Book Reviews

I am delighted to be the new Book Review Editor for ‘Inner Asia’ and look forward to working with readers and publishers to bring reviews of important new publications to this specialist audience. I would like to take this opportunity to remind readers that book reviews are always being sought for the journal. Reviews have to be in English and can be approximately 800–1,200 words in length. Reviewed books can be in any language but have to engage in the region of Inner Asia. We occasionally publish longer in-depth review articles, which can be on one book or a group of books on a similar topic, and these are considered on a case by case basis. If you would like to review a book please contact me in the first instance and I will ensure that no-one else is listed to do it. If you do not already have a copy, I will arrange with the publisher to send you one. Reviews will be published as received and should be submitted no later than 6 months from receipt of the volume. If you have any queries or suggestions please contact me directly.

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Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants, and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia

Brightman M., V.E. Grotti & O. Ulturgasheva
New York: Berghahn Books 2012. 226 pp. $90.00/£56.00

Animism in Rainforest and Tundra is the first book to draw a direct comparison between the cosmological systems of ethnographic regions as far apart and different as the Siberian tundra and the Amazon rainforest, and for this alone it is worthy of praise. This volume is not, however, a bolt from the blue. It stems in fact from a conference that the editors organised at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in June 2008 (‘Humans, Animals, Plants and Things: Personhood in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia’), itself a result of a workshop in Cambridge in 2006 (“Frontier” in Amazonia and Siberia: Extractive Economies, Indigenous Politics, and Social Transformations’). Theoretically, it is well grounded in recent debates about animism and personhood – especially Descola’s model of animism and Viveiros de Castro’s Perspectivism – and continues the ‘export’ of Amazonian theories through the Asiatic expanses started by Morten Pedersen (2001), and then

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The volume begins and ends with contributions by eminent experts on the respective ethnographic regions. In the foreword Stephen Hugh-Jones begins by justifying briefly the comparative endeavour – Amazonia and Siberia are both characterised by extractive economies and shamanic cosmologies, and their peoples are historically related. He then goes on to point out the potential that the ‘Siberianisation of Amerindian Anthropology’ has in debunking the old dualisms that dominate the animist discourse. One of the recurrent themes in the essays, and one of the volume’s most successful achievements, is in fact the dissatisfaction from both parts with the rigidity of the binary oppositions that have come to dominate the debates around perspectivism and animism. In the extensive introduction the editors show the comparative dialogue between the two regions goes back to readings of Levi-Strauss’ *Mythologiques* by certain Soviet ethnographers, and that the same structuralist (and hence binary) influence lies behind both much recent Siberian anthropology and Amazonian theories such as perspectivism. The editors then warn against the tendency of cataloguing cosmologies as ‘totemist’ or ‘animist’, and the essay by Willerslev and Ulturgasheva brilliantly argues against this very distinction. Animism and totemism, they argue, are both always present in north-Asian societies for one entails and comprehends the other not unlike a *yin* and *yang* configuration. A similar argument can be found in Swancutt’s contribution. Drawing from her fieldwork among both Mongolian Buryats and the Nuosu of southern China (perhaps one of the most unbridled interpretations of ‘tundra’ one could find) she argues that predation and hierarchy lie at the opposite ends of a continuum, and groups that explicitly uphold social hierarchies tend to hide or mask predatory and extractive relations, and vice versa. While the explicit rise in one entails a drop in the other, at a practical and implicit level they overlap and merge creating moral ‘loopholes’ within social organisation.

But the most pervasive binary in the debates about animism and perspectivism is undoubtedly the one between humans and non-humans, as testified by the cover of the book which oddly portrays animism through a series of pictures of human children holding baby animals. Lavrillier’s essay tackles this very binary opposition showing how among Evenki hunters and herders in Siberia the classification of beings works on a different criterion of differentiation, the *ommir* or ‘spirit-charge’. Once one understands the emic logic of Evenki taxonomy it is clear that beings are ordered not through the human/animal (or plant, stone, and mountain) categories, but according to multiple relations of reciprocity or ‘worlds of socialisation’. Grottì and Brightman’s approach to the same opposition is again different, in fact their argument holds that humanity and non-humanity are indeed real indigenous concerns in Amazonia. One of the central characterisations of humanity however is its capacity to transform and the necessity to be constantly cultivated. Perspectival change then does not (only) happen between the opposed extremes of animality and humanity but predominantly within the category of the human, indeed it is what defines it.