Pastoral Perspectivism: A View from Altai

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ABSTRACT

One of the characteristic aspects of Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism is the relative rather than absolute character of subject/object positions. In the Altaian context, animals are not attributed with subjectivity in the way found in Amazonian cosmologies. Still, the subject position is not particular to humans: the landscape is populated by masters of a both human and nonhuman kind. The terminological division of animals into wild (andar-kushtar) and domesticated (mal) in Altaian language is analogical to the human/animal division in Amazonia. Wildness and domesticity thus become relative categories defined with reference to the idiom of the master. What is wild for a human master is domesticated for a nonhuman master. Here, the common denominator is a sort of ‘livestock-morphism’: what for the human hunters looks like a deer is a cow from the point of view of the forest masters. If conducted improperly, hunting is thus analogous to livestock theft – morality transcends perspectivism in Altai. Exploring this ‘pastoralist perspectivism’ leads to questions about subjectivity and agency, ethics and ownership. The discussion is finally placed ‘into perspectival’ by showing that Altaians do not operate with a single idea of the animal and human–animal relationship.

Keywords: pastoral perspectivism, human-animal relationship, domesticity, hunting, Altai, Siberia

INTRODUCTION

Any effort to apply the concept of perspectivism in Inner Asia will inevitably contain a comparison with Amerindian circumstances within which Viveiros de Castro conceived the concept. While Pedersen has used such ‘Amazonising’ to undertake comparison of North Asia’s ontologies (Pedersen 2001: 411–2), my aim is different here. I will apply the concept of perspectivism, itself formulated in comparison of Amazonian societies, to one particular context – contemporary Altaian society in rural herding areas of the Altai Republic where I conducted my doctoral fieldwork in 2004–5.
The apparent difference in human–animal relationships in Altai and Viveiros de Castro’s Amazon is an underlying motif of this paper. While in Altai (and Inner Asia in general) animal husbandry has been, up to the present day, the dominant mode of production, in the ‘old Amazon’ there were no domesticated animals apart from dogs and non-reproducing tamed animals (e.g. peccaries). Bearing that in mind, I will explore and contrast Altaian ideas about hunting, animal subjectivity and animal masters with those presented by Viveiros de Castro. In doing so I will inevitably follow the same data selective track, which seemed to have led to the formulation of the notion of perspectivism. Therefore I will try to put Altaian perspectivist ideas into perspective in the last section of this paper.

ANIMAL?

One of the general features of the worldview that Viveiros de Castro associated with perspectivism is the conviction that ‘the notion of animality as a unified domain, globally opposed to that of humanity, seems to be absent from Amerindian cosmologies’ (n.d.: 25). In more empirical terms Viveiros de Castro says that:

It is indeed rare to find Amerindian languages possessing a concept co-extensive with our concept of ‘(nonhuman) animal’, although not uncommon to find terms which more or less correspond to one of the informal meanings of ‘animal’ in English: relatively big land animals, typically nonhuman mammals – as opposed to fish, birds, insects and other life-forms. I suspect that the majority of indigenous words which have been rendered as ‘animal’ in the ethnographies actually denote something analogous to this (n.d.: 22).

In Altaian, as in the Amerindian languages mentioned by Viveiros de Castro, we cannot find a single word that would denote animal as opposed to human. When consulting a dictionary the Russian word зверь (animal) is translated as an and the collocation андар-куштар as fauna (Tybykova 2005: 25). Yet, while the Western notion of fauna contains all of the animal kingdom, the term андар-куштар is in my experience used to denote wild animals and birds only. Even though it is not clear whether it refers also to fish and insects, the crucial point lies somewhere else – I have never seen anyone referring to domestic animals with the word an. Simultaneously, in congruence with what Viveiros de Castro has observed for the Tupinamba ‘soo’ or the Anglo/French ‘venison’ an is also the term for марал – big Siberian deer.

To explore the semantic field of the word an further I shall present meaningful grammatical variations of it. Altaian employs the suffix –da/–ta/–la to create verbs out of nouns. For example the word бичак (knife) when supplemented by that suffix бичакта- means to stab. Analogically анда- is translated into Russian as to hunt or to fish. In everyday speech, as I witnessed it in the village, people are much more specific. I have never seen anyone referring to
fishing by this verb. Instead people use the verb balykta- obtained through the same verbalising suffix from the word balyk (fish). The list continues. When there is a squirrel hunting season people tiiriende-, when my friends go to hunt roe deer they elikta-. Thus the verb anqda- refers to hunting in general but more specifically it refers to the hunting of big game animals such as big Siberian deer, elk, wild boar, bear and so on. Even the more general verb for hunting anq-kushtalisted in the morphological dictionary (Tybykova 2005: 122) is in my experience not in use.

Another suffix which is used with the noun anη is the personifying suffix –chy². Aηchy means hunter in general and the suffix is not normally used in combination with the names of other wild animals. At the same time, to be recognised as aηchy one has to hunt big game animals of which maral is the most prototypical. A few hares or squirrels would not make one a hunter proper. The word aηchy is also never used to refer to a fisherman – balykchy. The two can be contrasted as when I was told by a friend that my neighbour was a bad hunter (aηchy) but a very good fisherman (balykchy).

Domestic animals are referred to by a general term mal⁶ which is usually translated as livestock. In my experience it is used in a more narrow sense to denote domesticated mammals which are eatable. One distinguishes for example müüstü mal – cattle (literally horned livestock) or jylky mal – horses. Such narrow meaning would not contain dogs (illt) or domestic birds which are referred to as aiyldyη kushtary (literally birds of the house).⁷ Mal, unlike the word anη, does not simultaneously refer to a particular species.

Thus when trying to translate the word animal in its broad meaning into Altai one must combine aŋdar-kushtar and mal to appropriate the term since the only general term that contains them both – tyndu refers also to humans and plants.⁸ Viveiros de Castro stated that in the Amerindian context ‘our essentialist “nonhuman” is there a contextual “not-human”; “it” has no overarching, common substantive (even if privative) definition: taxonomical or ethological similarities apart, each nonhuman species is as different from all the others as it is from humans’ (n.d.: 22). In Altai the situation is apparently different. We indeed can see the lack of a general term and the widespread use of specific terms denoting the hunting of particular species (e.g. elikta-), which suggests a tendency to see those species perhaps as distinct from all the others as from humans. Yet, there are at the same time two general terms anŋ/aŋdar-kushtar and mal which group animals. Such grouping suggests important similarities between those covered by the same category. Since the key of such grouping is their relation to humans (i.e. domesticity or wildness) we can say that the opposition between humanity and animality is present in Altai. Animal is the implicit category out of which particular species are classified, with reference to singled out humans, as mal or aŋdar-kushtar. Thus the implicit category of animal as well as the two explicit categories of aŋdar-kushtar and mal are contrasted to and distinguished from the category of humans/humanity. The word kizhi, which refers to humans, does not work as a self-referential ethnynym, which is often the
case in Amazonia, and is therefore equally applied to Russians, Mongolians, etc. as it is to Altaians.

When examining Amerindian words often translated as animal, Viveiros de Castro not only pinpoints the relative absence of a general term, he also offers what might be seen as one of the core notions of his concept of perspectivism:

The Wari’ (Txapakuran) word applied to ‘animals’, karawa, has the basic meaning of ‘prey’, and as such may be applied to human enemies: the contrastive pair wari’/karawa, which in most contexts may be translated as ‘human/animal’, has the logically encompassing sense of ‘predator/prey’ or ‘subject/object’ – humans (Wari’, i.e. wari’) can be the karawa of predators, animal, human and spiritual, who are in their predatory function or ‘moment’ defined as wari’ (Vilaça 1992). (Viveiros de Castro n.d.: 22).

In other words what is often translated as animal and human would much more accurately be translated as predator and prey or subject and object. Moreover, the position of predator/prey and subject/object is relational. In relation to a tapir a human hunter is predator/subject but in relation to a jaguar he is prey/object. At the same time each species sees itself in human form and its way of life as human (particular Amerindian) culture. Jaguars see their claws as spears and the blood they drink as manioc beer, etc. The body or skin is in such a view perceived as a garment or an envelope within which the human essence of each species is folded. Thus Viveiros de Castro concludes that the difference in species cannot be located in culture, which seems to be universal, but rather in nature, the multiplicity of which is epitomised in the multiplicity of bodies. Bodies are the providers of perspective. It is a different body that makes one see something as manioc beer and someone else as blood. Hidden essence cannot account for the difference as it is always the same – human. Importantly, such perspectives provided by each body are not epistemological but rather ontological. There is no way to distinguish the world from its conceptualisations/representation as all perspectives are equally relational. It is impossible to say that something which really is blood is only seen by someone with a jaguar body as manioc beer; there is not an absolute perspective which would provide a particular clue about the essence of the matter (e.g. that it really is blood). I would conclude that in Viveiros de Castro’s Amazonia the bodies of living creatures (but occasionally also objects or nothing/invisibility) are treated as indexes of concealed subjectivities which are universally anthropomorphic.

In an Altaian context one might be tempted to see wild animals as having subjectivity. There are plenty of hunting euphemisms documented in the Altaian language and their usual interpretation by Russian scholars suggests that animals talked about with the use of their real names would hear and escape from the hunters (Potapov 2001: 125). Some euphemisms use kin terms like aka (elder brother/elder member of patriclan) for bear or wolf (Iaimova 1990: 104–5; Muitueva 2004: 136). I was told by my friends about one particular bear they would not hunt as he had lived next to them as a good neighbour without
touching their livestock. Another friend said that in the past each village would have a specialised wolf hunter who had not himself kept cattle. Hunted wolves can smell the livestock of their hunter and would take revenge on it. Wolves are also said to be vulnerable to *azart* – over-excitement which leads to hazardous behaviour – as much as human hunters are. Such views indeed remind us of the conception of hunting as warfare which implies combatants as intentional subjects.

Finally, there are short stories and parts of heroic epics which have cosmogonic character in relation to certain species. A bear, for example, is described as a big and strong human who once left his quarrelling family as if to get firewood and never came back from the forest (Grebennikova 2004: 64). In the epic Alyp Manash when the hero wants to punish his former friend–betrayed, the latter turns into a crane and escapes. Altaians, the story goes, therefore do not hunt cranes as they are after all people, albeit bad. Such stories lead some folklorists to conclude that in the Altaian ‘mytho-religious worldview’ all animals were once humans (Surazakov 1975: 103–105). Despite a strong resemblance to Amazonian mythology the ascription of subjectivity to wild animals *aṅdar* is implicit at best in Altai. There are plenty of other short stories which treat particular animals as distinct creations of gods (Kudai or Erlik) rather than (fallen) humans.

This divergence from a direct analogy to the Amazonian case goes further. The Altaian word *aṅ* does not coincide with the word for prey, and the word for human (*kizhi*) refers neither to predator nor exclusively to Altaians. The Altaian expression for body is *et-söök* or *et-kan* (literally meat-bone or meat-blood) which has no parallel to the Amazonian envelope-clothing idiom of the body. No wonder that I was never told by anyone that animals, when they get home would take their skin/bodies off as garments, that they see themselves as humans or that the blood they drink is, for example, vodka for them. Yet there is something I have encountered in contemporary Altai, rather than in century-old folklore collections, which could be thought of through the terms developed by Viveiros de Castro on Amazonian ethnography.

**PASTORAL PERSPECTIVISM**

One evening in the taiga, in the middle of the squirrel hunting season, I was told the following story by my friend Iura. Back in the seventies a man he knew was leaving the village for the taiga. Just after he crossed the first bigger hill he heard a female voice abusively shouting: ‘It is him, he came to shoot my cows again.’ Such an accusation is very serious in a herding society and the man started to look around to respond angrily. Yet, he saw a little herd of Siberian deer running nearby, which caught his attention fully. He grabbed his rifle and started shooting which led to the killing of two animals. The village was close and therefore the carrying of meat would not be a problem, Iura commented on the man’s decision...
to shoot two massive deer. Only once the rapid sequence of events was over, when approaching the game, did the man remember the female voice and look around. No one was there. This was the end of the story told by Iura. Everyone in the dark hunting cabin was silent for a second, perhaps experiencing the same sensation as the man in the story. To reassure myself about my understanding of the story I asked whether the voice belonged to the local eezi. Iura nodded.

The word ee is often translated into Russian as khozyain meaning master/landlord/owner but when paired with words like water, land, mountain it refers to the master spirits of the particular entity. There are plenty of stories about eezi. I heard stories similar to that told by Iura rarely, yet I found them extremely revealing as they comment on the nonhuman-eezi animal relationship. The clear message of the story was that deer were cows to the eezi. When searching the literature I found stories with the same message in Potapov’s work on hunting. He mentions a story explaining the practice of taking kaichi (story-tellers using the technique of throat singing to perform epics) on hunting expeditions. In one variant of the story eezi listening to the story-teller do not care for their animals who can then fall into hunters’ traps. After finishing the story the eezi says that he was absorbed in listening and now his stallion has been killed. The hunters, three brothers, do not understand but the next day they find traps full of game and in one trap there is a black woodpecker – which they understood to be the stallion of the eezi. A different variant of the story says that the eezi after listening decided to give his horse to the story-teller and the next day the brothers find elk in their trap (Potapov 2001: 127–8; see also Tioukhteneva 2004: 134). Potapov also mentions the giving of thanks by hunters reaching home after an expedition which says that ‘Kudai9 gave mal’ (Potapov 2001: 108).

In their work Altai Jaŋ (faith of Altai), which is meant as both scholarly work and guide of spiritual conduct for Altaians, Muitueva and Chochkina say that hunters ask the master of Altai and the mountains (Altaidyn, tuudyŋ eezi) to give mal (Muitueva & Chochkina 1996: 130). In the section on dreaming they also assert that if the dreamer receives a cow or horse in a dream, he will succeed in hunting bear or anŋ (probably in the sense of Siberian deer) (Ibid.: 192). Here it is implied that the gift giver is an eezi who gives his mal.

I believe we face something that might be described in terms of pastoral perspectivism. It is not the human–animal divide which depends on perspective but rather the domesticity–wildness divide. Categories of domesticity and wildness imply subjectivity in relation to which the animal is either wild or domestic. In an Altaian context, as in many places around the world, the position of the subject is apparently not saved exclusively for humans as there are also nonhuman eeler. It opens up the option of grouping animals differently in relation to different, nonhuman subjectivities. What was anŋ for the hunter of the story was mal for the shouting eezi (see also Tioukhteneva 2004: 134). Significant for the parallel to Amazonian perspectivism described by Viveiros de Castro is the fact that what are deer for the hunter are not domestic deer but cows for the eezi. Domesticity seems to be ‘cattle-morphic’ in an Altaian context as much as
subjectivity is anthropomorphic in the Amazon. We can conclude that while animals could be treated in the Amazon as indexes of concealed anthropomorphic subjectivities, in Altai they could be treated as indexes of their master-owner’s subjectivity. In other words, if there is an animal, there must be an owner of it in the same way as there must be fire behind smoke.\textsuperscript{12} It is not surprising since other things work in the same way; mountains, lakes, springs and so on are also treated as indexes of their eeleri.

However, we must be careful when employing rather fuzzy concepts to create clear-cut divisions between Amazonian perspectivism and Altaian pastoral perspectivism. In Amazonia, we can find a figure which is close to my interpretation of nonhuman eeeler and their relationship with wild animals. Prototypically there is the notion of animal spirit master referred to as master or father/mother of game animals or particular species, e.g. peccaries (Viveiros de Castro 2004a: 470; Morton 1984).\textsuperscript{13} The ‘masterhood’ of such a figure seems to be complex and hardly reducible to the idiom of ownership. Fock describes the father of the peccaries as ‘common denominator of all pigs’, which is virtually identical with the species as a whole and which is the ultimate source of individuals of the species, their beginning and end (Fock 1963: 29; cited in Morton 1984: 43). According to Viveiros de Castro such a figure works as ‘hypostases of the animal species’ and since it is conceptualised as possessing human-like intentionality, it creates ‘an intersubjective field for human–animal relations even where empirical animals are not spiritualised’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471). Altaian eeeler also open up such a field. In Altai as in Amazonia the consent of nonhuman masters is crucial for hunting. Yet, the idiom of ownership, domesticity and cattle-morphism which characterises what I called pastoral perspectivism brings to hunting an additional set of meanings. Ee means master, owner. The word mal defined above as domestic animal carries another meaning – possession, belonging. Finally, there is the word predator baryntychy which at the same time means thief, robber. The dynamics are clear here. While herding and especially haymaking are, in the region in which I conducted the research, restricted by the unwritten yet recognised rights of certain families to use certain land, hunting is opened to everyone.\textsuperscript{14} This is so, I believe, because no human can claim the ownership of land and wild animals since their owner ee is implied by their mere existence.

The main task of the hunter therefore is to behave in a non-offensive way towards the local eezi as he might at any time be exposed as baryntychy stealing someone else’s cattle/belonging rather than anchy, i.e. the one who deals with wild animals. Respect paid to eeleri is prototypically expressed by tying jalama to trees, by building cairns on particular places in the landscape (just one, not many),\textsuperscript{15} or by story-telling in the form of kai – throat singing. Indeed, the vast majority of stories about eezi talk about the punishment of disrespectful or in other ways improper behaviour.\textsuperscript{16} For example hunters who went to hunt in a forbidden territory accidentally shoot one of their number who was turned, by the local eezi, into a deer at the moment of shooting.
Another aspect of proper hunting behaviour is connected to the notion of *kire*. When living with Valera in a logging camp we often went to a nearby chalet to ask for milk and cream. When Valera successfully hunted we shared meat with the old lady at the chalet. During one of our visits the lady asked whether Valera had hunted recently. She had heard a rifle. He answered that of course he had not; so soon after a successful hunt one cannot go again. She nodded in appreciative agreement referring to *kire*.

*Kire*, in one of its meanings is often translated into Russian as *mera* – ‘measure’, ‘level’, ‘degree’ (Tybykova 2005: 109–1). The more appropriate translation for the context in which it was used, however, seems to be ‘norm’, ‘share’, ‘portion’ or ‘balance’. Every hunter has *kire* – the amount of animals which it is appropriate to shoot within a certain period of time (e.g. hunting expedition) as well as within one’s lifetime. Exceeding one’s *kire* leads to *kinchek* (often translated into Russian as *grekh* – ‘sin’, but by adherents of Buddhism as ‘karma’). *Kinchen* might not only lead to the punishment of the particular person but is also passed onto offspring and according to many it continues to affect offspring up to the seventh generation. In the context of hunting it is often said that sons of hunters who exceeded the norm are unsuccessful in hunting or have no interest in it at all. Another example of the use of the word *kire* is when someone is described as *kirezijokizhi* literally meaning a person without *kire*. It is used to refer to people who tend to go ‘over the top’, e.g. ask too much or behave inappropriately in other ways, showing signs of cupidity or obstinacy. On the other hand a *kirelü* person (literary the person with *kire*) is an *umerennyi, poriadochnyi* (‘gentle’, ‘restrained’, ‘honourable’, ‘decent’) person (Tybykova 2005: 210).

Once I asked my friend Anatolii to tell me more about *jerdin eezi* (master of a place). He answered: ‘He does not accept all kind of people. He might punish people and give nothing to hunters if they are sinful.’ Similarly, Potapov described Altaian hunters in the 1920s as stressing both physical as well as moral cleanliness when going on hunting expeditions (Potapov 2001: 87).

When describing the underworld as seen by *kam*, Potanin refers to N. Chevalkov’s account as he himself did not see *kamlanie*. Among sinners suffering in the underworld he mentions a person sitting on a red-hot iron horse—the one that, when alive, used to steal people’s livestock. He then goes on to say that the tortured are also those who shot too many animals (Potanin 1883: 66). If, as I suggested above, inappropriate hunting and cattle theft could be described as two sides of the same coin, then the side one can see is a matter of perspective. Yet, respecting/having *kire* prevents one from killing too many animals in the idiom of hunting as well as from stealing someone else’s cattle. From a different perspective the sinners in the underworld might be suffering a different torture (the torture of those who shot too much rather than that of cattle thieves) but it does not affect the fact that they are sinners who suffer for their sins. Thus morality seems to transcend the perspective – *kire* works as universal axis that goes through perspectives.
Repeating that the main task of the hunter is inoffensive behaviour which makes him a hunter rather than stealer of *mal*, we can perhaps say that it is morality which enables one to legitimately impose one’s perspective. Or, in other words, morality is the smooth meeting of perspectives, which is otherwise ‘dangerous business’ to use Viveiros de Castro’s expression (2004a: 468). To a moral hunter local *eezi* will give some of his *mal*. Thus even though their perspectives give them a different picture of what is going on, these pictures are compatible. Balance, one of the meanings of *kire*, is secured.\(^{19}\) Metamorphosis, Viveiro de Castro says, occurs at the meeting point of two perspectives (n.d.: 85). In this sense, we can say that hunting in Altai happens at the meeting point of the human hunter’s perspective and the animal’s *eezi*’s perspective and if it is successful it generates a metamorphosis of *mal* into *aŋ*. An unsuccessful hunt, as we saw above, can end in a disaster as when the hunter was shot for appearing, momentarily, as a deer to his fellow hunters. As Viveiros de Castro commented ‘appearances deceive because one is never certain whose point of view is dominant, that is, which world is in force when one interacts with other beings’ (n.d.: 88). In an Altaian context being moral seems to be the best way to avoid deception. After all those unlucky hunters, who only shot their friend, indeed hunted in a forbidden area.

Trying to find out more about the character of nonhuman *eeler* and their subjectivities I asked my friend Ivan, an uneducated villager, what *jerdin* *eezi* look like. ‘I do not know, I haven’t seen one. But probably like a human.’ He answered with reluctance, not eager to discuss such an issue loudly in the forest. On another occasion I asked Nadia, a Moscow educated ballet dancer, the same question. ‘He does not look like anything. You cannot see him, just feel, as he is spirit, power.’ The difference between Ivan’s and Nadia’s answers could be understood as the difference of their experiences and the conceptual arsenal each of them had acquired during their life trajectories. Their answers are nevertheless not entirely incompatible and they illustrate one aspect of the notion of *eeler*. Even though I suggest that the notion of *ee* is in Altai an overwhelmingly crucial concept, it also seems to be very vague.\(^{20}\) Bearing it in mind I can generalise that most people, according to my data and the data of other researchers (especially D’iakonova 2001 and Halembo 2006), would agree with Anatolii as well as with Nadia up to certain point. Under normal conditions one cannot see *eeler*. Yet, there are specific occasions when it is possible. First, in dreams one can see *eeler* most often in human form. They might speak to the one who is dreaming, praise him or grumble. They might give presents as well as punches and they might have sexual intercourse with the dreamer.\(^{21}\) There are also people endowed with the ability to see invisible things and beings including *eeler*. They are kind of *biler ulus* (people who know) and are often called *köyşökchi* (*kös* means eye) (Halembo 2006: 147–50; D’iakonova 2001: 198). They again see *eeler* in humanoid form. Also ordinary (*bilbez* – not knowing) people can rarely see or in any other way perceive the *eeler* when awake. As the story about the man who was shouted at by the *eezi* suggests, *eeler* manifest themselves in human form or
take on human attributes (e.g. human voice) (see Tioukhteneva 2004: 134–5). Altaian artists also depict eeler in humanoid form (Figures 1 and 2).

The only example of an eezi presenting itself in nonhuman yet visible form I have witnessed was once at arzhan suu (sacred healing springs). My friend with whom I was taking the water pointed at a little squirrel and said it was the eezi of the spring. She came to have a look at us and made her presence visible. When I asked more about the bodily shape he said the eezi entered the squirrel, used it. D’ikkonova describes a similar conception. People travelling to arzhan suu are not allowed to hunt or fish and the observance of such a rule is watched by the eezi who can take on the form of any animal or plant. If injured such an animal cries with the human voice of an eezi (D’ikkonova 2001: 173). 22

The last example in my view only stressed that under normal conditions eeler are invisible to ordinary people and the way they can manifest themselves is via the ordinary physical world (e.g. squirrel). 23 It certainly does not undermine what other examples show. When seen in their own realm (thanks to dreaming, special senses, etc.) eeler are almost exclusively anthropomorphic with many human qualities. 24 They are gendered. They have belongings and might give them as an expression of affections or exchange them for various things, stories, praise or even sex. I have met female kösmökchi who people respected for seeing eeleri of

FIGURE 1. Suudy eezi – Aidyn Kurmanov’s illustration of the fairytale ‘Golden Axe’. Eezi is partly anthropomorphic here. The head signals intentionality, the ears and eyes perception and the mouth command of speech. Finally hands make up the full-bodied agent.
springs and rivers. I was told that it is useful to know who exactly the particular eezi is as one might bring more specific offerings when asking for healing water. For example if the eezi is a little girl, it makes sense to bring beads while an old man might appreciate tobacco. Few people also mentioned that one should not carry things like jewellery he or she likes and wants to keep to arzhan suu as the eezi might like it and demand it.

The relation between eeler is unclear to me. Yet, the relation between people and nonhuman-eeler seems to be asymmetrical in terms of power. These are eeler who have the power to punish people for improper behaviour, not the other way round. In some accounts not a single animal is hunted without the eezi’s permission (Potapov 2001: 129). In some stories, however, the relationship is slightly
more equal. The shouting eezi I mentioned in the initial story was angry but did not manage to protect her ‘cows’. One of the explanations of story-telling on hunting expeditions mentioned by Potapov is that eeler; listening to the story, do not pay attention to their animals who then, unprotected, fell into traps (Potapov 2001: 127–8). D’iakonova mentions one of her informants who said that eeler fell asleep after a big gathering on 15 November and woke up on 15 March (D’iakonova 2001: 174–5). Such undermining of their omnipresence and constant attention makes their agency perhaps more human-like.25

Peoples’ conception of ee seems to be very diverse, yet what has been said makes me conclude that subjectivity is in an Altaian view anthropomorphic. If, as I said, all visible things like mountains, rivers, animals and sometimes even artefacts (e.g. kam’s drum) could be treated as the belonging – mal – of someone, than each ‘someone’ implied is in its own realm human.

PLACING PERSPECTIVISM INTO PERSPECTIVE

Even though (or perhaps because) the present paper should be read as a homage to Viveiros de Castro I shall now try to place Altaian pastoral perspectivism in a very different perspective, the one which I am struggling to find in Viveiros de Castro’s work. Long ago I came across an Evenki proverb: ‘Bear is human. Elk is human. Lucha is Lucha.’ Lucha, the small print in a collection of Eveki stories says, is the Evenki term for Russian (Brzakova 1995). My first reading of the saying was straightforward. Even wild animals are more human than Russian colonisers. I have since changed my opinion under the influence of Viveiros de Castro’s work. If we take only the first part, saying that bear and elk are human, we can interpret it as a clear example of perspectivist thinking. Bear and elk are human in their own realm, for themselves. How come, then, that Russians are denied this common idiom of humanity? I want to suggest that this is so because they themselves step out of it. In other words they see themselves as exclusive and essentially different from elks, bears and in a different way also from Evenki.26 Thus the proverb might be read as an Evenki appreciation of the existence of another, non-perspectivist, worldview. It is obvious that contemporary Evenki do not live in an isolated cage of their views (see Ssorin-Chaikov 2003), yet I suspect that Viveiros de Castro’s concepts did not equip us for describing their world in its full complexity.

After using the Evenki proverb as a topic opener I shall move back to my Altaian material to develop the issue further. I must confess that in the text above I have inevitably examined only some of the views possessed by Altaians. Many Altaians are perfectly fluent in Russian and well educated in Soviet and post-Soviet schools and universities. I shall consider here two implications of that fact. First, many Altaians are perfectly familiar with the Western notion of the ‘nonhuman animal’ which Viveiros de Castro uses to contrast Amerindian notions. Second, they are well aware of the dominant Western scientific
discourse of subjectivity/agency. Such discourse, according to Callon and Law, requires candidates of agency to meet ‘two great classes of conditions: intentionality, and language use’ (Callon & Law 1995: 490; original emphasis). Yet, even though eeler seem to have both of them (Figures 1 and 2) they cannot be in such discourse treated as agents/subjects. This is so because they are not human and, perhaps more importantly, they are most of the time invisible and in other ways contradicting basic conditions of the objectivist discourse to be seen as existing/real. Therefore eeler fit into the only space allocated to them – fantasy, folklore, fairytale, superstition ...

Such views are most notably views of the state. In medical records from the region we cannot find eeler being listed among the causes of someone’s illness or death. The legality or illegality of hunting is not, from the state’s perspective, derived from the relationship between hunter and eeler but between hunter and state (a hunting licence and firearm licence are obligatory for everyone who wants to hunt in the Altai Republic). Understanding of the objectivist perspective is apparently well founded. I have never heard about for example Altaian policeman who would try to use the notion of eeler officially in his work.

The whole situation is nevertheless far more complicated. Even G. B. Tylor complained about the irrational superstitions of the English gentlemen of his time and we can guess that he would be equally dissatisfied in present day Britain. In other words there is not a single place in the world where the objectivist-scientific discourse would be the only one in operation. Yet, its existence always seems to create a landmark in relation to which other discourses are perceived and presented. Altaians, in particular the well-educated ones, often speak about real cases caused by eeler in a half-voice which reminds me of people speaking about somewhat similar matters in Europe. ‘There are things between Earth and Heaven’ say Czechs when facing something hardly explainable. Dropping hints, rather than giving reasons incompatible with the main objectivist view, is common.

When Potanin travelled to Altai in the mid-nineteenth century he said that he did not manage to see a horse sacrifice simply because he did not have enough resources to fund it. Halemba, in the late-twentieth century, faced a rather different problem. She was not allowed to participate in an Altai tagylga ritual in Telengit Sortogoi village (Halemba 2006: 179). Even though I do not want to suggest that people told and showed to Potanin everything without keeping any secrets, the difference seems clear to me. Well educated revivalists of ‘Altaian faith’ from Telengit Sortogoi perceived their ritual activity as heterodoxy with regard to the dominant official objectivist discourse. A possible framing of their activity as superstition or false pretension of belief probably made them keep the ritual a low profile event. For the people Potanin was meeting in Altai ritual activity was part of doxa (to use Bourdieu’s terms cf. 1994) and there were no general reason to hide something or be ashamed of it. It is perhaps typical that Halemba did not face a similar problem in the Saratan village where continuity of the Altai tagylga ritual was unbroken (Halemba 2006: 180–2).
I of course do not want to suggest that Altaian intellectuals omit Altaian spirituality or religion in their public discussion. On the contrary, religious disputes and arguments are an almost daily topic in local media. Yet, when it comes to specifying cases, they are tamed into a slot given to them in the objectivist view, namely that of ‘culture’. (Even the fact that I called the topic ‘spirituality or religion’ shows that the language I use inevitably favours labelling in this particular way and Altaian intellectuals face the same problem.) For example, when Altaian NGO activists opposed the official (re)naming of one mountain they argued that for Altaians mountains are sacred and alive. This phrase ‘for Altaians’ clearly refers to the concept of culture and cultural rights. The politically relevant argument they make does not appeal to the protection of the mountain’s wishes but the protection of the cultural rights of people – the only relevant subjects/agents of the objectivist discourse. Altaian activists’ motivation might be respect for cultural rights rather than mountains, an effort to ‘translate’ worldviews or political soberness which says that under the condition of ‘ontological imperialism’ one has to give arguments compatible with the dominant objectivist paradigm. We can also employ Zizek’s concept of a ‘subject supposed to believe’ and say that Altaian intellectuals/activists believe through ‘common Altaians’ i.e. ‘belief in the belief of the other’ (Zizek 1997), which is just the case with anthropologists and ‘the other’ of their discourse.

In the everyday village talk, however, the situation is different. Eeler, as I have shown above, play important roles in explaining hunting success or failure, disasters and so on. Such explanations not only exist alongside other explanations derived from an objectivist paradigm but they can also challenge it. I have heard stories about Russian tourists making fun of sacred places and dying afterwards in natural disasters, but the story of a young Russian teacher who started to work in Ongudai region is particularly revealing. She was told about a particular mountain in the region to which people are not allowed to go. Out of curiosity she decided to go there and died the day after her lonely expedition. Doctors did not manage to identify the cause of her death. Unlike in the intellectualist cultural right discourse, taboos are valid for anyone, not just ‘for Altaians’. The disobedience of a Russian teacher, personifying proliferation of objectivist paradigm, is equally punished. Moreover, medical science is toothless in establishing an explanation compatible with its own paradigm.

The other aspect of everyday discourses is reference to non-objectivist genres present in mass media and other discursive arenas in Russia itself as well as in the West in general. I believe that such pairing is extremely revealing as well. I was watching a full moon with a friend of mine who pointed out spots on it and said it was Jelbegen – a cannibal monster from Altaian legends. Not knowing the legend I asked who Jelbegen was and my friend, after few seconds of thinking answered. ‘Well, how can I start. Have you seen King Kong?’ His intercultural translation was in my view very accurate. Unlike stories about local eeler, the legend or myth of Jelbegen people regarded as a story which is not perceived at face value i.e. as something someone you know saw or experienced.
Another example could be the approach of a relative of my neighbour in the Ulagan village. I met him in my neighbour’s shop. A man in his thirties looked at me and after I was introduced to him, he said that he had seen someone similar: a young foreigner looking for shamans.\textsuperscript{28} He found the goal very amusing since, as he said, these people are rare here and not called shamans any more, they are \textit{extrasensi} (psychic). He was not completely right as the word shaman or \textit{kam} is invoked frequently at least in the reference to the past. Yet everyone would agree that they are rare and would refer to people with extraordinary abilities most often as \textit{biler kizhi}. The translation of such a word as \textit{extrasens} was again very well chosen. The clear message was that there is nothing superstitious, backward, exotic or abnormal in Altai. \textit{Extrasensi} are important characters of Russian popular culture, New Age discourses, parapsychology or occult sciences. The Russian mass media offers a wide range of them starting from David Copperfield (whose masterstrokes are not that far from those of the old days’ \textit{kamdar} escaping from communist repressions), via astrology to Para sciences which use terminology from mainstream sciences (e.g. energy) in a way that makes the purity keepers of objectivist discourse cry.

The inhabitants of Altai also often themselves witness how representatives of the state do not always operate within the framework of the positivistic paradigm. On the one hand, the local officials from the Kosh-Agach region were threatened with the withdrawal of humanitarian aid by the federal authorities for publicly linking the 2003 earthquake in the region to archaeological excavations (Halemba in press). On the other hand, in the summer of 2007, the prime minister of Ukraine accompanied by his friends from the ruling ‘United Russia party’ visited Altai to undertake ‘alternative medicinal’ treatment of his knee, conducted by a local shaman.

I have shown examples of the three main ways of negotiating common grounds for objectivity discourse and alternative views into which the ‘pastoral perspectivism’ could be counted. First, alternative views could be fitted into slots of culture and subjectivity left in the objectivist paradigm. Second, there are narratives in which the formal dominance of the objectivist paradigm is reversed. Third, there are situations in which the objectivist paradigm is bypassed through associating particular issues with the western alternatives of objectivist hegemony.

CONCLUSION

Viveiros de Castro’s work in my view has proved to be useful in interpreting data from Altai. The concept of perspectivism has enabled me to think of the human–animal relationship and the concept of \textit{ee} together. Such an approach allows the linkage of hunting and herding through the concept of \textit{ee} which in turn becomes clearer – it is apparent why the word denotes both human masters and spirit masters of places. Placing what might be seen as Altaian perspectivist ideas into comparative perspective has shown that while the anthropomorphism of
The themes of pastoral perspectivism are clearly linked to the basic economic difference between Amazonia and Inner Asia. While in the ‘old Amazon’ there were no domesticated animals apart from dogs and non-reproducing tamed animals (e.g. peccaries), Inner Asia including Altai has been for centuries dominated by pastoral nomads. Even though we do not have to accept a Marxian division into base and superstructure with the latter being determined by the earlier, it would be impossible to deny that the Altaian perception of hunting is heavily influenced by a pastoralist imaginary. I am after all not the first one to note that in the Siberian context. Even though from slightly different angles, Hamayon’s distinction of hunting shamanism and pastoral shamanism (Hamayon 1994) and Pedersen’s distinction of North North Asian and South North Asian ontologies (Pedersen 2001) seem to be predicated upon economic variety in Siberia itself.

There are also other topics which seem to be well facilitated by application of the concept of perspectivism in the analysis of Altaian data and which I did not have space to develop in this paper. The eezi mal relationship seems to be the right departure point for analysing the local concept of ownership as such, which is in turn connected to the questions of personhood (to what extent can we treat mal as an aspect of personhood of its eezi?) and animal sacrifice (communication of human and nonhuman eerler via mal).

Even though I am finding Viveiros de Castro’s work extremely inspiring for interpretation of particular selective sets of my data, I feel guilty precisely for that selectiveness of my application. Just like Pedersen I have mostly ignored ‘the effect that over 300 years of Russian, Chinese and Manchurian presence in North Asia has had on conceptualisations of human and nonhuman social life’ (Pedersen 2001: 412). Hence in the last section of this paper I tried to briefly explore the limits of the approach. I believe we should be asking ‘whose point of view is dominant, that is, which world is in force when one interacts with other beings’ (Viveiros de Castro n.d.: 88) also when it comes to police investigation, state subsidy negotiation, medical treatment in local hospital or testing students in state exams. Viveiros de Castro described modern Western multiculturalism and Amerindian multinaturalism as two mutually incompatible ‘cosmological outlooks’. Even if we take such difference as an analytical starting point we should recognise that the ‘incompatibility’ is bridged in dozens of ways, as my own data show, which deserve to be studied more closely and accommodated in the theoretical framework. It is possible that the clear distinction between perspective/ontology and view/epistemology, which constitutes the difference between perspectivism and relativism, might not hold that firmly.
NOTES

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2The catch phrase ‘putting perspectivism into perspective’ arose from debates with Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov who has always been productively suspicious about the concept.

3I am aware that there are such things as “covert categories”, i.e. non-lexicalised conceptual forms. But my contention is that in the majority of (possibly all) Amazonian cases there is no submerged notion meaning “nonhuman animal” (in our sense of “animal”) (Viveiros de Castro n.d.: 22).

4Kushtar means birds. Altaian, as well as other Turkic languages, uses many word pairs for example ada-ene for parents (ada is father and ene is mother) or kazan-aiak for dishware (kazan is a cauldron and aiak is a bowl).

5In Mongolian aη is a verb root meaning ‘to hunt’.

6The very late introduction of domestic birds to Altaians might explain lack of categorical distinction between domestic and wild birds.

7Tyndu means literary with tyn. Where tyn means breath and therefore tyndu could be translated as breathing, with breath, i.e. living/alive. Recently the term tyn has been used in the translation of the New Testament into Altaian in the collocation agaru tyn – holy spirit. The Mongolian equivalent of the word tyndu seems to be amitan.

8Kudai is often translated as god due to the fact that it was chosen by nineteenth-century missionaries to denote God in the translation of parts of the Bible (cf. Halemba 2006: 197).

9I am aware that the domestic vs. wild distinction has been widely discussed in anthropology. There is however no need to link my present argument with those debates. I am neither using it to study the workings of the human mind (Lévi-Strauss 1966) nor am I imagining such a distinction as a version or subset of other dichotomies e.g. nature vs. culture or male vs. female. For a brilliant discussion of such an extension done by anthropologists see Strathern (1980).

10Pet deer could be for example found in the classical antique mythology of the goddess Diana.

11Viveiros de Castro characterised perspectivism as not concerning ‘points of view onto things’ but rather ‘things and being that are points of view’. ‘The question for Indians therefore is not one of knowing “how monkeys see the world”, but what world is expressed through monkeys, of what world they are the point of view’ (2004b). We can perhaps paraphrase: that looking at an animal Altaians do not ask who its owner is, but what sort of owner is expressed through such an animal. The white deer when met in the taiga often occurs in soul-loss stories implying that its eezi is particularly dangerous to human hunters. Yet I was told several times that horses of this or that man are really good (as if there were no bad horses in his herds), implying that it is a quite contrary quality of the owner which expresses the qualities of animals.

12In a certain way closer to the Altaian case than to Amazonian material seems to be an
example from Papua New Guinea. Marilyn Strathern says about wild spirits (*korrømi*) in Mount Hagen that they are ‘thought of as tending wild plants and animals as people do their domesticated varieties’. What is more ‘quite apart from the wild pig itself, other creatures of the forest such as marsupials may be thought of as the “pigs” of wild spirits’ (1980: 192–3). I cannot decide, thanks to the inverted commas, whether marsupials are pigs of wild spirits or whether marsupials play the same role for wild spirits as pigs play for humans (i.e. are like pigs). Hence I do not know whether we can talk of ‘pig-morphism’ and hence ‘pastoral perspectivism’ in Mount Hagen.

14 It is important to mention that such openness is inherent to communal perception, not to the Russian legal framework. Potapov is convinced about the existence of clan hunting territories in the past, yet he mentions that the Shor people of northern Altai would not physically attack intruders but challenge them in a customary court in order not to offend the *eezi* of taiga (Potapov 2001).

15 I was told by my informants who live next to the main road going through Altai that they have to destroy multiple cairns built by passing tourists. Having more than one cairn in one place is bad. Such a view makes me believe that each cairn is perceived as an index of particular subjectivity worshipped by it and therefore a multiplicity of cairns possibly constitutes something like a ‘schizophrenia’ of the place.

16 The father of the peccaries in the Amazon is also the one who can exact punishment when peccaries are hunted without his consent (see Morton 1984).

17 I am indebted to Altaian ethnographer Svetlana Tioukhteneva who first drew my attention to this concept. She suggested that the notion of *kire* is as important to Altaians as that of time and space.

18 Kam is an Altaian word for shaman. I prefer not to translate it as it does not carry the same and often misleading range of meanings as the word shaman.

19 Anthropology tends to think about morality as determined culturally, i.e. as being formulated within one monade – particular system of norms and rules. The morality I formulate on the basis of my Altaian data is different in this respect. It exists at the point of confrontation of domains, it equals resolution.

20 For example *tundyn eezì* is a spirit master of the mountain, yet it is sometimes described almost as an animated aspect of the mountain itself. Simultaneously it is not clear what the relation is between the ee of a particular mountain and the *Altaidyn eezì* (i.e. the master spirit of Altai as such). Are they separate entities in the relationship of equality/subordination or is the former an aspect of the latter? Potapov interpreted his data obtained in the 1920s as containing survivals of different evolutionary stages. He talks about pre-animistic and animistic stages, of which both are also pre-shamanistic. Since we do not have to subscribe to Potapov’s evolutionistic view we can perhaps treat such fuzziness as inherent to the concept and creating what Caroline Humphrey called the ‘multidimensional sense of the unknown’ (Humphrey 1996: 121).

21 Dreaming is generally important among Altaians. When having a sleepover for the first time in someone’s place the human *eezi*/owner will ask in the morning about dreams (*Kandyitüshkördì*?) and might interpret them for the visitor. Dreams concerning local *eezi* give an important clue about the *eezi*’s mood and possibility of success in hunting, fishing (see also Potapov 2001: 87–8). They can also be *körütüsh*, i.e. a dream that shows future happenings.

22 On spirits appearing in the form of animals see Humphrey (1996: 102).

23 Goldman talks about a similar issue among Kwakiutl in terms of ‘impersonations of spirits’. “The impersonators are artifice, but the power brought by the spirits is genuine
[...] the impersonators are not genuine spirits but genuine impersonators of spirits, (Goldman 1975; quoted in Viveiros de Castro n.d.: 84).

24 Halemba mentions a lake in the Kosh-Agach region whose eezi is a bull (Halemba 2006). I nevertheless believe that it would be hard to rule out the possibility that the eezi can show up also in human form. In such cases we are back to the question of impersonators.

25 The contemporary Altai intellectual elite is not united on this issue. Altaian ethnographer Muitueva argued in the republic’s press that Chaga bairam is the imported Buddhist new year because it entails making offerings to Altai ëezi in February. This is in her view total nonsense as Altai ëezi sleeps at that time. She was laughed at by other intellectuals in the press who argued that Altai ëezi is not a bear that goes into hibernation. Their view indeed played with the conception of omnipresent and much more God-like eezi.

26 Koryak joke told by Alexander King: A Koryak is sitting out in the tundra guarding the herd. He hears a voice calling, ‘People! People!’ [liudi]. He runs towards the sound over the hill and sees a Russian man at the bottom in the snow. The Russian calls out ‘People! People! Help me!’ The Koryak says, ‘Oh? In the tundra we are people. There in Tilichiki (town) we are just Koryaks’.

27 Latour recalls similar story of Indian intellectuals concluding that the only believers are those who believe in belief (Latour 1999: 266–92).

28 I feel obliged to stress here that unlike my ‘alter ego’ I was not looking for shamans.

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