

## EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: ETHNOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE AND THE MAGIC OF UNCERTAINTY

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Once I took an article of mine, written about the Komi hunters' worldview and subsistence practices, to one of my Komi friends.<sup>1</sup> Later he told me: "Everything is correct in your paper. All the facts are true and descriptions accurate. But we think differently from the way you approach the issue. We talk about these things just randomly."

I started to contemplate this response but could only reach a feeling of impenetrable ambivalence. I did not aim just to present facts about Komi hunting but also to point to the overall attitude of hunters to the forest, fish, game and human conduct. Apparently, I failed totally. My friend did not recognise any resemblance in my scholarly way of narrating and the Komi hunters' mode of storytelling. I suggest that this incoherence is not caused only by differences in vocabulary used by hunters and academics.

Perhaps I was too concentrated and systematic for my friend. In that article, I had put together stories and notions that hunters had presented over the decades of our ethnographic collaboration. Compressed into a twenty-page article, everything started to look too organised for my Komi friend. What troubled him in that thick and ethnographically rich paper? I suppose that the hunter disliked revealing too many true things about hunting practice.

Classical Komi ethnographies communicate a multitude of hunting taboos. It is forbidden to talk about game and the quantity of the catch. Before a hunting trip, one also needs to avoid contact with ladies and priests. Highly dangerous speech acts include directly mentioning women, cats, snakes, ravens and priests (because the forest spirits dislike them). Talking about them without using euphemisms "was punished as

\* This essay is based on research supported by the University of Tartu, project PHVKU19913 Finno-Ugrians in Multi-Ethnic Society: Negotiating Religious Boundaries and the Estonian Kindred Peoples Program's Finno-Ugric Bricolage: Sources of Indigenous Worldview and Scholarly Knowledge project.

severely as for other crimes" (Sidorov 1926: 31–32; Konakov 1983: 192–193). In general, hunters must circumvent any suspicious accidents (for example, tripping with the left foot) (Sidorov 1926: 30; FM 1999).

Komi hunters need to honour their catch because any killed animals can be reborn. One must avoid disappointment if the captured game is poor (for example if you tracked a fox but caught a hare) and conversely complain and swear if everything is just fine.<sup>1</sup> If a hunter insults a catch the forest spirits could remove his hunting success for a year or two, and in some cases even for a lifetime, or on some occasions the spirits might simply throw the hunter out of the forest (Sidorov 1926: 29–30; Konakov 1983: 189–190). Bystanders can also damage hunting luck by envying a good catch, and so hunters must always hide the caught animals from strangers' eyes (Konakov 1983: 191).

It happened once that I caught a beaver who had managed to squeeze himself into an otter trap. Seemingly, hunters started to praise me for my success. The way they expressed their appreciation is not appropriate for print, but these expressions were supposed to diminish the threat of magical damage. According to the animistic worldview, if one is straightforward with gratitude these words can cause harm.

One also needs to respect fish. Freshly caught fish cannot be squashed, thrown away, given to dogs or children. But all these rules were applied only to familiar fish. If representatives of unfamiliar species were caught, it was a totally different matter. For example, when in the 1830s, sterlets started to migrate from the Kama River through the Katherine Canal<sup>2</sup> to the Ezhva River, and the Komi first found them in their nets, fishermen used to swear, spit and urinate into their mouths and throw them back into water (Konakov 1983). This example has been used repeatedly in the ethnographic literature for two hundred years now. But my Komi friends have told me the same story as fresh news, claiming that sterlets had appeared in Komi rivers only recently, as a result of climate change.

Old Komi hunters also believed in 'impulsive' lakes. If one was trying to fish on these waterways in dirty or wet clothes, throw waste into the water or leave it on shore, or quarrel with one's companions, capricious lakes would provide horse manure instead of fish. Moody lakes also enjoyed drowning unclean fishermen (Konakov 1983: 189). When fishing, one's mood was also significant. If a fisherman had a "tough heart" it could scare fish and they would struggle in the nets (*ibid.*: 191).

These examples give the impression of a strict vernacular system of avoidance of talking or acting, although they also reflect, in a multitude ways, how this was not systematic. Ethnographers have been among those persistently cultivating this idea of total animism. However, my Komi friend claims that narratives about forest conduct must be hazy, one must touch upon animistic feelings only lightly. Hunters need to be a bit inconsistent because systematic behaviour makes them predictable to fish and game. If you cannot escape being predictable in your conduct, there remains the taboo against talking accurately. Any kind of verbal uncertainty is good for hunting magic.

How could I harmonise my research with the Komi hunter's cognitive expectations in these conditions? How to write a scholarly article without talking about anything precisely? Classical scientific argumentation presumes precision and continuous logical connections between evidence and conclusions. For Komi hunters, this would appear to be nonsense.

In fact, most Komi hunters' narratives are in accord with the mode of scientific rationalisation. These are practical discussions over daily actions, negotiating hunting conditions and skills, making long-term plans for the hunting season, etc. Most hunters' talk is very much practical and does not involve other-than-natural powers. So it is not surprising that Komi hunters somehow understand my work. Generally the hunters are just cool about my academic enterprise. They admit that, perhaps, I need to do all this for some reason. Still, they wonder why I need to make notes all the time ("at first, you should open at least one eye in the morning before starting to write", FM 2003) and record, photograph and film the most trivial things ("wasting tape", FM 1996). But they are not really troubled by this: "If you need it for something, just go on" (FM 2001).

In other hunting traditions, deception and uncertainty also foster creative interaction among humans as well as between humans and animals. A similar feature of hunting communication is that lies are intertwined with truth. Spanish hunters consider deception a vital, moral and aesthetic element of their practice (Cruzada et al. 2019: 514–515, 523). Deception is crucial in understanding the hunting world and in various relationships (between humans and between animals): "...it shapes the space, the fundamental language of the framework of experience, in which different beings relate with each other" (ibid.: 524). Rane Willerslev (2007: 159) argues that the Yukaghir hunters in north eastern Siberia are suspicious concerning narrated knowledge. However, this is not because people lie consciously, rather that priority is given to practical knowledge obtained from lived experience.

Ethnographic writing turns out to be cognitively detached from the field in the process of academic endeavour. The desire to connect with hunters' experiences introduces ambivalence between the opportunistic arbitrariness of cultural practice and the systematic functioning of scholarly knowledge. At the same time we sometimes connect hunting and research with a bridge of ironic contemplation. In this respect, I have a memory from the field that illustrates metaphorically the way, in the hunters' view, that I attempt to link dots in the course of the ethnographic analysis of gathered data.

Once I was accompanying another Komi friend on his hunting trip. We woke up on this autumn morning, left the hunting cabin and noticed a pair of ducks sitting on a lake nearby. We had only a small calibre rifle with us. I took a shot and hit the water between the ducks. My friend commented on this attempt of mine: "Aha, you tried to hit both of them at once!" (FM 2003). I suspect that Komi hunters feel a similar way about scientific reasoning in general. Apparently, I presumed some spatial continuity between these ducks. This obviously contradicts the elementary truth of quantum mechanics that somehow lies at the core of our scholarly reasoning.

Modern scientific thinking by itself involves recognition of fundamental unpredictability and incoherence. Inaccuracy relations<sup>3</sup> in quantum mechanics mean that spatial exactness produces a characteristic uncertainty of combined variables in time. This imprecision is semi-quantitative and not mathematically straight forward. Werner Heisenberg (1983 [1927]) argues that in intuitive understanding, "application of the theory excludes internal contradictions". If we put aside this desire for a continuously systematic physical world, it becomes easier to recognise that "for very small spaces and times discontinuities are somehow typical" (ibid.; see also Sen 2014: 203). Heisenberg (1983 [1927]) relates ambiguity to diversity of experiential positions: "...uncertainty in

the observation is not due exclusively to the existence of discontinuities, but is directly related to the requirement of doing justice simultaneously to the different experiences”.

A prohibition or inability to talk the exact truth makes Komi hunters wonder why an ethnographer documents all these lies. The same demand of avoidance obstructs our options to make it clear that we understand each other correctly. Hunters’ narratives are shaped by a strategy of deceptive mimicry, and talking to an ethnographer is not an exception. This is not an exclusive feature of the Komi people, taboos against talking precisely penetrate many hunting traditions: the fundamental experience of uncertainty serves as a creative engine for human reasoning in a more general sense.

Scholarly perception presumes coherence in cultural practice even if Komi hunters claim there is no vernacular procedure or set of systematic rules that guides the hunters’ habit of telling stories. Regarding precision, my friends’ way of narration is inversely proportional to their hunting practice. In the Komi hunter’s view this transposed relationship cannot be easily detected. Hunters aim to talk in such a way that the degree of incoherence between their stories and real-life events varies and the audience is not able to apply any exact narrative rule to detect the truth. Thus, there are no systematic animistic choices framing hunters’ storytelling. So, it holds that animism just appears sometimes as a fog and that there can be no principal continuity between different appearances of hunting belief and thought.

## NOTES

1 The prohibition against expressing happiness after a successful hunt is widespread in Siberia as well as among indigenous hunters in other parts of the world (see Alekseyenko 1967: 174; Vasilevich 1969: 69; Lukina 1986: 133; Potapov 2001: 125; Lar et al. 2003: 51; Cruzada et al. 2019: 515).

2 In 1785, during the rule of Catherine II, construction began on a canal linking the Volga and Northern Dvina river basins. The Northern Catherine Canal was completed in 1822. The economic effect of the canal was modest, but it still exists, and fish can move through it between southern and northern regions of Russia. The Kama River belongs to the basins of the Volga and Ezhva (Vycheгда on most maps) to the Northern Dvina.

3 Inaccuracy relations in quantum mechanics have been also defined as “position–momentum uncertainty relation”, “uncertainty-like inequality”, “fundamental uncertainty relations”, “time–energy uncertainty relation” and “the entropic uncertainty relations” (Sen 2014: 206–207).

## SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials, 1996–2019.

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