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Humans and Other Animals

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Using at least 2 ethnographic examples to illustrate your discussion, explore how non-human animals play a role in shaping cultural and/or personal behaviors.

The relationships that form between human animals and nonhuman animals, in any society, will intrinsically work to influence the cultural and personal behaviors of those within said society; Even if humans and nonhuman animals socialize separately, the fact remains that both groups exist within the same physical realm, Earth, and therefore are likely to have some manner of effect on the other. I would even argue that nonhuman animals shape human worldviews to the same extent that we shape their lives, and this is because we live out our lives in a state that is both mutually dependent and vastly intertwined with one another. Over the course of this essay, I'll be discussing a variety of ethnographic examples that help to expand on this topic, namely the contemporary humanization of pets, the treatment of farm animals within the meat industry, the cultural symbol of the cow in India, the Amerindian hallucinogenic plant Ayahuasca, and the unique prevalence and impact of the associations with snakes in folklore around the world.

In order to develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of how these examples relate to and interact with each other, it is necessary to first conceptualize a few terms widely used within this field of study. The first of these being multispecies ethnography; Popularized in the twenty-first century, this new interdisciplinary approach to studying nonhuman animals and how they connect to the notion of humanity brings in an entirely different perspective to anthropology that actually considers the effects of human exceptionalism in approaches to building and interpreting culture (Kirksey, 2010). Even deeper still, assessing how culture is defined, particularly in relation to nature, presents three main categories – naturalism, animism, and totemism – that describe how a human society perceives themselves in relation to the nonhuman animals around them (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). In a rather simplistic overview, naturalism can be explained as “ontological duality” between nature and culture in which they are “separated by metonymic discontinuity” while animism is almost the complete opposite,

recognizing a “social continuity” between the two (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 473). Totemism, on the other hand, exist somewhere in the middle, “where the relationship between nature and culture is metaphorical in character and marked by discontinuity” (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 473).

When thinking about the extent to which nonhuman animals play a part in contemporary human lives, pets likely come to mind as a significant contender. Nast (2006) highlights the recent occurrence of a dramatic shift in the extent to which “humans are investing in pet-animals” not just emotionally, but financially and culturally as well (Nast, 2006: 305). Because this altered the way pet animals are perceived not just by the individual but also on a much larger cultural scale in the global north, there has been a largely successful push in humanizing these animals by creating space for them within the human social sphere; This can be seen in the creation of things like dog yoga, social media accounts for pets and how this has developed in celebrity culture, or even in the momentum gained within the no kill movement that worked to ban pets from being euthanized in shelters (Hurn, 2012; Nast, 2006). This is not to say, however, that the pet animal relationship with humans is based on perceived equality, but rather a complex combination of domination and endearment that allows the human to characterize their chosen companion in any way they see fit (Hurn, 2012; Nast, 2006). Hurn (2012) relates this to the concept of ego-morphism, in which humans essentially attach personalities to their pet animals in an attempt to better understand them, all the while remaining to treat them as commodities waiting to be bought and sold for pleasure. Although the pet-human dynamic is representative of an increasingly complicated interaction between humans and animals, it is clear that pet animals have become a particularly significant influential factor in the lives of humans.

The treatment of pet-animals strongly juxtaposes with the handling of their nonhuman animal counterparts in the farming industry; This is due in part to what Hurn (2012) outlines as “widespread participation in a global capitalist system,” ultimately promoting and perpetuating the ideals of human exceptionalism, and also what Croney (2008) explicates as “the patriarchal nature of western society” in which humans have “God given dominion over animals,” authorizing them in their endeavor to exploit and abuse nonhuman animals for profit (Croney, 2008: 388; Hurn, 2012: 41; Singer, 1979). Because pet animals have become intriguingly adjacent to the image of humanity in Euro-American culture, they exist in an entirely separate social realm to the animals used in the farm and meat industries (Croney, 2008; Hurn, 2012).

These two groups, therefore, have entirely different ways of shaping human cultural and personal behaviors because they impact humans in two distinct and specific modes of action. Culturally, the language used surrounding the animals in the meat industry is “tightly bound to status and power relations,” meaning that it is beneficial for those profiting off the exploitation of the farm animals to ensure that only “sterile language” is used so that they can more easily “manipulate public perceptions” (Croney, 2008: 387, 389). This strategy quickly becomes noticeable once you are aware of it, specifically in how it is culturally expected for humans to refer to cow meat as beef, pig meat as pork, or even by normalizing farm animals as being bred for eventual slaughter but not to be murdered, and it should be noted that this is also done largely to maintain personal comfort when eating meat and thereby taking part in a cruel, often speciesist system (Croney, 2008; Singer, 1979).

In India, however, the cow is subject to an exceedingly different socio-cultural environment than it would be elsewhere. Simoons (1979) makes it abundantly clear that the history behind and subsequent consequences following the rise of the sacred cow in India is accompanied by many unknown factors that still require investigation and as a result, have given room to a great deal of heated discourse on the subject. This being said, cows have undoubtedly become a staple of Hindu culture in India over the past century and were commonly utilized by Hindu activists like Gandhi as a political weapon to wage ideological campaigns against British colonialism and Muslims, eventually succeeding in passing anti-slaughter laws because of the cow’s religious significance (Harris, 1966; Hurn, 2012). Yang (1980) thoroughly explicates the known history of the sacred cow and its path to widespread cultural devotion and personal respect, illustrating how the cow reflected issues between Hindus, Muslims, and even the British at the time because it represented an area where the differing “religion’s sacred spaces overlapped another,” allowing for boundaries to be redefined in a common goal against the recognized ‘other,’ and thereby helping to build a stronger “sense of group identity” for the Hindu community as a result (Yang, 1980: 580, 596). Despite the complexity within the symbol itself, human and cow relations in India today are visibly interconnected even just in the way that they share a social sphere out of mutual dependency and ingrained socio-cultural respect (Harris, 1966; Hurn, 2012; Simoons, 1979; Yang, 1980).

For the purpose of this essay, I will consider plants as part of the nonhuman animal category that is being discussed, mainly because they have a unique role to play in impacting

human behaviors just as the other expected nonhuman animals do, but also because the recent growth in multispecies ethnography has worked to take into consideration all possible living, and especially sentient organisms (Attala, 2019; Kirksey, 2012). Taking into account the three worldviews outlined previously which address how relationships between nature and culture are understood, Viveiros de Castro (1998) presents Perspectivism as an alternative, adding to the equation in order to better represent Amerindian Indigenous ontologies; Perspectivism remains similar to animism in theory, although it directly links back to Amerindian cosmology in which the “original common condition” for living beings is humanity (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 472). The plant I am going to focus on is called *Banisteriopsis caapi*, which is more commonly known in its contribution to making the Amerindian hallucinogenic drug ayahuasca (Attala, 2019). Used for medical and ritualistic purposes, ayahuasca helps native communities to promote individual and group health, as well as offer therapeutic aid by facing worries and deep problems that are brought to light through often uncomfortable snake or serpent hallucinations (Attala, 2016; Attala, 2019; Dobkin de Rios, 2005; Narby, 2016). Attala (2016; 2019) explores “digestion as... chemical discourse,” a more recent avenue in multispecies ethnography in which eating a plant that offers hallucinations is essentially “[breaking] trans-species communicative boundaries” because this particular process of interacting with the plant creates a method for the plant to communicate with other living beings in ways that it otherwise may not be able to (Attala, 2019: 52; Attala, 2016: 18). Accepting that plants can, therefore, offer an alternative way of affecting humans is transformative for those who do not subscribe to a perspectivist worldview, and has the potential to drastically alter how many people view themselves in relation to the world around them since it “involves [a form of] ontological blurring” that inherently “represents a challenge to mainstream culture” (Dobkin de Rios, 2005: 121; Kohn, 2007: 7). In this way, it’s incredible to begin to understand the extent to how plants like ayahuasca largely work to shift reality and allow those who decide to communicate with it an opportunity to interact with their environment through an entirely new set of eyes.

Detaching from a culturally ethnocentric bias, which Hurn (2012) dissects and readily determines to be a dangerous bias to maintain especially in an anthropological field of study, acts as one of the first steps in trying to understand the cultural significance that nonhuman animals have on societies that Viveiros de Castro (1998) describes as cosmocentric, or societal groups whose cosmology establishes nature and culture as being “part of the same sociocosmic field”

(Hurn, 2012; Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 475). The ayahuasca plant is not limited to the plant group considering it also holds form as a powerful, all knowing mother earth type nonhuman animal serpent when it communicates via hallucinations, which also holds connection to its physical form as it has a tendency to spiral up trees and thus resemble a large snake figure in its maturity (Attala, 2016; Attala, 2019). Snake symbolism is relatively common in various cosmologies and folklore from all over the world, and is especially well known for its presence in Christian cosmology as being a force of knowledge and temptation (Attala, 2016). In general, serpent or snake-like nonhuman animals have historically played a significant role in constructing culture and have proven to be inextricably intertwined with humanity, “[facilitating] the incorporation of nonverbal areas of conflict that might otherwise remain repressed” such as existential truths and “paradoxically complex... forces of creation and destruction” (Attala, 2016: 1, 3). Existing on a more intimate level with the nonhuman animals that live alongside us creates a much deeper and more profound understanding of how we as humans connect with nonhuman animals in aspects of our lives that we may have never even realized before; Myth and folklore in particular, as Attala (2016) makes a point to illustrate, “allow us to appreciate how the complexity of our shared worlds are interwoven with our morethanhuman companions” (Attala, 2016: 23).

While there remains a multitude of other examples around the world that exhibit the interconnectedness between humans and nonhuman animals, I hope to have provided a brief yet effective insight into this aspect of study. Altogether it seems that despite some cultural boundaries separating humans and nonhuman animals, both groups still find significant ways in which they affect each other. Nonhuman animals in particular play an influential role in helping to construct definitions for what constitutes as cultural and personal normative behaviors for human animals in many diverse societies.

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