partly added up during predesignated short-term survey sightings in diverse sites, and is partly based on scholarly estimates according to scientific and statistical conventions. Nayaka *engage with unique elephant-beings*, in the course of their everyday life, on an immediate, regular, personal, and life-long basis.

Elephants commonly enter Nayaka villages, especially in the wet season. Such occurrences often end up with severe damage being caused to cultivated plants, and the destruction of houses, and may also result

6. The discussion in this section is largely based on Naveh's 2003–2004 fieldwork.

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in the loss of human life. These nocturnal visits provoke fear within the village. For instance, when children were woken by the bellowing of elephants at close quarters, they were sometimes unable to control their bladder and immediately urinated wherever they happened to be. During the past few decades many people, most of whom were not Nayaka, have been killed by elephants. The majority of Nayaka killed by elephants were men under the influence of alcohol. Except for these cases, close encounters between Nayaka people and elephants, although risky, did not result in death.

During Naveh's fieldwork he observed several encounters with elephants involving both Nayaka and non-Nayaka people. The difference between the Nayaka and the non-Nayaka approaches was clearly evident. Most of the non-Nayaka responded in a fairly similar manner each time they encountered elephants. Nayaka, on the other hand, reacted differently to each given situation. Non-Nayaka typically chose between two options: running away or attempting to chase the elephants away. The Nayaka responses were much more varied: chasing the elephants away by fire and loud vocal exclamations was a common response. However, many times they preferred other options, such as standing still or speaking with the elephants and reasoning with them.

One October night in 2003, elephants entered KK[7]; they trampled one of the huts, walked through the wetland paddies, and started to eat banana plants. While doing so, they also emitted loud bellows that were heard all over the village. One man went to about eight meters from where the elephants were standing, a distance that, should the need have arisen, would still have enabled him to run away. From there he approached the elephants boldly. In a typical blaming tone he said:

> *Seri* [in this sense 'ok'], if you want to eat, you silently eat and go. We have children here!

The elephants, then, stopped bellowing, and a few minutes later went away, out of the village.

When such close encounters occur away from the village, running off may not be a viable option. Elephants can easily catch up with a fleeing person and they do indeed tend to run after those who take flight. Thus, often when, to his surprise, a Nayaka finds himself in front of an elephant, he prefers to stand still and, as calmly as possible, to address the elephant in a persuasive tone of voice (characterized both by the tone and by the substance):

7. KK is a Nayaka village located about two hours walk Northwest of Gudalur (the main town in the lower parts of the Nilgiris district).

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> I am not coming to disturb you, or to do any harm to you.

The most frequently used rhetoric in such cases stresses what is common to both sides of the encounter:

> You are living in the forest, I am also living in the forest; you come to eat here, I am coming to take roots (fruits, fire wood, etc.)...I am not coming to do any harm to you.

Talking with elephants is a deliberate choice, as the following example illustrates:

> Mathen [aged 45] who was fairly drunk walked from his house towards Boman's house. After he crossed the brook (about 15 meters from Boman's house) he came across two elephants. When he finally noticed them he was so close that their eyes seemed to him like 'two electric torches'. He didn't know what to do and cried out to Boman's family for help: 'I am so close to two elephants...what to do?' Until that point, Boman's family was also oblivious to the presence of these elephants so close to their house. Unable to reach Mathen they advised him to 'speak with them'. After a few long seconds, Mathen came to his senses and said to the elephants: 'I know you can kill me...I know you can kill me. Hmm? But before you do that I can hit you with this stick at least one time. So you better go. Hmm?' Finally, the elephants moved away and left Mathen unharmed.

Elephants are not the only forest animals to whom Nayaka speak. On several occasions, Nayaka were observed speaking to parrots and monkeys. Nayaka even spoke to snakes, as the following story shows, which was related by a young Nayaka man, Suresh.

> One year before, we [referring to himself and another Nayaka man from his village] were going to the forest to collect firewood. We were walking through a place where there were no trees and the grass is tall. On the way there was a big snake about 4–5 feet long. We were so afraid we got shivering. This snake also sees us. Suddenly this snake was rising—standing still for a long time (*nera*) looking at us without any movement. We didn't know what to do. Then we were telling this snake 'we did not know you are here. We are coming here to collect firewood. In the days to come we shall not come here again. Leave us today only'. Then we stayed quiet and after that the snake went along.
>
> Naveh: I saw you talking to elephants, you also talk to snakes?
>
> Suresh: We speak with everyone in the forest.

Nayaka who were asked whether forest animals actually understand what is said to them offered different answers. Some of them claimed that all the animals in the forest understood human language; some thought that they only understand the Nayaka language. Those who thought this way deduced it from the fact that forest animals tend to hurt non-Nayaka more than Nayaka people. There were also others who

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thought that most forest animals do not understand any human language. As one man said: 'How can they understand us, they got the fear from us and they run away'. This man further reasoned that only elephants, and a few other animals such as snakes, understand what is said to them since they do not run away from people. For him, the animals are not inherently incapable of understanding language. It is the lack of sufficient conditions for engagement, because of fear, that prevents communication through language. It is noteworthy that Gardner (2000: 45) similarly notes that the Paliyan address hunted game as well as some other forest animals by using a special set of inoffensive and respectful terms and that 'animals hearing their true names are said to become ashamed and run off and hide'.

Elephants are viewed by Nayaka as idiosyncratic and changing beings, not least in terms of their wisdom and attentiveness to others. Like humans, they are understood to have '*budi*', which may be understood as the ability to interact wisely with others (see Bird-David 2004: 332). Different elephants are understood to have different extents of *budi*. Their understandings depend on such idiosyncratic and contextual factors as individual life experiences, familiarity with the surroundings, qualities of their 'heart', and type of personality.

> There are good *budi* (*olle budi*) elephants and bad *budi* elephants. When we walk in the forest, if there is an elephant with good *budi* the elephant makes noise to make us know he is there. If there is bad *budi* elephant the elephant is not making any sound, just wait silently. When you get near, this elephant attacks.

The same elephants can act wisely towards others in a way that preempts unnecessary conflicts, but they may act at other times without *budi*, especially when they are angry. Nayaka were empathetic to elephants that they perceived as angry, even when the elephants damaged their houses. They theorized and speculated about what particular elephants felt in particular situations. Mathen and Boman told Naveh about the elephant who had killed their [classificatory] 'brother'\'cousin' the previous year that this elephant had been angry because his elephant-companion had been shot down.

> Mathen: There is one more elephant. This elephant always walks alone, he never joins up with other elephants. This is the elephant that killed my young brother [Mathen is referring to this man in relational terms]. The forest department wants to catch this elephant and take him to Mudumalay.[8] They came to ask our help but we refused.

8. A dangerous wild elephant may be caught by the forest department and sent to an elephant-taming facility located in Mudumalay game reserve.

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Naveh: Why did you refuse? That is the elephant that killed your younger brother?

Mathen: There were two elephants, they were a pair. Forest department were calling some of us to catch one of them. But no one went to help. How would you feel if your spouse[9] would be taken from you? Like this feeling only, this is the feeling of this elephant. These two elephants sometimes separated at night, going in different ways, one goes this way the other goes that way; but they would always rejoin in the morning. That day, the other elephant saw the first elephant fall down. If two are always together and then one is shot down how would the other feel?

Boman [a man in his early fifties]: This elephant saw his friend and the people around him. He was with so much of anger—ran to the forest and back to this place where his friend is lying; and again run back to the forest and again coming. All this in 15 minutes. When an elephant is angry that elephant can cross this distance very fast.

Mathen: This elephant was breaking anything in his way. This remaining elephant is the one that killed my young brother in CP—this elephant is still with so much anger—wandering around this forest.

Naveh: How do you feel for this elephant today?

Boman: There is nothing to say about it. We are living in this forest and this elephant is also living in this forest.

Mathen: If this elephant harmed him, what to do with that? Nothing can be done.

This instance shows that the idiosyncratic personality and circumstances of particular elephants are considered more important by Nayaka than their elephantness.

Empathy towards forest animals and the tendency mentally to view situations from their perspective is not restricted to elephants. In the next example we can see how Nayaka stick to this approach even when it involves personal cost and risk. One afternoon, while working in his small tea plot, Soman, a Nayaka man in his twenties, was bitten by a black (non-poisonous) snake: he had been trying to reach the roots of a tea plant and had failed to notice a snake hole next to it. The snake bit his hand. Soman rushed to his mother Puni who was the most knowledgeable person in KK at treating snakebites. After she had given him the necessary treatment he went on with his work. Soman did not try to hurt this snake afterwards, nor did he chase him away from his hole. When talking about the incident, he voiced his understanding of the snake's

9. It should be noted that both these elephants were males. The speaker used the analogy of 'spouse' to underline these elephants' close affinity.

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position, explaining that the snake 'was afraid and had no other option'. 'Like us', he added, 'this snake also lives here'. The snake continued to dwell in the same hole, without any interference, for the duration of Naveh's stay in KK. Soman could tell that the snake still lived in the hole because no spider's web covered its opening. He observed the hole and could see that the snake often left the hole daily, at dusk. Out of sheer curiosity, Soman often went at these times to observe the snake as it was coming out of the hole.

That was not the only case in which Naveh saw his friends allowing snakes to stay in their holes even if the holes were located close to their dwellings. In another instance, a snake hole was found in an area cleared for building a new *deva-mane* (house of gods); this time, a poisonous snake was dwelling in it. The snake quite frequently came out of the hole, but it was not disturbed even when the temple was finally completed and attended on almost a daily basis. Eventually, the snake left this hole and did not come back. In both these cases the snakes were not treated or engaged with as religious or mythic figures but as co-dwellers in the forest.

Empathy was shown by Nayaka not only to animals but also to trees. In contrast to their non-Nayaka neighbors, many Nayaka considered chopping non-dry branches of forest trees, whether for firewood or for any other usage, as a *tapu* (in the sense of misconduct towards others [see Bird-David 2004: 332-34]). They regarded it as an act that 'hurts' the tree that 'like us has a soul'. As one man said: 'Every [forest] tree is a living being, a tree has a soul. Like people have blood, trees have water'. Indeed, when collecting firewood for their own consumption, Nayaka tried and usually managed to avoid chopping down non dry branches.

## *'Relational Epistemology' and 'Biodiversity Conservation': Two Models*

For the benefit of our analysis, we turn now to comparing 'relational epistemology' and 'biodiversity conservation' as two cultural models (using 'cultural model' in the weak sense noted earlier). The former relates to the Nayaka ethnography described above, and the latter to MAB. As mentioned in the introduction, the comparison for us is a heuristic device by which to elucidate the salient features of 'relational epistemology', in particular reference to immediacy, in the present context.

'Biodiversity conservation' and 'relational epistemology' are scales apart. They pertain to what can be described, respectively, as macro and micro scales. They involve, respectively, an overview and a view from

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and within immediate engagement (the latter can be described in Ingold's terms as a dwelling perspective [2000]). This crucial difference simply cannot be overemphasized, especially given the rhetoric of MAB's objectives. MAB was conceived as a broadly based ecological program, whose aim was to

> develop within the natural and social sciences a basis for the rational use and conservation of the resources of the biosphere and for the improvement of the relationship between man and the environment; to predict the consequences of today's action in tomorrow's world and thereby to increase man's ability to efficiently manage the natural resources of the biosphere (Eidsvik 1979, cited in Siroli Shekhar 2001).

As can be seen from this citation, MAB concerns itself with a 'relationship'. But this 'relationship' is an abstract-logical one. It is a relationship between 'man' (written in the singular but meant as abstraction and reification of all humanity) and the 'environment', which likewise is conceived in generalizing abstract terms. The 'environment' is conceived in utilitarian terms, and is associated with 'rational use', 'conservation', and 'efficient management' of 'natural resources' in the 'biosphere'. The very title *Man and the Biosphere* constructs Man as outside the Biosphere, with which it supposedly has a relation (cf. Ingold 2000 for a neat exposition of this point). This relation is a managerial one, at that. MAB, furthermore, is concerned with 'the consequences of today's action in tomorrow's world'. These expressions are used metaphorically for abstracted 'present' and 'future', in general. The temporal horizons of MAB stretch far into the future. Far from referring to the next immediate day, 'tomorrow' in the statement refers to a far away future, imagined in terms of tens, hundreds, and even thousands of years ahead. The 'today' is of concern in so much as it indicates a projected future, on which care and attention focus.

A concrete individual elephant, that Nayaka are concerned with, is almost transparent in MAB's terms. Underscoring MAB's aims is an accountant-like view of a stock of items, listed and catalogued in a uniform way. Biodiversity itself is described in terms of the number and names of different flora and fauna species in the biosphere reserve, and in terms of the major types of habitats and land-cover types. In choosing which site to establish as a 'biosphere reserve', preference was given to areas that 'represent' the different biogeographic zones of a country. The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, which was the first in the country, is described in UNESCO 'Biosphere Reserve Information' as constitutive of:

> Tropical humid evergreen forests characterized by *Dipterocarpus indicus, Mesua ferrea, Palaquium ellipticum*, etc.; tropical montane shoal grasslands

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> with *Cinnamomum wightil, Elaeocarpus serratus, Syzygium aromaticum*, etc.; tropical semi evergreen forests including *Vitex altissima, Gmelina arorea, Persea macrantha*, etc.; tropical moist deciduous forests with *Terminalia tomentosa, Dalbergia latifolia, Schleichera oleosa*, etc.; tropical dry deciduous forests characterized by *Albizia chinensis, A. lebbeck, Anogeissus latifolia* etc.; scrub jungle with *Zizyphus oenoplia, Canthium parviflorum* and *Careya arobrea*; grazing areas, afforestations areas; agroecosystems; urban areas.[10]

The Nilgiri is elsewhere described as an 'ecological paradise', with more than 3000 varieties of plant species, of which about 80 plant species, including 36 species of orchids, are endemic to the Nilgiris (Venugopal 2004).

The 'biosphere reserve' program progresses from concept to implementation by means of intermediating international, national, and local politics, removed from the actual biosphere site. The concept moves down from the international centre to national ones, and from there to local sites, which by 2006 numbered more than 480 in over 100 countries.[11] '[P]olitics permeate all MAB debates' which has promoted more than 1000 field projects (in the late 1980s) on scientific and political grounds (Dyer and Holland 1988). One of MAB's main goals has been to abstract general lessons from particular locales, and disperse them globally. MAB's director and professional staff members come from countries as diverse as Burundi, Romania, Tunisia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany (1988: 636). The concept of biosphere reserve management came into practice in India in 1979 with the establishment of the Indian National MAB Committee. The Committee identified 14 potential sites for recognition as biosphere reserves, and subsequently the national committee, state governments, and experts proposed additional biosphere reserves.

The Nayaka 'relational epistemology' model stands out sharply against the cloth of this 'conservation' model, which, though implemented in their area, emerged from a faraway place, far beyond Nayaka knowledge and imagination. Not only the place but also the terms in which the program was launched were far removed from Nayaka relational perspectives. Their 'relational epistemology' model is concerned with engaging particular beings, which particular Nayaka meet, at a particular time and place, in the forest, or near their homes. These particular beings are considered as co-dwellers, and in some cases—including (but not only) ritual ones—as relatives. The local concern is to live and let live jointly in the shared forest, if not live together as 'one

10. See www2.unesco.org/mab/br/brdir/directory.
11. See www.unesco.org/mab/mabProg.shtml, accessed 10 December 2006.

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family'. The temporal horizons of the Nayaka model are the immediate 'today' and 'tomorrow'. Engaging with forest beings—whether in the forest or in the trance gathering—is personal. It is embedded in, and is inseparable from, actual immediate ongoing corporeal togetherness, negotiation, and sharing. The engagement involves empathy, rather than managerial control, and it is moved by concern not for 'rational use' as much as for sustained conviviality (Overing and Passes 2000). For the latter cause, it is vital to preempt anger and interpersonal tension in relations with other-than-human beings.

## *Conclusions*

In this analysis we emphasized that it is important to recognize the immediate quality of indigenous Animism. In the Nayaka case, this immediacy means that the reverence and care which are shown to the environment are specific to particular situations, and not universal. Furthermore, these features do not express commitment to, or even concern with, conservation. They are the epiphenomenon of an altogether different cultural model, in which the main concern lies with keeping good relations with co-dwellers in the shared environment in order to preempt or cure certain illnesses and misfortunes. This concern has some conservationist effects as a byproduct. But these effects are limited in scope and space: Nayaka are not concerned with protecting forest-beings or conserving the diversity of species in the environment. Their main concern is to avoid hurting fellow-beings in the forest unnecessarily. In other words, it can be said that conservation happens but not because conservation is cognized beforehand and then executed.

One may misread from the analysis that 'relational epistemology' surpasses 'biodiversity conservation' as a model for studying, understanding, and living with the environment. But it must be stressed that 'relational epistemology' has limitations, which do not afflict the 'biodiversity conservation' model. Immediacy sets limits on the organizational scope of 'relational epistemology'. Immediacy *ipso facto* precludes exporting the model globally, in the way in which MAB works. Immediacy, in the phenomenological sense specified above, even sets limits on the extent to which the model can be applied locally: it is restricted to particular situations of actual, personal dyadic engagements. 'Relational epistemology', in other words, as a model is unable to handle the problem of accelerating environmental depletion, which at its current state is on a scale far beyond the immediate horizons. Undoubtedly, there is a need for the kind of global, international, and political mobilization of environmental conservation which MAB leads.

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This said, our analysis highlights that such initiatives as MAB should aim to preserve not only indigenous knowledge but indigenous *ways of knowing*. The virtues of Nayaka 'relational epistemology', we have shown, includes not just what they know, that is, their so-called 'indigenous knowledge', but their particular *mode of knowing*. Their mode of knowing is embedded in and inseparable from the being-together of knower and known. This mode of knowing appears to be highly attuned to processes, mutualities, chains of events, and ripple effects, in ways which are yet to be explored. This mode of knowing is valuable, and should be given the necessary framework in which to prevail.

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