Hunter-Gatherer Cosmologies

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Cosmology is one of three principal domains of hunter-gatherer life that anthropologists have identified as defining characteristics of what it means to be a hunter-gatherer. The other two domains are subsistence strategy and social organization. Although there is considerable variety among people considered as hunter-gatherers, there is, accordingly, considerable commonality in their cosmologies.

In a loose sense, cosmology has been a persistent feature of European intellectual discourse since the Enlightenment, during which the Greek word *kosmos* was morphed and popularized as "cosmology." The term was introduced as a subdomain of philosophy by Christian Wolf in 1728 (see Agazzi 1991, 45). Cosmology in natural philosophy spanned both a theory of the universe as an ordered whole dependent upon general laws and an idea of the world as a sum total of all phenomena in space and time. In the nineteenth century, against a backdrop of growing colonial indigenous encounters and science becoming increasingly split from philosophy, the word "cosmology" began to appear as a subfield in texts concerned with the philosophy of foreign and native peoples. For example, in "A Discourse on the Philosophy of the North American Indians" (1876), J. W. Powell broke "savage philosophy" down into cosmology, theology, religion, and mythology. This text, from a founding director of the Bureau of American Ethnology, represents not only an early example of ethnology that dealt explicitly with cosmology but also a topography of spirit relationships, including the relevance of vertical and horizontal axes, that preempted much later work on sacred geographies.

In a more precise sense, a focus on hunter-gatherer cosmology followed the arrival of hunter-gatherer studies, signposted by the 1966 Man the Hunter conference, and a subsequent 1970s turn to hunter-gatherer symbolism, religion, and mythology. The emergence of interest in cosmologies is recognized as a critique of the earlier dominance of evolutionary ecology and the materialist bias in hunter-gatherer studies.

The headings "cosmologies" and "cosmology" are used across a range of ethnographic studies as a way of portraying the world of particular groups in a holistic sense, often at a large and relatively abstract level that deals with fundamental beliefs and behaviors. In hunter-gatherer studies, ethnographers often use the terms as a shorthand for the discussion of religion, spirituality, and spiritual relationships with the environment. Cosmology provides a framework for the interpretation of ritual and symbolism and may deal with life, death, spirits, shamanism, totemism, causation, magic, human–environment relations, social relations, modes of thought, and religion.

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Although hunter-gatherer cosmology was not a significant category of interest in early anthropology, much groundbreaking work from Tylor, Durkheim and Mauss, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and others related to cosmologies of people who would later be categorized as hunter-gatherers. Over the twentieth century, various corners of anthropology approached cosmology in a variety of fashions, but until the 1970s most interest lay outside hunter-gatherer contexts. Earlier work on hunter-gatherers that has proved particularly influential includes Hallowell (1960) on people of the circumpolar North and the Ojibwa and Lévi-Strauss's contributions to structuralism, which built on his Amazonian fieldwork. In 1964, Mircea Eliade published his study on shamanism, which, despite much criticism, remains frequently cited.

Land plays a critical role in the discussion of hunter-gatherer cosmologies. The wider defining characteristics of being a hunter-gatherer, from egalitarianism to seasonal mobility and a common-property regime, all map into ways of being in, and working with, land that are morally, ontologically, and mythically prescribed. These various aspects of hunter-gatherer life underpin a hunter-gatherer ethos characterized by the importance of sharing and reciprocity between people and a person-filled environment, and by an idea of "a giving environment," wherein if one behaves correctly in nature, the world will work in a more or less predictable fashion and nature will provide.

Popular culture frequently encourages an idea of hunter-gatherers as benign custodians of nature. However, it must be recognized that, although hunter-gatherer relationships with nature are based on reciprocity, trust, and profound sympathy, this does not make them compassionate conservationists. Some scholars point to the dangers of romanticizing hunter-gatherer life, highlighting the differences between what hunter-gatherers do, how they talk about what they do in possibly idealized ways, and how ethnographers then represent them. Questions are also raised about ideas of hunter-gatherers "caring" for the environment and how hunting might or might not be a sensitive spiritual activity. Academics increasingly recognize hunter-gatherers as highly practical people with diverse ontologies that permit diverse ways of being in the world. Studies of hunter-gatherer cosmology contribute to anthropology at a core level by highlighting that there are profoundly diverse ways in which people relate to nature. This approach challenges our "commonsense" assumptions about what it means to be human.

Animism

Hunter-gatherer cosmologies reveal that many of the boundaries taken for granted in a world known through science do not exist for hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherers are described as animists because they animate their environment through their recognition of subjectivity, agency, and personality in the things around them that "Westerners" consider inanimate—from animals to plants and even rocks.

Animism is the central pillar in the study of hunter-gatherer cosmologies. Through the early work of Edward Burnett Tylor, the topic became one of the first ideas in the foundation of anthropology in the later nineteenth century. After a

mid-twentieth-century hiatus, scholars have reengaged with the topic, but in new ways. Some refer to this latter genre of work as "New Animism." With scholarship coming from a wide range of disciplines, nations, and personal experiences, plus comparisons being made across very different hunter-gatherers, it is not surprising that contestation remains over the meaning of animism (Harvey 2014). It is, however, agreed that Tylor's (1871) identification of animism as a primitive religious belief in spirits has long hamstrung debate.

Tylor's definition established a persistent idea of animism as a marginal religious belief. Most work on animism now approaches the phenomenon as an opportunity for rethinking who we are as human beings and the various ways in which we relate to the world. With such a profound remit, it is not surprising that discussion of animism spans a long history of ideas, from Tylor's animism to Durkheim's social facts and classification, to the philosophical discourse of Kant, Heidegger, and Deleuze, to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the symbolism of Peirce, and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss.

A major thread in hunter-gatherer animism concerns how anthropologists should step away from Western categories and classifications to interrogate some of their fundamental ideas and understandings, from the meaning of "belief" and the word "spirit" to the theory and biology of mind, sociality, sensibility, and epistemology. Considerable discussion concerns how to recognize and deal with dichotomies attributed to a Cartesian intellectual heritage, from nature versus culture and human versus animal to subject and object, ideas and material things, universal and particular, being and becoming, sensation and thought, and mind and body, among many others. Much current thinking explores animism as a way of living in which the world comprises a community of persons, all of whom are deserving of respect and, if treated in a morally appropriate manner, will respond accordingly.

Hunter-gatherer animism has been heavily influenced by ethnography from the Amazon and the Eurasian and American north. Partly through Ingold (2000), the northeastern Canadian Cree ethnography of Hallowell is often cited as a typical description of hunter-gatherer animism in practice. Ingold (2000, 14) identifies the Cree world as "saturated with powers of agency and intentionality" and he describes how the Cree conceive of hunting as something alongside reproduction that ensures a cyclical regeneration and rebirth of the world. A hunted animal is perceived as giving itself up to the hunter on the understanding that the hunter will kill the animal with respect and without causing undue pain and suffering. The butchering, consumption, sharing of meat, and disposal of the animal's bones must also be done with respect. At death the soul of the animal is released to be bodily reclothed as part of the world's cycle of rebirth, just as the hunter's soul will be released and reclothed at a later time (Ingold 2000, 14, 67). If the hunter does not follow appropriate hunting procedures or kills unnecessarily, then he risks the wrath of the spirit master or guardian of the animals, and animals will not present themselves to the hunter in the future.

Morality and notions of regeneration are key to hunting among hunter-gatherers, but details do differ significantly. Among African Mbendjele Pygmies, for instance, Lewis (2008, 311) notes that justification for killing animals lies in the belief that humans and

animals are in conflict and that sorcerers are reincarnated as game for people to kill and eat.

In Amazonian animism, much discussion revolves around Amazonian perspectivism and its relevance to the wider world of hunter-gatherer cosmologies, such as that of the Cree. Perspectivism is a theory of relationship in which "the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view" (de Castro 2015, 196). The theory is most commonly associated with Viveiros de Castro. De Castro asserts that anthropologists start with such ingrained assumptions about the world that they leave no room for a "native" to describe anything truly different. He defines his task as aiming not to see with the eyes of a native but to discover what a point of view is for a native or what concept of a point of view Amazonian cultures enunciate (de Castro 2015, 8–17). At the heart of de Castro's perspectivism is the assertion that American Indians recognize the nonhuman world as one of people, because things we think of as natural and as objects have an essentially human spirit. It is the bodily clothing of other-than-human persons that makes them look different and gives them different attributes. Because people are essentially social and cultural, so too are the animals and other things (subjects), but each entity looks out from different bodily clothing and thus apprehends the world differently or, put another way, constructs nature differently. Among American Indians, therefore, culture is the given and nature the constructed. This American Indian orientation has been termed "monoculturalism" and "multinaturalism," and it is contrasted with Western multiculturalism and mononaturalism, wherein the epistemological starting point is the recognition of a common biology linking all things (objects) and the common biological root then differentiates into multiple spirits, meanings, and cultures (subjects). In the West, nature is the given and culture constructed. De Castro emphasizes the point that this is an issue not of different American Indian and Western epistemologies but different ontologies.

The challenge in studying animism lies not only in the lack of clarity incumbent in heterogeneous Western ideas of religion, spirit, and human–environment relationships but also in the difficulty of trying to write about the various hunter-gatherer cosmologies, which are often too slippery to drop into convenient classifications or categories of analysis. Moreover, despite the central location of epistemology in discussions of animism, it is surprising how few scholars really explore either different sorts of relationships with knowledge or the nature of knowledge and knowing among oral–aural cultures.

Psychologists increasingly recognize that much Western knowledge, thinking, and decision making is not nearly as rigorous, linear, and precise as Western elite culture believes. At the same time, the emerging neuroscientific field of "grounded cognition theory" is pointing to a key role for the body, body positions, body movement, smell, and other feelings as the fundamental ingredients of ideas. Both these developments indicate that Western relationships with knowledge are far more similar to hunter-gatherer ones than some anthropologists envisage (Low 2017). As Ingold suggests, animism should not be understood in terms of a relational epistemology in opposition to the modernist project and contrasting Western ways of knowing; it is

more that relational ways of knowing have lost much of their authority in the West (Ingold cited in Bird-David 1999, S81).

Double creation

De Castro (2015) is keen to root animism in ontology, and not epistemology, but it is challenging to think that one can separate what is known from ways of knowing and knowledge building. Hunter-gatherer ontology is founded in accounts of creation, and those accounts encourage an orientation to the world that, in turn, promotes receptivity to an essentially unstable reality.

With the instability and transformative capacity of life at its core, hunter-gatherer ontology is a notoriously slippery topic. Hunter-gatherer ontologies are marked by a primal time that is said to have shifted through an event, typically some kind of sorting of animals and people into distinct types, becoming a secondary, "now" time. In primal time, animals and people were the same and every living thing could talk with everything else, or even change into something (someone) else. After the shift, people and animals were the same but different, and change could still happen but only in particular circumstances. Some anthropologists refer to this ontology as "double creation." The dreamtime of double creation in Australian Aboriginal contexts not only holds the story of the laying out of the world but also provides a day-to-day mingling in that world, and this points to a wider hunter-gatherer acceptance that spirits, ancestors, and divinities work across the past and present. In secondary creation, some people, especially shamans, are particularly skilled at working in the spirit world in creative ways that cross back and forth across time, spirit and matter, order, disorder, and creation.

Trickster

A further key way in which primal time plays a role in the present is in the character of the trickster. Hunter-gatherer ethnographers from all over the world recognize trickster figures in their local contexts. A trickster is a mythical figure about whom stories are told that primarily relate to the figure's immortal heroic status and cunning, shocking, and creative activities in the primal time. The heart of the trickster lies in the capacity to change the order of things. Tales of the trickster combine lessons in morality with more pragmatic knowledge about how the world works as a potentially unpredictable place. Reflecting the interconnection of double creation, in certain cultures, including southern African San groups, strange landscape features or events in the bush are attributed to tricksters. Classic manifestations of the trickster include coyotes and ravens throughout North America and hares and jackals in southern Africa. Some anthropologists have problematized the appearance of tricksters in such extraordinarily varied ethnographic contexts as North America and Papua New Guinea, on the basis that finding the trickster equates to finding a mythical archetype and represents running roughshod

over local ethnographic detail. At the same time, however, they recognize that the continuities need to be explained.

The movement of tricksters between primal time and current time is part of a wider hunter-gatherer recognition that the landscape is filled with other-than-human persons and the commonplace knowledge that the landscape is the wandering ground of spirits of the dead and willful divinities.

Sacred geography and shamans

For hunter-gatherers, like many other peoples, life in the open is the backdrop to life-transforming encounters with spirits of many forms. When dreaming at night or when traveling in the plains, bush, or forest, there is always the chance of encountering dead people. The dead are often identified as the cause behind a strange encounter, such as particularly unusual animal behavior. People might also link misfortune to special places where spirits are known to linger. Among many hunter-gatherers, spirits are intimately linked to the movement of wind, rainbows, thunder, and lightning, and to cosmic serpents or other sorts of rain spirit animals.

One way ethnographers explore these hunter-gatherer cosmographies is in terms of sacred or mystical geographies, in which a specific topography holds the story of a people. Orientation to the world—from the stars above to the earth below, in the sea, over the mountain, or in the forest—roots people in accounts of who they are and provides a spiritual geography of where people will go once they die, or where their ancestors live or where they might go to confront or commune with spirits.

Ethnographers often frame sacred geographies in terms of an *axis mundi*, or cosmic route, connecting vertically arranged planes of existence. The phenomenon resonates strongly with beliefs found across all manner of cultures, but among hunter-gatherers a special role exists for the shaman to navigate the axis, climbing to upper sky realms or descending to underworlds. In physical or symbolic mode, awake and in altered states of consciousness, shamans enter the spirit world by climbing mountains or tent poles or descending through rock fissures or into bodies of water. Once in those worlds, shamans can move about on the backs of animals, in the form of animals, or, as among Kalahari San, by walking across webs of ethereal interconnecting strings.

The word "shaman" comes from the Tungus word *šaman*, as recorded by Russian explorers of Eastern Siberia in the seventeenth century. The word became popular among academics following its appearance in reports from the Siberian and northern American Indian Jesup North Pacific Expedition, initiated by Franz Boas in 1897 (Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2012, 9). Although the terms "shaman" and "shamanism" are useful for capturing a range of similar beliefs and behaviors, fine-grained ethnography is increasingly questioning just how widely the category can be applied. This is particularly true in cases where people thought of as shamanic reveal equally strong totemic characteristics.

A shaman is a person who is a mediator with the spirit world. Shamans communicate with spirits by their souls traveling to the spirit world during dreams or following rituals that induce an altered state of consciousness. Ways of inducing this state range from

consumption of hallucinogens, as widely found in Amazonia, to the extreme physical activity of a southern African San healing dance. Once in the spirit world, a shaman will negotiate with spirits for the release back to health of a sick person. They might also prophesy the future, bring rain back to earth, discover where game animals are, move about in animal form to protect a community, or, as San shamans report, check up on what is happening in a neighboring village.

In many cultures, shamans work with animal spirit helpers or familiars, and shamans express this relationship as ownership of these spirits. What is meant by ownership in these contexts and how these spirit helpers relate to ideas of a larger spirit essence, the "master" of the animals, is not always clear. Most work on ownership concerns the master of the animals as a spirit owner or guardian of animals. In some contexts, "spirit owners" seem to represent ownership of a species by being a species' essence, as in spirit tapirs of the Amazonian Makuna (Århem 1996, 190). In other contexts, master owners of animals are thought of as people, such as the old man Bayanay of the Siberian Eveny (Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekdeyev 2014, 17). Spirit masters care for their animals and control the release of their animals to hunters.

To understand ownership across different animist and shamanic contexts requires problematizing Western relationships with power and property. In hunter-gatherer contexts, to understand ownership requires setting the term within wider contexts of care, trust, identity, and kinship, which relate in turn to ontologies of movement from first to second creation.

Worldview

The word "cosmology" is often used alongside the word "worldview" or as a synonym for "worldview." Use of the term has been much criticized. An early attack came from Ong (1969). Ong extended McLuhan's (1962) proposition that the arrival of literacy heralded a shift from oral–aural culture to a new way of being in a rational world where sight and seeing, as the foundation of rational knowledge, took precedence over the other senses as means of knowing. This idea influenced the anthropology of the senses and historians' concepts of the colonial gaze. Ong objected to "worldview" on the grounds that the word reflected a modern Western, literate, technological way of being in the world that was not appropriate to "preliterate" cultures, implicitly including hunter-gatherers. Ong offered a different term, "world-as-presence," which he thought better represented preliterate ways of being in the world. Ong's term sought to portray the world not as something viewed but as a world of events and unpredictability, something experienced on a more personal and dynamic level of multisensorial intersubjectivity.

Ong's approach sits within the wider field of relations, objects, and subject discussion that informed Bird-David's (1999) later influential work on hunter-gatherer animism. Ingold (2000) rightly observes that, despite Ong's attempt to escape an essentially Cartesian worldview, his argument is founded in a Cartesian mind–nature dichotomy in which knowledge remains a representation of reality. Ingold determines that Ong's argument rests in the false belief that vision is objectifying and related more to surfaces

and exteriors than to inner feeling and hence knowledge. Vision, Ingold (2000, 248–50, 286) asserts, is not analytic and reflective but active and generative.

Since the late twentieth century, the Western world has exhibited an increasing enthusiasm for hunter-gatherer cosmology, in contexts ranging from academic disciplines to native and pagan animism, New Age healing, self-help, and shamanic tourism. Reengaging with the rituals and symbols of cosmology also plays an important part in the deliberate revitalization of hunter-gatherer cultures.

Twenty-first-century research on hunter-gatherer cosmology contributes to a vibrant cross-disciplinary discourse on human–environment relations and responsibility. Furthermore, interest in cosmology is contributing to the recovery of a unity of knowledge, lost since the nineteenth century split between science and philosophy. In terms of recent developments, the opening up of Siberian research is doing much to inform and invigorate the field, while certain corners of debate remain notably overshadowed if not neglected, including how cosmology relates to the division of labor and gender relations, and the relationship between feelings and knowledge.

SEE ALSO: Addiction; Agency and Morality; Animism; Color; Cosmologies; Cults, Male and Female; Embodied Cognition; Human–Animal Relations; Hunter-Gatherer Models in Human Evolution; Hunter-Gatherers; Hunting and Gathering as Techniques; Menstruation, Biosocial Perspectives on; Mimesis; Nature, Concepts of; Phenomenology of Space and the Environment; Philosophical Anthropology; Placebo; Pollution; Rock Art, Paleolithic and Hunter-Gatherer; Sacred Ecology; Sacred Space; Sacred Time; Shamanism and Possession; Social Anthropology: Emerging Perspectives on Human Origins; Tylor, Edward (1832–1917); Worldviews

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