

The Tao of Multispecies Ethnography

Scott Simon, Ph.D.

Professor, School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies, U Ottawa, Canada

and

Visiting Scholar, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan

ssimon@uottawa.ca

More-than-Human Worlds: A NatureCulture Blog Series

It has been eight years since “multispecies ethnography” made its grand splash into anthropology at the New Orleans meeting of the American Anthropology Association and simultaneous special issue of *Cultural Anthropology* (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Sitting in the audience, I found this new genre liberating, especially since I had just come back from fieldwork in Taiwan where indigenous Truku hunters had been telling me that their lifeworlds are inhabited not only by humans, but also by dogs (Simon 2015a), muntjacs, boars, flying squirrels and birds. Multispecies ethnography held out the promise of a literary genre that would allow me to share their lifeworlds with an international audience.

Writing multispecies ethnography turned out to be a challenge¹. First of all, the founders of multispecies ethnography are inspired by Western philosophers. Yet, my background is in sinology, which means that I am far more comfortable with Chinese classics than with Western philosophy. And, because I have learned so much from indigenous knowledge holders in both Taiwan and Canada, I am very aware that wrapping up our stories in European philosophy creates impressions of colonial exploitation (Todd 2016). I acknowledge that I have been inspired by Algonquin elders William Commanda and Dominique Rankin, who have taught me that it is important to learn from animals. I am thankful for that.

Most important to me is that multispecies ethnography is consistent with the lifeworlds of the people I meet in Taiwan. I thus give two examples, one Chinese and one Truku. I use the Chinese example because, when I encountered Taiwanese friends and told them about multispecies ethnography, several of them immediately cited the following story about a fish. They kindly made a pointed critique of our project, saying that we are not really making anything new. Long before the emergence even of anthropology, the question of animal agency was addressed by Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi (c. 4th century BCE). Since I spend more of my life speaking Chinese than English, I instinctively jumped right into the original Chinese version. The following is my translation.



Zhuangzi and Huizi were leisurely walking on the embankment by the Hao River (游於濠梁之上). Zhuangzi said, “The fish (儵魚) are leisurely swimming around (出游從容). This is the joy of fish!” Huizi said, “You are not a fish. From whence do you know the fish are happy?” Zhuangzi replied, “You are not me. How do you know that I don’t know the joy of fish?” Huizi said, “I am not you, so therefore I do not know what you know. By the same logic, you are not a fish and therefore you do not know the joy of fish.” Zhuangzi replied, “Let’s go back to the beginning. You asked me ‘From whence do you know the joy of fish?’ You knew that I knew when you asked. I know it from the Hao River.”²



This story is difficult to understand even for readers of modern Chinese, let alone in translation, but I think it is relevant to multispecies ethnography. The key to understanding is *an* (安), as in “子非魚，安知魚之樂？ (How [from whence] do you know the fish are happy?).” In classical Chinese, *an* (安) can mean “how,” but also “where.” Huizi is trying to understand how Zhuangzi knows how fish feel. Zhuangzi brings him back to the original experience, to their place on the Hao River. For Zhuangzi, it is not a question of “how” he knows, but “where.” His claim to knowledge rests on being there and on being attentive to non-human animals in the same place. The verb was well chosen. The author used *you* (游), as in the modern compound *liyóu* (旅游) for “travel,” to describe the actions of both philosophers and fish. This has the connotation that both Zhuangzi and the fish are moving leisurely and happily. Sharing the same actions, Zhuangzi and the fish share the same state of mind, which arises from shared

experience.

Multi-species ethnography encourages us to pay attention to the presence and lives of non-human animals and other kinds of lives. This means that the kind of fish is also important, since each fish has different habitats, lifestyles, and physical forms that influence how humans encounter them. But, it was not easy for me to find out what kind of fish this was. Most translations of Zhuangzi merely say “fish” or “minnow,” but the original text specifies the *tiaoyu* (儵魚). Starting with other Chinese classics, I found that this fish was defined in the ancient *Shanhai Jing* (Classic of Mountains and Oceans) as an inland (freshwater) fish that can be eaten. This didn’t tell me much at all, so I turned to the Sinological literature for help.



Figure 1: Maybe this is the kind of fish Zhuangzi was writing about.
Source: National Palace Museum, Taipei
(<http://catalog.digitalarchives.tw/item/00/60/72/34.html>)

Sinologists have already tried to solve this riddle. James Legge translated *tiaoyu* as “thryssa,” an anchovy. Yet, the search for a one-to-one correspondence between a classical Chinese character and a modern ichthyological taxon is difficult. Sinologist Michael Carr explored disagreements about the *tiao* identity, finally narrowing it down

by likely habitats to the hemiculter, dace, and chub fishes (Carr 1993: 42). He prefers the dace, also known as dart, because the name implies that the fish is “darting” around (Carr 1993: 47). The important thing is that this lively and gregarious silvery fish prefers clear streams with gravelly bottoms, playing near the surface in the summer sunshine. This is exactly the kind of fish that humans would notice while walking past a stream. Zhuangzi would have been unlikely to speculate about the joy of a bottom-feeding sturgeon. Zhuangzi has thus taught me that the characteristics of the animals themselves contribute to how they enter into multi-species relationships.



On the other side of the deep and fish-filled Taiwan Straits, I research human-animal relations with the indigenous Truku people. They speak an Austronesian language unrelated to Chinese, but coincidentally the phoneme “-an” is also related to place in their language. In Truku, -an is a locative suffix. Attached to a verb, it means either the physical place where something happened or the state of accomplishment of a verb. With the addition of the nominalizing prefix “kn-“, the verb *k’la* is transformed into *knklaan*, meaning the state of knowing, knowledge, or “science.” Again, knowing is a matter of being there.

The Truku know a lot about animals. They raise dogs, pigs, and chickens. They hunt in the forests, mostly for hooved animals like wild boars, muntjacs, sambar deer, and serows, but also for flying squirrels. In 2012 and 2013, I conducted six months of field research in two Truku-speaking communities on ethno-ornithology. I found that the Truku have a rich folklore about birds, including legends about humans transforming into birds and owls that predict the sex of unborn children. They say that some birds should not be eaten because they have souls. Souled birds include raptors, owls, corvids, and *sisil* (Simon 2015b).

The *sisil* is important in Truku ornithology. Colonial ethnographies from the Japanese period (1895-1945) and contemporary informants agree that the *sisil* is an oracle bird that predicts the success or failure of hunting expeditions. Nearly everyone translates *sisil* as *liiyan huamei* (繡眼畫眉), which corresponds to *Alcippe morrisonia* or Grey-cheeked Fulvetta. Some Truku, however, say it might be another bird or even birds. They refer to the “*sisil* and friends of the *sisil*.”

Although the Truku say the sisil conveys messages from the ancestors to the living, most people I asked said they are unable to explain how this is done. There is great idiosyncrasy in how people interpret the bird's behaviour. Most people say it is good luck if the sisil appears on the right side of a path through a mountain forest; but others prefer it to appear on the left. Nearly everyone says that a bird making distressed calls while flying back and forth in front of a person is a malefic omen. Maybe the confusion arises from using Huizi's logic to ask "how" we know what the sisil means. It might be better to follow Zhuangzi's insight about the importance of "where."

Truku knowledge holder Yaya Howat, a highly respected elder in her community likewise told me, "If you want to understand the sisil, you have to spend time with the sisil." I hence spent two weeks watching the sisil as they showed up in her fruit trees every afternoon. This made me realize that I may wish to consult ornithological descriptions of the bird in addition to talking about it with the Truku and watching it myself (Simon 2018).

Just as the dace fish appears in the right place for philosophers, the sisil arrives in the right place for hunters. A Truku hunter gave me a long explanation about why the sisil points to the presence of game. He said that it is attracted by certain fruits. The birds and other arboreal animals eat the same fruits. They drop some on the ground, which attract wild boars and muntjacs. This rather functional explanation is corroborated by descriptions made by ornithologists, who call it the Grey-cheeked Fulvetta. The Fulvetta is dominant up to 2800 meters in elevation, thus overlapping with Truku territory. During its non-reproductive season from September to February, it seeks food in flocks. This timing corresponds with the Truku preferred hunting season from November to February. Just as evoked by the expression "sisil and friends," the Fulvetta arrives as the nuclear species in mixed-species flocks that attract up to 32 kinds of birds. Its cry is distinctive, strong and repetitive, which makes it easy for other birds—and humans—to follow. The Fulvetta is useful to other birds because it protects them from predation. Seeing a raptor in the sky, it cries out and dives into the bushes. Viewing a mammal in the undergrowth, it cries out and flies through the forest. The other birds are warned and take cover (Hsieh and Chen 2011).

So, if we ask "from whence" Truku hunters interpret the message of the sisil, the answer is that they know it on the hunting trail. Perhaps skillful hunters put together such information only at a subconscious level, but it becomes what Gregory Bateson called

“binocular vision” when two creatures successfully think together (Bateson 1979 : 133). A bird flying into the bushes can be ignored, since it is evading raptors that are of little interest to hunters. A bird flying across the path may be fleeing a mammal, but probably down a steep ravine and thus inaccessible to the hunters. Only a straight flight path on the left or the right of the hunter means that it is fleeing a mammal that is on the same hunting trail. The former behaviours only get reinterpreted as bad omens when no prey is found; and the latter signs as omens of hunting success when prey is caught. The birds are just being themselves, but the humans have learned to intuit what that means.

I was very happy in December 2017, when Loking Yudaw and I went hiking and were able to photograph a bird he called sisil. It may or may not correspond with the Fulvetta, but that is not important. After all, the sisil comes with friends and all are collectively called sisil by most Truku people. Here is my photo.



Figure 2: Sisil, Nenggao Historic Trail, Nantou (photo by the author)



Bringing together different perspectives is at the heart of multispecies ethnography, but this approach is not new to indigenous people. Indigenous people are already talking to ornithologists. I am personally inspired by the collaboration between biologists and indigenous people that I encountered once while taking Truku people to visit the Mi'kmaq community of Eskasoni in Nova Scotia. There, Elder Albert Marshall, who collaborates closely with biologist Cheryl Bartlett, teaches about the importance of Etuaptmumk, or “two-eyed seeing” (Marshall 2017). His idea is that indigenous and western ways of knowing can be combined to create new insights. This is akin to Bateson’s “binocular vision” about how even people of two different species can see and learn together. Maybe we can move beyond two-eyed seeing and develop multiple eyes like that of flies by also adding the knowledge of Chinese philosophers and the perspectives of the animals themselves. After all the elders teach us that, in a very real way, all of these people, including animal people, are related. Acknowledging that changes everything.

Notes

¹ I am now in the first year of a 5-year project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, entitled “Austronesian Worlds: Human-Animal Entanglements in the Pacific Anthropocene.”

² This is an extract from “The Floods of Autumn,” part of the Outer Chapters of Zhuangzi. It can be found online, with an English translation by James Legge here: <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/floods-of-autumn> (last accessed on October 17, 2017).

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