

## THE PIGS THAT THEREFORE I AM

Jon Henrik Remme. (2014). *Pigs and Persons in the Philippines: Human-Animal Entanglements in Ifugao Rituals*. Lexington Books

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### The “animal turn” in the human mind

Among a wide array of ‘Human-Animal studies’, Jon Henrik Remme’s ethnographic study of Batad culture in Ifugao entitled *Pigs and Persons in the Philippines: Human-Animal Entanglements in Ifugao Rituals* (2014) helps to understand the importance of pigs in other peoples’ lives (and allows me to have a much deeper introspection of their significance in my own life). I approached it with a framework of alternative world seeing, looking at history as a *shared* story being told not only by humans, but also by the participation of other creatures as well.

The “animal turn” is a term used by Vandersommers (2016) to refer to the changing landscape of the academe where animals started to migrate from a distant imagined wild where they were considered silent, to a more significant role in the shaping of our *shared* history. Espoused by Aristotle, and reaching its peak at the advent of Descartes, animals were constructed as devoid of emotions—*automata*, to use a Cartesian term (DeMello 2012). Furthermore, the development of structuralism, as forwarded by Claude-Levi Strauss, created a wedge between the cultural and domestic human, *us*, and *them*, the Other natural and wild animal.

As theoretical thinking matured, the emergence of ‘post-humanisms’ under the banner of Philippe Descola’s “Ontological Spin” (Bond & Bessire 2014) ushered in the dissolution of the boundaries erected by Western thought that separated humans and animals. From being merely passive objects of study, *non-human animals* became recognized as subjects and fellow actors participating in the telling of the story of the continuously evolving network of society. Animals are no longer just “good to think with” as Claude Levi-Strauss proclaimed in his *Totemism* (1962), they are now also good to feel and *become* with (Haraway 2003).

Following this argument, *Pigs and Persons* then urges its readers to immerse themselves in the complex and dynamic relationship existing between the humans in Batad, Ifugao, and their significant companion animal, the pigs. The “entanglements” depict the compact relationship between these two actors. To be entangled is to have the formerly *distinct* essences of beings muddled up into one complex *cat’s cradle*, where the stories of humans are deeply tied to that of pigs.

### **Pigs and persons in Batad, Ifugao**

Remme’s ethnographic study on the material-semioticity of pigs circumscribed in the societal network of Batad, Ifugao bypasses the leaky boundary between humans and non-human animals. Although weighed down at first by several grammatical inconsistencies and typographical errors, the book slowly recovers momentum until eventually, it finds the proper line of flight (like a carrier pigeon), to deliver to its readers its message and advocacy, which is: the importance of reconsidering the significant role of animals in the shaping of the mind, and the telling of our shared history.

Remme seeks to show the active role of pigs in the emergence of persons in Batad by looking at how pigs are utilized through processes and relations of sharing and exchanging in Ifugao rituals. Remme does this by *imploding* the kinship systems existing in Batad, to uncover a network of actors who are actively involved in a symbiosis to produce that very system. ‘Implosion’ is a methodological concept developed by Donna Haraway that advocates the dissection of a specific concept by cracking open its surface so one may immerse oneself into its historical, biological, and cultural tissues which are collectively tied into an entanglement (Dumit 2014). This entanglement of tissues makes up threads that lead to many ontological routes, many possibilities of being and becoming.

That there is a plentitude of terms people in Batad employ in verbal exchanges to refer to pigs proves the significant role of the animal in their culture, especially if one relies on Boas’ linguistic theory of cultural emphasis.<sup>1</sup> In Batad, for instance, there are several terms for the specific cuts and parts of *wānah* or pig meat (pp.34-37), terms for the material culture involving *tubli*’ or bamboo sticks in rituals involving pigs (p.33), and even

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<sup>1</sup> “There are more separate terms, more synonyms and more fine distinctions made in reference to features of environment or culture with which the speakers are the most concerned” (Castro 2015, citing Franz Boas).

terms for various types of pigs in relation to their gender and suckling (p.102), all documented by Remme.

From painting a comprehensive ethnographic picture of the rituals and religious practices in Batad, Remme catapults his discussion towards an analysis of the role of pigs in the making and unmaking of persons in the village.

Rituals in Batad are arranged and sponsored by the people themselves, each motivated by various situations such as the death or sickness of a person, or more often, of personal interest, specifically acquisition of prestige. The presence of pigs precede the performance of a ritual; there are no rituals when the sponsor cannot afford pigs.

In chapter four, entitled “Pigs and Social Differentiation”, Remme recounts one of his informant’s endeavors to garner prestige in the community. He fails to discuss the importance of garnering such prestige among the Batad, but one can see clearly that its elemental use is for the construction of social hierarchies. Aside from the ownership of a number of terraces, the ownership of novelty items such as *tibung* or rice wine jars and *gangha* or *gongs* contribute to the accumulation of prestige among the people in community. However, these novelty items need to be publicly displayed through rituals in order to activate their intrinsic prestige generating quality. A sponsor therefore needs to purchase pigs, whose *raison d’être* in the occasion is to sanctify the novelty items (especially if they were purchased), and, which is more important, to be able to show off those novelty items (in the ritual).

### **Pigs and the de/construction of Persons**

Remme’s study reveals that pigs act as the *axle* through which the *wheel* of culture continuously rotates clockwise and forward towards the direction of *making*, such that persons and relations emerge. Moreover, the wheel could turn in reverse and effectively *unmake* the actors and kinship emerging from the ritual.

For instance, in the second chapter, Remme argues that the presence of *wānah* (pig meat) in rituals, and its consequent distribution among the participants, entails a substantial and an insubstantial outcome. The *sharing* of meat among the sponsor’s consanguines and neighbors is *substantial* for it manifests, or (literally) *incarnates* the shared consanguinity of the sponsor with his close-relatives. The *wānah* concretizes the consummation and the

re-enactment of the existing relation. The continuous exchange of meat correlatively inaugurates an insubstantial relation, a more political concern, between the sponsor and the people who receive a portion of the *wānah*. This insubstantial relation is evident when the person receiving the meat is not a direct relative of the sponsor. In Maussian sense, the receiver is expected to give in return for *the gift*. The level of reciprocation entails fabrication of a complex social dynamic— if the return gift is more (meat), then she shows power and gratitude, if less, the reciprocating party is relegated to beneath the social rank of the primary giver, and with failure to reciprocate, kinship ties are unmade and cut off.

### **Pigs, between two worlds**

Later on in Chapter Three entitled “Pigs and Human-Bā’i Relation”, Remme goes on to discuss the role of pigs in rituals involving the spiritual beings called *bā’i*. Remme’s inclusion of this chapter ironically self-critiques the limits of his theoretical framework by including not just *the non-human animals* in his project, but also, in his own terms, the ethereal *other-than human* beings. Ghosts and divine spirits play a role in the telling of history too. Apart from incarnating the precarious relationship between the humans and the *bā’i*, pigs also act as a fulcrum through which the balance between the earthly and spiritual planes is maintained.

Citing H. Otley Beyer (1913), Remme recounts a Batad myth explaining that humans own the domestic animals in the earthly plane, while the wild animals are owned by the *bā’i*: One time the spirits demanded from a family a sacrifice. They sacrificed wild animals, particularly a large snake but the *bā’i* were not appeased. The family then sacrificed one of their family members to satisfy the spirits, which they took gladly. Later, the spirits reminded them to abstain from sacrificing humans, and offer instead domestic animals, particularly pigs, for their essentially being owned by humans, thereby being from the very same plane, makes pigs proper substitutes to humans.

In this account, the pigs could be regarded not just as co-existing with humans, but also as constitutive of them—humans *are* the pigs they own. By giving away pigs in rituals, humans are giving a part of themselves. They are entangled into one being. This short-circuits the conspicuous *hamartia* or fatal flaw of Remme’s research where a superficial understanding of the relationship between pigs and the Batad could lead one to think that the animals are merely objects and tools in the practice of Batad ritual.

However it would have been helpful if Remme had provided a detailed ethnographic discussion of the daily life of pigs living side by side with their human companion or care taker, prior to their involvement in rituals. Do the Batad people give names to the pigs they take care of? How do pigs transform symbolically from companion animals to edible meat? This could have materialized and solidified the rather abstract relation existing between the two actors. In this regard, it would challenge Western thinking to inquire if it is proper to subject Ifugao culture into a binary opposition between humans and animals when clearly they are entangled into an already multiversalist environment.

By taking seriously the myths and beliefs in Batad, together with the active involvement of pigs in such customs, Remme's project of *metaplasm*— a revisionary stance of seeing the world beyond the dogmatic lens of biological determinism and social construction “a remodeling of the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (Haraway 2003:20) where both nature and culture are collapsed, or more accurately, entangled into one—allows for the emergence of new ontologies toward the transformation of persons and society.

Human hands and pig hooves clasped together may not be the perfect fit, but Remme's book shows the possibility of being able to tell a story beyond the grand narrative of the Anthropocene where people are the primary actors of evolutionary history.

### **Singing our shared history, a personal postscript**

Like the people in Batad, the spirits of the pigs from my childhood are part of the making of my own bloody history. Their bloodcurdling screams as they were forced to come out of their pens from behind our house typically roused a still half-asleep morning. They were led to the *kolong-kolong* waiting in our front yard which was there to transport them to their death at the Plaridel slaughterhouse. Looking out from the window, my childhood eyes watched in horror as I knew their impending doom. But growing up as a son of meat vendors, my parents taught me to distance myself from the animal that I was eating, the animal that kept our family financially stable. There came a time when I no longer questioned the ethics of it at all.

Pigs are the animals that therefore I am. I inherit from them their voice. In my human capacity to sing on behalf of our community, there rises an occasional aberration in the scale, a sudden high-pitched punctuation, a sudden “hoinking!”

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