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Size matters! The scalability of modern hunter-gatherer animism☆

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ABSTRACT

Cultural anthropology has for decades been committed to the tenet that all cultures deserve equal scholarly consideration, regardless of population or community size. In this article, I argue that the minuscule size of hunter-gatherer communities, as well as how they scale and imagine their worlds, are critical factors that should not be glossed over in their study. To illustrate my point, I examine the distortive effect of scale-blind research on a long-studied topic currently drawing renewed interest: indigenous animism. I demonstrate how uncritical use of key terms in analyzing animism, without regard for scale, inadvertently leads to serious disfiguring of hunter-gatherer worlds. I then factor scale into reanalysis of a South Indian forager community known as Nayaka that I started studying in the late 1970s. I argue that the Nayaka animistic cosmos is best understood in terms of a plurispecies community of local beings who are present in each other's lives, rather than in terms of human and nonhuman "persons" and "societies."

Modern hunter-gatherer group size is very small, as the symposium *Man the Hunter* established when it launched comparative research of such peoples in the 1960s. The demographic figures reported at that symposium led to the conclusion that modern hunting-gathering peoples commonly "live in small-scale societies in which the total population numbers a thousand persons or less"[1] and that local groups (often called "bands") comprise "twenty-five to fifty persons" (Lee and DeVore, 1968: 10–11). Symposium participants dubbed these figures "the magic numbers" of hunter-gatherer demography (Lee and DeVore, 1968). Subsequent studies endorsed the general order of size; for example, cross-culturally, average local group size was set by one authority at 28.4 persons (Kelly, 1995: 211) and, more recently, by other researchers at 28.2 adults (Hill et al., 2011). Generally, "small-scale societies," hunter-gatherer-cultivator as well as hunter-gatherer, have been estimated to comprise "a few hundred to a few thousand inhabitants."[2]

Living as many of us do in large-scale nation-societies with millions of members, we find it hard to imagine what it means to live in such minuscule societies, indeed, even to fully grasp their tininess. Hunter-gatherer local groups are so small that one could almost count each group's members on a child's wooden abacus, moving beads from one side to the other; they are fewer in number than the students enrolled in some university classes; some hunter-gatherer societies could fit into a large apartment complex with room to spare. The evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar (1993) argued that the human brain's neocortical processing capacity sets at 150 people the maximum size of a group within which each person can vividly know every other person and how all are related to one another. This argument (even if the figure itself is contested) resonates with our everyday experience and knowledge.

Yet the phenomenological and cultural consequences of human life in minuscule societies have drawn little attention in contemporary cultural anthropology and, consequently, in other disciplines that draw on its ethnographic products. Cultural anthropologists (unlike their colleagues in other anthropological subfields) have not substantially factored population size into their analyses of these peoples' cultures and lifeways. Nor have they addressed actors' scaling of their worlds, an activity that orients their actions and frames their understanding and making of those worlds – what I gloss as their "horizons of practice and imagination." This omission has been perpetuated for decades by what I call

☆ Delightful conversations over the years with my dear friend Mina Weinstein-Evron assisted me in developing some of the ideas I present in this article. I thank the organizers of this festschrift for inviting me, a cultural anthropologist, to join them in honoring her, and I am grateful to an anonymous reader for pressing me to substantially revise parts of my discussion to better reach this journal's readership. Whether I have succeeded in that effort remains to be seen.

[1] Estimating population size for such societies is logistically challenging, in some cases politically charged, and often conceptually murky. Their order of size, however, is very small compared with that of modern nation-societies.

[2] Smith and Wishnie 2000: 493, n. 1, citing Bodley 1996: 12; cf. Spielmann 2002: 195.

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a "scale-blind" disciplinary ethos (Bird-David, 2017a, 2017b). By *blind* I do not mean to imply disability or impairment, but, resonating with how the term is used in experimental scientific discourses, I refer to a method, a paradigm, a conventional way of doing anthropology (hereafter my use of this term refers specifically to cultural anthropology unless otherwise specified).

Anthropology's scale-blind approach in the study of hunter-gatherer (and hunter-gatherer-cultivator) societies has been guided by the democratic idea that all cultures are of equal scholarly significance, population size making no difference to their study. However laudable the intentions motivating scale-blind analysis, I argue (Bird-David, 2017a, 2017b) that such analysis is in fact often biased toward the large-scale and that it distorts understanding of tiny-scale hunter-gatherer worlds, lifeways, and cultures. Such analysis also skews understanding of the ideas of community and society that had dominated indigenous peoples' lives until postcolonial times, when they were made citizens of nation-states. Scale-sensitive ethnography and comparison, by paying attention to what a miniscale mode of living affords and limits, can shed new light on these social ontologies, these "indigenous ideas."

My scale-sensitive approach to hunter-gatherers is inspired by a nascent "scalar turn" in anthropology more generally, a "turn" consistent with growing attention to scale/ing in the broader social sciences (especially social geography and social linguistics).[3] Scale/ing is increasingly being recognized as a subject of analysis, and some scholars see it as a universal human activity. Bruno Latour has argued that all actors engage in "*scaling*, *spacing*, and *contextualizing* each other" and, therefore, that social analysis should resist the urge to "settle scale in advance" (2005: 183, 220). Actors should not be denied, he wrote, "one of their most important privileges," namely, that they are the ones "defining relative scale" (2005: 84). To date, anthropologists have focused, for the most part, on large-scale/ing as a frame of thought and a resource for seeing and making the world (e.g., Scott, 1998; Strathern, 1992, 1995), as a perspective that involves particular senses of plurality, complexity, and diversity (e.g., Strathern, 1991) and that undermines local diversity (Tsing, 2005). There is much, I maintain, to be gained from studying indigenous communities living in small groups through an analogous approach focused on the tiny-scale and tiny-scaling. We can learn much from examining their scaling projects and achievements. We can better understand their worlds by asking how they culturally downscale their communities and cosmos and with what gains. Modern hunter-gatherer communities cannot in any simple way inform analysis of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, but to the extent that their study can help in the interpretation of archaeological remains, scale-sensitive studies can do so much better than scale-blinded ones.

In this article, I test this broad approach by focusing on hunter-gatherers' animistic ideas and practices, and I point to what anthropologists may have missed by addressing them from a scale-blind perspective. I frame my discussion by reference to four terms that are key to contemporary thought in this field: *animism*, *nonhuman persons*, *ontology*, and *nonhuman societies and natures*. The meanings of these terms in cultural anthropology unfold through the contexts, both ethnographic and theoretical, in which they are used, and so, by way of introducing them to a more general readership, in the first part of this article I briefly sketch their landmark uses in the discipline. In the second part of the article, I highlight scalar oversights in previous theorizations of animism, and in the third I introduce my ethnographic case through a scale-sensitive examination of the animistic world of a South Indian gatherer-hunter community known to outsiders as Nayaka. In the fourth section, I develop a new conceptual term to aid in analysis of hunter-gatherer animism: *pluripresent world*. I argue that this concept is key to understanding the Nayaka animistic cosmos and that it has the potential to greatly expand our understanding of indigenous cosmologies more generally.

1. Framing concepts

The following review proceeds chronologically and is intended to generally familiarize readers with the evolution of anthropological thought vis-à-vis animistic societies.

Animism: Edward Tylor introduced this concept into anthropology in the 19th century in his work Primitive Culture (1958 [1871]). Recent decades have seen much renewed interest in it (e.g., see Bird-David, 1999; Descola, 2013 [2005]); Harvey, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1998, 2012). By the mid-twentieth century, it had traveled to fields such as religion and developmental psychology and had also made its way into general discourse. English dictionary definitions tend to perpetuate its mid- to late 19th-century meanings (see more in Bird-David, 1999) and so obscure how anthropologists have recently reconceptualized it.

Anthropological understandings of animism have radically changed since Tylor coined the term. For Tylor, *animism* glossed the belief of "primitive peoples" (as they were called in his day) that natural elements have souls, a belief he regarded as misguided, illusionary, and childish. He theorized that, having seen dead relatives in their dreams, they concluded that each person has a ghost soul that outlasts the body, and, moreover, that they ascribed the same kind of soul to nonhuman beings and inanimate things. Tylor likened their ideas to those of Western children, in line with the contemporaneous evolutionary reading of exotic faraway primitives as vestiges of the "childhood of man."[4] Scholars have attempted since Tylor's time to rehabilitate this image, to start with, by challenging the claim that its basis is illusionary. Emile Durkheim (1960 [1914]), for instance, suggested that conceiving persons to be composites of bodies and souls is not delusional. Rather, this view reflects the universal sense that people have of their dual constitution, that is, their experience of individual sensations and their membership in society. Lévi-Strauss (1962, 1966) proposed that "primitive" people did not misunderstand the distinction between humans and other beings. Rather, he argued, they symbolically used the natural world of discrete objects as a good analogical resource for thinking about social divisions in their own societies.

By the end of the 20th century, the approach to indigenous animistic systems had changed to the point that some scholars were arguing (e.g., Ingold, 2000) that these systems encode environmental insights, constituting registers that challenge – and, in the view of some (e.g., Viveiros de Castro, 2012), subverting – the modern Western binary oppositions between nature and society and between humans and nonhumans. Indigenous registers were seriously examined by those developing alternative ecological theories (e.g., Ingold, 2000), and some scholars, Amazonian specialists in particular, suggested that myths and ritual express credible ways of figuring the world (e.g., Viveiros de Castro, 1998;

[3] Over the past two decades, social geographers have intensively engaged with issues of scale (e.g., Howitt, 2002; Jones, 1998; Masuda and Crooks, 2007). Anthropologists have done so more sporadically (e.g., see Berreman, 1987; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Latour, 2005, esp. 183–185; Strathern, 1991, 1995, Xiang, 2013). Carr and Michael Lempert (2016) provide a useful overview of emergent anthropological work on scale in their introduction to a new collection of linguistic studies.

[4] I take this term from Wengrow and Graeber (2015).