Attitudes to Animals in Shoshoni Indian Religion

By
Ake Hultkrantz

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 4, No. 2. (Spring, 1970)
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

RELIGION, although inherent in man, borrows its expressions from the setting or milieu in which man appears. The forms through which man expresses the supernatural are all drawn from the cultural heritage and the environment known to him, and are structured according to his dominant patterns of experience.[1] In a hunting culture this means that the main target of observation, the animal, is the ferment of suggestive influence on representations of the supernatural. This must not be interpreted as meaning that all ideas of the supernatural necessarily take animal form. First of all, spirits do appear also as human beings, although generally less frequently; the high-god, for instance, if he exists, is often thought of as a being of human appearance. Second, although spirits may manifest themselves as animals they may evince a human character and often also human modes of action.

All this is apparent in Shoshoni Indian traditional religion as it lives on today. Since prehistoric times Indians of the Shoshonean linguistic stock have roamed about in the wide region between the high plains of western Wyoming and the Pacific Ocean at the coast of California. The desert or semi-desert area between the Rocky Mountains and California, Great Basin, has been the center of distribution of the Shoshonean groups. However, the easternmost Shoshoni extended out on the plains east of the Rockies. The present article deals with these Shoshoni, nowadays called (after their reservation) the Wind River Shoshoni. In contradistinction to the Basin Shoshoni who subsisted mostly on seeds and nuts which they gathered the Eastern Shoshoni mostly hunted animals, in particular the buffalo, and they achieved in the 18th century a veneer of Plains culture (characterized by mounted warriors, war-honors and a war society, tipis, Sun-Dance ritual etc.)[2]. The old political, social and economic patterns ceased to exist during the first decade of reservation life in the 1870's. Still, much of the religious life survived this change, for instance, the vision quest, the power of the medicine-man, and the Sun Dance. Also the characteristic mythology continued to flourish. Today, much of the traditional religion is gone, and in particular the younger generations turn away from old tribal beliefs. The visitor to the Wind River Shoshoni will find, however, that there are still medicine-men around and still celebrations performed of the yearly grand ceremony, the Sun Dance. And a careful observer will learn that the old-timers even today preserve religious beliefs of the past. Many of these beliefs concern the animals and the zoomorphic representations of spirits, as may be expected in a former hunting culture.[3]

The Shoshoni are keen observers of animals. In particular they know the animals good for food, like the buffaloes. They have many names for the buffaloes according to their age and sex, and for different parts of the bodies of these animals. Also a useful domestic animal, the horse, is known under many names. On the other hand, animals and birds which do not play any cultural role are often classified under group names; for instance, *ka:kh* means both raven and crow. Our

conclusion must be that the idea of the animal is structured culturally, that is, the animal is seen not exactly as a biological being, but as a being colored by cultural values, and judged from cultural premises. It plays the role ascribed to it by cultural tradition.

A closer view reveals that this structuring or patterning appears in two different connections. Firstly, as emerges from what has just been said, the animals occurring in the Shoshoni hunting area function according to selective criteria. Secondly, zoomorphic beings are conceived on different planes of cognition. Also in this case they represent, of course, a selective approach to Nature.

Like most other peoples the Shoshoni distinguish between a natural and a supernatural reality. The former is the common, everyday world where one event follows the other in an ordinary, expected way. The supernatural world, on the other hand, often breaks through into the natural world but may also run parallel to the latter and manifest itself in the ordinary pattern of events. It is not founded in an exterior chain of causalities, but in religious belief. Now, naturalism and supernaturalism are the two main levels of cognition referred to above. The animal which the hunter approaches may be a real (natural) animal, or it is the abode or rather the manifestation of a spirit. Sometimes the two conceptions blend, so that what appears from the outset to be an animal reveals itself as a spirit. In principle, however, the difference is sharp and uncompromising.

The changing attitude to animals depending on whether they are just animals or manifestations of spirits is well illustrated in the Shoshoni Indian's relationship to bears. The Wind River Shoshoni have quite a lore on bears, an animal species which apparently has fascinated them more than other animals. Why this has been so is open for speculation. Hallowell has shown that the so-called bear ceremonialism, centering on the ritual funeral of the slain bear, and in particular the orderly deposition of its skull and bones, has been spread over a wide area from the old Laplanders in Scandinavia to the Lenni Lenape of Delaware and adjacent regions.[4] This ceremonialism has been associated with an attitude of reverence and devotion on the part of the participants. There are no indications that similar rites ever occurred among the Shoshoni, but some of the awe and respect they felt for the bear may reflect the extraordinary position assigned to this animal in other tribes.

One of my Shoshoni informants, a reputed medicine-man, saw in the company of a white man (the identity of this man is unknown to me) some bears perform the Sun Dance at a place called Sweetwater Gap. This happened at sunrise on a day in spring. My informant watched the bears at a distance of about fifty yards. He was cautious, for bears are "wicked animals when dancing". If they had discovered him they would have hunted him mile after mile, he said. The bears were dancing in front of a pine-tree painted yellow, red and green. They made four steps forwards and four steps backwards, and all the time they were looking at the pole. They also sang, and their singing was a growling. They had built a fire there. My informant thought that this "midnight-fire" had been made by one of the bears who, he surmised, was a *puhagant,* a medicine-man. He added that when dancing the bears pray for their youngsters. "They act just like a person. They are smart".

It is evident that the pattern of this curious event has been borrowed from the Sun-Dance ritual; the informant in question is himself a firm believer in and a noted leader of this ceremony. Many details, in particular the four steps forwards and backwards, remind us however of the Bear Dance of the Ute Indians.[5] And, indeed, the informant knew about this dance and pointed

out, quite correctly, that in some way it had to do with the reinvigorated activities of the bears after their coming forth in the spring. The scene supposedly witnessed by this informant is nevertheless difficult to account for psychologically. Perhaps he had, at some sunup, watched some bears perform the characteristic, swinging movements which can be observed by anyone at a zoological garden. Perhaps he had also seen the first rays of the sun color the trees and create illusions of burning fire. And all these visual impressions had then been systematized into a pattern suggested by the observer's experiences from the Sun Dance and the (Ute) Bear Dance.

Whatever the background of this mysterious experience, to my informant it was a proof that in spite of their marvelous qualities these bears were animals, not spirits. He assured me that although bears act like human beings they cannot talk to me, and I cannot talk to them. "Spirit-bears can speak to you, but these bears are regular animals". Their almost human qualities simply show that bears have a psychic equipment which matches man's. Every human being has two main souls, the soul of the body or vital principle, *mugwa,* and the dream or free-soul, *navužieip,* which may leave him when he sleeps and often acts as an adviser and guardian of its owner.[6] The soul system of most animals is in comparison much simpler. Each animal has a body-soul, *mugwa*—"if it didn't, it would be lying on the ground, dead", explained my informant. The animals lack, however, the dream-soul, the *navužieip,* with one exception: the bears seem to own it. Speaking about bears in general and the sun-dancing bears in particular my informant attributed both sets of souls to them:

> The bears have got *mugwa,* for they can move. But they must also have *navužieip,* for otherwise they shouldn't have had power to throw that paint on the tree.

He added that after death the bear's *mugwa* goes to the realm of the dead, like the *mugwa* of all other animals.

True bears are never spirits—indeed, no spirits have souls—but spirits may appear in bear form. That is, they do not take a bear's disguise as they please, but they show themselves as bears because their nature comes close to that of the bear. As my Shoshoni informant said, "all spirits are different", never identical, differing in qualities and capacities. He went on:

> The Bear spirit looks like a bear, but is different from the bear in that he suddenly appears and suddenly disappears. He is like *a hïgiɛxn* (shadow). He has a bear's form, but is a spirit. He figures as a bear because *tam apö* (our father=the Great Spirit) made him that way. But he has nothing to do with the animal bear and other bears.

The Bear spirit is one of a host of spirits, all called *puha,* meaning supernatural power, whose main function it is to manifest themselves in visions to human clients who seek their help, and to bestow their power upon them. In other words, the *puha* are the guardian spirits of the Shoshoni visionaries. As is well known the vision quest is a ritual that occurs, or has occurred, among the Indians all over the North American continent, with the exception of the Indians of the Southwest.[7] It has been summarized by the American anthropologist Clark Wissler as follows:

> The procedure usually takes this form: if a youth does not have a dream or vision which his superiors regard as supernatural, he is instructed and prepared for the inducing of such an experience and left in a lonely place to fast and pray, day and night. If a spirit appears, it is usually in animal form and that animal becomes in a sense the individual guardian of the supplicant. This guardian is, however, conceived of as a spirit and not merely as a bear, eagle, wolf etc., which are, after all, but the objective links between the individual and the source of spiritual power.[8]

Wissler then goes on to demonstrate that the so-called medicine-bags (he calls them "medicine objects, or charms") are the material bonds between the Indians and their personal guardians. Very often these bags consist of skins of animals, and their contents may be claws, ears of an animal, feathers etc. The figure of the spirit is not infrequently painted on different utensils, such as the tipi cloth, the shield or the shirt.

The Shoshoni vision quest follows the pattern outlined above. It should be added, however, that among the Shoshoni as among all the western Plains Indians not only youths but also adults formerly took part in such quests and achieved guardian spirits, often one after another at successive occasions. Today, only single medicine-men keep up the old custom. They direct their steps to solitary hills or to the rock-drawings in the foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains, pass away the night there by smoking and singing and, finally, dreaming, and then meet their future guardian spirits if they are lucky. In most cases the spirit shows itself as an animal, but anthropomorphic spirits are not rare. For instance, one medicine-man told me that he had seen in waking visions "those powers which are around us in the country" dressed up as Indian old-timers. Even the sun, the moon and the evening star appear as *puha.* The rule is, however, that the spirits take animal form. According to my informants otters, eagles and buffaloes have been common spirit disguises, but also other animals and birds, such as jackrabbits, hawks and magpies have figured in this connection. It seems that *puha* can appear in most animal forms. Certainly, one of my informants, himself a medicine-man, was quite convinced that *puha* could never appear as deer, but this was contradicted by other informants. I never heard, however, of anybody having smaller mammals like chipmunks and moles for guardian spirits. They are not impressive enough.

This observation brings us over to the fact that although the spirits are independent of the animals whose form they have taken, they do represent in their powers the specific qualities of these animals. One knowledgeable informant said this:

> The buffalo can appear as *puha* because he is big and strong. It is not so that all buffaloes are *puha,* but the spirit may take on the shape of the buffalo.

The same informant stressed emphatically that each spirit animal endows his client with the capacity characteristic of the animal in question, and nothing else. For instance, the turtle equips you with the ability to cure the sick, for the following reason: the doctor has to see through the patient in order to diagnose the disease, just like the turtle who is able to see through water. It is easily understandable that a person with beaver-power is a good swimmer, a person with deer-power a swift runner etc.

Similarly, the bears—to whom we now return—express strength and fortitude, and other qualities as well. Here is a vision account recounted to me by the most respected medicine-man of the Wind River Shoshoni in the 1940's:

> When the sun went up in the east I dreamed about three bears sitting under a pine-tree. I shot at them. One of them came forth to me and said, Look now, you see all these bullets twisting the fur here?—Yes, I see them.—This is the way I am: the bullets cannot kill me.—It really looked as if the bear had mud twisted in his coat. The bear said, I want you to cut one of my ears. You should fasten it in a rope hanging down from your side. In this way you will dance the Sun Dance.—The dream ended. Later on I stumbled upon a dead bear, took his one ear and carry it now in the Sun Dance. No bullet can kill me. This is true. I never tell lies. That's the way

I like to be.

The same medicine-man also told me, referring to this vision, "The bears often come to me in my dreams, they rustle and scratch, but don't hurt me". He did not tell me, however, whether he could mingle with real bears without being hurt by them. In principle, these bears ought not to be affected by his owning bear *puha.* But in practice the case is the reverse. That is, a person enters into a certain relationship with the animals whose shape his guardian spirit has taken. The Indian cannot keep the spirit and the animal apart. Whether we accept Lévy-Bruhl's concept of the *participation mystique* or not, here we have the germs of such phenomena as nagualism and totemism.[9]

The close connection between the bears and a person who has the bear as his *puha* was repeatedly pointed out by my informants. One of them had the following to say on the subject.

A Shoshoni who has the bear as his guardian spirit may treat the bears in whatever way he pleases. Any other person will however be torn to pieces by a bear if he tries to deal with it. A man who has the bear as his *puha* may kill the bear, but not eat it.[10] He may, however, leave the meat for his family (to eat). The same rule holds for any animal a person has as his *puha.*

Another Shoshoni, a medicine-man, volunteered the following information:

The bear is an animal that gets mad, therefore no good *puha* for a family-man: he will get mad over nothing. One man with bear *puha* was Pinji:z ("cross-legged"), a good, strong medicine-man. When he got mad he growled like a bear, and the hair on his head stood up like the hair of a bear.[11]

Pronouncements like these show that since man takes part in the spirit's power, and the latter is somehow identical with the qualities of a certain animal, man is related to this animal.[12] It is too strong to speak here about a possession (in the psychological sense) by the animal, but the connection between man and animal is close to identity.[13] In contradistinction to the Mexican *nagual* the Shoshoni guardian animal is not born with the individual, but associated with him in a later phase of his life. You never know with whom you will be united. Said one of my informants who had the eagle for guardian spirit:

The eagle said in my dream, "You should never want to eat beaver-meat. Some day you might get some *puha* from the beaver, if you stay with what I tell you". It came true to me.

Paul Radin has suggested that the North American guardian spirits have been recruited among the genii loci, a possibility that Benedict has found to exist only among the Central Algonkian Indians in the Eastern woodlands.[14] As to the Wind River Shoshoni, the *puha* are said to exist in multiplicity within certain definite areas, known by the old men—on the north side of a well-known butte, among the hills north of Big Wind River etc.—but even so they are not in any way the "owners" of this country. In fact, when we meet animal spirits as *genii loci* they are never to be confused with the guardian spirits.

The *genii loci* are in some cases conceived in animal form and then consequently represent another level of the supernaturalistic cognition of zoomorphic beings.[15] The most well known of these *genii loci* are the water sprites. One of the Shoshoni mythic tales tells us that there are spirits in the form of muskrats in the waters. More common, and functioning more in actual beliefs, are the stories of the water-buffaloes, *pa:gwic,* who haunt Bull Lake and Dinwoody Lake and also certain spots in the Big Wind River. The Shoshoni refer to a tale about two Ute scouts who transgressed the rules of scouting by eating a rabbit and a water-buffalo raw; one turned into a rabbit, the other into a water-buffalo who immediately descended into a lake close by and

disappeared there. In another story it is told how once some Shoshoni hunted buffaloes near Bull Lake. When the buffaloes dived down into the lake and did not reappear the hunters understood that they were no real buffaloes but the spirits of the lake. I was informed that these mysterious beings are still there. It brings bad luck to see them, and nobody has seen them for a long time. However, you can hear them in the early spring when the ice is still covering the surface of the water. One Indian told me one can hear their noise when the ice cracks. Is this perhaps the empirical foundation of these beliefs?[16]

Perusal of comparative literature on Shoshonean peoples has convinced me that the water-buffalo is a concept peculiar to the Wind River Shoshoni. The buffalo of the dry plains has here become identified with the mysterious owners of the lakes in the Rocky Mountain chain. The concept mirrors the belief in miraculous powers in the buffalo and the awe for waters natural to a population on the plains.

There are vestiges of a third level of zoomorphic representation in Shoshoni religion, the lord or master of animals. Hunting peoples in Africa, Europe, Asia and America have developed the idea of a supernatural owner of the animal species, or of all animals, who protects them, commands them, and at request from hunters delivers them to be slayed and eaten. The concept is not infrequent in North America.[17] The master of animals is a spirit, generally figured as an animal. The Shoshoni have possibly in very remote times known the coyote, or rather the mythical Coyote, as a master of animals. With the impact of Plains Indian culture the buffalo and the eagle have halfway achieved the position as master of animals and master of birds, respectively.[18] In all fairness it should be pointed out, however, that this type of concept is very little noticeable among the Shoshoni.

The fourth and last level of zoomorphic religious representation belongs to mythology which, among the Wind River Shoshoni, is a cognitive segment different from religion.[19] Thus, the Supreme Being is anthropomorphic in cult and daily beliefs, but to a certain degree theriomorphic (wolf) in the myths. Actually, in mythology all acting personages are animals, or rather the prototypes of the present animals, whose deeds set the pattern for their present-day descendants. The chief actors are Wolf, the camp-chief, and Coyote, his announcer. The latter is, phenomenologically seen, the trickster and, to a slight extent, the culture hero. It is said that in mythological times, that is, the formative times in the beginning of the world, all animals were human beings which only later changed into their present animal form.

Shoshoni mythology, and the roles played by animals in it, offers a particular and involved problem that will not be discussed here. The important thing is, in this connection, that animal beings dominate mythology as they dominate religion. In this hunting milieu the animal offers the closest tie between the world of realities and the world of Spirit.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

A rabbi was walking with his young son in the street instructing him in the Law. They passed a beggar with a sign round his neck on which was written "Blind". When they had passed the rabbi said that it was a fault to pass a beggar without giving alms, but a sin to do so if he asked for alms. This beggar's sign was an asking. He gave the boy a coin and told him to go back and give it. When he came back after doing so the rabbi said another sin had been committed; when giving alms you must raise your hat to the beggar to show your respect. The boy must return at once and do just that. But, said the boy, he is blind and could not see. How do you know he is not an imposter, said the rabbi, go back at once and lift your hat to him.

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[1] Cf. Hultkrantz, An Ecological Approach to Religion (*Ethnos, Vol.* 31, 1966).

[2] Cf. Hultkrantz, Shoshoni Indians on the Plains: An Appraisal of the Documentary Evidence (*Zeitschrift far Ethnologie,* Vol. *93,* 1968). See also Hultkrantz, The Shoshones in the Rocky Mountain Area (*Annals of Wyoming,* Vol. 33, 1961).

[3] The following account describes the beliefs of the former Plains Shoshoni who constitute the greater majority of the present Wind River Shoshoni. No particular attention will be given to the remnants of the earlier Sheepeater population once sparsely distributed in the mountain areas of Wyoming. See Hultkrantz, The Ethnological Position of the Sheepeater Indians in Wyoming (*Folk,* Vol. 8-9, 1966-67).

[4] A. I. Hallowell, Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere (*American Anthropologist, Vol. 28:1,* 1926).

[5] M. K. Opler, A Colorado Ute Indian Bear Dance (*Southwestern Lore,* September 1941).

[6] Hultkrantz, The Concept of the Soul held by the Wind River Shoshone (*Ethnos,* Vol. 16, 1951).

[7] R. F. Benedict, The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America (*Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association,* No. *29,* 1923).

[8] C. Wissler, *The American Indian,* 3rd edition (New York, 1950), p. 199.

[9] Cf. Hultkrantz, Les Religions des Indiens primitifs de l'Amérique (*Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion,* Vol. 4, 1963), pp. 68ff. The Shoshoni never developed totemism and have no clan-animals since the unilinear descent system which is the basis of clans was lacking among them.

[10] Opinion is divided on this point, however. Another informant said, "A fellow who has beaver *puha* cannot kill the beaver animals. But other fellows who try to trap them, often at the same place as where the beaver *puhagant* (medicine-man) tried in vain, they will get them. I have noticed that myself. It is the same thing with other *puha* and animals. I don't know how to explain it; nobody now living knows. Furthermore, *puha* says in the dream, `Don't try to kill me, for if you do your medicine will be destroyed'. Therefore, when I am hunting elk I don't kill it, but ask my grandson to do the killing, for I have elk medicine".

[11] The same informant also recalled a medicine-man of the old days who called on his bear *puha* by taking on a bear's hide and growling like a bear. (He did not, however, cure the sick in this way, as did the Blackfoot medicine-man White Buffalo portrayed by Catlin.) My informant did not appreciate bear *puha* too much—and he ought to know, for he was loaded down with all sorts of *puha.* "The bear is tricky. There is only one thing I like about him, and that is to get some paint from him. If you have been hurt or you have rheumatism, you put the paint on the sick place. That is the best thing you can get from a bear".

[12] The close connection between man and his *puha* is *i.a.* stressed by the fact that loss of *puha* may mean sudden or gradual death.

[13] The psychological background of this phenomenon has been rightly appreciated by Frances Densmore: "The bird or animal that appeared to the Indian in his dream was an embodiment, to some extent, of the power that he desired and, by his individual temperament, was best fitted to use". F. Densmore, The Belief of the Indian in a Connection between Song and the Supernatural (*Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin* 151, Washington, D.C., 1953), *p. 220.*

[14] P. Radin, Religion of the North American Indians (Boas et alii, *Anthropology in North America,* New York, 1915), p. *294; cf.* pp. *286ff.;* Benedict, *op. cit.,* p. *46.*

[15] Like most tribes on the plains the Shoshoni have few localized spirits. Those who exist seem mostly to stem from the Reservation era.

[16] Another informant maintains that he saw a true water-buffalo in the City Park of Denver. It dived under the surface of the water when looked upon.

[17] Cf. Hultkrantz, The Owner of the Animals in the Religion of the North American Indians (in Hultkrantz, ed., The Supernatural Owners of Nature, *Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion,* Vol. *1,* 1961).

[18] Hultkrantz, The Masters of the Animals among the Wind River Shoshoni (Ethnos, Vol. 26:4, 1961).

[19] Hultkrantz, Configurations of Religious Belief among the Wind River Shoshoni (*Ethnos, Vol. 21:3-4, 1956*).