

Killing as Reproductive Agency

Dugong, Pigs, and Humanity among the Kiwai, circa 1900

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Abstract. – For Kiwai of south New Guinea a century ago, hunting of anthropomorphic animals was formative of culturally-ordered experiences of human sexual reproduction and human mortality. Through consideration of a diverse selection of representations related to the killing of dugong and pigs, this essay suggests that asymmetric roles of men and women in the social relations of hunting realized a broad pattern of simultaneous antipathy and affinity between hunting and procreation. Through animal signs, Kiwai recognized interconnections between human reproduction and human mortality while simultaneously repressing unacceptable aspects of this interconnectedness. [*South coast New Guinea, animal symbolism, anthropomorphism and the margins of the social world, embodiment, hunting and gender*]

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1. Introduction: Mortality, Reproduction, and Anthropomorphic Animals

In an extended parenthesis on the meaningfulness of animals in "Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion," Henri Bergson (1932: 192) postulated that, relative to our perception of fellow humans, we tend to perceive an animal less as an individual than as an instantiation of a type and a quality (cf. Boas 1940: 485). Lévi-Strauss has subsequently suggested that this tendency makes animals powerful signs for thinking about the constitution of social differences within human communities (1962b: 132–136) or even the ultimate discontinuity of reality in general (1962a: 178–181), but this is perhaps to neglect the importance of animals in the constitution of the category of "humanity" in particular. In interaction with an animal, humans may also perceive *themselves* more starkly as tokens of a species, not only because the animal other is so different that in interaction with it certain of the human self's type-level qualities may stand out more sharply than in interaction with other humans, but also because, in their species-specific ways, an animal and a human share in

common their condition of embodiment. Animals and humans alike are possessed of a definite corpus of living matter, and are bound to organic processes such as alimentation, locomotion, growth, sexual reproduction, and death by virtue of which this corpus exists through time and space as an individual instantiation of a species-type. In this paper, I hope to show how for Kiwai of south New Guinea about one century ago, culturally-ordered apperceptions of sexual reproduction, death, and species as aspects of individual animal bodies were themselves formative of ongoing experience of sexual reproduction, mortality, and species as aspects of *human* embodiment.

Kiwai communities are found on the islands and banks of the Fly River estuary and in the adjacent coastal region southwest of the Fly delta and north of the Torres Strait. In this paper I will consider in turn the hunting of dugong and pigs, among the most important and most anthropomorphized animals in Kiwai thought – though it should be particularly noted that, while pigs and pig-hunting have been pan-Kiwai interests, dugong are marine animals, hunted only by coastal Kiwai, not by Fly River Kiwai. Dugong and pigs approximate the gross size and shape of humans more closely than do other south New Guinea animals, sharing with humans such distinctive mammalian features as pregnancy, live birth, and lactation. Several sirenian characteristics are particularly evocative of human reproduction: dugong have two pectoral teats, and a female bears one calf and attends to it closely for a year or longer, frequently appearing to carry this single young on her back. Kiwai themselves have remarked that the length of gestation is the "same as people" (Eley 1988: 316). Such traits help explain why Kiwai have tended to associate dugong with human sexuality and childbearing, just as the notorious strength and dangerousness of wild boars helps explain why Kiwai have tended to associate pigs with warfare and homicide. Yet these biological and behavioral anthropomorphisms are material anchors in much broader pro-