

Anthropology Book Forum

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CHAMEL, JEAN and DANSAC, YAEL, 2022, *Relating with More-than-Humans. Interbeing Rituality in a Living World*. Cham: Palgrave Studies in Anthropology of Sustainability, Palgrave Macmillan. 254 pp. ISBN 978-3-031-10293-6

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The book is the eighth volume in the *Palgrave Studies in Anthropology of Sustainability* series. It comprises an introductory chapter, three sections each of three chapters and the Epilogue. The chapters illustrate ritualized relationships between humans and more-than-human beings in a variety of cultural contexts. They explore *condensed rituals* or traditional rituals in which the summoned entities affect the attitudes and beliefs of the participants, and *refracted rituals* or rituals invented by alternative spiritual people and movements, which focus on the actions of the participants rather than their beliefs (Houseman, 2011).

In the introductory chapter, Jean Chamel and Yael Dansac state that the objective of the volume is to explore how humans in diverse cultural contexts relate in more horizontal ways "with" other entities, and how life emerges from the interrelationships between "earth beings" (De la Cadena, 2015). They point out that among the many forms of relationality they chose rituality, because it is an important component of daily life, which allows us to understand the transformations in social formations.

The first part titled *Living with More-than-Humans: The Role of Daily Rites* comprises case studies on everyday relationships between human and non-human beings. In Chapter 2, Théophile Johnson studies ritual interactions between herders and yaks in Manang, Nepal, to understand how herders maintain domestication relationships and avoid feralization. Johnson proposes that domestication and herding comprise a geopolitic of relationships that give rise to certain behaviors

and emotions among participants. The herders establish a ritual language inspired by their own communication system but adapted to the yaks and the environment.

Cyndy Margarita Garcia-Weyandt in Chapter 3 proposes rethinking the relationships of the Wixáricas of the Y+rata community in Nayarit, Mexico, with their more-than-human relatives, the plants, in ceremonial spaces and everyday ritual interactions. Garcia-Weyandt studies the Our Mother Corn cycle, in which Wixárica families make pilgrimages, offerings, dances and exchange energy with Our Mother Corn (make kinship), that is, constant acts of incarnation of the relationship of reciprocity between beings. In Chapter 4, Bertrande Galfre analyzes the biodynamic agriculture developed on a neo-peasant farm in Southwestern France. Galfre suggests that biodynamics seeks to unravel the network of interactional gestures of the universe to understand them, integrate them, feel them internally and then reproduce them in agricultural practices.

The second part called *More-than-Human Politics: Belonging, Identity, Indigeneity and the Rights of Nature*, focuses on the cultural and political dimensions. Anna Varfolomeeva in Chapter 5 explores the effects of large-scale mining in Buryatia, Siberia, on the sense of belonging of the Oka Buriat and Soiot. For these ethnic groups, minerals are animated elements intertwined with spirits that own the territory, therefore, their extraction must be carried out in a respectful manner. However, mining promoted by state agents and companies is threatening this relationality and evoking complex emotions in inhabitants.

In Chapter 6, Degenhart Brown studies the medicine of animal origin prepared by Awinon healers in Togo and Benin, and its connection with the network of human and non-human relationships in the Vodun religion. He argues that in West Africa this type of medicine is helping people understand contemporary global changes, the pressures of neoliberalism and to cure the spiritual illnesses caused by globalization. Healers treat patients by restoring balance with the spirit world.

In the last chapter of the second part, Jean Chamel analyzes how the “earth beings” in the global movement for the rights of nature are constituted as people, beyond a mere cognitive operation that gives them a legal personality. Based on the study of water and earth ceremonies performed in different events, he argues that, although their practitioners try to escape Western naturalistic patterns by imitating the ritual animism of indigenous societies, they fail to conceive other beings

as people because they defend a relationship monistic with the world focused on ties of interdependence through analogical means.

The third part titled *More-than-Human Spiritualities: Liminality, Embodiment and Intimate Experiences of Personal Transformation*, presents case studies on alternative spiritualities and ritualities in Western societies. In Chapter 8, Ed Lord and Henrik Ohlsson study therapeutic nature practices in Wales, Sweden and Finland. They highlight as a common factor among their practitioners the notion of “escape” from technological and bureaucratic modernity, and the conception of nature as a refuge. Furthermore, these practices can be understood as a reaction to the scarcity of well-being in modernity and in everyday life, but from the individual, rather than social level.

In Chapter 9, Yael Dansac discusses spiritual practices performed at the Carnac megaliths in France. She points out that practitioners experience bodily and emotional connections with the spirits of the megaliths, which in some cases allow for intense self-examinations that can lead to turning their lives around. Tenno Tedearu, in the last chapter of the third part, studies the practice of using crystals in Estonia, as an everyday aspect of New Age spirituality in that country. He argues that crystals matter because of their materiality and their possibility of relationality and phenomenological communication, but not because of the deities they represent or possess.

The volume closes with the afterword by Michael Houseman, who highlights several aspects and connections between the different chapters: first, he highlights the continuity between the extraordinary and everyday character of the documented rituals, and the role of ritual in bringing more-than-human beings to the body (produce emotions, feelings) and the mind. Second, he expresses that the chapters advocate treating relationships between humans as comparable to those weaved with non-human beings.

Third, he says that in the book there is a generalized use of the word “connection” as a synonym for “relationship,” which for him is problematic, given that “relationship” consists of special interactions of humans with more than specific human beings, that is, interactions in which the parties are involved, there is mutual responsibility and continuous negotiation. This happens in the condensed rituals analyzed in Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6. For their part, the refracted rituals do not

establish a relationship but rather a connection, because one of the parts is shown to be absent or subsumed by the other, reduced to a felt presence (Chapters 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

In this sense, the volume shows that not all ritual practices and approaches to beings imply relationships with more-than-humans. Although alternative spiritual movements criticize the disenchanted and materialistic mentality of the modern world and are inspired by the ritual animism of indigenous societies, their ritual practices do not necessarily establish relationships, they continue to operate under the modern naturalistic ontological framework (Descola, 2005), that is, the separation between nature and society, individualism and instrumentalization. “Earth beings” are not recognized in their complexity and their “positive” qualities can be turned into another commodity. A subject that is not explored or criticized in depth in the book.

Finally, we would like to note that the chapters referring to condensed rituals show that horizontal relationships with beings more than human are not necessarily harmonious or stable, there is also conflict and negotiation. Furthermore, its practitioners have a great capacity for adaptation and innovation, aspects necessary to resist neoliberal logic.

In sum, the volume provides several case studies on the importance of non-human beings in contemporary ceremonial and the different relationalities and connections that can be created between them. Also, the challenges that come with establishing non-instrumentalist relationships in Western societies, disenchanted with the modern materialist world, but trapped in naturalistic logic. Each chapter provides complex theoretical and analytical frameworks that help think about novel approaches to address an old phenomenon in anthropology that still continues to fascinate us: ritual.

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