

RANE WILLERSLEV

Soul Hunters

HUNTING, ANIMISM, AND
PERSONHOOD AMONG
THE SIBERIAN YUKAGHIRS



© 2007 UC Regents
Buy this book

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2007 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Willerslev, Rane, 1971–

Soul hunters : hunting, animism, and personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs / Rane Willerslev.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-25216-5 (cloth : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-520-25217-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Yukaghir—Hunting—Russia (Federation)—Siberia.
2. Animism—Russia (Federation)—Siberia.
3. Yukaghir—Russia (Federation)—Siberia—Folklore.
4. Ethnology—Russia (Federation)—Siberia.
5. Siberia (Russia)—Social life and customs.

I. Title.

DK759.Y8W55 2007

305.89'46—dc22

2006035803

Manufactured in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on New Leaf EcoBook 50, a 100% recycled fiber of which 50% is de-inked post-consumer waste, processed chlorine-free. EcoBook 50 is acid-free and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/ASTM D5634-01 (*Permanence of Paper*).

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Animism as Mimesis	1
2. To Kill or Not to Kill: Rebirth, Sharing, and Risk	29
3. Body-Soul Dialectics: Human Rebirth Beliefs	50
4. Ideas of Species and Personhood	73
5. Animals as Persons	89
6. Shamanism	119
7. The Spirit World	141
8. Learning and Dreaming	159
9. Taking Animism Seriously	181
Notes	193
References	205
Index	221

Animism as Mimesis

Watching Old Spiridon rocking his body back and forth, I was puzzled whether the figure I saw before me was man or elk. The elk-hide coat worn with its hair outward, the headgear with its characteristic protruding ears, and the skis covered with an elk's smooth leg skins, so as to sound like the animal when moving in snow, made him an elk; yet the lower part of his face below the hat, with its human eyes, nose, and mouth, along with the loaded rifle in his hands, made him a man. Thus, it was not that Spiridon had stopped being human. Rather, he had a liminal quality: he was not an elk, and yet he was also not *not* an elk. He was occupying a strange place in between human and nonhuman identities.

A female elk appeared from among the willow bushes with her offspring. At first the animals stood still, the mother lifting and lowering her huge head in bewilderment, unable to solve the puzzle in front of her. But as Spiridon moved closer, she was captured by his mimetic performance, suspended her disbelief, and started walking straight toward him with the calf trotting behind her. At that point he lifted his gun and shot them both dead. Later he explained the incident: "I saw two persons dancing toward me. The mother was a beautiful young woman and while singing, she said: 'Honored friend. Come and I'll take you by the arm and lead you to our home.' At that point I killed them both. Had I gone with her, I myself would have died. She would have killed me."

Lifting us into an animated world, this passage sets the scene for this

book, which is about the Yukaghirs, a small group of indigenous hunters on the Upper Kolyma River in northeastern Siberia. For us in the West, it is customary to assume that attributes of personhood, with all this entails in terms of language, intentionality, reasoning, and moral awareness, belong exclusively to human beings. Animals are understood to be wholly natural beings, and their behavior is typically explained as automatic and instinctive. Among the Yukaghirs, however, a different assumption prevails. In their world, persons can take a variety of forms, of which a human being is only one. They can also appear in the shape of rivers, trees, souls, and spirits, but above all it is mammals that Yukaghirs see as “other-than-human persons” (Hallowell 1960: 36). Moreover, humans and animals can move in and out of different species’ perspectives by temporarily taking on each other’s bodies. Indeed, among the Yukaghirs, as we shall see later, this capacity to take on the appearance and viewpoint of another being is one of the key aspects of being a person.

The traditional term for this set of beliefs, whereby nonhuman animals (and even nonanimals such as inanimate objects and spirits) are endowed with intellectual, emotional, and spiritual qualities paralleling those of human persons, is *animism*. Animism is one of anthropology’s earliest concepts, if not the first. It was introduced by Tylor (1929a [1871]: 424) as a way of characterizing the simplest form of religious belief, “the belief in spiritual beings,” but it is a term that anthropologists today use with caution, if at all. The reason for this is summarized well by Descola, who writes, “modern anthropology has been extremely reticent on the topic of animism . . . perhaps out of an implicit fear of drawing undue attention to an apparently irrational aspect of the life of archaic societies” (1992: 114). It is certainly true that anthropologists have tended to give little credence to accounts, such as that of Old Spiridon, that differ radically from what we would consider “normal.” In the early days of the discipline, Victorian scholars would say that if the old hunter were not actually lying, then he must be suffering from delusions of some sort and would be incapable of telling fact from fantasy, or reality from dreams. Other, more recent, anthropologists, by temperament and training inclined to be rather more sympathetic to the indigenous viewpoint, would accept the hunter’s story by adding an “as if” to his account—so instead of talking nonsense, the hunter is deemed to be speaking in metaphors, constructing figurative parallels between the two separate domains of nature and culture. However, to say that the hunter is talking “as if” animals were persons is to say that his story should not be taken in a literal way but instead seen as a symbolic statement. The

“metaphor model,” which has roots in Durkheim’s sociology, is to be found everywhere in modern studies of hunter-gatherers. For both models, however, the result remains essentially the same: animals are not *really* persons, but exist as such only in the mind of the hunter, whose account is therefore not to be taken seriously as founded in reality. By this move, indigenous metaphysics appears to pose no challenge to our ontological certainties, and the anthropologist can get on with his job without having to worry about whether there is any foundation in reality for what people have to say.

In this book, however, I wish to reverse the primacy of Western metaphysics over indigenous understandings and to follow the lead of the Yukaghirs in what they are saying about the nature of spirits, souls, and animal persons. Only in this way can we hope to develop a framework that takes their viewpoints on these matters seriously. This does not imply exoticizing the Yukaghirs as being somehow more knowledgeable or wiser than us. Nor does it imply adopting their beliefs or accepting these beliefs without question. Rather, it involves an honest effort to draw attention to complex patterns of common features and differences between Yukaghirs and ourselves by placing their animistic beliefs and practices in a critical dialogue with our theories of knowledge. The remaining part of this chapter is mostly devoted to sketching out this new approach to the animism “problem.” However, before we can embark on this task, which will bring us up against both philosophy and anthropological theory, I need to introduce the people with whom this book is concerned.

THE YUKAGHIRS

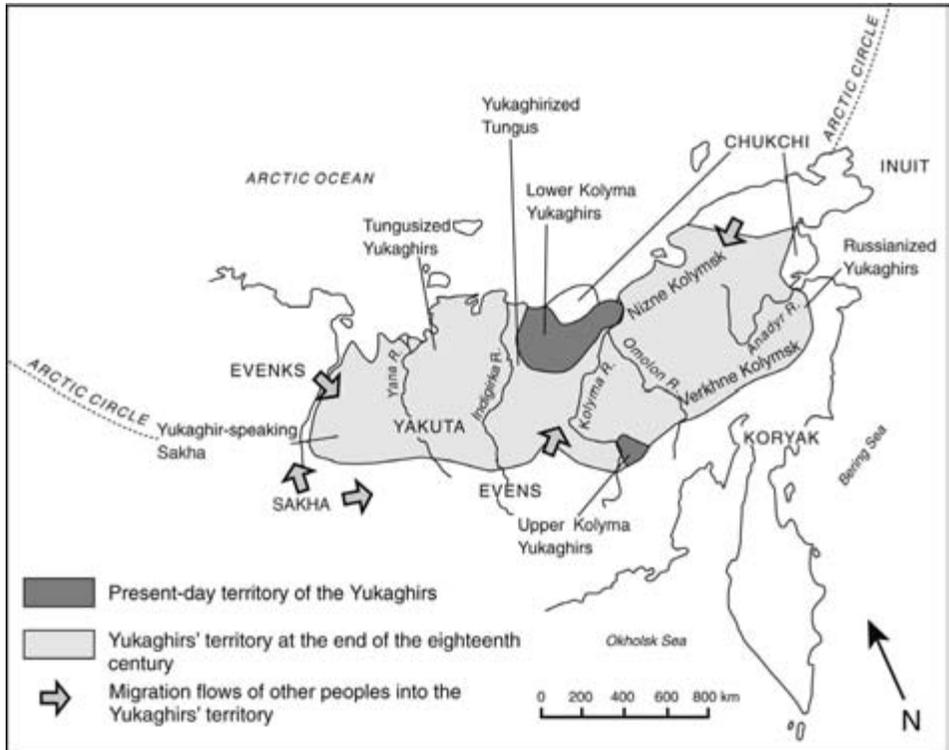
The name *Yukaghir* (alternative spellings: *Iukagir*, *Yukagir*, *Yukagiry*, and *Yukagirskiy*) is considered to be a generic name of Evenki origin, which was adopted by the Russians in the seventeenth century.¹ The meaning of the name has not been firmly established, although it has been suggested that it could mean “the icy or frozen people” (Ivanov 1999: 153). In their own language the Upper Kolyma Yukaghirs call themselves *Odul*, which means “strong” or “powerful.” Although this name is widely known among these people, hardly anyone uses it. Instead, they refer to themselves as *Yukaghirs*, which is why I refer to them by this name.

Roughly speaking, the Yukaghirs consist nowadays of two groups who speak mutually incomprehensible dialects of the Yukaghir language: the Upper Kolyma group, whose main settlement is the village of

Nelemnoye in Verkhne Kolymsk Ulus; and the Lower Kolyma group, who live in Nizne Kolymsk Ulus (see the map of the Yukaghirs' territory). It is the former group with whom I have worked, and it is they who are the focus of this book. The most remarkable difference between the two groups is that while the Lower Kolyma group lives mainly from reindeer herding (which they are thought to have adopted in relatively recent times from the Evenki), members of the Upper Kolyma group have remained hunters and fishermen, and even today the dog is their only domesticated animal.²

At the time of the Russian conquest of northeastern Siberia in the mid-seventeenth century, Yukaghir-speaking groups occupied a vast territory (about 1.5 million square kilometers) stretching from the lower reaches of the Lena River in the west to the Anadyr Basin in the east, and from the shores of the Arctic Ocean in the north to the upper reaches of the Yana, Indigirka, and Kolyma rivers in the south. They consisted of a large number of separate groups, such as the Chuvantsy, Khodyntsy, Anauls, and Omoks, who, although they spoke kindred languages, had no political unity. It is estimated that the Yukaghirs numbered about five thousand in the years before Russian contact (Zukova, Nikolaeva, and Dëmina 1993). However, during the first three centuries of Russian rule the Yukaghirs underwent the most rapid decline ever recorded among northern Siberian peoples. The 1859 census recorded some 2,500 Yukaghirs, the 1897 census 1,500, and the 1927 census only 443. Wars with invading neighboring reindeer-breeding peoples, including the Evenki, Evens, Koryaks, Chukchi, and Sakha (horse and cattle breeders), greatly reduced the population.³ The introduction of European diseases also had a disastrous impact, with very large numbers of Yukaghirs dying during smallpox and measles epidemics (Jochelson 1926: 54–55).

The practice of changing one's ethnic membership to avoid paying fur tribute (*yasak*) also may have contributed to the steady decline in the number of Yukaghirs (Morin and Saladin d'Anglure 1997: 168). Censuses for the purpose of fur tribute were undertaken infrequently, and the size of the tribute was calculated on the basis of the number of people counted in the previous census, so the Yukaghirs, with their population rapidly declining, often found themselves paying tribute for dead men. By identifying themselves as members of one of the demographically expanding groups, such as the Sakha (Yakuts) and Chukchi, they could ease their tax burden. Such "manipulation of ethnicity" is apparent even today. According to the 1989 census, there were a total of 1,112 Yukaghirs, of whom approximately half belonged to the Upper Kolyma



The Yukaghirs' territory. Drawn by Jens Kirkeby, Moesgaard Museum.

group. Strikingly, the 1979 census gives a figure of only 500 Yukaghirs total. The reason for this remarkable increase is mostly that people from different ethnic backgrounds register themselves as Yukaghir in order to qualify for a variety of welfare entitlements, such as special hunting and fishing rights, for which only Yukaghirs are eligible (Derlicki 2003: 123). Likewise, most children born of mixed parentage are today being registered as Yukaghirs. At present, Nelemnoye's population numbers 307, of which 146 are registered as Yukaghirs. In addition to a few Evens, most of the remaining population is listed as either Sakha or Russian.

It is important to note, however, that these ethno-administrative categories (Rus. *Natsional'nost'*) tell us very little about the local population's actual sense of belonging. For example, there are a number of elderly people in Nelemnoye who regard themselves as Yukaghirs and speak the Yukaghir language but who in their youth were registered as Sakha or Russians. Moreover, for many local people, being a Yukaghir person is

not so much an identity that one is born with or born to, but a quality that is obtained through one's occupation and territory of residence. An elderly man thus explained to me that although his parents were Yukaghirs, he registered as an Even when he moved to the mountains to work with reindeer herders, and then became a Yukaghir again when he returned to Nelemnoye to take up hunting. Likewise, a man who was born in the neighboring village of Verkhne Kolym'sk and listed as a Yakut assured me that after twenty years of residence in Nelemnoye, he is now more Yukaghir than Sakha because he is "living, eating, and working like a Yukaghir." Anderson calls this phenomenon a "relational identity," a way of accounting for the situational and fluid nature of identity formation in northeastern Siberia, where it is quite common for a single individual to move from one ethnic identity to another within a life span or even hold several identities simultaneously (Anderson 2000: 91). Indeed, as we shall see throughout this book, this relational quality of identity extends into the human-nonhuman domain as well: humans become animals, animals become humans, and one class of spirits turns into another. There are no fixed identities here, only continuous transformations of one class of beings into another.

The Yukaghir language belongs to the so-called Paleo-Asiatic group, where it occupies a special place. It is conventionally considered a genetically isolated group, yet it can probably be affiliated with the Uralic superfamily, consisting of the Finno-Ugric and Samoedian languages (Shnirelman 1999: 119). Until recently, multilingualism was widespread in Nelemnoye, with the Yukaghir, Even, and Sakha languages serving as alternative modes of intercultural communication (Maslova and Vakhtin 1996: 999). Although this is still the case among the oldest people (those over sixty), the long-term survival of the Yukaghir language is under threat from Russian, which since the late 1960s has become the dominant language. This, as I shall discuss in chapter 7, is mainly the result of the Soviet boarding school system, which removed Yukaghir children from their families. Today only the oldest generation is competent in the indigenous language; for everyone under the age of sixty, the primary language is Russian or Sakha, although for many of them the mother tongue is Yukaghir (Vakhtin 1991).

In 1931, during the Soviet era, the Yukaghirs were organized into a collective farm (*kolkhoz*) called Shining Life (Svetlaya zhizn), whose center was located in Nelemnoye, which was originally an old Yukaghir camp called Nungeden aNil', situated where the Yasachnaya River meets the Rassokha River. Between 1956 and 1958, Shining Life was merged

with the mainly Sakha collective farm called the Soviet Constitution to form the *kolkhoz* named Yukaghir. However, just two years later this collective farm was subsumed into the much larger state farm (*sovkhos*) called Verkhne Kolymsk, and Nelemnoye was moved downriver, about 70 kilometers from the district center of Zyrianka.⁴

During the Soviet period, Nelemnoye's hunters were subject to the region's official planning regimes; they were set target figures for the number of sable skins they were required to deliver to the *sovkhos*, in return for which they received cash payments. Subsistence hunting remained vital for local people until the mid-1960s. Thereafter, however, the village was increasingly incorporated into the Soviet state economy, with its wage employment and centralized delivery of consumer goods, and subsistence hunting came to constitute a supplementary rather than a central activity.

However, since the collapse of the state farm in 1991 and the economic crises that followed, people have largely returned to a subsistence-based lifestyle. Virtually no wages have been paid since 1993, yet prices of essential goods have risen several hundred percent. Consequently, the great majority of Nelemnoye's population are now totally dependent on hunting and fishing for their survival, and apart from bread, tea, and tobacco, no imported food products are consumed on a daily basis. This movement back to a subsistence existence is also reflected in the steady increase in the number of registered "full-time" or "professional" hunters (Rus. *kadrovye okhotniki*) through the 1990s. In 1991 there were twenty-two professional hunters in Nelemnoye (about 44 percent of the able-bodied male population), whereas there are now thirty-nine (about 78 percent). What is more, in comparison with the Soviet period, little time is spent hunting for sable today. Instead people focus mainly on subsistence. Old people, women, and children set nets for fish (white fish, trout, pike, and turbot), gather berries (cloudberries, great bilberries, and red bilberries), and set hoop snares for white grouse and hares near the village, while the men travel deep into the forest to hunt for big game, especially elk.

The Yukaghirs' history and present situation raise at least two interesting questions. First, to what extent are these people—who have undergone centuries of demographic decline, virtually lost their indigenous language, and lived through all the vicissitudes of Sovietization—still the bearers of old beliefs about spirits, souls, and animal persons? Moreover, what happens to these beliefs in times of total economic collapse, when subsistence and survival have again become critical issues? In

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Figure 1. Hunters with dead elk. Photo by Rane Willerslev.

chapters 6 and 7, which deal with Yukaghir shamanism and spiritual knowledge, I shall suggest some answers to these questions, but a few remarks are needed at this point.

Although I call the Yukaghirs “animists,” this does not imply that they dogmatically attribute personhood to everything in the world around them. One of the reasons that recent anthropologists have called for the term *animism* to be abandoned is its liberal use in the past to brand as primitive superstition systems of beliefs that supposedly attribute personhood freely to things that to any rational, thinking person are obviously mere objects of nature (Ingold 2000: 106). Animism among the Yukaghirs, however, is not an explicitly articulated doctrinal system for perceiving the world, nor does it hold that all natural objects and phenomena are endowed with personhood all the time. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The personhood of animals and things is, as we shall see, something that emerges in particular contexts of close practical involvement, such as during hunting. Outside these particular contexts, Yukaghirs do not necessarily see things as persons any more than we do, but instead live in a world of ordinary objects in which the distinction between human subjects and nonhuman objects is much more readily drawn.

Yet if Yukaghir animism does not resemble anything like a formally abstracted and articulated philosophy about the world, but is instead

essentially pragmatic and down-to-earth, restricted to particular contexts of activity and experiences, then what is it? My overall argument is that it is a practice—or at least it contains within it the traces of a practice. This practice, I suggest, is mimesis.

MIMESIS

Mimesis is usually regarded as a literary theory, a theory of interpretation. Only recently has this theory been extended to the realm of anthropology (Jackson 1983: 330–39; Taussig 1993; Koester 2002; Cox 2003; Roepstorff and Bubandt 2003: 9–30; Harrison 2005; Willerslev 2004a, 2006; Santos-Granero forthcoming). However, as Cox points out, “The concept of mimesis has undergone so many changes in the history of its usage, from Plato and Aristotle to Auerbach and Adorno, that one cannot properly talk of it as a coherent theory” (2003: 106). I shall discuss mimesis in its more limited sense as the meeting place of two modes of being-in-the-world—“engagement” and “reflexivity”—while also including other members of the mimetic family such as “sameness” and “difference,” “self” and “other,” “me” and “not me.” In so doing, I shall draw upon Taussig’s (1993) anthropological reinterpretation of mimesis, whose primary inspiration comes from the German cultural critic Benjamin. Benjamin sees in mimesis not a theory but a “faculty,” which, like the body, is an inherent part of the human condition. In modern times this faculty has resulted in a world filled to overflowing with images and simulacra, so that nothing seems real any more, but its origin, Benjamin argues, can be traced back to a primitive compulsion to imitate, thereby fostering similarity with the world and with others: “Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s. His gift of seeing similarities is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role” (Benjamin cited in Taussig 1993: 19).

Taussig, in his Benjamin-esque analysis, takes up this notion of a mimetic faculty, which he defines as “the nature that culture uses to create *second nature*, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other” (1993: xiii; my emphasis). What are we to understand by “second nature”? Taussig does not tell us, but I shall try to make a suggestion on his behalf toward the end of this chapter. However, let me begin with Taussig’s own account. He proposes a

two-layered notion of mimesis that involves both “copying” and “sensuous contact.” Mimesis is a form of representation, an expression that involves copying. However, there is also a decisively corporal, physical, and tangible aspect to mimesis, which is its second layer, that of sensuous contact (1993: 21). This notion of mimesis is drawn from Frazer’s two classes of “sympathetic magic,” discussed in *The Golden Bough* (1993 [1922]): “magic of contact” and “magic of similarity or imitation.” Taussig argues that Frazer’s idea of the copy in magical practices is compelling in its power to affect “the original to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented” (1993: 47). He illustrates this with a number of different examples, mostly from the colonial milieu, in which colonial subjects mimic their European “masters” as a means of manipulating and controlling them.

Taussig’s description of “colonial mimicry” finds certain parallels in recent anthropological writings on the relationship of Siberian indigenous peoples with the former Soviet state. Ssorin-Chaikov (2003), for example, describes how the Evenki of the 1930s re clothed themselves in the state’s image (copy) by putting on Soviet-style clothing, wore medals (contact), and even let themselves be persecuted for engaging in shamanism in humiliating trials of self-confession, all in an attempt to “embody certain state politics, if not the state itself” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 115). Likewise, Grant (1995) describes how the Nivkhi willingly traded their traditional culture for pan-Soviet symbols and ideals, and Bloch (2004: 108) reveals how many Evenki women allied themselves with the Soviet state’s attempt at modernizing them “and in this process gained a sense of belonging to it.” These are all examples of how Siberian indigenous peoples, through acts of mimicry, have attempted to incorporate the Soviet state’s version of modernity into their own selves in order to assume its character and power.

During my fieldwork, however, I saw nothing of this sort of colonial mimicry. In fact, I was struck by the almost complete absence of the former Soviet state. I saw no statues of Lenin—or any other statesmen, for that matter—no helicopters, no money, and almost no imported food products. Virtually all the well-known symbols of the state’s presence and power had vanished, and it was quite hard to imagine these people ever having been an integral part of the Soviet empire. What is more, because of the general economic crisis, many had returned to a subsistence lifestyle, and questions about state politics and ideology were generally of little or no interest to them. All the same, the ability to see similarities and invent correspondences with the surrounding world is, as we

shall see, an enduring trait among Yukaghirs. In fact, their entire cosmos is in effect a hall of mirrors, as various dimensions of reality are conceived as replicas or reflections of others. Thus, the world of the dead is, as we shall see, conceived as a shadowy mirror image of the world of the living, populated with the souls of people, animals, and objects found in this world. Similarly, humans and animals are locked in a pattern of mutual replication. Animals and their associated spiritual beings are thus said to take on human shapes and live lives analogous to those of humans when in their own lands and households. Likewise, when the hunter seeks to bring an elk out into the open by mimicking its bodily movements, he is inevitably put into a paradoxical situation of mutual mimicry. As a result, the bodies of the two blend to a point that makes them of the same kind. In sum, the world of the Yukaghirs is by and large a “mimeticized” world: everything is paired with an almost endless number of mimetic doubles of itself, which extend in all directions and continually mirror and echo one another.

However, as with Taussig’s colonial subjects, there is more to this than mere copying. Yukaghirs imitate significant and powerful others not simply to represent them, but also to exercise power over them. The question, then, is in what way does the copy have to resemble the original in order for the copy to take power over what it is a copy of? Taussig himself observes that a copy is rarely perfect: “It is logical to expect that the form such an imaginary gratification would take is one of ‘the greatest possible resemblance to the original’ so as to increase, in the case of magic, the efficacy of the charm. . . . But no! This is not the case. Instead, ‘primitive man who avails himself of dolls and drawings in order to bewitch is generally quite indifferent to the lifelike character of his magical instruments’ ” (1993: 51).

Remember Old Spiridon mimicking the elk? He was a strange “elk” indeed, with a human face, two legs, and a gun. His imitation is in no way a perfect doubling, and the differences between the two are quite striking—in some ways more striking than their likenesses. Why is the hunter ambiguous, at once similar to and manifestly different from the animal he is imitating? I shall argue that it is because what we are dealing with in the seemingly identical mirror world of Yukaghirs are not “full identifications” but “partial ones” (Pedersen 2001). It is by means of their *difference* from the world impersonated that they can hold power over it. Without difference, the imitator and imitated would collapse into each other, would become one, making any exercise of power impossible. Thus, although the basic movement of mimesis is, as

Benjamin describes it, toward similarity (what Taussig calls sensuous contact), it always depends on the opposite—that is, difference. As we shall see in chapter 5, when I return to hunters' mimetic encounters with animal prey, it is the "copiedness" of mimesis, its lack of realism, so to speak, that secures this strikingly necessary difference because it forces the imitator to turn back on himself. It reverses his dominant and "natural" directedness toward the object of imitation back toward his own awareness as imitating subject, thus preventing him from achieving unity with the object imitated. Such turning back upon oneself is what we understand by reflexivity. In this sense we can talk about a kind of "depth reflexivity" built into mimesis, a certain withholding or nongiving of the self. If, in fact, mimesis becomes totalizing, and the imitator loses himself in what he imitates, we are no longer talking about mimesis but metamorphosis: nothing is left to imitate when the difference between the copy and the original is totally gone. Mimesis, therefore, is situated and defined through difference as much as through similarity. As imitator, one must move in between identities, in that double negative field, which I, using Schechner's words (1985), will call "not me, *not* not-me."

The world of the Yukaghirs is, as we shall see, just like this. People here are betwixt and between: their souls are both substance and non-substance; they are both their bodies and their souls, their selves and reincarnated others; hunters are both humans and the animals they hunt, both predators and prey, and so on. This condition of fundamental liminality or in-betweenness seems to have no ending. People must constantly steer a difficult course between analogy and identity and tread a fine line between transcending difference and maintaining identity: they can and do transform themselves into various others, both human and nonhuman, but must avoid total participation and confusion.

Now, this idea that something can be both X and not X at the same time plays serious havoc with established Western dualisms and dichotomies. The notion that a human being can be both himself and a deceased relative, let alone that he can transform himself into various animals, is simply inconceivable within canonical Western thought. The reaction of anthropologists, as we shall see, has been to neutralize the challenge that this set of ideas presents to our own mode of thinking by imposing a comparative framework, which a priori presupposes the primacy of the Western dichotomies and the falsity of indigenous attempt to reject them. In other words, the comparison between their understandings and ours has been on our terms, creating conditions under which

animism can be nothing but a false epistemology (Bird-David 1999). In what follows, I shall illustrate this by singling out for inspection a sample of anthropological accounts in the study of animism. In doing this, I do not attempt to chronologically outline the entire history of the animism debate within anthropology, which is huge and obviously cannot be dealt with here. Rather, my aim is to reevaluate what I take to be certain Cartesian presumptions commonly underlying the anthropological models of explanation. The most basic of these assumptions is that an impermeable barrier exists between the human mind or consciousness on the one hand, and things and objects in the world on the other, such that the perceiver can make the world available to himself only by means of mentally representing it in his mind through some kind of cognitive processing. However, not only shall I argue that the terms of such a mind-world dichotomy make it impossible to take the animism phenomenon seriously, but I also intend to show that it provides an almost entirely distorted account of the nature of human perception. As an alternative, I shall suggest a radically different approach, one that holds that perception is firmly situated within the practical contexts of people's ongoing engagement with the world. This, as we shall see, allows us to work from a Yukaghir understanding of personhood, which rather than being something that is "added on" to animals and things by the human mind is instead immanent in particular relational contexts of involved activity. However, let me begin my discussion by attending to Descartes himself, who in a fundamental way has shaped the already established anthropological theories on animism, but who also in a strange way plays a key role in my own line of argument.

THE CARTESIAN LEGACY

A prominent feature of the Western intellectual tradition has been the need to keep humans and nonhumans apart by constructing a diverse yet interrelated set of dichotomies, each along a different axis of a dualistic opposition. The dichotomy between humanity and animality has thus been arranged next to those between subject and object, person and thing, mind and body, intentionality and instinct, and, above all, culture and nature (Ingold 2000: 41). These hierarchically ordered dualisms largely arose from Cartesian metaphysics some three centuries ago and have had a potent and lasting impact on how we think about ourselves in relation to nonhuman animals.

Descartes sought to arrive at a basis for certainty of knowledge by

doubting everything that could possibly be doubted, including his own body and the very existence of the world. He concluded, as we know, that he was a mind, a thinking thing (*res cogitans*), because his ability to think was the only thing that he could not doubt and because doubting is a form of thinking (Descartes 1996: 19). He then moved from the proposition that he could doubt the existence of his body and the external world to the conclusion that he could exist without them: “I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is solely to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. . . . the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body” (Descartes 1988: 36). The overriding implication of this was a radical dualism, separating mind from body and self from world. The body, Descartes argued, was merely a vessel—a machine, he called it—in which the self, made up only of mind, was situated, and this disembodied self was totally self-sufficient, with no need for the mediation of the real world of things and people for its existence.

So what did this do for the way we think about nonhuman animals? In his writings, Descartes is blunt:

Primitive man probably did not distinguish between, on the one hand, the principle by which we are nourished and grow and accomplish without any thought all the other operations which we have in common with the brutes, and, on the other hand, the principle in virtue of which we think. He therefore used the single term “soul” to apply to both. . . . I, by contrast, realizing that the principle by which we are nourished is wholly different—different in kind—from that in virtue of which we think, have said that the term “soul,” when it is used to refer to both the principles, is ambiguous. . . . I consider the mind not as part of the soul but as the thinking soul in its entirety. (1984: 246)

Thus, although humans and animals are physically the same, that is, machines, they are mentally wholly different. Animals lack the thing that makes humans distinct from mere machines: they lack mind, and because mind and soul are absolutely inseparable, animals do not possess souls either. Animals, he claims, are merely self-moving machines, which, like a clock or an artificial fountain or mill, have the power to operate purely in accordance with their own internal principles, depending solely on the dispositions of the relevant organs (Descartes 1984: 161).

This separation of mind and matter, which is so central to Cartesian philosophy, and the denial of a rational mind to animals fed into the world of science at large. Although a few bio-behavioral scientists, as I shall describe in chapter 5, kept challenging this purely mechanistic con-

ception of animal behavior, the vast majority accepted Descartes' doctrine of the "beast-machine" as a "fact of nature" (see, for example, Skinner 1938; Kennedy 1992). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that anthropology as an intellectual product of the Cartesian tradition has tended to see indigenous claims about the existence of nonhuman persons as a particular cultural construct, intensely intriguing and interesting perhaps, but without any foundation in reality.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRADITION

At first, this view was proposed under the banner of social evolutionism. Victorian scholars such as Tylor and his protégé Frazer read cognitive underdevelopment into the animism concept, arguing that because of their inadequately developed scientific reasoning, "primitive" peoples attempted to explain the world to themselves by "ascribing personality and life not to men and beasts only, but to things" (Tylor 1929a: 477). The expression "ascribing" at a stroke downgraded indigenous ideas about nonhuman persons to the category of "mistake," and this was indeed the crux of their argument. Animism was understood as a "magical" philosophy about the workings of the world, akin to a scientific theory but grounded in error.⁵ It was based on the "association of ideas," a faculty that Tylor saw as lying "at the very foundation of human reason" (1929a: 116). But, said Tylor, instead of moving from fact to thought, from things to image (as in the Western sciences), the "primitive" reversed the flow, "thus mistaking an ideal connection for a real connection" (1929a: 116). In other words, analogy—such as when the Yukaghir hunter imitates his prey as a means to kill it—was mistakenly taken as a causal connection. However, as we shall see in the discussion of Yukaghir imitation of prey in chapter 5, there is in fact considerable causal power in just such analogical production of resemblances. For Tylor, however, this analogical thinking was taken as a sign that the "primitive" was incapable of making a rigid distinction between imagination and reality, and between subjective and objective realms of being (1929a: 445). He went on to speculate how the "primitive" had come to these erroneous ideas. He suggested that dreams of dead relatives and friends had led the "primitive" to believe in the existence of "ghost-souls," a conviction that was extended to explain causality throughout all of nature as well, so that the entire universe became endowed with animated souls (1929b: 356). Now, it turns out that Tylor might have been right in treating dream experience as the ultimate source of spiritual

beliefs. In fact, I shall propose an argument not unlike Tylor's in chapter 8. However, the problem with his and Frazer's speculations was that they were just that, based neither on fieldwork nor on other kinds of empirical research, but merely on secondary accounts provided by missionaries, administrators, travelers, and other people from the colonial establishment. Whether or not their speculations were at all what the natives themselves had in mind or could acknowledge as the real forces behind their animistic convictions was not considered an issue. On the contrary, it was argued that the indigenous peoples did not understand the real grounds of their own convictions and that the job of the anthropologist was to explain (or correct) the natives' faulty explanations and replace them with his own. As Frazer put it to an audience of anthropologists some 150 years ago, "It is to be observed that the explanations, which I give of many of the following customs are not the explanations offered by the people who practice these customs. Sometimes people give no explanation of their customs, sometimes (much oftener than not) a wrong one" (Frazer quoted in Stocking 1996: 131).

The naturalistic and mentalist stance of evolutionist theory has seen a recent revival in the work of Guthrie (1993, 1997). Attempting a solution to the question of why living creatures, ranging from frogs to human beings, animate the world around them and do it so pervasively, Guthrie has employed a "cognitive and game-theoretical model," suggesting that animistic thinking is "pre-programmed" into our hereditary makeup through natural selection because it has proved to be useful for survival in an uncertain world: "In the face of chronic uncertainty about the nature of the world, guessing that some thing or event is humanlike or has a human cause constitutes a good bet. It is a bet because, in a complex and ambiguous world, our knowledge always is uncertain. It is a good bet because if we are right, we gain much by correct identification, while if we are wrong, we usually lose little" (Guthrie 1997: 55–56).

However, if, as Guthrie argues, it holds true that uncertainty is what drives animistic thinking, why is it that the more regularly and closely we engage with nonhuman entities and the less doubtful we become about them, the more we are inclined to see in them anthropomorphic qualities? This, as we shall see, is true of the Yukaghir hunter's conception of his prey, which becomes gradually more personlike the closer and more intimately he engages with it. But it is equally true of our own cars, computers, and other mechanical devices, which we, through regular and consistent involvement, come to experience as intentional persons with minds of their own (Gell 1998: 18–19).⁶ In addition, one could ask how

Guthrie would explain the fact that animistic ideas and practices not only survive but continue to flourish among indigenous peoples like the Yukaghirs (a problem that he shares with Tylor and Frazer). If the Yukaghirs retrospectively recognize their animistic interpretations as mistakes, why should they let these mistakes remain as a centerpiece of their cosmology? Indeed, the consequence of Guthrie's argument, as one of his critics has pointed out, is that "it further downgrades indigenous cognitive ability, for now they cannot do even what frogs can do, namely, 'after the fact' recognise their 'mistakes'" (Bird-David 1999: 71). However, as will become apparent below, the mistake might well be Guthrie's assumption that the world is divided a priori between the non-human and the human, and his assumption that the world has to be "grasped" conceptually within the terms of an imposed mental design as a precondition for meaningful action.⁷

For now, however, I shall turn to another grand tradition in the study of animism, that of symbolic anthropology. The term *symbolic anthropology* of course fails to differentiate between the diverse writings of this field, but I use it very schematically to refer to the congeries of theories that identify animistic thinking as inherently metaphoric or symbolic, being generated by human society. Although this tradition at first appears to be rather more respectful of indigenous understandings, as we shall see, it points to roughly the same conclusion: that animism is essentially an erroneous mental operation. Consider, for instance, the following statement by Århem with regard to the Makuna of the Colombian Amazon: "Animal communities are organised along the same lines as human societies, and human interaction with animals is *modelled* on the interaction among different groups of people in the human life world" (1996: 190; my emphasis).

Thus, the Makuna are said to call upon their experiences of relations in the human social domain in order to model their relations with animals, because the latter, it is assumed, cannot really possess powers of intentionality, awareness, and sociality. "Socio-centric" models, like that of Århem, which see animist ideas as symbolic reflections or representations of human social relations, have provided the theoretical framework of much modern hunter-gatherer research (see, for example, Leach 1965; Tanner 1979; Bird-David 1992, 1993) and can be traced back to the sociology of Durkheim (1976 [1912]). In his classic studies on totemism (a term that encompasses aspects of animism), Durkheim thus expressed his main argument in symbolist terms, namely that totemism was best understood as "metaphorical and symbolic," and that the concrete and

living reality that it expressed was the social group.⁸ In other words, totemism was not really what it purported to be about, that is, nonhuman persons and agencies and their relationships with humans. For Durkheim, totemic concepts and beliefs constituted a symbolic representation of the human social order, which they served to enforce. That the natives themselves did not realize this fact was, Durkheim claimed, due to their fundamentally irrational feelings about the force of the social: “It is natural that the impressions aroused by the clan in individual minds . . . should fix themselves on the idea of the totem rather than that of the clan: for the clan *is too complex a reality to be represented clearly in all its complex unity by such rudimentary intelligences*” (1976: 251–52; my emphasis).

At this point we see that Durkheim’s argument runs parallel to that of Tylor. In both instances, the analyst finds it necessary to replace the indigenous peoples’ own animistic explanations of relevant occurrences with his own, because the natives, it is assumed, do not speak the literal truth in their statements about nonhuman persons.

Although few anthropologists today would put it as crudely as Durkheim did, his main argument, that the human social domain is the fundamental reality from which all representations of the natural environment are derived, is still commonly held. Bird-David (1993) is a case in point. In a recent article she proposes the existence of four distinctive animistic constructs, each of which she claims is expressed by a “core metaphor.” While the Nayaka, Mbuti, and Batek draw extensively on an “adult-child” metaphor in representing their relationship with the environment, the Canadian Cree draw on a “sexual” metaphor, Western Australian Aborigines on a “procreational” metaphor, and the San Bushmen on a “namesake” metaphor (1993: 112). However, as Ingold (2000: 43–46) has shown, the notion of “metaphor” or “social modeling of nature” escapes evolutionist reductionism only to fall into a nature-culture dualism. This is because the notion of metaphor supposes a prior distinction between a domain in which social relations are constitutive and literal (the social world of humans) and another in which they are representational and metaphorical (the natural world of animals). Consequently, Bird-David ends up with the very same dichotomy—between human society and nature—as Durkheim does. Thus, with regard to, for example, the Nayaka, Mbuti, and Batek, she argues that their “adult-child” metaphors, drawn from the human social domain, provide them with a cultural framework that enables them to make sense of their environment, even though “they may not be normally aware of [the meta-

phors]” (1990: 190). In other words, when the Nayaka, Mbuti, and Batek say that the forest is a parent who shares with them, Bird-David claims that they are indulging in metaphor, for nature cannot really share with people. Although they themselves assert the contrary—that they share with humans and nonhumans on an equal footing—we are told that this is because the practice of sharing within their own human communities is so deeply embedded in their thought that they fail to distinguish metaphor from reality (Ingold 2000: 76). However, Bird-David insists that *she* can, and she implies on this ground that the hunter-gatherers have gotten it wrong.

It seems we are pretty much back to Descartes, who by means of his method of radical doubt drew the initial lines between true and false knowledge on the one hand and humans and animals on the other. Three hundred years later, the same dichotomies lie at the heart of the anthropological thesis on animism. Now, it appears that the indigenous peoples themselves do not endorse these dualisms. As Bird-David herself notes, hunter-gatherers “do not inscribe into the nature of things a division between the natural agencies and themselves as we do with our ‘nature: culture’ dichotomy. They view their world as an integrated entity” (1992: 29–30). A nondualistic perspective is also evident among the Yukaghirs, who, as we shall see, do not even have a word corresponding to our term “nature.”

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE

So, whom should we believe? The various theorizing anthropologists, who argue that animism is best understood as either “erroneous thinking” or as “symbolic constructions of nature,” and that its real significance operates behind the backs of its indigenous practitioners? Or the Yukaghirs, who, along with other hunter-gatherers, hold that animals and other nonhumans possess qualities paralleling those of human selves or persons, qualities that come into view in the context of close mutual engagement? The anthropological accounts take the Cartesian division between humanity and animality as axiomatic—“Personhood as a state of being is not open to non-human animal kinds” (Ingold 2000: 48)—but must necessarily be “added on” or “superimposed” upon them through an alternative construction—what Tylor, Durkheim, and Bird-David would call “culture” and Guthrie describes as naturally encoded structures of the mind. For the Yukaghirs, however, animals and other nonhumans are conceived as persons, not because personhood has been

bestowed upon them by some kind of cognitive processing, but because they reveal themselves as such within relational contexts of real-life activities, such as during hunting.

The question is not so much *whom* we are to believe (as if the Yukaghirs had chosen to participate in this debate about the true nature of their animistic convictions), but *what* we are to believe.⁹ Are we to believe that people come to know what is “out there” in the world by mentally representing it in their minds, prior to any attempt at engagement with it? This is what the anthropological accounts presume—for people, it is supposed, can neither know nor act upon the world directly, but only indirectly through imposing some kind of “mental design” upon it, whether this design is provided by culture (Tylor, Durkheim, and Bird-David) or is naturally built into the human brain (Guthrie). As we have seen, this assumption has its roots in the Cartesian mind-world dichotomy, which lies deep in Western thinking. Or, as an alternative, could it be that meaning is inherent in the relational contexts of peoples’ direct perceptual engagement with the world, so that mental representations or cognition instead of being primary is derived from a practical background of involved activity? This is what the Yukaghirs seem to hold when they argue that animals are persons because they are experienced as such during subsistence-related activities.

I take the second view to be both more accurate as an ethnographic description and heuristically more valuable in understanding the nature of perception. In doing so, I join not only the Yukaghirs, but also certain recent figures in Western thought, all with a broadly phenomenological bent. These include, above all, Heidegger, but also various other scholars firmly based in the phenomenological tradition, such as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Schultz, Dillon, and Ingold.

Although all of these thinkers belong to different disciplines—philosophy, sociology, and anthropology—they share a common urge to overcome the Cartesian rift between mind and world as two totally independent realms of reality. Thus, all take as their starting point the view that notions of the world and of human reality are ontologically inseparable—an idea conveyed in Heidegger’s well-known phrase “being-in-the-world” (1962: 107). The hyphenation of this expression signals that our everyday involvement with the various components that make up the world implies that we cannot regard them as a purely objective and value-free set of things, waiting, as it were, for our mental construction to render them meaningful. Rather, things with which we deal have meaning for us in the immediacy of our dealings with

them. This, however, does not imply that such dichotomies as “subject” versus “object,” “self” versus “world,” or “culture” versus “nature” are altogether false or useless, but rather that they are derivative modes of being. Our practical involvement with things is prior to the cogitating ego, confronting an external world “out there,” and that which is revealed through involved activity is ontologically more fundamental than the context-free properties revealed by detached contemplation.

Now what does this do for the way we might think about personhood? If the person or self is, before all else, a being-in-the-world, caught up in the everyday activities of living a life, it follows that *world* in this sense is not something that the self can get outside or stand beside as a self-contained Cartesian “mind.” This is because, first, a self that is *in-the-world* is necessarily embodied. Only someone who is firmly based in some corporal physicality can have a place in it (Merleau-Ponty 1998 [1962]: 408). Second, no matter how much we may reflect and abstract, we are already in a direct and immediate relationship with the world. Thus, we cannot think of self and world in terms of external contact between two separate domains. Rather, self and world are always from the outset inextricably intertwined, and one cannot be without the other. As Heidegger puts it, “Self and world belong together in the single entity . . . self and world are not two entities, like subject and object . . . rather self and world are . . . in the unity of the structure of being-in-the-world” (1982 [1927]: 297).

The critical consequence of all of this is that personhood, rather than being an inherent property of people and things, is constituted in and through the relationships into which they enter. Personhood is, so to speak, a potentiality of their being-in-the-world, which might or might not be realized as a result of their position within a relational field of activity. An animal therefore can be just that, or it can be a subject-person with a mind of its own. The relational context in which it is placed and experienced determines its being. This considerably reduces the havoc caused by indigenous peoples like the Yukaghirs attributing personhood freely to nonhuman animals, for not only does it reveal that animals and things are not self-sufficient persons, and gain personhood only in and through textures of close practical involvement with others (most notably humans), but it also explains what anthropologists since Tylor could not help noticing, namely that indigenous peoples do not endow all things with personhood all the time, but only ascribe personhood to certain things and only every so often.

THE PROBLEM OF ENGAGEMENT VERSUS REFLEXIVITY

Have we then, with Heidegger's theory of being-in-the-world, finally found a suitable framework for analyzing the animism problem in a way that takes its indigenous practitioners seriously? The theory certainly has several advantages. First, it reverses the ontological priorities of anthropological analysis by convincingly showing that everyday practical life is the crucial foundation upon which so-called "higher" activities of mental representation or cognition are firmly premised. Moreover, by taking seriously the actual experience of those indigenous practitioners, the theory allows anthropologists, for the first time, to analyze animistic beliefs in a way that is compatible with the indigenous peoples' own accounts, which tend to be based on hands-on experience with animals and things rather than on abstract philosophical contemplation. Ingold points to exactly this when he writes, "I shall argue that hunter-gatherers do *not*, as a rule, approach their environment as an external world of nature that has to be 'grasped' conceptually. . . . indeed the separation of mind and nature has no place in their thought and practice. . . . I wish to suggest that we . . . follow the lead of hunter-gatherers in taking the human condition to be that of being immersed from the start . . . in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with the constituents of the dwelled-in world" (Ingold 2000: 42; emphasis in the original).

Ingold's careful and nuanced view of perception, expressed in his use of the Heideggerian term "dwelling," is foundational to all that follows in the argument of this book about indigenous animism. Indeed, no other scholar has exerted a greater influence on my thinking. It is not only the profundity with which he engages with the hunter-gatherer literature from which I draw inspiration, but also, and even more so, the clarity of his theoretical challenge to anthropology's Cartesian tradition. However, although I adhere to Ingold's attempt at turning hunter-gatherer studies away from abstract Cartesian dualisms and back to the concrete and solid ground of practical and perceptual engagement with the world, I believe that his approach runs headlong into a dualism of its own, which seriously distorts our understanding of the "human condition" of perception in general and the animism problem in particular. What I am pointing to here is the stark dichotomy that the Heideggerian model draws between "practical" and "reflexive" states of being. For Heidegger, these two modes are seen as mutually exclusive: either you are absorbed in the world of involved activity or you step back and become an "onlooker," conceptually reflecting upon the world and your relations with it. You

cannot, Heidegger seems to hold, be “world-involved” and “self-involved” at once. Indeed, for him the reflexive mode is simply seen as a derivative state of being, which may or may not follow from our practical and prereflexive types of engagements with the world. Ingold conveys exactly this idea when he asserts, “Imagination [i.e., reflection] is not a necessary *prelude* to our contact with reality, but rather an *epilogue* and an optional one at that. We do not have to think the world in order to live in it, but we do have to live in it in order to think it” (1996: 118, emphasis in the original; see also Ingold 1992: 52–53).

I find such a contrast problematic, at least when it is made in such stark terms as defined by Ingold. I do agree that people often carry out tasks without interpreting or reflecting upon their meanings in the abstract, and that for the most part meaning already inheres in the relational properties of the subject’s practical engagement with the world. This is, in fact, my point in chapter 7, where I argue that during everyday rituals such as “feeding the fire,” Yukaghirs simply perceive spirits as tools, “ready-to-hand,” which they employ in an immediate and matter-of-fact fashion. Still, I find it hard to accept that our practical involvement in the world, no matter how absorbed our coping with things and people around us might be, does not involve some self-referential mode of awareness. It holds true that consciousness by its very nature actively transcends itself, what in phenomenological theory goes by the name of “intentionality.” Consciousness is always and necessarily directed outside oneself and has no inner content. We cannot therefore retreat into a self-enclosed subjectivity in which we doubt the existence of the external world, as did Descartes, since even our awareness of our own subjectivity is possible only if we are also aware of a world that transcends it. Subject and object of experience are inseparably bound together, and our being is and must therefore be a being-in-the-world.

Still, there is an element of truth to Descartes’ claim that our experience of the world requires as a starting point our awareness of ourselves as subjects. As Dillon writes, “To perceive a thing is *not* to coincide with it, to be it. The presenting of a phenomenon requires a *distantiation*, a space between the *here* of perception and the *there* of the phenomenon; and there *has* to be an awareness, albeit tacit, of the *here* for the *there* to appear *as such*” (1988: 103; my emphasis).

In other words, we can only have an experience of the world if we ourselves are conscious subjects of experience that somehow distinguish between ourselves as subjects and a world that transcends our subjective experience of it. Merleau-Ponty also draws attention to precisely this

point: “All thought of something is at the same time self-consciousness, in the absence of which it could have no object” (1998 [1962]: 371). Thus it cannot be, as Heidegger argues, that the being-in-the-world of our everyday practical involvement with things and people carries with it a sense of “*being absorbed in the world*” (Heidegger 1962: 80; my emphasis), a situation in which “self and world merge . . . so that one cannot say where one ends and the other begins” (Ingold 2000: 169). If this were the case, then the experienced and the experiencer would conflate, would become one, thereby making any experience of the world impossible. Such a state of fusion or perfect continuity between self and world is, as I shall argue in chapter 3, something akin to stumbling into death or the total dissolution of the self. There must therefore be a reflexive awareness of the “I” as distinct from the world built into experience from the very start.

This insight is, I shall argue, of paramount importance when it comes to understanding animism, which, although it rejects the Cartesian principle of absolute differences between self and world, is anxious about drawing differences nevertheless. Let me begin my argument by quoting Pedersen, who defines animism in terms of “partial” rather than “absolute” identifications with the world: “Since animism conceptualises a continuity between human and non-humans . . . a logic of endless substitutions seems intrinsic to animist thought, the principle that every element . . . can be interchanged with another. There are no radical discontinuities here, only continuous substitutions of Same becoming Other, and vice versa. The fundamental animist principle I therefore propose is one of *analogous identification*. I use ‘analogous identification’ to stress that we are *not* faced with full identifications here, but only *partial* ones” (2001: 416; my emphasis).

In Cartesian dualistic thinking, identity and difference are, so to speak, correlates: a thing can be what it is only by dint of its total difference from other things. Indeed, this was the Cartesian view of the *cogito* as a special kind of “inner” object, clearly distinguishable from all “outer” objects in mere flux by being both unified and fully transparent to itself. However, the moment we accept that the self is caught up in a world that transcends it, our selfhood cannot take the kind of unified transparency that Descartes attributed to it. As a being-in-the-world, the self cannot be fully identical with itself because it is, as we have seen, not self-sufficient, but needs the “otherness” of the world as a condition of its possibility. Indeed, without the mediation of the world of others, there would be no conception of self as such. However, the self is not truly

identical with the world either, because a germ of self-awareness—the self as a subject standing apart from the world—is built into experience from the very start. Thus, the world can never furnish the self with an integrated or coherent being in the way that Ingold seems to suggest when he writes, “self and world merge . . . so that one cannot say where one ends and the other begins” (2000: 169). Rather, the otherness of the world, its difference from the self, is part of the meaning it has on the most primordial and prereflexive levels of experience.

This condition of being like and not like, the same and different from oneself and from the world, is what Lacan (1989 [1966]) brings together in his account of the “imaginary,” a mode of being in which no absolute distinction between subject and object is apparent; the self identifies with the world, feeling at once *within* and *apart* from it, so that the two glide ceaselessly in and out of each other in a sealed circuit. I shall return to discuss Lacan’s theory in detail in chapter 3 as part of my account of Yukaghir soul conceptions. What I want to convey at this point is that animism can be seen as the example par excellence of seeing personhood in terms of this enigma of “dissimilar similarity.” Thus, the Yukaghir world is, as we have already seen, very much like Pedersen’s (2001: 416) description, “a logic of endless substitutions” in which “every element can be interchanged with another” and “no radical discontinuities are apparent”—all of which points to a state of fundamental similitude between self and world. Taking a closer look, however, “we are not faced with full identifications here, but only partial ones.” Thus, rather than being at one with the world, the Yukaghir self is in a state betwixt and between: its soul is both substance and nonsubstance; it is its body and its soul, itself and a reincarnated other; it is both human and the animal hunted; it is both predator and prey, and so on. In this world, in which everyone is never solely themselves but always at the same time something else as well, and anyone can transform into virtually anything else, much everyday activity is not just routine and unreflexive practice. Rather, here everyday practical life demands a kind of “depth reflexivity” as a form of defense mechanism against the dissolution of the self, which faces a real risk that identification with the world of other bodies, things, and people will become so complete that all differences will appear to vanish and an irreversible metamorphosis will occur. Reflexivity and engagement, therefore, rather than being mutually exclusive, constitute each other, and neither is amenable to prioritization. What this means, then, is that if we are to take animism seriously, we need to single out that mode of being-in-the-world, which is capable of accommodating

both “self-involvedness” and “world-involvedness” within a unitary and coherent view of human experience. This mode of being is mimesis. Mimesis, as we have seen, puts the imitator in contact with the world of other bodies, things, and people, and yet separates him from them by forcing him to reflexively turn in on himself. Indeed, this is why the Yukaghirs attach such tremendous importance to mimesis as a source of power, because as imitator, one can enter into relations with significant and powerful others and be transformed, but without necessarily losing oneself in the process.

SECOND NATURE

Perhaps we are now in a position to suggest what is meant by mimesis being “the nature that culture uses to create *second nature*” (Taussig 1993: xiii; my emphasis). “Second nature” is nature that is reflexively aware of itself as standing somewhat *apart from* nature. We are, however, not talking about a disembodied Cartesian *cogito* that turns in on itself in passive isolation from the world. Second nature reflects upon itself in activity, and it is through its mimetic encounter with other things and bodies that it acquires its self-awareness of standing apart from them. This, as we shall see in chapter 3, is backed up by much physiological research, which gives mimesis a central role in the constitution of the self. The very young child has no sense of differentiation from the world of others, but must learn this by mimetically incorporating an other into the self, which then comes to be experienced as both “me” and “not me.” In this way the child assumes a duality or doubling of perspectives, which allows it to see itself as another would see it from an external vantage—that is, it comes to observe itself reflexively.

While nonhuman animals can imitate others (e.g., insects imitating leaves) and might even possess self-awareness to some degree (Noske 1997: 131), mimesis reaches its highest capacity, as Benjamin notes, in human beings. Yukaghir animism, as we shall see, exploits this capacity to its fullest. By means of mimicry, the Yukaghir hunter assumes the viewpoint, senses, and sensibilities of his prey while still remaining aware of himself as a human hunter with the intention of killing it. Likewise, the Yukaghir person is intertwined with the deceased relative of whom he is considered a reincarnation, sharing the same name, personality, and knowledge. Yet, he also retains a personhood of his own and is capable of individual agency and intention. These are all events that could not be achieved without the intervention of the mimetic faculty and its power to

“dance between the very same and the very different . . . registering both sameness and difference, of being like and of being Other” (Tausig 1993: 129). If animism is defined by “analogous identification,” not “full identifications” but “partial ones” (Pedersen 2001: 416), then mimesis is what calls animism into action. Mimesis is the practical side of the symbolic world of animism—its necessary mode of being-in-the-world.

BOOK OUTLINE

With these considerations in mind, let me sketch out the structure of the book. The next chapter examines the ethnography of the hunters and their relationship to the animals they seek to kill, with a particular focus on their ideas about animal rebirth. I ask if there is any connection between hunters’ belief in reincarnation and their apparently “aggressive” subsistence practices, in which more animals are killed than can be transported and eaten. Chapter 3 continues the discussion of reincarnation, but with a focus on its implications for relations within the human lifeworld. I show how reincarnation, which emphasizes the continuity rather than the finality of personal relationships, is important as a model for dealing with grief. However, I also reveal how a person’s relation to the soul of his previous incarnation is problematic. The dead ancestor may work with or against the person, sometimes helping him but also occasionally sabotaging him by taking control of parts of his body and making them work against his intentions. I relate this notion of the fragmented body to Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage” and discuss the complex pattern of common features and differences between them and our understanding of the self and embodiment.

Chapter 4 returns us to the issue of human-animal relations. I describe Yukaghir ideas about species and personhood and reveal that they can be ascribed to what has been called a “perspectival ontology,” in which all creatures—humans and nonhumans—see themselves as humans and everyone else as prey and predators (Viveiros de Castro 1998). In chapter 5 I suggest a possible grounding if not origin of perspectivism in the mimetic encounter between hunter and prey. Moreover, I suggest how we are to understand animal personhood, which opposes both anthropological and biological models. Chapter 6 discusses shamanism. I argue that shamanism among the Yukaghirs, rather than being seen as “mysticism” under the control of a particular religious elite, is to be understood as a much more broadly based activity practiced to varying degrees by ordinary hunters. Chapter 7 shifts the focus toward the spirit world. The

Yukaghirs rarely give names to spirits and have no neatly ordered system of classification. Drawing on Heidegger's philosophy, I develop an argument that relates this to the nature of Yukaghir practical experience, going beyond the widespread view of knowledge as a matter of linguistic representations or cognition. Chapter 8 looks at hunters' storytelling, learning, and dreaming. I argue against theories of the "mental map," which sees storytelling as a medium for transmitting knowledge. Instead I show how Yukaghirs learn through nonverbal means, and how hunters' narratives serve as a tool for "humanizing" them when they return from the forest. Moreover, drawing on recent findings in cognitive science, which show that concepts can and do exist independently of language, and that dreaming shares basic cognitive structures and processes with waking life, I suggest that it is possible that children, before they learn to talk, could develop prototypical concepts of spirits through dream experiences. In the concluding chapter, I revisit the animism debate and suggest how mimesis might help us in taking animism seriously.