

Animistic Epistemology: Why Do Some Hunter-Gatherers Not Depict Animals?

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ABSTRACT *This paper addresses the question of why certain hunter-gatherers (of the 'immediate-return' type in Woodburn's terms) have little interest in visual art. Their lack of interest is striking in comparison with the elaborate traditions of painting and carving in Australia and the circumpolar North, which Ingold (2000) compares, showing that they correspond to totemic and animic ontologies respectively. The 'immediate-return' class of hunter-gatherers is examined in relation to Ingold's typology, using the Nayaka of South India as a specific example. It is argued that their lack of interest in depictions corresponds to an ontology which is inseparable from their animistic epistemology (Bird-David 1999). This ontology differs from Ingold's animic and totemic types and can be added to his scheme.*

KEYWORDS *Animistic epistemology, Nayaka, visual art, hunter-gatherers*

In his 'Totemism, Animism and the Depiction of Animals,' Tim Ingold (2000) compares depictions of animals by people known in anthropology as hunter-gatherers from Australia and the circumpolar North, two regions famous for their distinctive and elaborate indigenous art traditions.¹ Ingold shows that these depictions explain and are explained by their respective totemic and animic ontologies. Compared to these two rich and distinctive regional art traditions, it is striking how artistically impoverished are other hunter-gatherers in Africa and Asia, to whom I collectively refer as 'immediate-return hunter-gatherers' (Woodburn 1980). These hunter-gatherers, with some exceptions, do not have elaborate visual art; they rarely paint or draw animals, or indeed anything else. In 1980, Woodburn noted that in these societies there is 'a minimum of investment in long-lasting *artifacts*' (1982b:205, emphasis added). More recently, in passing, Howard Morphy (1999) linked Woodburn's distinction between immediate- and delayed-return 'hunter-

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gatherers' and the distribution of emphasis on visual art (see also Layton 1985). To date, however, no one has asked why people in this particular type of society show relatively little concern with visual art. Persistent popular images of technological simplicity, material poverty, and nomadic people's need to travel lightly have perhaps preempted this question. Following in Ingold's footsteps, in this paper I ask whether the apparent lack of emphasis on depictions among 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers explains and can be explained by their ontology. I also ask if this lack reflects a different ontology from Ingold's totemic and animic archetypes.

First, I shall introduce Ingold's argument in more detail, and then profile James Woodburn's 'immediate-return' type, including the group with whom I am most familiar, the Nayaka of South India. I then probe into the kind of ontology and epistemology that are embodied in the Nayaka tradition and compare it with Ingold's animic and totemic types. I shall argue for an animistic ontology inseparable from their animistic epistemology (Bird-David 1999, 2004a, 2004b), an ontology that is closer to Ingold's animic than the totemic archetype, but nonetheless illustrates a distinct type that can be added to Ingold's scheme.

Totemic and Animic Ontologies

In a critique of the conventional view of art as representation, Ingold (2000) offers a neat and insightful comparison of animal depictions from the circumpolar North and Aboriginal Australia. (He uses 'depiction' rather than 'art' in order not to connote *a-priori* 'representation'.) Ingold painstakingly explores what these depictions *are* by examining them in a cultural context in relation to ways of understanding the relationships between human beings, animals, and the land. He distinguishes between the Australian 'totemic' and the circumpolar Northern 'animic' understandings, stressing that far from being two coherent and explicitly articulated doctrinal systems, these are *orientations* which are deeply embedded in everyday practice. They are not so much, he writes, 'systems *to* which people relate as immanent in their ways of relating' (2000:111–112).

The location of the 'vital force' is for Ingold one major difference between these two orientations. I cannot in a few words do justice to his rich argument, but these are some of his main points. In the Australian totemic cosmos, the land plays a major role. All forms of life are congealed in its features, textures, and contours. The land was created by the ancestors, as they traveled, acted, and interacted with one another, becoming the land itself. In the land dwell

the vital forces that animate all the plants, animals and people that the land engenders. Humans and animals relate primarily to the ancestral powers, rather than directly to one another. Even hunting is understood as a way of procuring food more than as an act of great symbolic significance. By contrast, Ingold argues, the 'vital force' in the animic cosmos, instead of being concentrated in the land itself, is distributed among the manifold beings that inhabit the world. These beings mutually engage with one another, and it is this reciprocal interaction, not the interaction with the land, that engenders them. Whereas humans and animals in the totemic cosmos primarily relate to the ancestral land, in the animic cosmos they are in constant dialogue. In this dialogue, one can temporarily take the point of view of the other and become an 'other' to his or her own people. Hunting is at the core of this dialogue and is critical for what Ingold describes as 'world-renewing.' Human life is predicated here on the mortality of animals, whereas in the totemic ontology it is predicated upon the immortality of the land. The totemic world, Ingold sums up, 'is essential, the animic world dialogical' (2000:114). In the totemic ontology, forms are given priority, while in the animic ontology, the process is key. In the totemic ontology, life emanates from form, while in the animic ontology, life generates it.

The comparison is illuminating, even if (for me) Ingold's distinctive philosophical language of analysis sometimes leaves unclear where his (or the so-called etic) terms end and the native (or the emic) terms begin. His point, however, becomes ethnographically tangible and exceptionally lucid through an ingenious juxtaposition of two concrete depictions, the first executed on bark by the Australian Aboriginal painter, Namerredje Guymala, from Western Arnhem Land, and the second drawn on paper by the Inuit painter, Davidialuk Alasuaq, both done in the mid-seventies (see Ingold's illustration 1). In the Australian depiction there appears a diminutive hunter (a spirit-being called *mimi*) throwing a spear, and a large kangaroo that seems inanimate, whose bodily architecture is shown in a manner characteristic of the so-called Aboriginal X-ray style. There is no sense of narrative in this depiction. It does not even show where the kangaroo is, but rather, in Ingold's words, 'the world as it is enfolded within [this] ... particular being. The bodily limits of the being are ... the limits of the world' (2000:119). By contrast, the Inuit depiction relates a narrative scene in which the hunter and the animal are in mutual engagement. Both are energetic and alert. The caribou is depicted as a sentient agent with intention and movement, unlike the static kangaroo (2000:121).

Ingold shows convincingly that these examples illustrate general motifs

that recur in the art traditions of these regions. For example, in the desert regions of Central Australia only the permanent traces of animals' activities are depicted, without the animals themselves, portraying, as Ingold puts it, 'a world that is already made, not in the making' (2000:120), where 'nothing is going on, or being done' (*ibid.*). In the circumpolar North, by contrast, distinctive and widespread wooden masks of animal faces reveal the animals' agencies by capturing their underlying character and personal idiosyncrasies (2000:124). Minute, realistic animal figurines help one to keep animals in mind and close to oneself, to be engaged with and also open to some degree of manipulation (2000:126).

The difference between the two archetypes is also expressed, Ingold shows, in ceremonial practices. The Australian Aborigines re-enact ancestral activity through song, dance, and storytelling, 'going over' it again and again. They dance the ancestral world-creation; they paint their bodies with the ancestral designs. In these ways, they stress their co-substantiality with the ancestors. In the circumpolar North, Inuit and Yupik dancers wear animal masks which bring the spirits into life amidst the audience. The shamans are believed to make arduous journeys to the communities of non-human animals, and negotiate with them the reciprocal release of game for hunting.

I believe that Ingold's rich comparison between the arts of the animic cosmos in the circumpolar North and those of the totemic cosmos in Aboriginal Australia can be extended to include another class of 'hunter-gatherers,' namely the 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers.

Hunter-Gatherers without Depictions?

James Woodburn (1980, see also 1982a, 1982b) distinguished between the 'immediate-return' and the 'delayed-return' types of 'hunter-gatherers' primarily by the temporal horizons of their economic effort. In the 'immediate-return' type, Woodburn wrote, 'people use their labor to obtain food and other resources which are consumed on the day they are obtained or casually over the days that follow... there is a minimum of investment in long-lasting artifacts or in long-enduring debts...' (1982b:205). Originally, Woodburn problematically insisted on a dichotomous opposition between the two types, and this has been rightly critiqued (e.g., see Ingold 1983; Bird-David 1992b; Naveh 2003). Woodburn's own observations about the intermediate position of the Australian Aborigines, as well as subsequent critics, suggest a far more complex continuum. At the very least, we do better to think in terms of a continuity between ideal types.

The 'immediate-return' class is also problematic because it is not regionally based, and natural diversity cannot be downplayed by such regional terms of reference as, say, 'Australian Aborigines,' or 'circumpolar Northern hunter-gatherers.' It is precisely for this reason, however, that this concept is instructive for generalizing beyond a particular case to a host of hunting and gathering societies living in Southern and Central Africa, South and South-East Asia and, arguably, a few in South America. They live in different cultural milieus, under different political regimes, and have been parties to diverse regional, political economies and histories. Nonetheless, there are certain features that they share, which can be explored comparatively without reifying the class. These societies should not be conceived in totalistic terms as if they were totally identical to one another, or totally different from all other societies. Their shared features deserve study. Here, I address one of these common features – the relative lack of interest in depictions.

There is only scant ethnographic evidence of depictions among 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers. Body paintings are reported among the Batek of Malaysia (Endicott 1979) and among the Andamanese of South Asia (Pandya 1993). However, according to the respective ethnographers, Kirk Endicott and Vishvajit Pandya, in both cases the paintings are done in order to attract the other-than-human beings to come and participate in the local rituals. The Andamanese even emphasize that the *smell* of the decorations attracts the non-human beings, more than the vision. There have been, of course, imaginative studies of Bushmen rock art, for example, by Lewis-Williams (1980, 1981), but these paintings were made a long time ago, and we cannot know with any certainty who were their producers, and whether they had an 'immediate-return' type system. The literature suggests that there is a case for the broad claim that 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers invest little effort in visual art. As mentioned earlier, Howard Morphy drew the same conclusion, suggestively linking Woodburn's classification with the distribution of emphasis on visual art. He noted that among 'delayed-return' hunter-gatherers there was extensive production and use of visual art, and among the 'immediate-return' groups only minimal.

Let me now illustrate ethnographically this general claim in order to link it more closely to Ingold's concerns. The Nayaka of South India are one example of the 'immediate-return' hunter gatherers. They do not invest effort in depicting animals or, for that matter, any other aspects of the environment that their culture animates, such as hills, rocks, rivers, or trees. I have known and worked with a community of Nayaka since the late 1970s. At the end of

my doctoral fieldwork in 1979, I remember packing examples of all the items that were self-manufactured by them in a rusty metal trunk. The modest-sized trunk had ample room for various bamboo containers, a sleeping mat woven from grass, a back-carrier and a fishing basket, both woven from strips of bamboo, a bird-trap made of bamboo strips and bark-strings, a few arrows with iron heads, several spoons made of coconut shell, a bamboo rattle for scaring elephants (so I was told: luckily I never had to try it myself, nor saw it being used for this purpose by anyone else), and a drum and a flute used in shamanistic celebrations. *None* of these things, it should be stressed, were decorated in any way, let alone symbolically carved, not even the ceremonially-used flute and drum.

Considerable changes have taken place since then, something which I noticed during revisits in 1989 and 2001. In the very place where I lived in 1978–79, a few brick-and-mortar buildings were built in 2000 by an NGO, in place of the traditional huts that were built from timber, bamboo, and grass. Some other settlements have grown larger, beyond the traditional half a dozen or so huts. Some have become semi-sedentary for a variety of reasons. For example, workers needed to remain close to their place of employment, individuals wanted to safeguard their land rights, or the forest department or private forest-estates enforced restrictions on settlement. Nayaka took up wage work, and when this was not available, some even tried small cultivations as a means of supplementing their income from the foraging activities which they still carry on to varying degrees. My return visits clearly showed that despite the ongoing changes, there is still little visual art and not much accumulation of material possessions, a fact that is all the more striking given the Nayakas' increasing wage-work and integration into caste-society.² With reference to Ingold's animic and totemic ontologies, I shall elaborate on the relative lack of interest in depictions in relation to and within the context of Nayaka ceremonial practices.

Immediate Engagement

The Nayaka's main ceremonial occasions are trance-gatherings, which are held every year or so in each hamlet (Bird-David 1999, 2004a). A few performers go into a trance, and a variety of persons in alter-states 'appear' via them, including deceased predecessors, ancestors, various embodiments of the environment such as hill-persons, elephant-persons, and stone-persons, some deities of the non-Nayaka neighbors (mostly minor Hindu deities), and previous non-Nayaka neighbors, including in a few cases even white coloni-

alists. I shall refer to all of them as 'trance-visitors' for short, or sometimes as 'spirits,' although in its Western modern rendition, 'spirits' is a very inadequate term. Nayaka themselves commonly address all the trance-visitors together as *dodavaru* (big persons), or as *dodappanu* (big fathers), and just as commonly, they refer to themselves *and* these spirits together as *nama sonta* (our family).

Unlike the Inuit and Yupik dancers who wear animal masks, and the Australian performers who decorate themselves with ancestral designs, the Nayaka performers have no special artwork associated with their ceremonies. They dress up as festively as they can, wrapping colorful pieces of cloth around their waists, and wearing trinket jewelry, though not necessarily more than the other celebrants. I saw one performer, Atti-Mathen, who was unemployed at the time, paint white circles like armbands and necklaces on his body. This was his way of making himself attractive and festive, he explained to me. His understanding of these depictions echoes those of the Batek and the Andamanese. If in the circumpolar North dancers wear masks that reveal the animals' agencies by capturing the animals' underlying character and personal idiosyncrasies, here the trance-visitors are revealed not by masks worn by the performers, but by the performance itself. Their *social* and *communicative* character is revealed by *how* (via the performers) they engage *with* the audience: whether and how they laugh loudly or softly, talk fast, slow, in a low voice, or in a shriek; whether they move rapidly from side to side, stand still, or wave a stick; whether they request biddies (Indian cigarettes), water, or rice; whether they are demanding, cajoling, firm or lenient, and whether and how they join the dancing and the singing. Their social personalities, I should stress, are invoked not in and for themselves, as on stage, to be listened to or gazed at, but rather within and as part of ongoing actual social engagement. Day and night, Nayaka individuals and families with their children take turns engaging with the trance-visitors in order to keep the conversation going throughout the event, as it must. In the circumpolar North, the voices of other-than-human beings can be heard from inside the ceremonial shaking-tent, and the audience can talk with them. But here, bodily engagement is important, and even bodily touch. In mimicking the trance-visitors, the Nayaka performers embody them and in this way enable singing, dancing, talking and sharing a meal with them. The on-going dialogue with the trance-visitors involves a great deal of what is known in the literature as 'demand-sharing,' which is common among hunter-gatherers (Bird-David 1990; Peterson 1993). Those on each side demand, nag, beg,

and cajole each other to give them what they need, in a sort of bargaining over needs and sharing that expresses, affirms, and regenerates caring and responsibility.

Whereas the Northern shaman makes arduous journeys to the communities of non-human animals, the trance-visitors come *en masse* to visit the Nayaka. A significant ontological difference underscores this seemingly technical one. In the Northern cosmos there are separate communities of humans and animals, separated by a vast distance which only a few powerful shamans can cross, just as only they can traverse the human/animal boundary. Hunters encounter animals in the wilderness that have previously been seen in dreams as unknown women, strangers who then give themselves to the hunters. Game, when it is brought home, is likened to a visitor from far away. In this cosmos, indeed, being with other-than-human beings is being in an other or a liminal place temporarily away from one's own people and, as Ingold puts it, as an 'other' to them. At best, in the shaking-tent ceremony the voices of the other-than-human beings can be heard. By contrast, the Nayaka cosmos is very local. It is constitutive of a heterogeneous, plural community, comprising all sorts of persons who share the same place, all of whom come to the Nayaka hamlet. The Nayaka with whom I worked did not elaborate on another land where the invisible beings live, not even the land of the dead. However, even if the invisible beings live in a separate place of their own, as seems to be the case among some 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers, this place is not too far away, and the invisible beings return regularly for visits. The Batek are a case in point.

A considerable proportion of the adults in the community fall into a trance, not only a few, powerful shamans. In my 1979 community of study, about one fifth of the men fell into a trance. In some other 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherer groups, the figure is even higher, for example, one third of the men among the !Kung (Katz 1982), and 28 per cent of the adults among the Paliyans (Gardner 2000). Any Nayaka can become a performer; this is not an exclusive or an inherently prestigious status. Unlike their circumpolar counterparts, the Nayaka performers do not speak for their people, nor do they represent them in any way, for example in negotiations with the owners of animal-spirits. They are commonly referred to as *cekamara*, a word meaning something like 'experienced.' They know how to call and host the trance-visitors, who, when they 'arrive,' engage and share with everybody. The visits are critical for 'world-renewing' (in Ingold's terms), as much as hunting is in the circumpolar ontology. Hunting keeps human-animal ex-

change relations balanced; the visits facilitate sharing, which in turn makes the plurality of beings who share a common home-place (*nama sime*) 'one family' (*nama sonta*).

Whereas the Australian performers *reenact* ancestral activity through their songs, dances and storytelling, and paint their bodies with ancestral designs to stress their *co-substantiality* with the ancestors, the Nayaka performers physically and verbally mimic the trance-visitors so as to make the ancestors present, sociable and available for communication. The songs and dances that take place during the Nayaka trance-gathering do not enact something else; they *are* the important acts themselves. The dances and the songs are not *about* the ancestors or *about being* them, as much as they are shared experiences *with* the ancestors, an extension of the meal which is shared at the end of the celebration. If, in the Australian context, storytelling is inseparable from the dancing and the singing, here little is narrated *about* the ancestors in myth or other oral tradition within the performance or outside it (Bird-David 2000a). Every Nayaka engages directly with the ancestors. The trance-performers facilitate this plural immediacy, just as their circumpolar counterparts link the spatially-separate human and animal communities, and the Australian dancers link the temporally-separate (or parallel) dreamtime and the present.

A house is built for the trance-visitors, in exactly the same way as ordinary houses, so much so that when in 2000 an NGO constructed brick-and-mortar buildings for my 1979 study-group, villagers refused to use these houses until an identical one was built for the trance-visitors. The house for the trance-visitors is not necessarily decorated. In the late 1970s, I saw one decorated with a small repetitive geometrical design in black, white, and brown. It was painted by the aforementioned old performer, Atti-Mathen, who explained to me that he liked to beautify the house in this way. The house serves the needs of the trance-visitors, who in the local understanding occupy it during their visit. They 'come' not only to *talk* with the local Nayaka; they *live with* the resident Nayaka during their visit and take part in daily domestic activities such as sleeping, bathing, and eating.

Special objects (which were otherwise stored unceremoniously in a far corner of someone's house) were displayed during the trance-gathering inside and at the front of this house. When they had the means to do so, Nayaka made *puja*-offerings to the trance-visitors, placing half-coconuts and rice on large plantain leaves, lighting incense sticks, and dotting the special objects with white spots. As far as I could ascertain, the painting was not significant

in either of the senses distinguished by Ingold: result or activity. It doubled as decoration and as a means of conforming in appearance to regional customs. The items included an assortment of knives, bells, bracelets, cups, and cheap metal Hindu figurines. In popular Hindu worship, as Chris Fuller (1992) summarizes it, such icons are commonly regarded by devotees as both containers *of* the deities' powers and as deities in and of themselves. For Nayaka, revealingly, they were regarded not so much as the representations of the trance-visitors as their belongings. Upon death something that was used by the deceased is ritually appropriated and made into such an object, stressing that the deceased had not passed away. The deceased is gone, but will return for visits.

The incorporation of Hindu icons is particularly interesting, especially that of the elephant-shaped Ganesha. In 1979, this figure did not *symbolize* the Hindu deity *or the elephant-person* of the Nayaka's own animistic cosmos. Stretching the Nayaka logic to its adaptive limits, the figure's critical property for the Nayaka I worked with was that it had been *bought* and *used* by *particular* dead relatives. It brought them to mind, helping to invoke their presence because they had engaged with it previously. Unlike the circum-polar miniature animals whose creation is important as a way of keeping the animal in mind, and who can be turned in the hand as thoughts can be in the mind, this miniature elephant was important as a belonging, not in a legal sense, but in the sense of on-going, everyday, touch and engagement. (On the importance of 'touch' see also Bird-David 2004b.) This miniature embodies social engagement, rather than thoughts or even thoughts about engagement. Because it is used by both the ancestors and the Nayaka who are currently alive, it embodies a community of users, and a community of sharing.

Finally, certain stones also take part in the trance-gathering. They are natural stones from the forest, which are untransformed and even unadorned. Nayaka point to their elongated shape and smooth curved face, which, I was told, resemble a person's shape. However, Nayaka also emphasize their unique encounter with them. These are stones which, in Nayaka rendition, they 'meet' during their forays – the stones 'come towards' them, jump into their laps, and 'talk' to them, demonstrating their capacity and wish for social engagement. The stones, thereupon, are carried home to 'live with us' or 'grow up with us.' The understanding of these stones presses home the point I have made in this section, namely, that the importance of material appearances in the local understanding is not as representations of some-

thing else, and not even as beings in and of themselves. The critical point in the local understanding is the encounter itself, the immediate *engagement with* these things and beings.

Animistic Epistemology and Ontology

Following John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1975), I maintain that 'knowings are always and everywhere inseparable from the knowns.' Ontology, to a degree, is but the congealed form of processual and agentive knowing. Describing it as Ingold does in the Australian and Northern cases lends ontology the appearance of a representation, which can be passed down from generation to generation, from natives to ethnographers, and from the ethnographers to their readers. However, this is hardly the case for Nayaka, and I assume for many other peoples. For one thing, Nayaka are extremely vague about their cosmos, sufficiently at any rate to frustrate an ethnographer intent on an orderly mapping of it and chronicling its creation and past events. They are vague about the *distinctions* between the various beings who, in their tradition, constitute the world. Their concern and effort is largely vested not in these beings in and of themselves, but in the relations with them. The actions of differentiating and characterizing aspects of the cosmos are subordinate to their overall interest in how to relate and keep relating to them. Ingold cautions that he refers to 'orientations,' but perhaps we would do better to speak about epistemologies, plural epistemologies, and even rival epistemologies in any social context.

In previous and forthcoming papers (Bird-David 1999, 2004a, 2004b) I examine the Nayaka's 'animistic epistemology.' I argued that regarding as animate that which in Western terms is inanimate (e.g., hills, trees and stones) is far from a misunderstanding. This widespread indigenous practice is not the result of an incorrect ascription of human personhood to objects. Rather, in the indigenous culture, another sense of personhood is ascribed to what in Western terms are inanimate objects. The capacity to be with others, share a place with them, and responsibly engage with them is the critical attribute of the local sense of 'personhood', which is also extended to the non-human, the animate, and the inanimate. Secondly, the indigenous animation is an instrument of knowledge. Personifying something in the local terms directs inquisitive concerns to the being-together of oneself and the other and to learning mutualities within the *pluralities* that *are* in the world. Instead of framing one's target of study as a separate object, it is here framed as a subject co-living with the learner. The learner focuses on their joint selves and how

each one affects and is affected by the other. This perspective provides insight into the other, although favoring some aspects at the expense of others. This epistemology generates knowledge which inheres in and grows from social engagement, and it authorizes viewing any 'what' as a social 'who' for the sake of learning about and knowing it. For example, a tree would be regarded as a being who is influenced and who influences others. Its behavior within mutual relations would be studied more than what it is made of. The tree would be perceived along with its relations, not as existing outside of them.

In a sense, then, it can be said that this animistic epistemology is relational rather than objectivist. However, it is not relational as in the Western rendition of 'relational' in which attention shifts from 'the self' to 'relations.' A self in the local conception is not seen as a bounded singular entity. However, neither is it pluralized as in some recent feminist literature and seen as a bounded embodiment of the exterior relations and classes with which the individual engages and belongs to (Weiss 1999). Rather than pluralized in that way, the self in the local conception is seen as joined inseparably with fellow-beings. The local conception does not dwell on a single instance, but turns attention away from the separate self altogether to an open-ended web of local connections and mutualities. It does not only shift attention away from the self to inter-selves, but also heightens the awareness of the encompassing whole to which everything is a party (Bird-David 2004b). The local attention, as far as I understand it, focuses on pluralities, rather than on individual selves: the plurality of trees in the forest; the plurality of these with other beings in the forest; the plurality of all the latter with the Nayaka who live there; and so on. A tree is just one detail in the rich tapestry of life on which the local attention focuses.

This animistic epistemology is an institutionalized way of knowing. It privileges knowing how to behave within relations in order to nourish these relations more than it privileges knowing things in and for themselves as objects separate from the knower. However, it is not the Nayaka's only perspective on the world. This is their traditional approach to understanding. Their animism is a favored method of understanding the world as much as it is a description of what the world *is*. In terms of the previous example, trees as such may be animated, not animated, or regarded as objects, depending on what *actually* happens between them and Nayaka. When trees are engaged with and become the subject of attention and study, then they are perceived as animated. Other trees can be cut down in a utilitarian way for building or for wages (when working, for example, on forest estates). Distant trees, which

are not present and available to be engaged with, can be referred to without animating them, for example, when asking the ethnographer whether trees grow in her home-place and of what kind. The local expression of animism is inseparable from *living jointly with the animated* and seeking to understand the local life in its plurality and mutuality.

An animistic epistemology is at work in getting to know the temporal environment as much as the physical one (Bird-David 2004a). For example, Nayaka recount few stories of the past, even in the current, all-encompassing sense of the word as a narrative told, sung, performed, read into the landscape, or embodied in objects. Yet, although they relate little information *about* the first people, they keep relating with their invocations. They do not want to leapfrog to the past in order to learn how it was before who and what *they* are. On the contrary, they want to know and teach their children how to keep living with the first persons as 'coevals' (Fabian 1983). They invoke the previous people in their trance-gatherings, through dialogue with them, and through the joint singing and dancing, they relate with them, learn how to relate with them, and in the process learn a little *about* them as a by-product.

An animistic epistemology underscores some local senses of causality, especially regarding certain illnesses and mishaps (Bird-David 2004b). These are associated with the activities of the trance-visitors, who are approached by means of trances and divinations. On these occasions, Nayaka do not try to find out 'what' has been done wrong or how they have offended the trance-visitors. From their perspective, this is relatively unimportant. Indeed, in their terms, the originating cause can even be far removed in time and space from the afflicted individual and affects him only because everything is connected. At stake, in the local conception, is the 'who' in the individual's immediate surrounding, or more correctly, the ruptures in the local web of relations (caused as they may be by ripples spreading from the original 'fault' which itself is no longer important). The local relations must be healed and they are healed by promising to share with and care for the local trance-visitors in the future. The preventive concern lies not with 'what' should not be done lest it trigger illness and mishap, but with the needs, whims, and desires of the various 'whos' in the local web of relations, lest they be offended.

For the purpose of this paper, what difference there may be, if any, between Ingold's use of 'ontology' and my use of 'epistemology', is negligible. We can therefore return to the correspondence which Ingold shows between the circumpolar and the Australian forms of visual art and ontologies, respectively, and ask the following question: Is there a connection between

the animistic epistemology of 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers and their lack of visual art?

Totemic, Animic and Animistic Ontologies and the Depiction of Animals

The case of the Nayaka certainly illustrates the received wisdom that 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers have little visual art, and we are invited to speculate on why this is so. No single reason can be given, but clearly there is more to it than a lack of technical skills. Technical craftsmanship is amply manifested in their manufacture of everyday domestic and foraging equipment and the occasional and idiosyncratic bursts of decorative work by individuals such as Atti Mathen.³ Their culturally institutionalized lack of concern with animal depictions, and visual art generally, cannot be simply attributed to a nomadic past, arguing in functionalist terms that art in object form would burden a nomadic people. The few things that these people *do* keep *could have been* the subject of elaborate artistic attention, compensating for quantity with quality. Furthermore, as these people have been forced to settle down and be more sedentary, little additional attention has been given to their visual art. Of course, one can argue that they rarely depict animals because hunting is not of primary importance in their economy and tradition. Yet neither do they depict the hills, trees and elephants that do feature prominently in their traditions, nor the risky honey-hunting in extremely tall trees and on almost perpendicular cliffs which provides them with the highly prized foodstuff.

Howard Morphy found no clear correspondence between economic and environmental factors and an emphasis on visual art among hunter-gatherers (1999:443). In view of this, it makes sense to ask whether the apparent lack of emphasis on visual art among 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers is connected to their ontology. As Ingold has demonstrated, artistic traditions and ontologies are mutually connected in Aboriginal Australia and the circumpolar North.

How does the Nayaka animistic ontology compare with Ingold's animic and totemic ones? It appears to be closer to the former than to the latter. In Ingold's language of analysis, which I use here, though, with some reservations, the 'vital force' is not concentrated in the land itself, but is distributed among the manifold beings that inhabit it. The land, in and of itself, has little significance unless it is brought into focus as a 'home' that fosters and requires sharing. (This situation, of course, has undergone changes with grow-

ing economic pressures and the current political struggles over land. In most cases, these struggles are initiated and led by NGOs rather than by the Nayaka themselves.) As the above account demonstrates, the Nayaka cosmos is more 'dialogic' than 'essential.' Priority is given to 'process' rather than to 'form,' and 'life' generates forms rather than emanates from them.

Yet, the Nayaka ontology also differs from Ingold's 'animic' archetype. Ingold's analytical language, with its use of terms like 'vital force,' 'life,' 'form' and 'process,' reflects his engagement with a Bergsonian ontology instead of a Newtonian one, and it is not entirely generalizable universally. My purpose is better served by following Ingold with regard to ethnographic detail and using a descriptive and analytical language that is grounded in the local concerns with social and kinship relations. For as I have demonstrated, there are significant differences between animic and animistic epistemologies. In the circumpolar cosmos, there are separate communities of animals and humans, far apart in space from one another, and connected by the arduous travels of the shamans and by hunting. In the Nayaka cosmos, there is a localized plural community of 'persons' of all sorts. Dancing, singing, talking, and sharing food together constitute a joint experience that unites people in this cosmos not as co-substantial or dialogical exchange-partners, but as close relatives, as one 'family.'

In the animic ontology, exchange-relations are paramount. Human-persons and animal-persons are in exchange relations, and perspectives can be exchanged by altering one's positioning within the dialogue. A self/other separation, an animal/human boundary, are assumed and crossed. By contrast, 'sharing relations' are paramount in the animistic ontology, drawing together all sorts of 'persons' into a pluralist community, as 'we, the relatives,' 'we, the family.' A we-ness is stressed that absorbs the differences. Sharing and caring are expected, even of perspectives.

These differences can perhaps help us understand the lack of concern with visual art among the Nayaka and among 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers more generally. Visual art is based on perspective; the painter or carver offers her own perspective, as does the observer. The hunter and the game in Ingold's Inuit example may themselves be portrayed as being in mutual engagement, but the painter and the observer view them from afar and are thus not similarly engaged. At most, the painter and the observer can temporarily adopt the perspective of either the hunter or the animal, forsaking the one they share with their own social companions. Depictions not only afford different perspectives, they also involve a certain subject/object relation

that can then be crossed, a certain distance that can then be bridged. In an animistic cosmos, by contrast, there is no place for exchanging perspectives. On the contrary, effort is invested into producing a shared one. There is no place for distance. Distance annuls relations, whereas staying close and together underscores them (Bird-David 1994). In the animistic cosmos beings are invoked as participants and members of a single community of sharing. They cannot be depicted and looked at as objects. They have to be invoked and engaged with as co-subjects. They cannot be looked *at*; rather one has to look *with* them sharing a perspective.

With the 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers in mind, I doubt whether hunter-gatherers have always painted and carved. We have no way of knowing if they have done so. They have left nothing for us to see. In any case, Ingold's conclusion about the commonalities between the animic and the totemic ontologies in the circumpolar North and in Australia is as true and even truer for the 'immediate-return' type. 'In one word,' as Ingold puts it, their depictions 'are not representational' (2000:130). Among the 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers, as I have suggested, icons and depictions are avoided altogether. Instead, this cultural regime privileges framing anything that is important as a co-subject in mutual engagement and sharing with oneself.

Ingold suggests that the purpose of the Australian and the circumpolar depictions is 'not to represent but to reveal, to penetrate beneath the surface of things so as to reach deeper levels of knowledge and understanding' (2000:130). Many Western artists and art-lovers might say the same of some Western depictions, but as Ingold shows so well, the hunter-gatherers' depictions – or their lack thereof, as I have shown above – help *us* to penetrate beneath the surface of *their* worlds and to understand.

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Notes

1. The article first appeared in 1998 in a volume published by the Pori Art Museum of Finland which accompanied an exhibition on 'Animal, Anima, Animus.'
2. One striking sight that I remember being taken by in my 1989 visit was that of cut-up newspaper on the traditional bamboo-walls.
3. The regional context must be given its due share of credit, for as Woodburn emphasized, 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers are encapsulated within larger

agricultural societies, and, in the case of the Southern Indians, within old civilizations of great complexity and artistic richness. This fact has many implications, but along with Ingold, I focus on their sense of their cosmos.

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