

Ava Clark

UWTSD

Humans and Other Animals

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Human-Animal Hybrids: An Anthropological Narrative on How Humans Differentiate
Themselves from the 'Animal World'



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The werewolf myth as most people have become familiar with it today is the result of centuries worth of diffusion and various adaptations, however, one particular aspect of the werewolf has prevailed over the years: its bestial and dangerous characterization (Ginzburg, 2017; Metzger, 2014). This was not always the case, Metzger (2014) explains, but similarly to the witch, the demonization of the werewolf was rampantly popularized in Europe alongside the

spread of Christianity. The image above illustrates the violent, uncivilized, threatening version of what it means to be an ‘animal’ that we often see in media (Metzger, 2014). By portraying the animalistic qualities given to the werewolf as out of control and sinister, the bridge between the animal and human world only became more twisted as some humans determined to not only separate themselves from these qualities but to establish themselves as naturally superior. This drive towards human individualism works to perpetuate and normalize human exceptionalism, essentially helping to establish a world in which humans are undoubtedly at the center of. The werewolf can then, in this context, be viewed as a decent metaphor for how countless humans, especially those coming from a Euro-American perspective, see themselves in juxtaposition to the ‘animal world.’ Over the course of this essay, I will explore how human beings differentiate themselves from animals, despite the reality that the line between human and animal can often blur, by examining human-animal hybrids such as the werewolf.



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Unlike the hierarchical way of thinking that dominates the Euro-American outlook in regard to the animal world, numerous indigenous communities around the world understand their

relationship with animals to be much more cohesive. This photo shows a Mongolian wolf, who holds a surprisingly complex role in Mongolian cosmology; while they are widely respected and associated with both strength and intelligence, High (2016) expresses that the wolves are also often denounced for “intruding into human life and destroying the wealth that humans have built up” (High, 2016: 11; Jila, 2006). This duality in how the Mongolians understand the wolf, along with the belief that wolves hold a unique role between the human and nonhuman worlds, creates an interesting foundation for the wolf people that are believed to reside in their communities (High, 2016; Jila, 2006). Although they may sound similar at first to the werewolf, wolf people do not undergo any physical changes but are instead believed to be a wolf “concealed” in the body of a human, and are ridiculed for their greed (High, 2016: 1). This particular aspect of Mongolian culture displays the duality in the nature of the wolves, in which they are respected and fulfill a crucial position in their communities while still being perceived as threats to their contemporary way of life, and ultimately reflects a worldview that resonates with totemism – Pederson (2001) expands on this by defining the space inhabited by humans and nonhumans as two “mutually independent domains,” which supports a distinct separation from its neighboring worldview animism (High, 2016; Pederson, 2001: 418). Similarly to De Castro’s (1998) explication of Amerindian perspectivism, where the concept of being human extends beyond just the physical body to act as a shared starting point for all forms of life in their social sphere, Animism can be understood as a single domain in which both human and seemingly nonhuman beings exist and socialize in a fairly symbiotic relationship (Candea, 2012; De Castro, 1998; Pederson, 2001). Human-tiger shapeshifters among the Angami in India are a prime example of this, specifically in how this transition is made possible because the soul is believed to have the ability to shift from the human body to that of the animal as humans, nonhuman animals, and spirits all exist on common ground (Heneise, 2016). As a result of the differing worldviews, this hybrid acts as a vivid contrast to the werewolf by not portraying the animalistic aspect of the shift as wicked and brutish, but rather as natural and intriguing. Both totemism and animism provide an alternative perspective on how humans distinguish themselves from animals, demonstrating a noticeable shift from the rather abrasive Euro-American approach.



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Moreover, gaining an awareness of how exaggerated and often speciesist the Euro-American outlook on animals tends to be, it's impossible to ignore how similar this rhetoric is to that of the prejudiced imperialist mindset when describing indigenous peoples. During the peak of colonialism, indigenous people were often treated like and compared to animals because of these exact characteristics that the Euro-American perspective demonizes (Akena, 2012; Putoya, 2018). Akena (2012) investigates these notions, establishing that the intentions of the colonizer revolve not just around race supremacy, but of “domination and exploitation” as well, essentially working to delegitimize everything that does not fit into the western ethnocentric knowledge base by writing off indigenous forms of thought as “savage, superstitious, and primitive” (Akena, 2012: 600). They become categorized as ‘other’ and therefore grouped in with the animal world by displaying so called ‘animalistic’ and uncivilized behaviors. Besides the fact that this strain of thought is extremely racist, this push for Eurocentric intellectualism allows for the development of a hero complex in which colonialism is excused as a way to bring ‘civility’ to Indigenous societies, overall demonstrating ignorance and an unwillingness to attempt to understand the world from another perspective (Akena, 2012; Saler, 1977). When trying to conceptualize other cosmologies, recognizing that certain descriptors and observations can be widely subjective or prejudiced is a crucial part of the process, and it should be noted that various other cultures do not promote human exceptionalism like Euro-American ideals do when considering their relationship to other animals; The Mongolian wolf people, the Amerindian societies, and the

Angami human-tiger shapeshifters are just three ethnographic examples within a diverse array of cultures that can underpin this claim (De Castro, 1998; Heneise, 2016; High, 2016).



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The freak show, which was popularized as a form of entertainment during the nineteenth century, clearly reflects the horrors that were produced from colonial ideology in Europe at the time (Putoya, 2018). By dehumanizing those that fail to fit into the Eurocentric cultural norm, anything as well as anybody who is grouped into the ‘other’ is viewed essentially as both animalistic and as lesser than human, whether or not the being in question is human or animal. This blurs the lines between the human and animal worlds, primarily by blending the themes of human exceptionalism with those of racial dominance. Putoya (2018) recounts how these “depictions accentuating exoticism,” such as the freak show flier above, were used as ideological

tools to confirm the “cultural superiority” of “civilized western society” and therefore justify “their right to colonial expansion” (Putoya, 2018: 92). Perpetuating these negative stereotypes produces an environment that forcefully establishes the colonizer as the antithesis of the savage animal, and then further works to institute the colonized individual as closer to the animal on this cultural sliding scale of observed humanity; The “status,” as Putoya explains it, of the so called ‘freaks’ were essentially “drawn inhumanely into the world of animals” and stripped of their agency to exist without outside intervention (Putoya, 2018: 100). Eventually freak shows died out, however, this happened more as a result of their fading popularity at a time when movies were on the rise instead of a realization that the entire concept is cruel and exhibits a serious lack of empathy (Putoya, 2018).



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The past few decades have witnessed a widespread shift in how the average person, especially in Euro-America, distinguishes their personal relationship with animals and this can be directly linked in part to the adoption of pets into the family unit (Nast, 2006). Nast (2006) thoroughly analyzes a multitude of ways in which pets have infiltrated an environment that, as

mentioned previously, was rather exclusive and often strictly limited to a space for humans. However, it has been largely normalized to treat your pet as if it was your child, humanizing them in such a way that was not even granted for other actual human beings not long beforehand. Dogs specifically have been given a space to participate in human activities such as yoga, dancing, dietary regiments, and consistent grooming (Nast, 2006). It should be noted that although pets are granted this experience, the same cannot be said for animals living in the wild or farm animals; In fact, pets in particular are excused from being associated with the animal qualities discussed previously. In reality, a golden retriever or a tabby cat are not going to be affiliated with being dangerous or dirty in the same way that a coyote or even a racoon will be. Werewolves in pop culture in recent years have also been through a similar transformation, as Rikk (2014) notes, in which they are no longer demonized to the same extent in media but are genuinely beginning to “challenge all manner of boundaries” by addressing underlying social issues within contemporary society (Rikk, 2014: 111). Altogether it seems as if a substantial shift is occurring in how Eurocentric individuals are perceiving interspecies relations.



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The furry community has grown in popularity to a great extent over the last thirty years, and represent the possibility of a changing ideological stance in regard to how people view themselves in relation to the animal world (Gerbasi et al., 2016). Scientific studies on the furry fandom have discovered that while there may not be one specific contributing factor that causes people to begin to identify as furries, the increasing numbers have allowed for a better understanding of how these individuals consider the human-animal sphere in general; Not only do they have a larger knowledge base on animals than non-furries, but they also have been documented to show a considerable amount of concern for animal rights (Gerbasi et al., 2016). Almost like a new type of contemporary shapeshifter, furries create an alternative animal identity known as a fursona that usually represents an idealized version of their human counterpart, which reflects a similar conceptual idea to the traditional werewolf in which both animal and human aspects of an identity coexist in one body (Gerbasi et al., 2016; Nast, 2006). While furries do not necessarily perceive themselves as nonhuman animals, therians, another expanding shapeshifter community online, do not just adopt animal behaviors but fully believe that their “spirit is an immutable blend of human and animal” (Gerbasi et al., 2016; Robertson, 2013: 17). Therians are more likely to experience what they claim to be species dysphoria and therefore will consider serious body modifications as well, but despite their detachment to the concept of humanity, Robertson explores how the existence of these contemporary shapeshifters “represent the possibility of transformation and ascension beyond the norm” within the Euro-American society (Robertson, 2013: 15). It may be unintentional, but both furries and therians are challenging the status quo by working to normalize these experiences, and the distinctions between the human and animal worlds are blurring now more than ever as a result of globalization. Even more significant is the fact that giving these communities a platform is working to push against the intellectual elitism that has been perpetuated within the Eurocentric worldview for so long. Of course, these communities still face judgement and are not widely accepted as of yet, but they bring to light an interesting point of discussion for what the future could look like if we continue to progress in this direction.

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