

REVENGE, THE CORE NOTION UNDERLYING RELATIONS
BETWEEN INDIGENOUS HUNTERS-HERDERS AND PREDATORS
ON THE YAKUTIA TAIGA



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SUMMARY. This article considers the notion of revenge as an agency of wolves, bears and the master-spirits in the animistic worldview of indigenous Eveny and Sakha hunters and the reindeer herders of the Eveno-Bytantaiskii and Tomponskii ulusy (districts) of North Yakutia. Predators are perceived by hunters and herders as conscious non-human beings that can enter into relations with humans on a reciprocal basis. The possibility that predators may carry out revenge on people can be perceived as showing that there are similarities between humans and non-human predators. This article shows how the notions of reciprocity, similarity and relational symmetry between people and predators are reflected in the narratives and hunting rituals of indigenous hunters and herders. As comparative examples, the blood feud customs that earlier existed among the Tungus, Sakha people and Chukchee clans are also considered here. Although these customs no longer exist in the contemporary societies of the indigenous people of Yakutia, the notions underlying them very much reflect the human-predator relations on the taiga today.

KEYWORDS: Yakutia, indigenous hunters and herders, predators, revenge, blood feud, taiga relations.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article¹ is to discuss the vernacular notion held by indigenous hunters and reindeer herders in North Yakutia whereby wolves and bears are perceived as human-like beings that engage with people in the taiga relationship of revenge. Additionally, this work seeks to contribute to theoretical approaches in relation to ethnographic engagements with different species, these being widely discussed in recent anthropological research in the fields of human-animal studies, posthumanism and multispecies anthropology (see Fijn and Kavesh 2020; White and Candea 2018; Ingold 2013; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Haraway 2008).

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This article will analyse original narratives by different Eveny² and Sakha indigenous people regarding their relations with predators on the taiga of North Yakutia. This material was collected during long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in 2018-2019 among the groups of hunters and reindeer herders and based in the Eveno-Bytantaiskii and Tomponskii ulusy. Most of these hunters and groups of reindeer herders predominated by Tungus speaking Eveny, numbering about 15 thousand people in Yakutia and recognized as a minority in the Russian north. However, their identity is relational and can shift over the course of their lifetimes, often dictated by education or the entering of mixed marriages. Also, because of possibilities to receive preferential governmental benefits, reindeer herders may choose to switch their declaration of ethnic identity to either Eveny or Sakha. With most Eveny settling in remote villages in the early 1930s as part of the Soviet project of modernising the Russian north (see also Ulturgasheva 2017), contemporary Eveny communities are mostly semi-nomadic. Nonetheless, people still conduct traditional subsistence practices based on a combination of reindeer herding or horse breeding and hunting in the mountainous taiga landscapes.

Many hunters and reindeer herders in North Yakutia try to prevent allowing wolves to habituate in or near their reindeer pasture areas. In their taiga encampments, people experience an imminent closeness to the wolves and bears that do not hesitate to approach and attack reindeers and bears also sometimes pose a threat to humans. The herders think that the predators definitely would come to take as many reindeers as they could, so the people equate the presence of predators as an indication of intention to attack livestock or even people. However, despite the predators being seen as a threat to livestock or human life, they are also perceived as the closest beings to people on the taiga. Such a notion is associated with the human-like appearance (of the bears) and the intelligence of the predators as well as their intentions to act cunningly and deliberately. Bears, perhaps resemble humans in their ability to stand on two legs and their front paws being quite manipulative and resembling human hands. It is not uncommon to hear from Eveny hunters and herders how a bear does human-like things, such as making dough from flour, pulling out nets, taking fish and then throwing the nets back into the river and also performing rituals to respectfully bury another bear, a relative. Therefore, predators are perceived to share many external and behavioural qualities with people. Sometimes, when talking about relations with predators, hunters and herders say that bears or wolves are the same humans as themselves. One Eveny hunter even said that killing such a great and intelligent animal as a bear or a wolf can make a hunter feel pity and guilty, as if he killed a human person. In the accounts

² For a purpose of this article, I use the plural Eveny derived from singular Even.

of the hunters and herders of North Yakutia, the similarity between humans and predators, as well as the symmetry³ in their relations, is reflected. It is not so, that predators are treated as mentally, socially, morally or physically equal beings to the Eveny and Sakha people in the straight meaning. Still, they are considered as conscious non-human cohabitants capable of entering reciprocal taiga relations, which contain notions of mutual revenge and respect. In many cases, hunters and herders engage in intersubjective relations with predators as individuals rather than as species in the general meaning. However, in some cases, predators are perceived by these people as instruments of a master-spirit sent to punish people for various wrongdoings, e.g. disrespectful treatment or killing animals in cruel ways, or for excessive killing (for further reading see Brandišauskas 2017: 204-213; Charlier 2015: 29-55; Willerslev 2007: 29-50). I will show that hunters and herders of North Yakutia can perceive master-spirits as arbiters and mediators regulating taiga relations between people and animals. To reveal more aspects in the symmetry of the human-predator relations in Yakutia, I will consider how principles in the past custom of blood feud among the Tungus groups, Sakha and Chukchi, are still reflected in the current interactions between herder-hunters and predators. The perception by hunters and reindeer herders of North Yakutia of the notion of reciprocal revenge between humans and non-human beings expresses to the degree of their similarity. Moreover, the narratives of these people will reveal that their notion of predation is tightly related to features such as greed, non-control of emotions, violence, morality, excessive killing and the breaking of social norms, all of which can be also attributed to humans. Of course, this does not mean that hunters and herders in North Yakutia believe they can become the animal predators and vice versa, but that the similarity of humans and non-human predators, in some sense, can be perceived as a condition of predation shared by humans and animals.

MEETING WITH OTHERS: WOLVES

Beginning with an account of a middle-aged woman named Veronika⁴ from Sakkyryr village in Eveno-Bytantaiskii ulus, I attempt to convey the common notion among Eveny hunters and herders whereby wolves are seen as conscious non-human beings that similarly can think, judge and react to the other's intentions,

³ In this article I elaborate on the terms of similarity and symmetry, which is expressed by Andrey V. Tutorski (2023: 887-899) in describing human-bear relations in northern part of European Russia, where bears are perceived by local inhabitants as almost human beings.

⁴ To guarantee their privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, the true names of most of narrators were replaced by Russian names that are common in the Sakha Republic. Other contacts in this article are simply referred to as hunters, reindeer herders. This generalization is used to preserve anonymity.

also apprehending the human subject's will and character. Veronika's account also demonstrates a very intimate experience with wolves, triggering her memory while narrating the story which refreshed her impressions and senses of this meeting. An important aspect in this two-way interaction is that both parties shared a living space on the taiga and observed each other to apprehend each parties' next actions. The account also conveys a sense of being observed by wolves that can take watch from the human stance. The fact that both a human and a wolf can look at each other in the eye shows the degree of their similarity, as both subjects can be aware of the other's thoughts. Below I am giving Veronika's narrative.

I was a young girl then. Once, while guarding reindeers one morning, I suddenly heard a rumble coming from the reindeer hooves. I wondered who was chasing them. Suddenly I saw two grey creatures lurking around. They approached me and sat nearby, staring at me. Wolves... it was a terrible sight! Those eyes were so frightening, the teeth, the wolves were growling at me. I was scared. The reindeer herd ran away. I stood with a stick and thought that the wolves would attack if I ran but would attack me too if I approached them. I couldn't decide what to do, I didn't dare to take any actions, neither this, nor that. Eventually, I raised my stick and whined aaahh. I started to approach them, shouting, hitting the ground and making more noise by stomping my feet. I approached closer to them, but the wolves sat there for a while, probably thinking "what a foolish girl". The wolves slightly stepped back. Aha... I thought, I am a human! I kept approaching. The wolves retreated a bit, then sat and gazed at me for a time, but eventually they turned and ran to the hillside. That was my first meeting with wolves, it was absolutely terrible, their eyes were something absolutely horrible and their faces were something absolutely terrible, horrible.

It is taken in this account that the wolves attempted to scare the Eveny girl, anticipating she would flee and leave the reindeers unattended. The wolves intended to overplay the girl and simultaneously judge her character and will to resist them. Talking about wolf hunting in Yakutia, Aivaras Jefanovas and Donatas Brandišauskas (forthcoming), define the term "overplay" as situation when both hunter and wolf learn from each other's behaviour while simultaneously trying to overcome each other and succeed against the other. Such a conscious response from the wolves is possible because the predators can observe, read and predict human action sequences (see also Oehler 2022; 2020: 142–160). This demonstrates the wolves' abilities to perceive the cause-and-effect connection. From the Veronika's perspective, wolves also demonstrated human-like empathetic features to perceive human fear, stupidity and even the naivety of the girl, who was in doubt of her actions. However, Veronika's account also illustrated the differences between human and the predators in that she resisted the frightening gaze of the wolves. She repeated several times how the predators' outward appearance and horrible face expressions frightening her, but even finding herself in the position of prey, she

simultaneously recognized herself as a human being and thus in a position superior to the predators. Switching from the victim (prey animal) to the human perspective, she demonstrated that although the boundaries between humanity and animality are permeable in her worldview, the distinctions are clearly maintained. I am not, however, trying to impose on to Veronika's account any ideas of the western ontology based on nature/culture and the human/animal divide (see more on humanity/animality in Ingold 1994: 14-32). Although animals are perceived by the Eveny as other than human beings, their similarity to humans are partial but not straight. As Ingold (*ibid.*) aptly expresses, the boundaries between humans and other animals do not run alongside but crosscuts the boundary between humanity and animality as states of being. In this regard, the animality is not a position opposed to humanity as in western thought, but animality is inclusive of humanity. Regarding the vernacular notion by the Eveny and Sakha people of a transition to the predatory condition, I shall discuss later. Here I return to the predator-prey position, that will allow a better articulation of the vernacular perception of predators.

A BEAR'S HYPNOTISING GAZE: THE FEAR OF PREDATORS

A horrible gaze with the hypnotizing eyes of a predator was a descriptive stressed by several herders when talking about meeting bears on the taiga. A second account by a horse breeder named Vasilii, from the same village as Veronika, describes an encounter with a bear during daily activities on the taiga. This encounter caused him an unexpected and impulsive stupor, triggered by fear of the predator. I met Vasily in the village during the annual summer "Ysyakh" festival in Yakutia with traditional horse races. Vasily's racehorses repeatedly won top awards, but after falling from a horse he underwent serious surgery several times. His approach to life with a lot of humour helped him recover more than once. When asked to talk about his experience with predators, he spoke partly anecdotally, but seriously repeated that he fears bears, even seeing them in dreams. Here is Vasilii's account.

Arriving on the taiga, I went to gather dry twigs in a hollow to make a fire. I didn't think anything, I just gathered twigs, but turning to the left, suddenly there was a bear...15 meters. Ooo, I got scared, unexpectedly. He watched me, he was about to attack from above. I walked out of the hollow with the twigs in my hands. He looked at me, he was sitting there, brown, his nose was in constant motion, his eyes were absolutely terrible. I completely forgot myself, I couldn't even scream, he hypnotized me, the gaze-eyes were very strong, sharp. I forgot everything, my knife, matches, even how to shout. I just stood with the twigs. The bear sat like that for 2-3 minutes and then ran away. I lit a fire and, suddenly, the bear came again.

Somehow, he was not scared at all. I grabbed my rifle. The bear ran to the forest. I stood, my eyes were going around, I was worried. If the bear had attacked me there, I would have stood in that hollow holding the twigs and died just like that. I couldn't do anything. If you meet a bear one-on-one on the taiga, you'll shit your pants, so better you take toilet paper with you (laughs). Bears are very fast. You can't escape them even with a horse. When a horse sees a bear, the horse trembles and stands still. A bear tore up my racehorse soon he will eat me too (laughs). I had a dream, I was worried, a bear attacked me in the dream. I wanted to shoot, but I couldn't pull the trigger, I pushed, pushed, but it didn't fire. I adjusted to a bear female with two cubs, to the mother, but I couldn't pull the trigger. How can it be? It's scary. Bears really bother me at my work on the taiga. They became locals there already. I called the guys and asked them to hunt the bear, but they didn't yet. I haven't shot a bear yet, but I am going to.

Having met the bear's hypnotizing gaze, the man fell into a stupor of fear. To describe his condition, the storyteller gave an episode where a horse froze without motion when seeing a bear. He himself was surprised how it could be that he could not do anything except stand still watching what the bear would do to his body. The gaze of the predator, the eye contact, made Vasiliï feel to be in the position of prey. The man found himself, so to say, with bare hands in front of the bear. Although he had a knife and a rifle, he couldn't defend himself. Therefore, at least sometimes, an armed man cannot withstand the natural fear of a predator on the taiga. Thus, the fear of a predator can be stronger than technology. I cannot, however, deny the idea that fear of predators is an archetypal and linked to human prehistory, when our ancestors were very prone to attacks by now-extinct predators such as sabre-toothed felines and cave bears. Paul A. Trout (2011) asked why predators hunted and chased us in our dreams and why stories and myths are filled with predatory agents - wolves, bears, ogres, giants - that eat hapless humans. He gives a reason: our early ancestors were prey, not predators. They were racked by constant fear of being eaten alive by the carnivores that dominated the landscape (*ibid.*). Therefore, our brain, our emotions, our behaviours and our culture were being shaped by the need of our Pleistocene ancestors to survive amid a variety of terrifying mammalian carnivores (*ibid.*). Some hunters in North Yakutia are so cautious of killing bears that they keep talking of them and do not even think badly about them. A bear is thought to understand human speech. For instance, one Eveny hunter said that it is wrong to talk about a bear hunt when outside because a bear can catch the vibrations coming through the ground. A hunter can whisper about it later in a log house, as the floor isolates the words and thus no bear would be informed. There is no need to discuss further the idea of fear for its own sake, however, the aspects of fear of predators can be found nearly in all accounts of my

contacts. What is important to stress here is that fear, respect and revenge are inter-related categories, since people fear the revenge of predators which, they think, is the result of disrespectful behaviour with animals.

Vasilii's account also has a moral implication. When depicting a bear attack in his dreams, he was unable to shoot at a bear female with cubs, not only because of the fear, but perhaps the bear resembled to him a human mother with kids (see more in Sleptsov 2014). Such killing would be immoral. Concerning this point, he shares with other hunters and herders the vernacular belief of reciprocity with non-human animals. I also heard Eveny saying that it is not wise to kill wolf cubs in dens, as the wolf female in grief then kills livestock in exchange. People emphatically judged that it is immoral for hunters to kill wolf cubs, equally it would be as if humans didn't have their own mothers. Interestingly, Vasilii repeated that although the predators disturbed him very much in his horse breeding areas, he never shot any bear. He would prefer other hunters to hunt the bears instead of him. Furthermore, he also admitted that bears had become locals at his taiga place. In some sense, Vasilii perceived these bears as his neighbours, that also made the kill a moral dilemma. Therefore, killing a predator evokes ambiguity in the hunter, which stems from fear and respect, as well as regret for killing a human-like being. To be clearer with ambiguity, I shall take another case of relations with bears by a hunter from Sakkyryr village. It is also worth noting that an Eveny hunter thinks that it is a shame for a hunter having powerful rifles and vehicles to tremble before the eye of a bear or wolf - the killing of such big game as a bear should evoke deep respect rather than fear. A hunter feels sorrow for taking the life of an intelligent and powerful being, he wants to amend his fault. To show respect to a bear, a hunter mounts the skull of the bear on a tree with the gaze pointed directly at the hunter's traces. In this way, a hunter believes that a bear would see that he was killed honestly by facing him directly, not by sneaking up from behind like a thief. Whether wolf or bear, it is better to direct the predator's gaze at the hunter's tracks, thus making the predator aware of who killed him. It is even better to whistle before the shot to let the animals know that you hunted them. If such rituals are not followed, a bear could in turn stalk the hunter from behind in exchange. The symmetry in hunter-bear interaction is evident here, a hunter would not cheat the bears, as he then expects that the bears will behave similarly with the human. Moreover, the account also shows, that a hunter is not so afraid of predators as physical wild animals, but of their powers to seek revenge if the hunt is immoral (see more on bear revenge in Dudeck 2018; Brandišauskas 2017: 207-213; Vainshtein 2016: 71-76; Scott 2006: 51-56; Gemuev et al. 2000; Ingold 1986: 243-276; Hallowell 1926). Fear and respect are also demonstrated by Eveny people in their restrictions on consuming the meat of bears. As an Eveny hunter expressed, a bear is not a hare

or a duck, it is a powerful being, that's why people deny eating a bear even if they do. Additionally, they believe it is not right to simply bite off bear flesh from the bones, otherwise a bear would attack a human and in return forcefully tear his flesh off. Regarding this notion, however, there is also the concern of becoming a predatory human, like a bear or wolf. The slipping into a predatory condition in humans is possible partly due to the human-predator resemblance, but also because of the Eveny believe in kinship with bears. The Eveny, as well as the Evenki, have many versions of a myth on how a woman coupling with a bear gave birth to a human-bear infant from which indigenous people originated. Thus, a bear in Eveny and Evenki folklore is considered a mythic ancestor (see also Sleptsov 2014). I heard from an Eveny saying that the consumption of bear meat is not wise for a pregnant woman as angry kids would be born in such case. The perceived similarity with the predators can bring people to their predatory condition, I'll consider this idea with the following account.

THE PREDATORY CONDITION

Although there is no radical discontinuity between humans and animals in the animistic worldview of the indigenous hunters and herders in Yakutia, the boundaries between what is attributed to the behaviour of humans and to animals are nevertheless maintained. Rane Willerslev (2013: 41-57), investigating indigenous Yukaghir hunters in north-eastern Yakutia, also shows that according to their animistic perceptions humans can transform into animals and animals into humans. However, this doesn't mean that hunters don't detach themselves from non-human beings, especially during daily activities such as hunting (*ibid.*). Indigenous people in Yakutia share the common notion that the full transition into an animal condition is dangerous, because a hunter may thus undergo an irreversible transformation (for Yukaghirs see Willerslev 2004). According to the Eveny and Sakha people, a slip into a violent predatory nature is unwelcome, as humans may lose self-control. My contacts in Yakutia associated the notion of predation with behaviours such as disrespect, excessive and crude killing of living beings, the disposal of desires and uncontrolled violence, as well as greed, revenge and addiction to alcohol. In effect, people would create harm to society much in the way that wolves do to livestock. People may also describe their indigenous fellows as lonely as a wolf, or angry and offended as a wolf. Therefore, predation can be seen as an inner condition or a predisposition of humans to violence, which is not limited to but shared with non-human predators.

The account below by an elderly women of Sakha origin named Alexandra who talks about a wolf hunter's predatory traits perceived by her as repulsive and unsympathetic. Alexandra, having a background as a medical doctor, was a shamaness practising traditional methods of healing people from various mental and physical disorders. In her late age, she had many unusual experiences with healing practises to recollect. When conversing with me, in her apartment in the city of Yakutsk, she narrated the case of a wolf hunter in Eveno-Bytantaiskii ulus who was obsessed by the wolf spirit.

A young man Grigorii was brought by his relatives to me and, really, his behaviour was like that of a wolf. He looked so ugly, dirty and shaggy. For him there were no limits, he drank and hunted wolves almost from a young age. He utilised poisons and pursued wolves with a snowmobile. I said to him "Grigorii, you can't hunt like that, it's not hunting but extermination." He admitted: "I was killing wolves for so long; I started eating only cold food. When I come home, I don't even need hot water anymore. I open the door at home with my foot, I don't need any doors." I said that he was doing wrong by mocking and killing the living beings like that, as they were the same people as he. It was the spirit of a ravenous wolf that has taken up residence in Grigorii. I started healing him, but he was so ugly and aggressive. He couldn't sit still, like a spring, like a wolf. During several healing sessions, he would fall as if dead, vomit and then fall asleep. He started to fear me (laughing). When he came the last time, he had already taken a bath and changed his clothes, he looked as a different person. I said to him "Shall we drink for goodbye? Open your bottle of vodka and pour two glasses!" He filled his glass and said: "ooo...how many worms at the bottom." I said go ahead, drink your glass. "Oh, it's full of worms, bigger than grains of rice" he said. I said "drink, if you don't, I'll force you to drink." I took his glass and looked, then I said "well, look, are there worms now?" he said no, there weren't. "Now drink", I said, "the worm soup" (laughing). He drank and that's it. He still doesn't drink. He has transformed completely. He became an entrepreneur. And not at all with wolves.

In this transition to the predatory condition, the image of worms in the glass symbolizes the ugliness and dirtiness of the predation which had erupted out of the hunter with vomiting and aggressive behaviour. The healing and purification ritual performed by the shamaness released the violent, aggressive and uncontrollable human nature that had crept deep into the hunter's mind, evoked by immoral behaviour, cruelty and violation of socially acceptable boundaries. The account shows that in certain circumstances humans are predators themselves. Interestingly, the man from the account while immorally and crudely killing wolves lead himself to predatory ways. As we can see from the account, the shamaness perceives wolves as humans and, due to this similarity, wolves shouldn't be treated badly. Thus, hunting animals recklessly, with addiction and in excess, can also lead humans to wolf ways. Ludek Broz (2024: 111) also writes that the indigenous people of the Altai perceive wolves to be vulnerable to *azart*, or overexcitement, which leads to

overly destructive behaviour – much as human hunters are. Therefore, hunters on the taiga should acknowledge their potentials to predation and restrain from ways leading to this confusion. Similarly, Willerslev (2007: 91) describes how, while hunting sables with a local Yukaghir hunter, both became increasingly obsessed with accumulating furs. They were of a feeling that they were turning into greedy predators, just like wolves, having a need to kill more and more without any feeling of satisfaction. Another example came from my research in Eveno-Bitantaiskii ulus, where Eveny herders were reluctant to take the prey of wolves, especially the carcasses of preyed reindeers. The herders believed that using reindeers killed by wolves would look as if the predators were hunting for the needs of the human, so the human would become a participant in the predation or, in other words, a predator like a wolf. Authors investigating Siberian hunting-herding societies give accounts of the transition of humans into what can be called animal/predator condition. For instance, Charles Stepanoff (2009: 283-307) describes the devouring perspectives of Tuva shamans, who, becoming predatory, can “bite and eat” other humans as prey. Willerslev (2004) shows how Yukaghir hunters by taking a double perspective assume the animal’s point of view, nevertheless, remain a human hunter who chases and kills prey, thus being both Self and Other, the same and different. Away from Siberia Eduardo Viveros de Castro (1998: 469-488) describes Amerindian perspectivism showing how Amazonian shamans can become the shamans-jaguars, the predators who see other people as prey. Regarding Alexandra’s narrative, predation is perceived more as a fluid state of the human mind, rather than intent transformation into a predator animal through the changed perspectives.

Humans, as well as non-human animals, acting in predatory ways deserve punishment on a reciprocal basis. In Aleksandra’s account, the hunter was revenged by a spirit of a wolf that had taken up residence in the hunter as a response to his immoral behaviour. Revenge can be seen as a natural response of humans as well as agentive non-human beings to the violation of taiga relations. This will be discussed in the next section.

VENGEANCE-BASED TAIGA RELATIONS

Hunters and reindeer herders in Yakutia perceive predators as intersubjective beings who can comprehend human intentions and character. The predators are also seen to recognise dishonesty and injustice and to be aware of the relations with humans that are based not only on exchange, but also revenge. From the perspective of these people, dealing with the non-human predators on the taiga is, in some sense, not so different from dealing with human neighbours. For comparison, the Russian

ethnographer Sergei Shirokogoroff M. (1929; 1935) describes northern Tungus relations with bears and tigers on the taiga that were based on mutual awareness of the ownership of the places by both humans and predators. He demonstrated that the Tungus would not go to war with their neighbouring predators unless they were forced to take away the territory occupied by them (*ibid.* 1929: 42-44). Likewise, the bears would not go to the places occupied by man as this would evoke a fight (*ibid.* 1935: 79). Shirokogoroff's accounts illustrate that the interactions of the Tungus and predators were regulated by a mutual perception of taiga relations, which, if not violated by either party, led to what was called by the author "peaceful existence". It can be also assumed that the same norms were applied by the Tungus to neighbouring ethnic groups when establishing relations (see also *ibid.* 1929: 44).

The described symmetry in human-predator relations is well reflected in the perceptions of mutual revenge held by the Yakutia hunters and herders, which in turn rest on the vernacular notion of shared similarities between humans and predators. Considering symmetry in human-predator relations, I shall dwell on the revengeful aspects that echo the old blood feud customs that existed among the Tungus (Evenki), Sakha people and Chukchi⁵ before the colonial conquest of Siberia by Russian pioneers and missionaries (for further reading see Mayakunov 2022: 111-114; 2015: 111-113; Ushnitskiy and Varavina 2018: 98-105; Bogoraz 1934: 179-191). Of course, the blood feuds among the indigenous people of Yakutia, and other Siberian regions, ceased after the inclusion of Siberia into the Russian state and, had they not, would have been considered a serious crime by the State. In the past, however, murder, insult and theft of livestock within the clan system always resulted in blood feuds (see *ibid.*). The idea of blood feud among the Tungus was based on the principle of retribution: blood for blood, life for life, which accordingly would mean that, for example, the killing of a murderer would put an end to a conflict in the case of homicide (see Heyne 2007). Therefore, revenge was one of the oldest forms of response to violence that was reflected in the principle of social justice among customary law societies in Siberia. It seems that although blood feud customs are not officially widespread among people today, the vernacular notion of revenge still circulates in the animistic ontology of the hunters and herders in Yakutia, as is manifested in their daily interactions with predators.

⁵ I could barely find examples of blood feud among the Eveny, and this is probably due to an absence of research in this area. Instead, I demonstrated the principles of blood revenge among another related Tungus group, the Evenki, as well as Sakha people with whom the Eveny are related due to mixed marriages and their worldview (see also Gurvich 1977: 206-207). I also cite cases described by Bogoraz (1934: 179-191) on blood feud among the Chukchi. The groups of Chukchi also inhabit the landscapes of Yakutia. Indeed, the worldview of the Eveny was strongly influenced throughout their ethnic history by numerous migrations and cultural exchanges with other indigenous groups in Yakutia (see also Alekseev 1993: 16-24). It is likely that the blood feud customs of the Eveny had much in common with neighbouring indigenous groups in Yakutia, such as the Evenki, Sakha and Chukchi.

Although predators have been hunted in Yakutia through the ages to protect reindeers from wolf attacks or for the sake of self-defence in encounters with bears, it has been considered a risky endeavour. Because, hunters and reindeer herders believe, that a person enters into a vengeful interaction with the predator, his soul and the master-spirit.⁶ Accordingly, I will return to the vernacular notion of the master-spirit repeatedly throughout this article. It is believed by hunters and herders that predators can take revenge on humans who have killed one of theirs. Such a perceived solidarity of all the members of the wolf group reminds of the notion among the Tungus, Sakha and Chukchi people that any attack by outsiders on a member is seen as an attack on the entire family or clan, evoking revenge (see Mayakunov 2022: 111-114; 2015: 111-113; Seroshevskiy 1993: 439-442). Eveny hunters and herders consider wolf revenge as a purposeful attack on the live-stock owned by the person who was responsible for the killing of a predator. This means that wolves can trace a certain hunter and herder and harm his property in exchange, e.g. killing reindeers in excess by just attacking the prey and discarding the carcasses. The main principles of these more-than-human (includes human and non-human actors) interactions on the taiga were commonly expressed by my Eveny and Sakha contacts who would say that they do not hunt predators on purpose, except when defending themselves and livestock. They usually stressed that they killed the predator because the predators themselves were guilty, e.g. when a bear broke into a log cabin or attacked reindeers. Hence, the punishment of a predator was performed only because the offender had violated the domestic place of humans or had destroyed property or infrastructure. Doing so, the hunters and herders also justified the principle of symmetry, that if a bear or wolf violates domestic boundaries, he becomes an adversary and people could kill the intruder in exchange. People would consider that if a bear just entered a log cabin and left things in place, not making a mess inside, or if it took only a few food products from the storage platform, then the hunters would consider the possibility to leave the bear alive. Sometimes the hunters empathise with bears saying that a hungry bear should be allowed to take some food because it, as well as a human, needs to eat something to be alive. When talking about wolves, the Eveny hunters and herders also justified, that wolves too need food to feed themselves and their cubs, as humans for their children. Thus, it would be not honest to take away their prey, even if it was a domestic reindeer. If they did deprive the wolf, then the wolf may

⁶ In Eveny, Sakha and Evenki cosmologies, the master-spirit is an entity who dwells in the landscapes and rules wild animals and shares the game with the hunters (see also Alekseev 2008: 49-71). Hunters and herders in the North Yakutia call the master-spirit „Baianai“ (in Sakha) or „khoziain“ (in Russian). They believe that master-spirit can be benevolent or malevolent to people, by bringing luck or misfortune, illness or even death, this depending on the established relations between a human and the entity.

retaliate by taking the hunter's prey the next time in exchange, especially in times of scarcity when a hunter lost his luck (see more on hunting luck in Brandišauskas 2017: 80-111). Overall, the key notion that the hunters and herders emphasized was that if predators didn't touch them, they wouldn't touch the predators.

Similar relations also exist in relation to human neighbours on the taiga. Hunters and herders usually refrain from entering the log cabins of other hunters or herders without urgent need (storm, trouble or another emergency). However, people don't mind if a person in trouble or lost on the taiga during a blizzard temporarily takes shelter in a neighbour's log cabin and even takes some stored food or necessary clothes to avoid freezing or to have a sleep. It is expected that in exchange a person will allow others in trouble to use his own shelter the next time. However, the things and food stored in a taiga cabin shouldn't be taken, stolen or destroyed in general circumstances – in such cases, a thief or a stranger who violates these taiga relations is usually dealt with harshly. I was told by contacts in Yakutia that in some extreme cases a conflict can escalate into an active skirmish, especially if the human master of the place was offended or didn't receive fair compensation. Accordingly, there is a common notion in Siberia, including in Yakutia, about bears as masters of the taiga (see also Brandišauskas 2017: 207-213; Sleptsov 2014; Hallowell 1926). I show elsewhere (2020: 29-51) how in Tuva the bears feeling the masters of the taiga would stalk a hunter for a certain period in revenge for being challenged by a human. Similarly, a hunter from the Eveno-Bytantaiskii ulus narrated how a hunter just wounded but did not kill a bear, and in response the bear stalked him - when the hunter returned to finish off the wounded predator, the bear attacked him from an ambush. Such stories by hunters in Yakutia often end up with a bear injuring or even killing a hunter. In Siberia, it is also a widespread notion that humans can be marked out by bears. Such persons are considered to be in great danger while on the taiga, as they are at risk of being repeatedly attacked by a bear (for Tungus see Shirokogoroff 1929: 42-44). Willerslev (2012:67) also shows that Yukaghir hunters that have killed many bears are recognised as “bear-marked”. Those can make themselves targets for predator revenge as other bears are always on the lookout for such persons and will take any opportunity to avenge a dead member of their own species (*ibid.*).

Stalking is a common theme repeatedly narrated by in such cases, a thief or a stranger who violates these taiga relations is usually dealt with harshly in Yakutia when describing bear attacks and revenge. Usually there is a time gap whereby the predator waits in ambush for a particular person that is recognized personally. As such, a hunter may feel the inevitability of coming retribution, otherwise the debt of revenge will only accumulate until resolved. Some parallels with these principles of revenge can be drawn by considering the old custom of blood feud among the

Tungus. For instance, Georg F. Heyne (2007) writes that blood revenge among the Evenki in northern Manchuria was not fought in the form of single combat or duel, but rather the avenger killed the victim with a well-aimed rifle from a secure hiding place or in ambush. A person intending to take a blood feud would firstly carefully hide his intention and observe the chosen victim over a long period of time. He would try to stay close to the victim, awaiting a favourable opportunity and attacking the victim unexpectedly, especially when he was sleeping or at a campfire where he was resting or eating (*ibid.*). The executor of the blood vengeance could be either a close blood relative or the entire family clan (*ibid.*). Therefore, the obligation of blood vengeance could be passed from generation to generation until it was fulfilled by the killing of the other person on the principle of reciprocal justice understood as an eye for an eye (*ibid.*; for Sakha people see Seroshevskiy 1993: 439-442). For instance, murder rarely went unavenged among the Chukchee, since failure to fulfil the duty of revenge would be met with public shame of the entire clan (see Mayakunov 2015: 111-113). In terms of predators, the notion of the postponed revenge was expressed by an Eveny reindeer herder in Tomponskii ulus. He believed that the high rates of reindeer predation by wolves at present time is the result of revenge that had accumulated during the Soviet times when wolves were shot from helicopters en masse (on wolf extermination in Soviet Yakutia see in Jefanovas and Brandišauskas 2023). However, when Soviet state collapsed and intensive predator extermination ceased, the wolf population re-established and, according to a herder, the predators did not forget being crudely pursued. Additionally, according to the herder, the predators could take revenge not only on a certain person, but also on his kin.

The following story by Evgenii, a predator hunter of Sakha origin, will give us not only a glimpse into the notion of postponed revenge from predators, but also on how the predator revenge can be transmitted through the family members. Evgenii attributes himself to be a kind of wolf and bear hunter specialist who can apply not only trapping technologies, but also hunting magic (see more in Jefanovas and Brandišauskas forthcoming) to deal with the predators that, he believed, could be sent by the master-spirit to avenge people for various wrongdoings. Telling his account, Evgenii also wanted to show that predator revenge can relate to the spirit's activity, which makes the punishment a long lasting and also transmittable debt. Here is his account.

One night, a bear came into the village and tried to bite through the door of a woman's house. She had locked the door, but the bear climbed onto the roof and, destroying the chimney, clambered inside the house. The woman ran out through the door, but the bear caught her in the middle of the village and killed her. Nobody noticed anything, even the dogs hadn't barked that night, it was as if the bear was a ghost. Only in the

early morning did a villager spot the bear sitting on the dead woman in the middle of the village. Hunters were immediately called to shoot the bear, but the bear, having accomplished its revengeful mission that it had been sent to do by the spirits, kept sitting there waiting his time to be killed by the hunters. The bear was a killer sent to carry out revenge. I found out what had happened - the bear was taking revenge for the fact that the woman's father had killed too many bears, perhaps more than 100, back in Soviet times. It appears that while working as a hunter at a Soviet farm in Tomponskii district, he organized the shooting of bears from helicopters in huge numbers. There were so many corpses of bears that the farm manager decided to run a facility for the production of smoked sausages and fats made from bear meat. Twenty years after the bankruptcy of the farm, when the hunter was already dead, the bear took revenge by killing his daughter.

Evgenii's account depicts the bear's behaviour as something unusual, that the bear had entered the village unnoticed by the villagers nor sensed by dogs, and moreover sat in the middle of the village on the dead human without fear of being shot by hunters. The account points to the special role of the bear as a human killer, as an instrument for revenge driven by the master-spirit. Similarly, Brandišauskas (2017: 210-211) also shows that the Orochen Evenki of Zabaikal'ia perceived the bear as an intermediary between people and the master-spirit. The story by Evgenii suggests that the taiga relations between the humans and bears, as well as the spirits, had been severely violated by the hunter of the farm. A hundred bears⁷ had been killed by the hunter and, furthermore, their corpses were disrespectfully made into sausages at the farm. They had not been buried in a special way to demonstrate respect. And that, according to the teller, had evoked the anger of the master-spirit. Accordingly, not resolved immediately and not countered by appeasing rituals that would have restored balance in these taiga relations, the revenge accumulated. With the following example of a bear honouring rite, I will illustrate one such a performance in North Yakutia that was supposed to calm the bear's spirit and avoid the risk of revenge. Hunters and reindeer herders of Eveno-Bytantskii district, after having shot a bear which had attacked reindeers, took the bear's head with the trachea and heart and mounted it on the nearest larch so that the bear's gaze was directed eastward (see picture 1). Furthermore, people also stuck a reindeer bone in the bear's jaw. This ceremony was to serve as a sign to the bear so that it realized its guilt in killing the reindeer and thus did not inflict people with vengeful actions. Turning the bear's gaze to the east demonstrates deep respect like that shown to the human dead, i.e. looking to the rising sun that symbolizes the world of souls and also rebirth in a new body. Indeed, before Christianity was introduced

⁷ In Siberia, there is a common belief that once you exceed a certain number (50 for example) of bears killed, you should stop bear hunting, as it becomes too risky that the next bear will kill you (see also Tutorski 2023: 893).

to Yakutia by Orthodox missionaries in the 18th century, people were traditionally buried elevated on wooden platforms with their bodies placed with heads to the east (see also Sleptsov 2014; Vitebsky 2005: 263-264; Alekseev 1993: 19-23). Therefore, the bear honouring ceremony works as a compensation means for the killing of the non-human being, and this exchange signals the proper behaviour of a hunter to both bear and master-spirit. Again, parallels can be seen with the blood feuds among the indigenous people of Yakutia, where revenge also could be accomplished by offering something in exchange as a compensation for the killing of a human person. Aleksandr Mayakunov (2022: 111-114) points out that in the 18th century among Sakha people, regardless of the crime, a person would not be punished with death, but reciprocated with compensation. If someone committed murder, the perpetrator had to negotiate with the victim's relatives to pay an indemnity. For instance, the maximum compensation for a rich person among the Sakha was three-to-four-man slaves and the same number of woman slaves, as well as 40-50 reindeer (see *ibid.*). If the murderer was poor and had nothing to repay, then he had to forever remain as a slave on the murdered family side (*ibid.*). In the case of the Chukchi, the blood ransom could be very high: if he was rich enough or had rich relatives for example, a quantity of reindeers and other goods were collected from the killer side for three years (see *ibid.* 2015: 111-113).



Picture 1. The bear heads mounted on the trees. Photo on the left by the author 2018, on the right by Serafim Sleptsov 2018

Thus, taiga relations among humans and between humans and non-human beings contain similar principles which are based on the anticipation of reciprocal vengeance. This potentially concerns not only the person responsible but could also be postponed and even shifted to the members of the clan/family. Furthermore, the account above by the predator hunter Evgenii also demonstrates that the

social system of revenge-retribution between humans and non-human predators is regulated by an arbiter, the master-spirit. It is to this idea that I am turning to next.

MASTER-SPIRIT: THE REGULATOR OF TAIGA RELATIONS

According to the animistic ontology of hunters and herders of Yakutia, the master-spirit can both punish and free people of their guilt relating to the killing of a non-human being animal. Therefore, mediation by the master-spirit in human-predator relations also helps people to justify and resolve issues in taiga relations that arise in people upon the anticipation of retribution and, to some degree, absolve the sense of guilt for killing big animal, i.e. the other than human being. Similarly, an authority-arbiter for equalizing and balancing social relations between human rivals was also demanded in old times. For example, among the Manchurian Evenki reindeer herders in ancient times, a shaman, chief or elder with the necessary authority as an arbiter was required to defuse conflicts between rival parties without further bloodshed (see Heine 2007). Tungus leaders and elders of rival clans would enter negotiations and seek to find a path to reconciliation through the mutual exchange of women, children and gifts (see Gvozdev 2011: 138-143). However, it could also be a majority of the clan or community who judged the reasonability of the blood feud and the fairness of compensation (for Sakha see Seroshevskiy 1993: 439-442; for Chukchi see Mayakunov 2015: 111-113; Bogoraz 1934: 179-191). Without such intervention, the blood revenge could develop into bloody feuds that lasted for years, because the punished family would take revenge for the punishment suffered, which in turn would trigger reciprocal revenge and murder would follow murder (see *ibid.*). Furthermore, prolonged blood revenge with a series of reciprocal murders spanning several generations would have a devastating impact on the social and subsistence practises of the small indigenous groups of the north. Therefore, the role of the arbiter mediating and balancing relations between the clans seems even very reasonable if not crucial. Of course, the master-spirit resolving conflicts between humans and predators on the taiga does not seem to be a life and death question compared to the lasting blood feuds between humans in the past. However, the role of master-spirit in taiga subsistence has its own logic and need, since rivalry between predators and herders also may lead to economic losses, i.e. the depredation of livestock. For instance, in Tomponskii ulus, some reindeer herders used to accuse wolves of the destruction of reindeer herding and the entire nomadic economy. Meanwhile, in southern Yakutia, the Evenki declared that due to a growth in wolf and bear populations, predation became “the number one problem” exterminating reindeer herding in

the face of which it was very difficult to adapt (see Lavrillier and Gabyshev 2018). Thus, negotiation with the master-spirit concerning predators' revenge can be seen as a need in daily practise from the stance of the indigenous hunters and herders. Not occasionally is the master-spirit described by the Eveny and Sakha people as an old wise man with a long white beard and a wooden stick, usually surrounded by various animals (see also Alekseev 2008: 59). This is supposed to symbolize master's authority, wisdom and power in regulating the relations between human and non-human beings in their daily endeavours on the taiga. Similarly, Broz and Willerslev (2012: 73-89) explained the role of the local master-spirit in the Altay as a judge of human deeds, and furthered that a hunter's success or failure may be the result of the master's ruling. Brandišauskas (2018) also showed that the Evenki belief in master-spirits who are in charge of different animals and river basins helped to control the balance there.

The animistic notions of the hunters and herders in Yakutia rest on the assumption that all animals have their spiritual owners, master-spirits to whom they refer. The essence of the animal is perceived by hunters and herders as a spiritual force, the soul, residing as embodied in and beyond the body. Accordingly, the ambulating soul of a predator, that falls into anger because he was killed, can converse with the master-spirit asking for revenge on a certain person. It is also perceived that the master-spirit can act through an animal which is sometimes the master-spirit's embodiment, thus killing them can insult the master-spirit the most. Therefore, in some instances, the perception of the agency of an animal and the agency of a master-spirit might mix. The Eveny believe that the strongest power of the master-spirit is manifested in the bear (see also Vitebsky 2005: 264). As it is shown in the account by the predator hunter Evgenii, the master-spirit can send a "killer bear" to punish humans. Thus, hunters and reindeer herders are aware that master-spirit can act upon their destiny and even demand a human life in exchange for human misbehaviours. Accordingly, upon entering a taiga place, a human falls under the potential power of the master-spirit of that given place (a river valley with the surrounding mountains), and a hunter must show respect to the spirit by feeding a fire and giving offerings. When going hunting, people usually feed the fire with a piece of meat, tobacco or tea, asking the master-spirit for success. After a successful hunt, a hunter also must say thank you to the master-spirit by throwing a piece of the meat of the prey into the fire or sprinkling a cap of vodka. Investigating the Eveny hunters and herders in North Yakutia, Piers Vitebsky (2005: 262) aptly described the master-spirit's power as an elemental force that pervades animals and landscape alike and can wax and wane, surge or retreat at different moments, in different locations or for different hunters. With the following example of mine, which is not about a predator but about a bird, I will illustrate the perception by

the herder Aidar of the master-spirit's power to act on humans and his response to sidestep the master's punishment. This being a similar view to that held by Yakutia hunters and herders in case with the predators.

During my stay with a family of a reindeer herder in his taiga encampment in Eveno-Bytantskii ulus, my host Aidar shot a black woodpecker that had been flying next to his log cabin for a week. The herder believed that the close presence of the black woodpecker was a sign of forthcoming retribution by the master-spirit for some wrongdoings in the present or past. It could have even been a misbehaviour such as the excessive killing of birds of prey⁸, that had been done long ago by already dead relatives. Aidar believed that this sign meant that someone from his family might get ill soon or even die. In response, he hung the black woodpecker head down on a larch by binding the bird's legs to a branch and putting the woodpecker's feathers in its beak (see picture 2). The herder explained that he did this to prevent the bird speaking to the master-spirit about being killed. He added that sometimes even the tongue of a bird could be cut off for this reason. Therefore, by "shutting" the beak of the bird, Aidar tried to avoid the punishment of the master-spirit. For the bird not to augur trouble, the herder had to kill it. Consequently, the punishment from the spirits could be sidestepped by deceiving them. To disrupt communication between the bird and the spirit, the herder "shut out" the bird's beak so that the bird would not transfer the message to master-spirit, so overcoming the spirit's will. Following the logic of this account, it seems that the herder believed that the master-spirit would read these signs and judge that the human was innocent in the killing of the other beings. From this perspective, the placement of feathers in the bird's beak could also mean that the bird had bitten itself and had died or, in other words, the herder ritually negated the act of killing as if there was no human fault. As with the bird ritual, the performances applied to negate the act of killing a bear have very similar meanings in their communication with the master-spirit. For instance, some hunters in Yakutia tell the dead bear that he was killed by Russians, thus transferring their guilt onto others (see also Ibid: 263–265). Indeed, according to Stepanoff (2009: 283–307), all specialists of North Asia could cite many examples of human actions which influenced non-human (spirits) perspectives: imitating raven's cawing while eating bear meat, orientating a bear's skull to divert its revenge, dressing a boy or doing his hair in a feminine way

⁸ Although the hunters and reindeer herders in Yakutia consider eagles as most sacred and as most revengeful birds (see also Sleptsov 2017), sometimes they shoot them if the birds attack reindeer calves. It is believed that if one killed an eagle and didn't bury it correctly, then the hunter's family would face misfortunes. Eagles are buried on elevated platform, directing the head towards the summer sunrise (to the north-east) and wrapping the bird in hay (see *ibid.*).

and vice versa. Doing so, people seek to act on the spirits' perception of reality and to evade the retributions.



Picture 2. Blackwoodpecker with his feathers put into beak. Photo by the author, 2019

The idea that follows from these examples is that the quality of hunters and herders to deceive others seems to have been integral to indigenous peoples' taiga relations and subsistence based on taking advantage of opportunities. This can also mean that hunters and herders could sometimes act slyly and misleadingly against others, be it non-human beings or rival clan human members. For instance, Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan (1934: 184-187) showed, that sometimes the compensation, which was supposed to stop warfare between Chukchi clans, was abused, neglected or cheated by one of the parties, which could result in renewed conflict. More affinities to human relations can be recognised in other forms of interactions between humans and non-human beings on the taiga, this including notions of cooperation, as well as obligations, demands and ambiguity. Willerslev (2007: 43-46) showed that Yukaghirs recognize in the animal master-spirits not only generosity, but also many of the negative attributes they recognize in themselves, such as sexual yearning, jealousy and slyness. Although Yukaghirs perceive animal master-spirits as nurturers, or parents who are obliged to share their game with people, they can also be deceitful and should never be fully trusted (*ibid.*). This ambiguity arises of the people's notion that the master-spirit can refuse to nourish them, or even demand human life because people have acted immorally with animals (*ibid.*). Brandišauskas (2017: 1-20) describes how Orochen Evenki hunters

engage in cooperative relations with the master-spirit to obtain luck in hunting and successes in well-being. This cooperation could be achieved through various offerings to the master-spirits as well as the non-accumulation of a large baggage of wrongdoings (ibid.). For instance, acting aggressively against animals would mean losing the master-spirit's support and luck and would thus make hunters vulnerable to attacks by bears or malevolent spirits (ibid.: 88).

It seems that the multiple forms of interactions described here between the indigenous hunters-herders and the non-human predators on the taiga of Yakutia leads people to ritualistic negotiation with the master-spirit as a regulating authority. The primary purpose of such negotiations is to sidestep misfortunes and troubles, which can manifest in livestock depredations by predators, as well as predator attacks on humans, or even illness and deaths as retribution for accumulated wrongdoings. In this regard, the predators are perceived by the hunters and herders as separate non-human actors taking revenge on humans, but also sometimes as the instruments for revenge by the master-spirit, or even the embodiment of him. This in no way means that predators are perceived by these indigenous peoples as an extension of the master-spirit, but as self-sufficient and conscious beings sharing the Yakutia landscapes with humans. Moreover, people engage in taiga relations with the non-human predators which also demonstrates, as I have tried to show here, affinity with the complex social systems that exist between neighbouring human groups, clans and tribes.

CONCLUSIONS

Beginning this article with the first-person narratives of the Eveny and Sakha hunters and herders of North Yakutia regarding their experiences encountering wolves and bears on the taiga, I hoped to convey the vernacular notion of predators as conscious non-human beings similar but not the same as humans. These similarities are recognised by the indigenous people in external as well as behavioural traits of the humans and animals, but also in the predatory condition that humans share with non-human predators. Nonetheless, the accounts also demonstrate that boundaries between humans and animals are recognized in the animistic ontology of the hunters and herders. People try to avoid slipping into the predatory condition, as a state of mind, which they associate with violence and wrongdoings. Moreover, some accounts also show peoples' fear to appear in the position of prey to bears and sometimes wolves. This demonstrates relational symmetry in human-predator taiga interactions.

The second half of the text discusses the aspects of the symmetrical relations by emphasising mutual revenge and reciprocity between humans and predators. The very idea of the article is that human relations with predators on the Yakutia taiga are reminiscent of the principles of the past blood feud customs among Tungus groups, Sakha people and also the Chukchee clans. Thus, analogically, revenge between humans and predators embraces the ideas of accumulation, postponement, debt of reciprocal vengeance, transition through generations and compensation. Hunters and herders in Yakutia believe that a human person can be avenged by predator and/or animal master-spirit for misbehaviour with animals. Wolves and bears can attack people's livestock and humans in retaliation for the members of their species being killed. Furthermore, a master-spirit can send predators to punish people for various wrongdoings, also those done by dead kin members. To sidestep the retributions, people engage in ritualistic negotiations with the master-spirit, giving offerings and respectfully burying predators, this compensates for the killing. Therefore, the master-spirit substitutes the role of the shaman, chief or elder as an arbiter in the negotiation between the murderer's and victim's clans for indemnity, that would end further bloodshed. Thus, this article highlights the similarity between the human-predator relations on the Yakutia taiga and the historical blood feud customs among the indigenous clans in Siberia, showing that the former are built on quite similar notions. Moreover, these more-than-human relations on the Yakutia taiga can be viewed as complex and social, much as interaction between neighbouring groups of indigenous humans.

The animistic ontologies of indigenous peoples have been classically opposed to the Western ways of thinking, where the boundaries between the humanity and animality, as well as nature and culture, were clearly drawn by Cartesian philosophy. However, these boundaries do not seem to be absolute, or at least they are permeable in our today's societies. Likewise, for example, Donna Haraway (2008) talks about animals as companion species (at least domestic ones) that could potentially be included as members of our families or even human societies. In this sense, I hoped to contribute to the growing array of texts in more-than-human anthropology, where animals are considered to be endowed with agency and mind, making them self-sufficient non-human persons capable to interacting in multispecies societies.

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JAKUTIJOS MEDŽIOTOJŲ BEI ELNIŲ AUGINTOJŲ IR PLĖŠRŪNŲ KERŠTO SANTYKIAI TAIGOJE

SANTRAUKA. Šis straipsnis nagrinėja evenų ir jakutų medžiotojų bei šiaurės elnių augintojų animistinį suvokimą apie vilkų, meškų ir „dvasių šeimininkų“ kerštavimą, plėšrūniškumą, jų santykiuose Jakutijos taigoje. Medžiotojai bei elnių augintojai plėšrūnus suvokia kaip sąmoningus nežmogiškuosius asmenis (angl. *non-human beings*), galinčius įsitraukti į abipusę sąveiką su žmonėmis. Plėšrūnų keršto idėja parodo šių žmonių suvokiamą santykių su gyvūnais simetriją. Šių santykių abipusiškumo ir simetrijos kategorijos atsispindi evenų ir jakutų naratyvuose bei medžioklės ritualuose, kuriais remiamasi straipsnyje. Plėšrūnų keršto idėja lyginama su kraujo keršto papročiais, egzistavusiais tungusų, jakutų ir čiukčių gentyse. Šiuolaikinėms Sibiro medžiotojų bei ganytojų bendruomenėms kraujo kerštas nebūdingas, tačiau būtent šiuo principu pagrįsta dabartinė žmonių ir plėšrūnų sąveika taigoje. Šis tyrimas grindžiamas originaliais etnografiniais duomenimis, straipsnio autoriaus surinktais 2018–2019 metais šiaurės Jakutijoje, daugiausia Eveno-Bytantaisko ir Tomponsko rajonuose.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Jakutija, medžiotojai bei šiaurės elnių augintojai, plėšrūnai, kerštas, santykiai taigoje.