

On Domestication, Permanent and Temporary: *Qoraᅇᅇ, Țlwelu, and Akwᅇqor*

Au sujet de la domestication, permanente et temporaire : *Qoraᅇᅇ, Țlwelu, et akwᅇqor*

О доместикации, постоянной и временной: *Qoraᅇᅇ, Țlwelu, и akwᅇqor*

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Article abstract

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Nikolai Vakhtinⁱ

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyze a Yupik folklore plot represented by two stories. Both were recorded in 1940-41 by Ekaterina Rubtsova from two Ungazighmiit storytellers: Nalugyaq (1888–1942) and Tatko (ca. 1875–ca. 1944). The plot is as follows: A man abandons his older wife and two sons and leaves with his younger wife, taking away the herd and apparently leaving the old family to die. But they survive; the boys grow up, start to hunt, and finally come across a herd of wild deer grazing nearby. They tame the herd and fully domesticate it, then set on a journey in search of their father. Eventually they find their father, and once they reach their goal, the herd suddenly turns into a flock of cranes and flies away. Several questions require attention here: From the emic perspective, where is the line between tame and wild? What should a wild animal learn to do, or feel, or get accustomed to, or stop being afraid of, in order to become domestic? What are specific techniques of taming? What are the human-animal relations that enable people to tame the deer and at the same time leave an option for the deer to become wild again?

KEYWORDS

Yupik folklore, human-animal relations, deer domestication, domestication techniques

RÉSUMÉ

Au sujet de la domestication, permanente et temporaire: *Qoraŋə*, *əlwelu*, et *akwəqor*

Dans cet article, j'analyse un aspect intrigant du folklore yupik au travers de deux histoires. Toutes deux ont été enregistrées en 1940-41 par Ekaterina Rubtsova auprès de deux orateurs Ungazighmiit: Nalugyaq (1888-1942) et Tatko (vers 1875-vers 1944). L'intrigue est la suivante: un homme abandonne sa femme aînée et ses deux fils, et part avec sa jeune épouse, en emportant le troupeau et en laissant apparemment mourir sa vieille famille. Mais ils survivent; les garçons grandissent, commencent à chasser et tombent finalement sur un troupeau de rennes sauvages qui paissent à proximité. Ils apprivoisent le troupeau et le domestiquent complètement, puis partent à la recherche de leur père. Ils finissent par trouver leur père et, une fois leur objectif atteint, le troupeau se transforme soudain en une volée de grues qui s'envolent. Plusieurs questions doivent être examinées ici. Du point de vue émique, où se situe la limite entre apprivoisé et

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sauvage? Que doit apprendre un animal sauvage pour devenir domestique? Que doit-il faire, ressentir, intégrer comme nouvelles habitudes ou de quoi doit-il apprendre à cesser d'avoir peur? Quelles sont les techniques spécifiques de domestication? Quelles sont les relations entre les humains et les animaux qui permettent d'apprivoiser les rennes tout en leur laissant la possibilité de redevenir sauvage?

MOTS-CLÉS

Folklore Yupik, relations humains-animaux, domestication des rennes, techniques de domestication

АННОТАЦИЯ

О domestikации, постоянной и временной: *Qoraŋə, əlwelu, и akwəqor*

Николай Вахтин

В этой статье я анализирую эскимосский фольклорный сюжет, представленный двумя текстами. Оба текста были записаны в 1940-41 гг. Екатериной Семеновной Рубцовой от двух рассказчиков из села Ун'азик: Налугьяк (1888-1942) и Татко (ок. 1875 – ок. 1944). Сюжет обоих текстов одинаков: мужчина бросает старшую жену и двух сыновей и уходит с младшей женой, увозя стадо и таким образом оставляя первую семью умирать. Но они выживают; мальчики вырастают, начинают охотиться и, наконец, натываются на стадо диких оленей, пасущееся неподалеку. Они приручают стадо и полностью одомашнивают его, а затем отправляются в путешествие на поиски своего отца. В конце концов они находят отца, и как только они достигают своей цели, стадо внезапно превращается в стаю журавлей и улетает. Здесь необходимо обратить внимание на несколько вопросов. С эмной точки зрения, где проходит грань между прирученным и диким? Чему должны научиться, или чувствовать, или к чему привыкнуть, или чего перестать бояться дикие животные, чтобы считаться домашним? Каковы конкретные методы приручения? Какие отношения между человеком и животными позволяют людям приручать оленя и в то же время оставлять оленю возможность снова стать диким?

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Эскимосский фольклор, отношения между человеком и животным, одомашнивание дикого оленя, техники одомашнивания

It is hard to tell who started the current avalanche of anthropological research and publications on human-animal relations. For decades, it was a familiar theme within the good old evolutionist paradigm among (pre)historians and (human) geographers who studied animal domestication (Simoons 1974). “The precise meaning of domestication [as a (pre)historic phenomenon] has remained a topic of scholarly debate for well over a century”, writes Ingold (2002, 3). Today, we find dozens of publications not only on the history but also on the sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc., of human-animal relations as they exist nowadays.

The emphasis here is on the word *relations*. Ingold's key position is that the treatment of animals in herding (unlike hunting) is characterized

by domination, and with the rise of reindeer herding in the North, “animals moved from being quasi-persons to being consumable things” (Ingold 1986, 10). This approach has been challenged in more recent works (Beach and Stammer 2006; Vaté 2007b; Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekseyev 2015; Stépanoff et al. 2017; Anderson et al. 2017, among others).

Today, it appears that the idea of domination is more or less “voted down”; instead, the “symbiosis” approach is suggested (see references in Stépanoff et al. 2017). There are disagreements however, as to how many parties are involved in this symbiosis: two (people and animals—Anderson et al. 2017) or three (people, animals, and the landscape—Stépanoff et al. 2017), or four (people, animals, landscape, and cosmology—Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekseyev 2015).

The present article does not take sides in this debate. Its aim is rather to provide new evidence and to demonstrate how careful analysis of folklore texts can shed light on the “emic” perspective of human-animal relations in general and on the process of domestication as control or as spiritual partnership, in particular.

An important note is necessary here. I am fully aware of the complex problem regarding the correlation between folklore and reality, between folklore text and ritual; many scholars have indeed tried to solve this conundrum over the last hundred years, starting with Vladimir Propp (see a collection of his articles published posthumously in Propp 1976). Thanks to these scholars, we know that a folklore text is governed by its own rules, that it “reflects” nothing, and that its relations with real life and real rituals are quite complex. I will not delve into this jungle—my task is much more modest. The plot of the story analyzed in this article contains, at the very end, a strange twist. I propose an interpretation of this oddity. At first glance, the story is about the control of humans over animals, but such a reading does not allow us to interpret the end. I will suggest a way of reading the text that enables us to see it as fully logical.

The Data

In the early 1940s, a vast collection of “Siberian Yupik Eskimo”¹ folklore texts were recorded by Ekaterina Rubtsova.² Approximately one-half of her collection

1. Asiatic Yupik speak (spoke) two idioms: Chaplinskii (Ungazighmiit) language, spoken in villages and towns of southeastern Chukotka (in Alaskan academic tradition, the language received the unhappy name “Siberian Yupik”, although it has nothing to do with Siberia), and Naukanski (Nevuqaghmiit), spoken in northeastern Chukotka. The collection in question consists mostly of Ungazighmiit texts and includes two texts in Nevuqaghmiit. In this paper, I use the standard ANLC orthography for Yupik.
2. Ekaterina Semenovna Rubtsova (1888–1970) worked as a teacher of Russian and Yupik in Chukotka from 1929–1932, graduated in 1938 from Hertenzen Pedagogical

was published in 1954 (Rubtsova 1954); the other half was kept as an unedited manuscript at the Northern Languages Department of the Linguistic Institute in St. Petersburg until its publication in 2019 (Rubtsova 2019).³

While I was working to get the second half of the texts ready for publication, two texts struck me as unusual for Yupik folklore. These two texts share the same plot; one is short (No. 12, 147 sentences, pp. 183–195) and the other is rather long (No. 35, 586 sentences, pp. 431–474). Both were recorded by Rubtsova within four months, between December 1940 and spring 1941, and are in the *Ungazighmiit* language: the first was told by Nalugyaq and the second, by Tatko.

Nalugyaq (1888–1942) was the head of a small clan called *Nengluvaqet* (*lit.* “those living in dugouts”) as well as a recognized authority on the history of his clan. Rubtsova recorded several stories from him (Arutiunov, Krupnik, and Chlenov 1982, 84–85; Krupnik 2019, 862). Tatko (*Tatku*, ca. 1875–ca. 1944), a hunter from the *Laakaghmit* clan,⁴ was born and died in Ungazik (Krupnik 2019, 864).

The Plot

A man with two wives abandoned his first (older) wife and their two sons and left with his younger wife, slaughtering half of his reindeer herd for the abandoned to feed on and driving away the other half; without the deer and without the man (the herder), the abandoned family was doomed to die. Nevertheless, they survived: the boys grew up and began hunting, first small animals like lemmings, then bigger ones, then finally wild deer. The boys became strong, learned from their mother to make a sledge, and decided to set off on foot in search of their father, dragging the sledge with some equipment and their mother. At some point, they came across a herd of wild deer grazing nearby. They decided to tame the deer, and eventually they fully domesticated the herd, trained several deer as harness (draught) animals and continued the journey. On their way, they passed other camps where people immediately recognized that the deer were wild and were surprised that a wild herd behaved like a domesticated one. Eventually

University in Leningrad, and worked at the Institute of the Peoples of the North (INS). She spent 1940–1946 in Chukotka living among Yupik and recording their folklore. She also compiled a large Yupik-Russian dictionary (Rubtsova 1971).

3. This collection is of particular importance, since it was recorded before intensive contacts between Yupik and Russian languages began in the mid-1950s. These contacts quickly led to heavy interference of Russian into Yupik and eventually triggered a language shift (Vakhtin 2001). The recorded texts reflect “pre-contact” Yupik language and Yupik oral tradition.

4. On the Yupik clan system, see Krupnik and Chlenov 2013.

the boys found their father who then killed his younger wife and, giving his sons half of his herd, killed himself “because he was ashamed of what he had done”. The boys merged the two herds, the new one (formerly wild) and their father’s domestic one and went back south. After a few days the wild deer suddenly turned into cranes and flew away leaving the boys with only their father’s old herd.

The plot appears to give interesting insights on several questions: (1) From the emic perspective, where is the line between the tame and the wild? (2) What should a tamed animal learn to do, or feel, or get accustomed to, or stop being afraid of, to be considered domestic? (3) What are specific techniques of taming? And one more question that the story does not give a direct answer to: (4) What does this unexpected end of the story mean? Why does the story suddenly turn from an almost realistic narrative into a mythical tale (*skazka*)?

Moreover, the story appears to contradict a reiterated claim that domestic reindeer have no significant phenotypical differences with their wild counterparts (Stépanoff et al. 2017, 69). The question here is of course what is *significant*, as there are clear differences in the observable characteristics of the animals, their behavior, and the taste of their meat (Davydov 2014a, 113; Beach and Stammler 2006). Apparently, nomadic herders easily distinguish between the two: in the texts analyzed, there are episodes when the heroes meet other people in the tundra who are surprised to see the two brothers moving a herd of wild deer that behaves like a domestic one. This can be confirmed by the classic descriptions of Russian ethnographer Vladimir Bogoras (Bogoras 1904, 73–74, 82), as well as by data from current fieldwork. People distinguish the two by their shape; they say wild deer are bigger and are not as white as domestic ones are, with the latter being more visible to *rychvat*, Chukchi for warble fly larvae (*oestridae*) (Virginie Vaté, p.c.).

Yupik and their Language

The Yupik group in question—Ungazighmiit (or “Chaplinskii”)—lives in southeastern Chukotka, and their traditional subsistence model includes collective sea mammal hunting (seals, walruses, whales), tundra hunting, and fishing. The group has lived in very close contact with the maritime part of the Chukchi group who, in turn, has maintained close relations and permanent exchange with Chukchi reindeer herders (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013). Although Yupik are not particularly known as reindeer herders, they have experimented with small-scale herds (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013, 146–147; Krupnik 2000, 114); furthermore, their folklore provides numerous stories about their nomadic neighbors.

The Yupik language clearly distinguishes between two kinds of deer: *quyngiq* is a domestic deer, while *tungtu* is a wild one. Other Indigenous Siberian languages also have this distinction; for example, the Chukchi language distinguishes between *qora-ŋə* “domestic reindeer”, *əlwəlu* “wild deer”, and *əchweteykən* “deer born by a domesticated doe and a wild bull” (Bogoras 1904, 74; Weinstein n.d.); the Evenki language also distinguishes the three types: *oron* “domestic reindeer”, *baiun* “wild deer”, and *boiunchikan* or *baiunchukan* “a reindeer that has a domestic mother and a wild father” (Davydov 2014c, 10).⁵ Sometimes domestic deer are referred to in Yupik as *quyngiipik* “real deer” (where *-pik* is a postbase meaning “real, authentic”, as in Yu-pik, *lit.* “real person” (see below for further discussion). Throughout the story, the herds are distinguished: the tamed wild deer are called *tungtu* and the domestic deer are called *quyngiq* until the end; when the two herds are merged, the storyteller evades the conflict by calling both *quyngiq* (*qerngugbulluuku quyngiq* “having merged the deer”).

The meaning “to tame, to domesticate” can be rendered in Yupik in several ways. First, there is the verbal stem *mapiira-* “to get/make accustomed”, cp. *mapiiraat tungtu* “they began to tame the wild deer”, or *mapiirastat* “they made [the deer] to become accustomed” (= tamed). In one case, the word *nuyaghisimakanga* “stopped being wild” is used. Morphologically, the form can be analyzed as follows:

nuyagh-is-ima-kaa-nga				
nuya(gh)	it	ima	ka	anga
wild	NEG	PAST	TRANS	3SG.AG+3SG.OB

“They made them not wild.”

In some cases, the meaning is rendered by the verbal stem *ulimaa-* “to make, to build”, as in *taana ulimanayagbghput* “we would tame (*lit.* ‘make’) this one”; cp. *ulimaaghtumarangat* “they tamed (*lit.* ‘made’) many”, or *ulimaaghsi quyngiq* “your tamed (*lit.* ‘made’) deer”; or *llangaqa ulimaagbmeng quyngilguk* “as if [they two] possess tamed (*lit.* ‘made’) deer”.

5. A similar situation is reported with Evens. Compare: “Though Eveny are perfectly aware that they [domestic and wild deer] belong to the same species, there is no single species name that encompasses *buyun* (wild reindeer) and *oron* (domesticated reindeer). The distinction is not morphological but behavioural, in terms of their different potential for sustaining a relationship with humans” (Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekseyev 2015, 17). Behavior is the key word here: most Indigenous herders would hardly agree with Ingold’s statement that “[t]he animals of fully fledged pastoralists such as the Chukchi, Koryak and tundra Nenets (Samoyed), though under the supervision of herdsman, are no more tame than the wild animals they replaced” (Ingold 1986, 10).

Another way of expressing the meaning is to form a verb with a verbalizing postbase *-nglla(gh)*- “to make N” added to a nominal stem, as in *qimughsi-ngllagh-umaaq* “he made sledge”; cp. *naten-ngam igleghusi-ngllagh-aqetsi?* “So how do you tame (*lit.* ‘make’) the draft deer?” from *igleghusiq* “draft deer”.

In one Russian-Yupik dictionary (Radunovich 2012), tamed wild deer is glossed as *quyngiingllaqaq*, *lit.* “made or constructed deer”.

In short, the Yupik language presents domestic deer, on one hand, as “made”, that is, “artificial, manufactured”, and on the other hand, as “real”, as opposed to wild deer, which is considered as (kind of) incomplete: not “real”, not touched by a skillful human hand. This apparent contradiction between “artificial, made” and “real” appears to be a contradiction only from a Western perspective that postulates a crisp distinction between the artificial and the natural. As for the Yupik *Weltanschauung* (world view), there is no inconsistency here: let me repeat that the word *Yupik* itself is a derivative of the base *yuk* “person” plus the postbase *-pik* “real, genuine”. Everything that belongs to the world of humans—including domesticated deer—is both real *and* manufactured, and wild deer belong to the realm of nature. To paraphrase the famous opposition put forth by Claude Lévi-Strauss, wild deer are both “raw *and* uncooked”.

How Are “Real” Deer “Made”?

So, how do people “make” “real” deer? The texts provide a detailed description of the process.

Both storytellers make it clear that the brothers knew very little about the deer: they were skillful hunters and had killed many wild deer, but they didn’t know anything about the domestic ones. The first thing they ask their mother is about the *size of the herd*: groups of wild deer pass by all the time, but the brothers wanted to know how big their father’s herd was so that they could have a herd of the same size. They wait until their mother says, looking at a wild herd: “Here! Your father’s herd was exactly the same size as this one!”

Then the brothers get to work. One brother blocks the way of the deer; the deer see him and turn around; the other blocks them from the other side; the deer start running around clockwise; the brothers run around them in circles (for a comparison, see Vaté 2007b, 281). They run all day long until the deer get tired and lie down to sleep, then the elder brother sends the younger one to get some rest and continues running around the sleeping herd. The next day the younger brother returns and they run together, then the older brother goes away to rest, and so they continue until they come to *control the movement of the deer*: the deer graze in a compact herd, not wandering freely wherever they wish; they become used to the sight of humans.

The next step is to learn to *move the herd* and teach the deer to move on command. The brothers therefore make the deer stand up and move to a new place where there is more grass and moss. The deer try to run away but the boys block their way again and bring them back into a compact herd. In this manner, they gain *control over the feeding process*: where and when the deer will eat.

Then comes the turn of the *sense of touch*. The brothers start walking through the herd, touching and stroking the deer so that they get used to a human presence. Yupik has a special stem, *pulaagh-*, which means “to squeeze, to push one’s way through the herd”, and when the boys teach the deer not to be afraid of *pulaagh-*, the storyteller uses the verb *mapiira-* “to get accustomed, to get tamed” for the first time in the story.

Next comes the *sense of smell*. The boys and their mother collect firewood, make several fires with a lot of smoke, and drive the deer into the smoke. The deer get scared and try to run away, but the boys chase them and drive them back into the smoke, closer to the tents—until the deer get used to the smoke and to the smells of human dwellings. The sense of smell is now fully controlled by the humans.

Fire and smoke play an important role in domestication. Virginie Vaté was told of a man who tamed wild reindeer by putting ash from his fire into the reindeer’s nose. And, she continues, when the herd comes back to the encampment after the summer transhumance, a fire is thrown toward the herd and arrows whose ends have been lit with the fire are shot in the same direction; these are meant to cleanse the herd of spirits “to reintegrate the reindeer under the protection of the hearth and to perpetuate reindeer domestication” (Vaté 2011, 151–152).⁶ Just like the story I discuss here, the ritual reported by Vaté turns at one point from a pragmatic action into a mythical one (in her terminology, from a technical to a symbolic domain); putting ashes into the deer’s nostrils can be interpreted as practical instruction (to help the deer get used to the smell of the human home), whereas shooting lit arrows appears to be a purely symbolic action (see below).

Two more things must be done before the wild deer begin to behave like domestic ones and before they can be regarded as tamed. First, the boys move the herd from one place to another until it is time for the deer to fawn (give birth); it is the humans who choose the time and place for calving,

6. On the role of fire in distinguishing the domestic space from the outlying world and in creating and preserving the *iarén* (domestic) space around the Chukchi camp, see Vaté (2007a; 226; 2011): *iarén* corresponds to the space under the influence of the hearth, something that protects humans after they return from the outer space (Vaté 2011, 141ff.). Human beings who stay far from domestic fire for too long can lose their human qualities. Human territory can then be defined as a space that is symbolically in interaction with the fire of the domestic hearth (ibid., 143).

thereby *controlling the birth*. And finally, the brothers start to snatch deer out of the herd and slaughter them right there; the other deer, paying no attention to this, continue to graze quietly, or lie and sleep. This is the final victory: the humans now have full *control over deer death*; they control not only the animals' movement and nutrition but also the beginning and end of their lives. The process of domestication is thus completed.

Let me emphasize that although the story was told by two Yupik Eskimo men in the Yupik Eskimo language, this is a story about reindeer herders. The herders are not depicted as an alien tribe—rather, the knowledge of their customs is intimate, and the attitude to them is that of sympathy. We know of course that the cultures of Yupik Eskimos and maritime Chukchi were almost identical (Bogoras 1902; Ivanov 1954, 407; Krupnik and Chlenov 2013); that said, it appears that there is a lot in common between the former and the culture of the reindeer Chukchi, at least by what is shown in the folklore. As Willem deReuse notes, many Yupik folklore stories are similar to Chukchi ones; this can mean that they were borrowed, although not necessarily (deReuse 2007, 202–203, 207). Georgii Menovshchikov wrote quite explicitly that the degree of contacts between reindeer herders and Yupik hunters resulted in a merging of folklore plots and motifs: “Chukchi and Yupik mythical tales [*skazki*]... are hard to differentiate as belonging to one group or the other” (Menovshchikov 1974, 37; my translation—NV).

Interestingly, there are, to my knowledge, no similar plots in Chukchi mythology. Bogoras (1910) published two versions of the same text (*The reindeer breeder and the Aiw'an*, pp. 46–51 and 162–165), yet there is no mention of taming wild deer. There is a text (*The polygamist*) about a man with two wives (pp. 169–170), however, later, the plot evolves differently.

There is a Chukchi incantation for taming wild deer recorded and published by Bogoras (1910, 128–129);⁷ this incantation is more or less a summary of the plot analyzed above; the plot “in a nutshell”:

When a wild reindeer-buck that has just shed his hair joins a domesticated herd, the owner says, “Let us try it and make of him a tame reindeer! Let him create offspring for us!” He goes to the herd and pronounces an incantation. He talks to the Being of the Zenith. “Listen to me, you there, above! I am in great need. This one wants to go away, and he is the first of his kind that I have seen here. Give me your wooden stake! I will stick it into his foot and *fasten him to the ground*; I will thrust it in between his antlers; I will pierce his lower jaw, and bring it down *to the level of the ground*. With what else will I *pin to the ground* this fleetfooted reindeer-buck? I will gather *boulders* from all

7. The same text is published in W. Bogoras (1907). *The Chukchi, Pt. 2, c. 497*.

sides, and pile them up between his antlers. How will he move his head? I will *wrap his ears* with sod. I will gather withered sedge-grass and *cover his nose* with it. Let *all bad odours* from every part of the earth enter into his nose! I make him into a fawn newly born. Oh Va'irgin! Do not despise my demand. Let me get possession of him! I will give you in exchange something equally worthy of desire." Then he spits, to fasten the incantation. After that he says, "Bring the herd to the house!" *The wild buck is very tame. They drive the herd windward, so that he will smell the odour of the house, and hear the noise of the people. But he is heavy, and less shy than before.* The end. [*italics added.*—NV]

In other words, to tame the wild deer, it must be immobilized, its hearing and sight must be blocked, it must be pulled down to the ground, that is, taken away from the heavenly world of the "Being of the Zenith" and brought into the human world. According to Bogoras (1910), wild deer belong to the "Being of the Zenith"; this is the first hint we have to interpret the final motif of both texts recorded by Rubtsova: the wild deer turn into cranes and fly away—apparently returning to their master.

It should be noted, finally, that the Chukchi language has a highly developed system of deer terminology—much richer of course than the Yupik system. If this story were told in Chukchi, we would probably have there not only *əlwelu* "wild deer" and *qoraŋə* "domestic deer", but also *əswetejkən* "reindeer born from a wild male and a domestic female", *notaqor* "domestic deer that grew wild, feral deer", and *akwəqor* "domesticated deer" (Weinstein n.d.; Zhukova and Kurebito 2004; cp. Vaté 2007b, 277).

Discussion

The story indicates that although wild deer are different, they can be domesticated if certain techniques are used. Several questions arise:

First, the description of taming does not appear to resemble the relations Yupik have with other animals, particularly game animals. Of course, Yupik hunters killed whales, walruses, or seals, but the killing was governed by a set of complicated rituals aimed at maintaining good relations with the animals and their spirit masters, so that the souls of the dead would return to their kin and tell them that the humans respected the game, obeyed the rules, and knew how to behave, and that other animals could come forth and *let themselves be caught* by members of this particular group, family, or clan (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997, 241ff.; for comparison, see the concept of "ideal hunt" in Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekseyev 2015).

At first glance, there is nothing of the kind in this story, no *letting to be tamed*: the taming process is described as brutal and violent, as the wild

deer are forced to become domestic through coercion. Fear is used as a tool; the deer are “dragged” into the human world by force. However, looking at the unexpected finale of the story, where the “tamed” deer suddenly turn into cranes and fly away, one is tempted to ask: were the deer really domesticated? Or, put differently, can taming be permanent? Can a living being cross the line between the human world and the rest and stay with humans for good? If not, perhaps the wild herd did not intend to stay with the humans from the start? Is it possible that this, after all, is a story about a conscious decision by the deer to become domesticated—as in the case of hunters who depend on the animals’ favorable response—yet “this response has to come entirely at the volition of the animal itself” (Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekseyev 2015, 15). Apparently, some of the motifs of the plot reflect “technical” aspects of reindeer breeding, while others do not. I will discuss them in consecutive order.

The “Technical” Aspects of the Story

The size of the herd must be taken into consideration. At first, the brothers did not know how big the herd should be and had to ask their mother. An optimal size for a reindeer herd probably exists⁸ (known to herders) and differs depending on the region and the climate conditions (Krupnik 1989; Takakura 2010, 35; Istomin and Dwyer 2010).⁹ Perhaps the reason is that a small herd is more difficult to handle than a large one is (Bogoras 1904, 82).

The sequence of events in the story follows one of the versions of the actual history of deer domestication in Northern Eurasia, as far as we know. According to Krupnik, for a long time, tundra dwellers hunted wild deer for meat and skins; domestic deer were rare and were only used as draft transport and possibly also for ritual purposes (Krupnik 1989, 153). The meat of wild deer was (and still is) considered to be more prestigious and better tasting, whereas domestic deer were slaughtered only on rare occasions. The nomads of the tundra began to slaughter domestic deer on a regular basis and used their meat and their skins; later, they added breeding reindeer to the practice of hunting wild deer, and after a period of time, the former psychological stereotypes and conceptions changed (ibid., 154–155).¹⁰

8. For example, the optimal size of a herd in Southern Yakutia is 500 deer; a bigger herd will trample down the moss and grass on the tundra, and starve (Davydov 2014a, 96).

In tundra herding, the size is always bigger and the herding techniques differ radically.

9. ‘Optimal’ may not be the best word to use here; the size of the herd differs depending on whether the explanation uses a human perspective (the number of animals that can be controlled by the herders) or an ecological perspective (how badly the pastures will be trampled), etc.

10. The eating of wild deer and the breeding of domestic reindeer continue to this day mainly in taiga reindeer herding, but also in the tundra (Ventsel 2006).

The advantages of having a domestic herd walk hand in hand with the drawbacks; this is also reflected in the story I analyze here. At one point, the younger brother becomes irritated, as the deer start calving, and the people have to stop and wait. It would be better, the younger one says, if we drew the sledge ourselves like we did before and hunted the wild deer for food; in this case, we would move faster. The older brother convinces him that it is better and safer to wait and then move with the herd. This dilemma is also well known and documented: speed of movement *vs.* guaranteed food. The hunters could be more mobile, but the herders rarely starved (for a comparison, see Burch 1972).

Domestic herd goes wild again. Leaving aside, for now, the miraculous *manner* of this departure, let me note that reindeer becoming feral again is a very common occurrence. It was so in the times of Bogoras, who described special techniques the Chukchi herders used to attract a wild bull to the herd while a few does were still rutting; such unions were considered as “blessings, obvious tokens that Providence looks favorably on the herd”. The herdsmen, “with special charms and incantations, strive to allure and to detain as long as possible the wild reindeer. After the crossing, the herdsmen try to kill the wild buck as speedily as they can” because they believed that if several wild bucks that “have crossed with the herd should make good their escape, they will induce the herd the next spring to return the visit, and will keep them afterward” (Bogoras 1904, 73–74). This behavior remains so today, as wild deer often drive away parts of domestic herds.¹¹

Let us now return to the *motif of control vs. partnership (symbiosis)* mentioned at the beginning of this article. The story I examine here seemingly demonstrates human control over the animals (for a comparison, see Davydov 2014a, 113; 2014b, 110); still, its unexpected finale leaves room for a different interpretation: that of “the intimacy of partnership that humans have with animals” (Stammler 2010). Is it possible, then, that human control over animals does not exclude the human-animal partnership—and the other way round?

It has been noticed that “[i]n indigenous herding systems, livestock are quite often let loose, with rare supervision and without food supplies, shelter, or fences. What kind of link then keeps together humans and animals in North Asian mobile herding systems?” (Stépanoff et al. 2017, 58). The answer to this very important question—from an Indigenous perspective—is apparently more complicated than the “animals’ disposition”, and the authors acknowledge this: “In their oral traditions, North Asian peoples do not represent animal husbandry as the result of a conquest that allowed humans to establish their domination over animals... On the contrary, myths describe

11. For a discussion on becoming tame and becoming feral as two sides of the same coin, see Beach and Stammler, 2006.

the domestication of animals as an effect of a divine decision or of a choice by the animals themselves to come and live with humans [...]. The ‘emic’ interpretations of herding peoples appear to contradict classic anthropological oppositions between wild animals as subjects and domestic animals as objects” (Stépanoff et al. 2017, 59, 60). Ten years earlier, Virginie Vaté came to a similar conclusion: she showed that the activities of Chukchi herders are governed by more than one logic, including productivity logic. For them, reindeer breeding “does not only mean having as many reindeer as possible, it also implies a special symbolic relationship to the animal without which, some believe, productivity will not be possible» (Vaté 2007b, 281; my translation.—NV).

This brings us to the last—and the most intriguing—aspect of the story.

The Symbolic Aspect of the Story

Vladimir Davydov recorded stories among Zabaikalskiie Evenki about attempts to tame the wild deer: If one starts very early, before the animal has turned one year old, this *can* be done, however it *should not* be done, because this can lead to the death of the person who tames the deer (Davydov 2014b, 369–370). We find similar motifs in Veronika Simonova’s writings about the same area in which she mentions a correspondence between the role of wild animals and spirits in the human world (Simonova 2018, 1); she also writes that keeping “the wild at home” is a magical act of maintaining contact with the world of the wild (ibid., 4).

In light of this, the plot in question can be read as a completely different story. The children and their mother not only managed to survive in the tundra without adult men or reindeer (this alone is proof of their exceptional supernatural strength and luck: let me mention that in Yupik oral tradition, orphans getting help from the spirits is a recurring motif). Not only did they tame the wild deer, bring the wild into the human world, and manage to escape the punishment for this “blasphemous” act, they were also able to use the power of the wild world to find their father and regain their domesticated herd. As soon as this was achieved and the wild deer were no longer needed, the “tamed” deer broke loose, turned into cranes and flew away, leaving the boys with the herd of “real” deer.

With this in mind, we may then ask, ultimately, who is controlling whom? Is this story a description of human power over nature, a proud laudation of Man as lord and master of Nature? This would probably be the way Europeans of the nineteenth century would have understood it. Or is it instead an illustration of the Indigenous attitude toward relations between human and non-human worlds? A story of unceasing dialogue of equals, where both parties acknowledge and respect the other’s rights and needs? Or perhaps both?

Conclusion

For the “Western” eye, the text in question clearly falls into two parts: the realistic one and the magical one. The first section (99.99% of the text) describes in great detail the process of domestication and the way people use reindeer, while the second (the last two lines) suddenly turns the entire story into a mythical tale. One may be tempted to interpret this as a mistake, a slip of the tongue, or a whim; an intentional extravagance by the storyteller. This interpretation, I believe, would be wrong. This is an integral, indivisible text, supported by the fact that this “strange” finale is repeated in both versions of the text. Interpreting the text as having two “distinct” parts would be too Eurocentric: it is only in our interpretation that the two parts—taming the deer and the deer turning into cranes—are inconsistent. From the emic perspective (that of the storyteller and the audience), the story is fully consistent and logical. Both parts peacefully coexist in the *Weltanschauung* of those who tell or listen to this story, which means that we must treat and interpret this plot as being integral and consistent.

It thus appears that the only possible interpretation is that this story confirms the claim that, from the emic perspective, human control over animals, however violent and brutal, can only be achieved if the animals (or better their spirits¹²) actually *concede* to this; in our case, only if the deer *allow themselves to be tamed*, and only for a short period of time. Moreover, even with their consent, the process remains precarious, as domestic reindeer are viewed as “companions” or “partners” of humans, while wild deer are considered as dangerous beasts (Vitebsky 2005). In the present case, humans can successfully negotiate with these dangerous wild deer, just like hunters can negotiate with wild animals (for a comparison of hunting and herding, see Willerslev, Vitebsky, and Alekseyev 2015).

Any contacts between humans and the non-human world, be it with spirits, animals, or inanimate objects in the environment, are always dangerous; the border between the two must be carefully guarded, and it is always risky to bring anything across this border—regardless if it be the newly born, the dead, or animals. Through the process of domestication, humans transfer (smuggle?) wild deer across this border and turn them into “the real deer”.

Taming wild deer is not only hard physical work, it is also a precarious activity; the risk is thus minimized if this “trespassing” is done by a shaman. The boys in the story apparently possess some shamanic power—as orphans in Yupik folklore often do—otherwise, they would not be able to survive on the tundra without reindeer and an adult male present. The boys somehow

12. Although this would be logical and expected, I have no evidence, linguistic or otherwise, as to whether Yupik (or Chukchi) view the “spirits” of wild and domestic deer as similar or different.

managed to negotiate the consent of the wild deer (and their master, “The Being of the Zenith”, as Bogoras translated this Chukchi term) to temporarily become domestic.

This looks to me like more than a simple symbiosis of humans and animals from which both sides benefit: humans get food and clothes, reindeer get protection from predators and insects (Beach and Stammler 2006, 10; Takakura 2010, 36). I see this more as a treaty concluded quite voluntary between humans and animals in order to restore the balance of the outer world disrupted by a man who abandoned his wife and children and thus doomed them to death. Temporary control of humans over animals based on fear and force is part of the treaty.

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