

‘An anthropological concept of the concept’: reversibility among the Siberian Yukaghirs

ALBERTO CORSÍN JIMÉNEZ *University of Manchester*
RANE WILLERSLEV *University of Aarhus**

This article attempts to sketch a new anthropological epistemology. It does so by revisiting the work that concepts do in economic models, and by suggesting an alternative ‘anthropological concept of the concept’ for the economy. The article looks to how concepts create their own limits of meaning and uses the very idea of limit to rethink how conceptual thought out-grows and transforms itself. We develop our epistemology by looking at the socio-economic practices and institutions of the Yukaghirs, a small group of indigenous hunters, living along the Kolyma River in northeastern Siberia. The Yukaghirs’ moment of creative possibilities is given through the reversibility of every one of their economic practices, informed by the work of a shadow force (*ayibii*) that aims for the limit. We gain insights from this notion of reversibility to rethink the purchase of the ‘economic’ in our contemporary world, questioning the validity of such ‘conceptual’ descriptions as virtualism or the knowledge economy.

[W]hy should concepts not be ... open to manipulation? Why should it not be a part of their use that the ambiguity of words, the logically illicit transformation of one concept into another (like a spirit appearing in diverse forms) is exploited to the full by the users of what seems to be ‘one’ concept?

Gellner 2003: 39

Published in 1962, Ernest Gellner’s famous ‘Concepts and society’ essay unpacked the many refractions and epistemological distances separating ‘our’ concepts from ‘theirs’ (the people we study) (Gellner 2003). In the heyday of what he called ‘moderate functionalism’ (Gellner 2003: 21), Gellner challenged the hermeneutic generosity of anthropologists, who, in their rush for making sense of all indigenous institutions and activities, quickly resorted to the idea of a social whole. This is the idea that if an institution seems incoherent or illogical it is only because we have not made full sense of the social context to which it belongs. Gellner thought this view wrong because it stabilized the anthropological notion of a ‘concept’: it disregarded those social practices that were not seen as immediately and directly contributing to social stability. This was a ‘concept’ with no room for ambiguity or discrepancy. Instead, Gellner argued, the challenge for anthropology is to come up with concepts that are not ‘one’ with society,

*These authors contributed equally to the work.

or that are not necessary correlates of a social whole: concepts that can cross boundaries, that can move and change shapes between and across contexts. What would our concepts look like if they were to (say) move or transform like spirits? And what use would this concept-spirit, or concept-transformation, have for anthropological theory at large?

This article builds on Gellner's original critique of our tradition of conceptual thought and argues for a view of concepts that stresses not only their capacity for providing stable meanings but also their ability to out-place themselves too, to unsettle their own reificatory tendencies. We build our case for a new anthropological epistemology through a review of the work that concepts do in economic models. Our theory develops from an attempt at finding a conceptual framework with which to describe the socio-economic practices and institutions of the Yukaghirs, a small group of indigenous hunters living in northeastern Siberia.

Central to the way the Yukaghirs think of hunting is the notion that all physical entities have a second modality of being, or a 'hidden side', which they call *ayibii*, meaning 'shadow' in their native language. The ontology of the *ayibii* is complex. As the name 'shadow' suggests, the *ayibii* refers to the idea of a 'doppelgänger' or 'twin' that appears simultaneously with the visually perceived object but in the shape of its wraith. The *ayibii* inhabits the borderline of the visible world. They are visible yet without material presence, objectual but not objectified. Although they resemble the things that cast them, *ayibiis* are at the same time different, existing in a tension between like and unlike, sameness and difference, unity and disintegration. Indeed, they capture the tension in all shadow images: things that are never just themselves, but always something else as well.

While not all the economic activities of the Yukaghirs are animated by an *ayibii*, they all contain or carry with them the moment of duplicity or shadow-force that the *ayibii* evokes. The Yukaghirs have a dual hunting economy (sable and elk), each side of which works as a shadow and creative force of the other. The economy thus contains its visible and invisible moments within, making it difficult (in fact, we claim, impossible) to specify with exactitude where the economy resides.

Taking stock from Gellner's intuition about the spirit-like movement of concepts, and building on the insights obtained from the *ayibii*'s displacement in and out of the hunting world of the Yukaghirs, this article aims to explore what kind of concept the economy would be if grasped through its shadows. We are taking up here the challenge recently posed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who has called upon anthropologists to develop 'an anthropological concept of the concept' (2003: 14). Our task is to re-conceptualize anthropologically the economy as 'concept', and to interrogate the valency of such a tentative epistemology for anthropology at large.

The rest of the article is in four parts. We first introduce the Yukaghir hunting economy and describe its most important features in terms of the classical hunter-gatherer literature on sharing and reciprocity. Here we hint at the difficulty of finding a resting place for the economy as an analytical whole: when the economy is only seen for its visible moments.

The second section illustrates ethnographically the shadow or invisible moments that animate Yukaghir hunting practice. The instability and ambiguity that the shadow force of the *ayibii* brings to Yukaghir sociality is described using the image of *reversibility*: the idea that a visible institution or practice is never simply identical with itself but always carries with it its invisible double or shadow, which can turn back upon it so

that one crosses over and becomes the other. Borrowing from the writings of Spanish philosopher Eugenio Triás, whose work we look at later, we give the name of a 'limit appearance' to the moment when the *ayibii* turns the invisible and the visible inside-out.

The third section explores the possible contours of an anthropological epistemology founded on shadow movements and limit appearances, and in particular its lessons for an epistemological description of indigenous categories.

Last, the article concludes with an application of our critique of visible epistemologies to contemporary debates in hunter-gatherer studies and economic anthropology at large.

The Yukaghirs

The Upper Kolyma Yukaghirs are a small indigenous population who have survived centuries of demographic decline and are remarkable in having maintained an almost pure hunting economy. Thus, while all neighbouring indigenous groups are involved in either intensive reindeer- or cattle-breeding, the Upper Kolyma Yukaghirs have never pursued any livestock and the dog is, even today, their only domesticated animal.¹

At the time the Russians entered northeastern Siberia in the mid-seventeenth century, the Yukaghirs occupied a huge territory, ranging from the Lena to the Anadyr Rivers, and were bounded in the south by the Verkhoyansk Mountains and in the north by the Arctic Ocean. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, when the Russian anthropologist Waldemar Jochelson carried out his classical fieldwork among the people (Jochelson 1926), the Yukaghirs numbered only a few hundred, scattered along the tributaries of the Kolyma River. Wars against invading neighbouring reindeer-breeding peoples, the Evenki, Evens, Koryaks, Chukchi, and Sakha (horse- and cattle-breeders), combined with epidemics of European diseases and frequent starvation as a result of game shortage, greatly reduced the Yukaghir population in a period of less than three hundred years (Graburn & Stephen Strong 1973: 38–41; Morin and d'Anglure 1997: 168). Today, the so-called 'Upper Kolyma group' numbers only 600 people, the majority of whom are based in the village of Nelemnoye at the Yasachnaya River in Verhnekolymsk Ulus, about 70 kilometres away from the region's centre, Zyrianka. They inhabit a forest environment, dominated by larch trees, more popularly known as the *taiga*. Seasonal temperature variations are extreme, with winter temperatures reaching lows of -60°C and summer highs of $+45^{\circ}\text{C}$.

In ancient times Yukaghir hunting was part of a subsistence life-style in which the elk (the Siberian counterpart of the American moose) was the most important game animal (Jochelson 1926: 378). However, with the Russian expansion into Siberia in the mid-seventeenth century, Yukaghir hunting took on a commercial turn. Wild fur – especially of sable – was an unparalleled source of wealth for the Russian state, and the Yukaghirs became fur-trappers as well as subsistence hunters (Willerslev 2000; Willerslev & Ulturgasheva 2007: 80). Sable-hunting was partly forced upon them via the imposition of the 'Yasak' (fur-tax), an occupation they willingly took up due to the many imported consumer goods they could obtain by trading in furs. Thus, over time, commercial values attached to sable-hunting were woven into the social fabric of Yukaghir life.

The importance of commercial hunting continued during the Soviet period. Yukaghir hunters were provided with 'plans' for how many sable furs they were expected to deliver to the *sovkhos* (state farm), in return for which they received hard cash.

Subsistence hunting for elk remained vital until the mid-1960s. However, with Nelemino's ever-increasing incorporation into the Soviet state economy, and all this entailed of cash payment and centralized consumer goods deliveries, elk-hunting came to constitute a supplementary livelihood. This took a further step after the collapse of the state farm in 1991, when people largely returned to a subsistence-based life-style. Virtually no wages have been paid since 1993, while the prices of essentials have risen several hundred per cent. Today old people, women, and children fish, gather berries, and set snares for small animals near the village, while the men spend eight months or more deep within the forest, hunting for elk and sable. The meat from elk is for the most part consumed within Nelemino, while the furs from sable are sold to Sakha and Russian traders in exchange for consumer goods.

The visible economy

Hunting for elk is a collective activity, typically involving five or more hunters, many of whom are not genealogically related. In fact, hunting groups are extremely unstable units; people are constantly moving in and out, and the constitution of a group may change completely from one year to the next. Moreover, while leadership exists, it is *ad hoc* and frequently changing. Sable-hunting, by contrast, tends to be a much more private activity, tightly organized around a stable group of close kin with the household head as the principal leader. Furthermore, the practical and spiritual knowledge associated with sable-hunting is regarded as highly secret and owned strictly by the individual hunter. By contrast, hunters regard such knowledge about elk-hunting as a communal resource that must be shared with the rest of the group. The same contrast is apparent in questions of access to land: anyone may hunt elk wherever he likes, without restriction, whereas sable-hunting involves exclusive rights to family-owned territories.

Following Woodburn (1980; 1982; 1991), an important difference between the elk and sable economies would seem to rest in the fact that the former is structured around the egalitarian principle of 'immediate sharing', whereas stratification and the moral right to ownership and to accumulate wealth marks out the sable economy ('delayed-returns'). There is a historical pattern to this, as we have seen above, since the elk economy is subsistence-based, whereas the sable economy is generated through an external market of supply and demand. Moreover, there would also seem to be a neat correspondence between the Yukaghirs' two hunting traditions and Marshall Sahlins's famous 'sector model' of reciprocities in which there is a systematic correlation between the quality of reciprocity obtaining in a given relationship and the level of social distance between the parties. Thus, the Yukaghirs, as we shall see, are obliged to share meat with kin in the manner characteristic of Sahlins's 'generalized reciprocity',² in which people give and take regardless of the specific balance of account (Sahlins 1972: 194). Indeed, Sahlins himself draws on Jochelson's Yukaghir ethnography to make this point (Sahlins 1972: 210).³ The sable economy, by contrast, concerns interaction with 'outsiders' in the form of traders who provide resources with a view to receive an equivalent or greater return and who make claims for debts. Thus, a principle of 'balanced reciprocity', with its emphasis on exact repayment, dominates the sable economy, which at times may even take the form of 'negative reciprocity' or 'theft', characterized, as it were, by persistent and underhand 'attempts to get something for nothing' (Sahlins 1972: 195).

The economy, however, does not only encompass human-with-human relations, but extends also into the realm of spirits. Thus, hunters' relations with the spirits of prey animals are in general modelled on the same principle of unconditional sharing that applies to the human community – comprising together what Nurit Bird-David (1990) has called 'a cosmic economy of sharing'.

The economy in parts and wholes

Woodburn's 'immediate- and delayed-return systems', Sahlins's three forms of 'reciprocity', and Bird-David's 'cosmic economy of sharing' are all attempts at producing concepts that can work as stable funds of meaning. They are concepts with a context, as Gellner would have put it. However, as Marilyn Strathern has noted in an important paper on the provisionality of all such models (Strathern 1985), the idea of the concept that is used here is one where different *parts* are correlated to make up a *conceptual whole*. For instance, in Sahlins's concept of 'reciprocity', kinship and the economy are the 'parts' that are brought together in a correlative function, so that more of something (say, kinship distance) becomes less of something else (say, undisguised reciprocity). The problem with such parts-to-wholes models of conceptual organization, as Strathern has noted, is not so much what gets aggregated into a whole, but that the notion of *co-relation* itself remains unproblematized. When kinship and economy each work as the correlate of the other, there is a second, 'internal relationship' that is tacitly invoked and yet whose analytical work remains unacknowledged. This is the relation that each term has to an imagined 'society' (Strathern 1985: 202). This so-called 'society' is here made to stay in the background as a conceptual whole and provides the stability that 'kinship' and 'reciprocity' need to work freely and *visibly* as correlates of one another. In other words, their visibility is rendered stable by the unacknowledged work of an invisible conceptual whole.

The coupling of economy and society in a fiction of visible and invisible parts and wholes has an old genealogy in social theory. Gunnar Myrdal, for example, in his *The political element in the development of economic theory*, criticized liberal economists for holding the 'communist fiction' that some kind of 'harmony of interests' made 'society' appear as a 'whole' (Myrdal 1953: 194-5). His work had a considerable influence on Hannah Arendt, for whom notions such as 'political economy', 'economy', or indeed 'society' had no real analytical purchase. For Arendt, the economy *moved*: once a household concept, it later took residency in the public sphere, and has today installed itself in the labour market (Arendt 1998 [1958]: chap. 2, esp. 28-49).

Economic anthropology has seldom paid attention to Arendt's lesson about the residency-in-motion of the economy. In the formalist vs substantivist debate of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, the underlying discussion was about the political *nature* of the economy; few attended to the *qualities* of the concepts deployed to describe such nature (cf. Humphreys 1978: 58; Isaac 2005: 20). The concepts of land and labour, for example, were defined by both camps in terms of the contribution they made to the overarching concept of the economy: they were both consolidated and given stability as economic concepts by being made to work in an economic context. But as Keith Hart has pointed out (Hart 2000: 67, 303), these are originally *agrarian* concepts whose direct application to contemporary society lends a rudimentary consistency to our social theory (see also Tribe 1978): descriptions of the exchange of labour and land in capitalist market economies echo Hobbes's model of possessive individualistic society (Macpherson 1962); the category of labour is reminiscent also of Marx's views on

human action and human energy (Arendt 1998 [1958]: Ollman 1971).⁴ On both fronts it can be argued that Hobbes and Marx's conceptualizations of 'labour' and 'land' responded primarily to political motivations, and it was in a political rather than in an economic context that they intended to put the concepts to work.⁵ The question of how concepts are mapped onto and stabilized within specific contexts is therefore never a straightforward affair.

That the difficulty of pinning down the residency-in-motion of the economy might be an epistemological problem did not go unnoticed to participants in the debate. Scott Cook, for instance, once distinguished between substantivists' synthetic and formalists' analytical methodology: in the former, the whole determines the part; in the latter, the part determines the whole (Cook 1966: 327). For Cook, substantivists' failure to see this difference meant that they treated the economy as a 'real' object, as opposed to an epistemological perspective. What Cook did not question, however, was the very nature of the concepts that all participants were using. For him, epistemology had a transcendental quality: different methodologies render different relationships (between parts and whole) visible; but the fact that there is a 'whole' (be it a formal economy or a substantive social relationship) to be analysed was never questioned. Once elucidated and settled, the economy's whole became its very residency.

It is at this juncture that we would like to return to Gellner and Strathern's original insights into the problem of visible *co-relation*: the question of what exactly is being evoked when parts and wholes, concepts and contexts are put to work together. In what follows, we want to take their interest in the way relations and conceptual orders are conjured one step further. Our interest is in how the very ideas of 'concepts' and 'relations' have been rendered stable in anthropological epistemology. In our ethnography, a closer look at the hunting practices of the Yukaghirs shows that the realms of the elk and sable traditions, rather than being opposed orders of relationality, form two movements in a complex moment of potentiality, where each order becomes the shadow and the creative force behind the other: at once its invisible agency and its visible future.⁶ In epistemological terms, this is the idea that parts and wholes already contain within them the possibility for becoming something other than what they are: the whole inhabits the part; the part encompasses the whole; and each folds into the other through a reversible movement. In what follows we call this capturing of the visible by the invisible a 'limit appearance'.

Yukaghir hunting economies

The elk economy

In many respects, one could say that Yukaghirs' distribution of resources follows the sharing economy model. Thus, they run what Nicolas Peterson (1993) has described as a 'demand sharing' principle, where people are expected to make claims on other people's possessions, and where those who possess more than they can immediately use or consume are expected to give it up without expectation of repayment. This principle of sharing affects virtually everything from trade goods, such as cigarettes and fuel, to knowledge about how to hunt elk, but applies most forcefully to the distribution of game meat: 'I eat, you eat. I have nothing, you have nothing. We all share out of one pot', say the Yukaghirs.

When meat is shared in the forest among hunters, shares are put in piles according to the number of group members and everyone gets an equal share, irrespective of age and skill. Hunters say they own the slain animal collectively, because everybody has in

one way or another applied his labour and skill to the hunt. It is the hunting leader who is in charge of the distribution. By recognizing and fostering a fair distribution of meat, the leader enjoys the authority to decide who gets what. Should he exploit his role as a fair distributor, however, the others will abandon him or another member will start to take authority and sooner or later be recognized as the new leader of the group.

Now, while all of this fits neatly into Woodburn's category of immediate-return societies, based, as it were, on the ethos of equal sharing and individual autonomy, the articulated egalitarianism suggests its other, 'hidden side'. Hunting groups are not financially self-sufficient units, but depend on donations of 'gifts' from wealthy sponsors in the form of fuel and ammunition. Whereas in pre-Soviet times these were mainly wealthy Sakha from neighbouring communities, during the Soviet period they were replaced by state farm deputy directors, policemen, or other important figures from the bureaucratic establishment, who would join the hunting group for a few days during the holidays, either because they needed meat or for pure leisure. Today they are mostly Russian or Sakha businessmen from the regional centre of Zyrianka. The important point, however, is that their sponsorship of essentials is what enables hunters to carry on with their profession. Without the gifts of fuel and ammunition, hunters could simply not afford to go hunting. Although hunters usually share meat in a spirit of equality and no visible signs of hierarchy or interpersonal dependency are apparent, the burden of indebtedness is nevertheless present along the margins of the transaction. This becomes visible in those rare but awkward moments in which a wealthy sponsor demands a larger or better part of the meat, arguing that after all he was the one who waged the expedition. Hunters will then bow their heads in humility and offer the sponsor the meat, because a relationship of dependency hitherto 'hidden' is now made painfully manifest. At this point a change of vocabulary takes place. Sponsors, who had previously been referred to by the kinship term *brat* (Rus. brother), are now addressed as *Khozyain* (Rus. Master), a term that, as we shall see, has echoes in the invisible economy of spirits.

What we want to bring to attention here is that sharing and reciprocity are not manifestly different forms of exchange, as many writers on hunter-gatherers would have it (Bird-David 1990; 1992; Gell 1992: 152; Price 1975; Rival 2002: 104; Woodburn 1998: 50). Such an understanding reflects the type of epistemological organization that we criticized above for its conceptual stability and wholeness. There is instead a case for understanding every moment of sharing as a limit-case in itself: both itself (sharing) and something other than itself (reciprocity). This means that any attempt to characterize the elk economy as a sharing economy is bound to fail because sharing and reciprocity are expressions of one unitary appearance. The visible side of the egalitarianism of sharing is defined and takes texture against an invisible background constituted by hierarchical relations of exchange and dependency. The ongoing debate about the egalitarianism vs stratification of hunter-gatherer societies (e.g. Fried 1967; Lee 1991; Woodburn 1982) is in this light reframed from an 'either stratification' or 'no stratification' paradigm to a situation where both egalitarianism and stratification carry each other as invisible moments of their visible manifestations.

The sable economy

While the ethos of sharing is foregrounded in the elk economy, the right to ownership and to accumulate stand out in the sable economy. On the most basic level, this difference is reflected in the fact that, unlike game meat, the furs from sable and other

fur-bearing animals are considered the private property of the individual hunter. Indeed, the role of the hunting leader in sable hunting is not that of a sharer of resources, but a steward of the individual's right to the bounty of his land and labour. Thus, if a hunter from within or outside the hunting group starts placing traps within another person's trap-line or another group's territory, it is the leader's role to settle the matter before it develops into physical fighting. In previous times, such conflict over access to trapping grounds led to killings and even warfare (Jochelson 1926: 383). Today, such violence is mostly apparent in relation to predatory animals, most notably the wolverine, which, if caught stealing from hunters' traps, is tortured to death on the grounds of 'theft'. However, while hunters conceive the wolverine as an enemy and competitor, occasionally a kind of 'silent trade' (cf. Bogoras 1904-9; Woodburn n.d.) develops between the two parties, in which gifts of sables and other goods are left on the forest trails to be picked up by the opponent – gifts that bear a message of peace and friendship and thus of the potential of all social encounters to become something other than what they are.

The source of all imported consumer goods are Russian and Sakha fur-traders. They belong for most part to the fur company 'Sakhabult', which has monopolized the republic's fur trade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Yukaghirs see these traders as unpredictable and extremely unreliable, for they are subject to everything from the vagaries of the weather to government regulations and inflation. Moreover, the traders are generally conceived as immoral and greedy beings, who give away things in a spirit of self-aggrandisement or profit and who use the seductive power of their goods to keep hunters in a constant state of indebtedness. Often hunters do not know if the furs they give are in payment for last year's goods, an advance on the next, or both at once (cf. Hugh-Jones 1992: 49). The traders, it is said, take delight in playing tricks on hunters by providing them with poor-quality products or outsmarting them of their furs by getting them drunk. It is for all of these reasons that hunters refer to them as 'children of the devil'. The devil's (Yuk. *Yioodeiis'ien'ulben*) character is said to be that of carelessness, having no feeling of concern for others, but being simply obsessed by satisfying selfish and voracious needs. Importantly, Yukaghirs also consider the devil to be the same spirit as the master of the animals (Yuk. *Lebi'-po'gil*), whom Jochelson (1926: 150) places among the highest of benevolent beings and who is said to feed his 'human children' generously without asking anything in return. In the context of trading, this reversible image of the devil, as not only evil but benevolent too, plays itself out during the exchange of furs for consumer goods. Here the trader is addressed as a compassionate 'friend' and a 'member of the family' (Willerslev & Ulturgasheva 2007: 87). Indeed, at times a hunter may offer his 'friend' large quantities of furs without demanding anything in return, as he would do with close kin. What this points to is that in an environment in which supplies of consumer goods are unpredictable and notoriously unreliable, the desire for goods and the need to establish social bonds with traders are not incompatible goals (Hugh-Jones 1992: 49). It is also the reason why Yukaghirs say that 'a rich man is born in debt' and 'the more debts a man has, the richer is he regarded' (Jochelson 1926: 433). The point is that 'debts' and 'sharing' can only be said to carry (negative or positive) reciprocity within the compass of a so-called 'visible' economy. It is only when one neglects the effects of their shadows that one can speak about a *co-relation* between kinship distance and reciprocity, as does Sahlins in his 'sector model'. The moment one takes the shadow into account, the various forms of reciprocity become co-implicated in a potential reversible movement.

The hunter becoming the hunted

When arriving in the forest, Yukaghir hunters often address the master-spirits of the rivers and places where they go hunting as ‘fathers’ and ‘mothers’ and refer to themselves in this context as the ‘children’ of the spirits. They will, for example, say: ‘Mother, your children are hungry and poor. Feed us as you have fed us before’. Hunters believe that the animal spirits in their nurturing capacity are obliged to share their abundance of game with them, in much the same way as fellow humans who possess resources beyond their immediate needs are obliged to give them up. This notion is reflected in the fact that, although hunters often praise the goodness and generosity of the spirits before going hunting, they hardly ever thank them after a successful hunt. Thus, from their viewpoint, the spirits are doing no more than they should do when they provide them with prey. Moreover, whenever hunting luck fails, hunters will swear at the spirits, in much the same way as fellow humans who are not willing to share are openly accused of being stingy.

This analogy between Yukaghirs’ relations with spirits, activated during hunting, and their relations with fellow humans, activated in the sharing of meat and other goods within the village, could be interpreted as an integrated system, an all-embracing ‘cosmic economy of sharing.’ This is what Bird-David (1990; 1992) proposes in her comparative study of how hunter-gatherers and cultivators relate to their natural environments. She makes a two-front distinction: hunter-gatherers tend to represent their forest environment as a ‘parent,’ who gives them food in abundance without expecting anything in return – what she labels the ‘giving environment’ (Bird-David 1992: 28); cultivators, by contrast, link the environment to ‘ancestors,’ who give their bounty only reciprocally, that is, in return for favours rendered – what she calls the ‘reciprocating environment.’

Yukaghirs’ relation with their spiritual environment is not, however, as straightforward as Bird-David’s account allows for. As already pointed out, for them benevolent and evil spirits are not separate beings but reversible figures. A story that an elderly Yukaghir woman told to Willerslev makes the point:

Our friend Igor caught a strange fish. I’ve never seen anything like it. It was singing with different voices. I got scared and told Igor to put it back into the river. So he did. That winter, he had great luck in hunting. I believe he took more than fifty sables and God knows how many elk. They just came to him time and time again. The next year was the same. The animals kept coming. However, he did not notice that, in line with his good luck, his own son got worse and worse. He [the son] kept to himself and looked increasingly depressed. In the end, he went and hanged himself, and you saw for yourself how the father died shortly after, while hunting in the forest. *Khozyain* (spirit master) was in love with him and wanted to live with him. This is why it sent him prey in over-abundance. *Khozyain* could then go and kill him and drag his *ayibii* back to its house.

In a sharing economy, people have the right to demand that those who possess goods beyond their immediate needs give them up. With regard to the hunter-spirit relationship, this means that, as long as an animal master-spirit possesses prey in plenty, the hunter is entitled to demand the spirit to share its animal resources with him, and the spirit for its part is obliged to comply with the hunter’s demands. However, if the wealth divide between the two agencies becomes displaced, their respective roles as ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’ would be inverted, and the spirit would now be entitled to demand the hunter to share his resources with it. Such a changeover of roles is exactly what happens in the story cited above: the spirit provides the hunter with prey in over-abundance,

and the latter takes all the animals ‘offered.’ As a result, he comes to stand out as accumulating a surplus of animal souls. This in turn gives the spirit the right to demand the hunter to share with it, and asserts its claim by striking him and his son with sickness and death, so that it can then drag their *ayibii* back to its dwelling place. Thus, the spirit deliberately manipulates the principle of sharing to put the hunter in the position of wealthy donor, which justifies it in going and ‘demanding’ his soul. An urge for reciprocity therefore underlies the ethos of sharing, which hitherto remained invisible but which now becomes dangerously manifest. It follows from this that the ‘environment as giving’ and the ‘environment as reciprocating’ cannot easily be polarized (cf. Bird-David 1990: 191). Rather, in this case, reciprocity is derived from the shadow-limit of sharing. Sharing constitutes the ‘premise’ of reciprocity, the condition of its possibility. Yet, reciprocity also constitutes the impossibility of sharing, because the moment the switch from one to the other occurs, we are no longer dealing with sharing *as such*, but with a different kind of economic constituency. This switch appears to be characterized by what we call a ‘reversible movement’: the two transaction-regimes constitute reciprocally the shadow-limit of each other, mutually enabling themselves to move beyond what they appear to be on the surface.

Avoiding being preyed upon

The reversible potential of human-spiritual relations produces much anxiety among hunters. Their anxiety stems from the fact that, whenever they succeed in killing animals in plenty, they can never be certain about the intention of the animal-rulers in providing them with good hunting luck. Are the spirits simply fulfilling their obligation as ‘parents’ to share their animal resources with them, or are they about to act as devils and trick them into the position of ‘donors’ in a reciprocal relationship, which allows for a ‘divine’ predatory attack? No hunter knows for sure. Their response to this uncertainty is to carry the exchange process with the natural agencies to a further stage, which they refer to as *pákostit*, meaning ‘to play dirty tricks’ in Russian. This implies that the hunter seeks to induce in the animal spirit an illusion of lustful play. This process of what is basically sexual seduction is set in motion the night before the hunt. Hunters go to the sauna to conquer their human smell. Likewise, they avoid the language of hunting and violence altogether and feed the fire with vodka, tobacco, sugar, and bread, all trade goods obtained through the sable economy. The idea here is to get the spirit into a drugged and lustful mood, just as hunters say that traders use commodities to play a game of seduction with them. When the hunter’s *ayibii* then travels to the house of the spirits during his nightly dreams, these will take him for a ‘friend’ and ‘lover’ and they will have sexual intercourse together. The feelings of sexual lust that the *ayibii* evokes in the spirit are somehow extended to the spirit’s physical counterpart, the animal prey (Willerslev 2004). Thus, the next morning, when the hunter goes out in search for elk, the animal is said to run towards him and ‘give itself up to him’ in the expectation of experiencing a climax of sexual excitement, only for the hunter to shoot it dead. Thus, what we are dealing with is in principle two homologous hunts: the visible hunt of the hunter seducing the elk and, preceding this, the invisible hunt in which his *ayibii* seduces the animal’s spirit. The *ayibii* moves in and out of these two hunts, turning the visible and the invisible inside out, and recasting the shadows of both worlds as it travels and sneaks between their limits.

After killing his prey, the hunter will cover up the fact that he was the one responsible for its death by making a small, roughly carved wooden figure, painted with lines of

blood from the dead animal. The figure is said to be a miniature model of the animal's killer. It is hung from a string above the meat and serves to attract the attention of the raging spirit. As a result, the hunter himself will not appear to have taken anything from the animal spirit, at least not formally, and no sharing relationship has therefore ever been established between the two. This in turn rules out the spirit's right to demand the hunter's *ayibii*. In other words, *pákostit* implies that the hunter seeks to maximize benefit at the spirit's expense, while avoiding the risk of falling into the position of potential donor. In this sense, it corresponds, partly, to what Sahlins has called 'theft', which he characterizes as 'the attempt to get something for nothing', and which he argues to be 'the most impersonal sort of exchange [that] ranges through various degrees of cunning, guile, stealth, and violence' (1972: 195). While guile is an integral part of the game of seduction, we are talking about neither 'an impersonal sort of exchange' nor a simulacrum or lying in any straightforward sense. What we see here is a recursive movement of displacements: the appearance of guile in the disappearance of benevolence, the disappearance of guile in the appearance of seduction, and so on. Sociality thus emerges as a forever self-eclipsing reversible movement, a shadow-limit that expands itself by recasting the very terms that keep it alive (Corsín Jiménez 2005).

An epistemology of the shadow

In our earlier review of the hunter-gatherer literature, we noted how Strathern's critique of conceptual orderings exposed the way 'relations' had been taken for granted in the classical studies on kinship and the economy. Anthropologists, she suggested there and has insisted elsewhere, have tended to focus on the *parts* that make up a conceptual whole, rather than on the *relations* that bring these parts into existence in the first place (Strathern 1991; 1992; 1995). Aware of the importance of such a critique, in our ethnography we tried to keep the relational moment in view at all times, and further noted that the Yukaghirs' own conception of this moment takes in fact a non-relational shape: a shadow form (*ayibii*) that takes residence in its own self-displacements.

The Yukaghir *ayibii* appears thus as an indigenous re-description of the Euro-American concept of the relation. In this sense, the ethnography shows the extent to which the idea of the 'relation' might itself be a problematic epistemological concept. It intimates that we might do more justice to ethnography if we attend to its own moments of *re-description* and look to how indigenous concepts find residency *in their own accounts*: from sexual seduction to love, to guile, and death, and so on. What is needed, then, is to open up within every conceptual description an ulterior space for future descriptions.⁷

This self-embedding of the conceptual within ethnography (within, in fact, all modes of description) allows us to see in a new light how concepts create their own spaces for expression and how they draw their own *limits* behind and around their shadows.

The work of Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías provides us important support here. Traditional philosophy provides a *de-limitative* definition of concepts, outlining the *necessary and jointly sufficient conditions* under which a concept has purchase and works. Here one looks inwards to see what a concept is made of, rather than outwards to its possible reach. There is little room for shadows or invisible (spirit) movements in this epistemology. This echoes Gellner's dissatisfaction with the concept-context equation: when the inside of a concept is said to be no different from its contextual outside.

Triás's philosophy is focused on reversing such tradition. He has developed a philosophy of the shadow, where the move is to see how concepts work by placing them at the 'limit' of their world (Triás 1983 [1969]; 1985). For Triás (1999), limits stand at the frontiers of all that is possible. At the moment of their conceptual *limitation* (the moment when they stand at the end [*fin*] of their worlds, their *de-fin*ing moment), concepts capture their own shadow and become something other than what they are (Triás 1991).

This liminal capacity of concepts to out-stretch themselves is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's definition of philosophy as the discipline creative of concepts (Deleuze & Guattari 1994 [1991]). For Deleuze and Guattari concepts have an ambiguous nature. They look like they have a stable fund of meaning but in fact they are an assemblage of many different elements; they are at once a condensation of multiple components *and* a singular potency. For this reason, for Deleuze and Guattari the nature of concepts is a 'flying' (*survol*) singularity, encompassing in one ordinal intellectual movement a diversity of qualities (1994 [1991]: 20). Each quality can, in turn, be seen as a concept in its own right, nested within, dormant inside, or overlapping the concept with which it was first associated. This dormant quality Deleuze and Guattari call a 'conceptual personage' (*personnage conceptuel*). An example is philosophy itself, which was conceptualized/conceived through one such personage: the *friend* (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*).⁸

This brings us back to the *ayibii*'s displacements and to the limitations of the relation for conceptualizing such re-descriptive movements. For while Strathern focuses on how concepts' internal and external relations re-describe themselves (kinship *to* the economy; kinship:economy *to* society), she does not always pay attention to how the relation *itself* takes a descriptive moment; how it creates a space for itself (dis-places itself) as an epistemological moment. But relations need to be described to be seen to work; otherwise they solidify as concepts and become epistemological givens.

If we are to stick with the kinship and economy example, there is an illuminating passage in Strathern's essay when the idea of the relation is itself given an analytical description, though this goes unmarked. 'We demand from explanations', Strathern writes towards the end of her article, 'that they bring different elements into relationship: thus "kinship" can be explained by reference to "economic" organization. But such terms are not always *reversible*' (1985: 204, emphasis added).

Reversibility makes for an interesting definition of relationality: a description of how and when a conceptual order (say, kinship) reaches its limit, or how kinship *at the limit* becomes the economy. For unlike other expressions of counterpoints – for example, contraries, antitheses, or polarities (Needham 1987) – reversibles are opposites that self-contain themselves: at the limit *they are* their own shadow. It is of course true that kinship and economy need not be reversibles. However, *as individual concepts* they can only work *conceptually* at the limit. It is here that the concept makes itself visible; and it is at this point too that the shadow emerges in the form of a reversible. Crucially, the limit is also the place where the concept out-grows its shadow, and becomes something else.

Interestingly, Triás has described this folding of concepts out of their own limits in the very language of reversibility. 'No philosophy', he argues, 'is *limited* to creating the "philosophy" that we commonly associate with [itself] ... First and foremost, philosophies are related to the very *reverse* of what they enunciate and unwittingly develop. In this way each philosophy *invents* its own twin, which is what it then *denounces*' (Triás 1983 [1969]: 15-16, emphasis added in the first two italics).

Not coincidentally, reversibility is also central to Merleau-Ponty's mature thought, as developed in *The visible and the invisible* (1968). He uses the term as an organizing trope for his ontology of the flesh, where the sensate and the sensible, body and world, intertwine in a unitary phenomenological movement. Not unlike in Yukaghir hunting, the visible and the invisible are here ontological expressions of a reversible potentiality.⁹

Last, Deleuze and Guattari also employ the notion of 'reversibility' in passing to describe the oscillatory, infinite movement of thought (1994 [1991]: 38): reversibility as an expression of the open potency of thought itself. The crux of the matter is that the invisible or 'shadow' is never quite relationally determined *vis-à-vis* the visible; it is a *folding moment* not a structure. And this is of course what we found the *ayibii* do in our ethnography: to progress outwards by out-folding one concept into another. Reversibility is thus the conceptual name we give to the *ayibii*: the name the concept takes when it captures the shadow at the moment it reaches its limit. It is, following Viveiros de Castro (2003: 14), an anthropological concept of the concept.

Conclusion

Despite Gellner's long overdue critique of the stability and wholeness of the concepts with which anthropologists make sense of social life, his insights have not taken root in the field at large. In fact, the discipline seems as committed as ever to the production and consolidation of new concepts, often inflected by what appears to be their *un-limited* purchase, such as 'virtualism', 'globalization', or 'rights'. In this conclusion, we bring our argument to a close by attempting to sketch what an anthropological epistemology of shadow-limits can say about our contemporary political and economic predicament. We do this by first elucidating what the implications of our theory are for the hunter-gatherer tradition to which our ethnography belongs. We then expand on this critique of socio-centrism to interrogate some of its modern-day disguises in anthropological theory, and in political and economic anthropology in particular.

Hunter-gatherer studies have tended to subscribe to a model of Durkheimian socio-centrism, where the human social domain is privileged over the spiritual one, and the latter is taken for a symbolic or metaphorical reflection of the former (e.g. Bird-David 1992; Descola 1996: 87-9; Tanner 1979). A theory that takes the reversible, and hence potential or liminal, dimension of conceptual life seriously must necessarily move beyond the substantive and give a central place to the role of the imagination, that is, of the shadow-to-be (see also Ortega y Gasset 1992 [1958]: 291; 1996 [1956]: 50-2; Viveiros de Castro 2003: 14). This is a view of the imagination not as a separate cognitive capacity but as an inherent potentiality of social life: the vehicle through which conceptual limits out-place themselves, expanding the scale of their conceptual purchase. It is a view that takes human-spiritual relationships seriously for the material impact they have in re-shadowing everyday life: that is, the material impact that shadows (*ayibii*) may have in anticipating or delineating the direction of actions.

A similar point has been made by Tim Ingold, who describes the openness of animist thought using the image of a line. This he opposes to the thought process of Western epistemology, imagined as a circular movement that closes unto itself (Ingold 2006: 12). We note here the similarities between the line and the limit, and further observe that though Ingold speaks of upholding a *relational* ontology, lines or limits are in fact *lateris* (the flanks or ends of the world). The term re-lations, from the Latin *re-* (bring back, return) and *latus* (broad, wide, the flanks or side), was originally used to describe the bringing back to its point of restoration all that was far and away; in other words,

to summon in a singular moment the extensions of that which is possible. Relations are therefore the moments or places from where one sees the flanks. The relational is the epistemological movement that brings one back from the flanks. An epistemology of the limit, by contrast, stands on the flanks.

Socio-centrism is a malady that has extended to our theories of the new 'knowledge economy'. For one, recent developments in the anthropological study of Western political economy have focused on the virtuality of its models. Virtualism's over-exaggerated simplification of the complexities of economic and political life, it is argued, works as a negation of all that is social and moral (e.g. Carrier & Miller 1998; Strathern 2000; Thompson 2000). The virtualist ideas to which these critiques are addressed include, amongst others, econometric models, audit cultures, and moral discourses about transparency. Now, whilst no doubt insightful, some of these critiques are built on the fictitious polarization of their critical terms. The virtual becomes a conceptual limit, which acquires its meaning by opposition to the (substantive and embedded) social. The trouble here is that this renders the social itself liable of over-conceptualization, which is indeed what is happening in current capitalist discourse, as when organizations talk about corporate *social responsibility*, the re-institutionalization of *trust* and *ethics*, or the re-engagement with '*the public*' (e.g. Braithwaite & Levi 2003; O'Neill 2002; Power 2004). The social objects through which 'society' is re-imagined – trust, risk, and responsibility being favourite contemporary descriptors – are therefore redefining the terms and institutions of civic association – the social contract, as it used to be called. Society thus makes its reappearance on stage as a virtual object of social management.

Whether the move to define society managerially is a welcomed one, we leave others to decide. As anthropologists, however, we hope to use our cross-cultural comparisons to elucidate the consequences of seeing concepts for both their conceptual and creative work: their shadows and their limits. The Yukaghir reversible economy, we have argued here, leaves room for a recursive movement of concepts in and out of their own conceptual worlds. If we were to push the analogy we would say that Yukaghirs have a virtual economy – and they know it. The oscillation between the 'virtual' and the 'substantive' (between spirits, kin, traders, etc.) is an indigenous attempt at social management, one which renders visible a very different indigenous social theory: an invitation to imagine a critical scenario where 'society' is seen not only as a conceptual entity but also as a creative force; where reciprocity, sharing, or debts (risk, responsibility, or trust) are seen as emergent forms in a continuous displaceable movement. Where the social, in sum, casts always a shadow larger than its own conceptual definitions.

NOTES

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¹ According to some Soviet anthropologists, the Upper Kolyma Yukaghirs might originally have had domesticated reindeer, which they subsequently lost at the time of the Russian conquest (Stepanova, Gurvich & Khramova 1964 [1956]: 790).

² From now on, when talking about reciprocity we mean 'balanced reciprocity' and we replace Sahlins's term 'generalized reciprocity' with 'sharing'. A vast body of literature in hunter-gatherer studies is concerned with the different way resources are distributed in sharing systems (see, e.g., Altman & Peterson 1991; Bird-David 2005; Rival 2002).

³ We thank Keir Martin for reminding us of the Sahlins reference.

⁴ Polanyi in fact probably came closest to a radical revisionism of his own working categories when arguing for a view of Aristotelian ideas of the 'economy' as inseparable from the *metaphysical* value placed on the self-sufficiency (autarchy) of the community (Meikle 1995; Polanyi 1957).

⁵ Marx did of course write in an economic spirit. But he is also known for being the greatest of the neo-Aristotelians, a view that would place his project closer to political metaphysics than economics (Meikle 1994).

⁶ The way moments of exchange extend their powers outside their 'home' (visible) domain is reminiscent of Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov's analysis of the multiple and ambiguous meanings attached to exchange practices in a post-Soviet, central Siberian collective farm (Ssorin-Chaikov 2000).

⁷ The conceptual emerges in the *spaces* opened up by ethnographic *re-description* (in our ethnography afforded by the *ayibii's* dis-placements). Note the difference with the classical construction of concepts, where ethnography provides a univocal and fixed conceptual space: 'When faced with ideas and concepts from a culture conceived as other, the anthropologist is faced with the task of rendering them *within a conceptual universe that has space for them*' (Strathern 1987: 256, emphasis added).

⁸ Despite their exclusive definition of philosophy (vs the sciences or the arts) as the only discipline creative of concepts, Deleuze and Guattari's *descriptive* engagement with the conceptual brings them very close to the spirit of anthropology. For example: in their characterization of French, German, and English philosophies, the latter is said to be the philosophy of 'custom and conventions', dealing in 'habits'. Although they do not say it themselves, their account of English philosophy is in this sense as close as one can get to a 'philosophy of *culture*', that is, an anthropology. More importantly, they hold that because the prime resource of English philosophy is 'conventions', 'English philosophy is a free and wild creation of concepts' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994 [1991]: 105). Elsewhere, they ask of the philosophical enterprise: 'Becoming stranger to oneself, to one's language and nation, is not this the peculiarity of the philosopher and philosophy[?]' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994 [1991]: 110). The epistemological excursion through which one 'becomes stranger to oneself' is of course what has always brought distinction to the anthropological method.

⁹ In the concept of 'reversibility', philosopher Jack Reynolds has also recently found a common ground for the philosophies of embodiment and alterity of, respectively, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida (Reynolds 2004). An example of Derrida's reversible alterity is his playful critique of Plato's categorical inflexibility in 'Plato's pharmacy' (Derrida 1981), where he accuses the Greek philosopher of sophistry (a giant reversal in itself!). Central to Derrida's deconstructive move is the ambiguity of the term *pharmakon*, meaning both 'remedy' and 'poison' in Greek. For Derrida, Platonic philosophy works through the 'dialectical inversion of the *pharmakon*' (1981: 123), now making it mean remedy, now poison, and yet always stabilizing and never recognizing the 'complicity of contrary values' within the term itself (1981: 126). Although we appreciate the similarities between Derrida's *pharmakon* and the shadow movements of the *ayibii*, we would like to stress how the latter adheres to the logic of the limit, which imposes important ethnographic constraints to the extensions of metaphoric play. We would like to thank *JRAI's* Editor for prompting us to explore the similarities between Derrida's position and our own.

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Un « concept anthropologique du concept » : de la réversibilité chez les Yukaghirs de Sibérie

Résumé

Les auteurs tentent ici d'ébaucher une nouvelle épistémologie anthropologique en revisitant l'action des concepts dans les modèles économiques et en suggérant un autre « concept anthropologique du concept » en économie. L'article étudie la manière dans les concepts créent leurs propres limites de signification et utilise cette idée de limite pour voir la façon dont la pensée conceptuelle se dépasse et se transforme elle-même. Les auteurs développent leur épistémologie par l'étude des pratiques et institutions socio-économiques des Yukaghirs, un petit groupe de chasseurs indigènes vivant le long de la rivière Kolyma, dans le nord-est de la Sibérie. Le moteur des possibilités créatives des Yukaghirs est constitué par la réversibilité de chacune de leurs pratiques économiques, informées par l'œuvre d'une force de l'ombre (*ayibii*) qui tend vers la limite. Cette notion de réversibilité fournit des éléments pour repenser l'emprise de « l'économique » sur notre monde contemporain et remettre en question la validité des descriptions « conceptuelles » telles que l'économie virtuelle ou celle de la connaissance.

Alberto Corsín Jiménez is Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. He is editor of *The anthropology of organizations* (Ashgate, 2007) and *Culture and well-being: anthropological approaches to freedom and political ethics* (Pluto, 2007).

Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK. alberto.corsin-jimenez@manchester.ac.uk

Rane Willerslev is an Associate Professor in the Institute for Anthropology, Archaeology, and Linguistics at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. He is the author of *Soul hunters: hunting, animism, and personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs* (University of California Press, 2007) and *Hunting and trapping in Siberia* (Arctic Information, 2000).

Institute for Anthropology, Archaeology and Linguistics, University of Aarhus, 8270 Højbjerg, Denmark. rane@mail.dk