

Body Metamorphosis and Interspecies Relations: An Exploration of Relational Ontologies in Bering Strait Prehistory

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Abstract. This article explores the prehistoric ontologies etched into theriomorphic images on ivory harpoon parts among the Okvik and OBS cultures that flourished about 2,000 years ago in the Bering Strait region. Inspired by the theory of relational ontology, the author argues that the images on prehistoric Inuit artifacts not only reveal the interior essence of other-than-human animals but also signify the interpersonal and intersubjective relationship between humans and other-than-human persons. A comparison between the prehistoric Inuit artifacts and the Yup'ik *yua* masks suggests that these Okvik/OBS hunting artifacts with theriomorphic images represented rebuilding of the hunter's multiple, extra body. Further analyses show that interspecies relations between other-than-human persons are crucial in prehistoric Inuit ontologies. Accordingly, the author argues that the polymorphous form represented by the prehistoric hunting implements was not only the human hunter's but also the other-than-human being's extra body.

Body metamorphosis is the central concept in the theory of relational ontologies, which has arisen in anthropological studies of Indigenous cultures since the 1990s. Ontological studies of the Amazonian, Arctic, and Subarctic ethnographies have revealed that humans and other-than-human persons share the same personhood or internal forms but differ either by body shapes or external forms. Subjectivities are not only attributed to humans but also animals, plants, and things. However, humans can ritually transform themselves into other-than-human forms to be endowed with other-than-human powers, perspectives, and strategies (Descola 2013; Ingold 1998; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004).

This article explores the theriomorphic images on ivory harpoon parts among the Okvik and Old Bering Sea (OBS) cultures that flourished about 2,000 years ago in the Bering Strait region.¹

Okvik and OBS cultures are well known for strong artistic traditions that are represented by incised and carved art. Many of ivory artifacts have geometric engravings or representational images in theriomorphic and zoomorphic forms (Arutiunov 2009a,b; Arutiunov and Sergeev [1969]2006, [1975]2006; Bronshtein 2009; Collins 1937, 1973; Fitzhugh 2009a). Among these art motifs, a masked face, designed with a pair of large, round eyes, is often seen on ivory harpoon heads and counterweights. Through ethnographic analyses and comparisons between archaeological and ethnographic data, this article conducts heuristic explorations of Okvik/OBS hunting artifacts with theriomorphic images in order to reveal the prehistoric ontologies in the Bering Strait region.

Inspired by the conceptualization of body in ontological theories, my attempt in this article is to

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explore how body metamorphosis was employed in both historical ceremonies and prehistoric hunting practices and how the body was engaged with multiple relations between humans and other-than-human persons and between other-than-human persons. In the conclusion, I hypothesize that Okvik/OBS harpoon-related implements appeared to be a polymorphous form that represented both the hunter's and the other-than-human person's extra body.

The Body and Relational Ontology

The theory of relational ontologies has been proposed by anthropologists based on Amazonian, Arctic, and Subarctic ethnographic data. In the relational point of view, while humans see themselves as humans, animals and spirits also perceive themselves as humans. These animals and other beings, usually called "nonhuman persons" or "other-than-human persons" in Indigenous texts, are perceived as persons to possess intentionality, subjectivity, and perspectives that are identical to human consciousness (Descola 2013; Fausto 2007; Hallowell 1960; Harvey 2006; Ingold 1998, 2006; Pedersen 2001, 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Willerslev 2004). Drawing from Amazonian cosmology, Viveiros de Castro (2004:6) points out that Amerindian perspectivism "imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul." In Fausto's (2007:497) words, "intentionality and reflexive consciousness are not exclusive attributes of humanity but potentially available to all beings of the cosmos." That is to say, animals, plants, and other entities all possess personhood and occupy a subjective position when they interact with humans.

Differing from anthropological multiculturalist ontology, which imagines a diversity of cultures and single nature, Arctic, Subarctic, and Amazonian Indigenous perspectivism asserts a multiplicity of natures and a single culture. Many beings in the world are endowed with the same soul, although "the visible shape of the body is a powerful sign of these differences in affect" (Viveiros de Castro 1998:478). Thus, the body appears to be the site of ontological difference, namely, "the site of main differentiation between different kinds of beings" (Borić 2007:89). While personhood is attributed not only to humans but also to other types of beings, the body shape or the corporeal form differentiates between human and other-than-human persons (Descola 2013:131).

Viveiros de Castro (1998:478) also argues that the concept of "body" does not simply mean "distinctive substance or fixed shape"; rather, it is "an assemblage of affects or ways of being that consti-

tute a *habitus*." Descola (2013) further points out that human and other-than-human beings distinguish each other by both outward physical forms and biological behaviors, which form the habits of each species.

Shamanic rituals among indigenous peoples inexorably convey their understandings of bodies. When the shaman is adorned with clothes, masks, or other props, the human body is actually animalized. However, according to Viveiros de Castro (1998:481), this metamorphosis is neither change of a spirit nor a bodily transformation, but rather a rebuilding of the affects and capacities of the body. He writes,

We are dealing with societies which inscribe efficacious meanings onto the skin, and which use animal masks (or at least know their principle) endowed with the power metaphysically to transform the identities of those who wear them, if used in the appropriate ritual context. To put on mask-clothing is not so much to conceal a human essence beneath an animal appearance, but rather to activate the powers of a different body (Viveiros de Castro 1998:482).

Animal masks in the American north often depict animal images with a human-like face. Such an iconic design reveals other-than-human interiority "by taking on the form of human physicality" (Descola 2013:138). When discussing Alaskan wooden masks depicting animal faces, Ingold (1998:196) stresses three distinct features. First, the face is the central component of almost every mask. Second, the mask is not used to hide the human physical form but to reveal the animal's identity and invoke the presence of the animal. Third, the mask is not designed to resemble the animals but rather to express aspects of the spiritual essence of the animals.

In this way, the body metamorphosis is not determined by the dichotomy of human and other-than-human beings as what Western anthropology has held for over one hundred years. Rather, it is based on relational interactions between human persons and other-than-human persons (Morrison 2013). Such intersubjective and interpersonal interactions have been envisaged as "a domain of entanglement" or "the meshwork" by Ingold (2006:14). As he writes,

This tangle is the texture of the world. In the animist ontology, beings do not simply occupy the world, they *inhabit* it, and in so doing—in threading their own paths through the meshwork—they contribute to its ever-evolving weave (Ingold 2006:14).

Whether for human persons or other-than-human persons, they construct their own perspectives, identities, and *habitus* through relational interactions between them, and these interpersonal

interactions constitute social actions. Hill (2011:408) puts it bluntly, humans and other-than-human persons “become themselves through experience, interaction, and discourse. Identity and self are, therefore, constructs and must be perpetually constituted through social action.” For Ingold (2006), the holistic environment is composed not only of humans, other-than-human persons, and material objects but also of relations between them. In Rival’s words, becoming human “involves the process of becoming with non-humans, and ‘becoming with’ the exploration of the unfolding relatedness of humans with non-humans” (Rival 2012:131). Therefore, it is human/other-than-human relatedness that enacts body metamorphosis in human daily life and rituals.

Based on the relational perspective, archaeologists have reconsidered archaeological artifacts, seeing them as dynamic, transformative things inhabiting the world rather than as animated objects (Betts et al. 2012, 2015; Boyd 2017; Fowler 2004, 2013; Groleau 2009; Hill 2011, 2013, 2018; Qu 2019; Vanpool and Newsome 2012; Wallis 2009, 2013; Watts 2013b). First, artifacts can be seen as other-than-human beings, which served as active agents in a cosmological and ontological structure. In Wallis’s (2009, 2013) argument, art objects are equated with humans and are seen as things and persons, manifesting their attempts to build up harmonious relations by negotiating between human persons and other-than-human persons. Art objects also resemble interconnected relational webs “of interactions between human people and other-than-human peoples as much as those between humans” (Wallis 2009:55), and art images “act as nonhuman intentional agents themselves” (Wallis 2009:62). Follower (2004:34) emphasizes artifacts’ social relationships with human beings. In his view, things appear as persons because they have the same social effects as human persons, and they are socially active in various interactions. Second, when artifacts were used to decorate human bodies, they were inhabited by both the human and other-than-human persons to fabricate an extracorporeal body (Descola 2013; Ingold 1998; Pedersen 2001, 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Willerslev 2004). In the perspectivist opinion, a shaman or a hunter covered by feathers, clothes, and masks represented “the maximum social objectification of bodies” and a redefinition of a body’s essential affects and capacities (Viveiros de Castro 1998:481). When analyzing Darhad Mongolian shamanic artifacts embedded in relational ontologies, Morten Pedersen (2007:142) found that “the shamanic costume affords the shaman with a multiple, extra-human body,” which “is perceived to imbue shamans with the magical capacity to crosscut the boundaries between human and non-human beings.” This rebuilding or redefinition of

the body indicates the entangled relations between human and other-than-human persons.

Based on these perspectives, I argue that the body concept helps us toward better understandings of prehistoric artifacts in the Bering Strait region. Meanwhile, the materials provide evidence showing how body transformation was crucial when prehistoric Inuit perceived themselves, other-than-human persons, and different worlds in relational ontologies.

Theriomorphic Images on Ivories in Inuit Prehistory

The earliest prehistoric Inuit cultures, Okvik (ca. 100–400 AD) and OBS (ca. 400–800 AD)² were found on the Bering Strait region, including the Chukchi Peninsula, northwest Alaska, and St. Lawrence, Punuk, and Diomed Islands. Like historical Inuit, Okvik and OBS ancestors relied on hunting sea mammals, fish, and birds and harvesting indigenous plants. A large number of harpoon-related artifacts have been excavated from archaeological sites of Okvik/OBS cultures. This harpoon gear, including harpoon heads, harpoon foreshafts, socket pieces, and counterweights, is mostly made of ivory, and almost all of them are decorated with geometric forms or iconic images (Fitzhugh and Crowell 2009).

Many Okvik/OBS harpoon heads and counterweights are engraved with a theriomorphic face, which often includes round and embossed eyes, nostrils, and a toothy mouth. A counterweight excavated from the Okvik Site has a pair of large oval eyes surrounded with detailed eyelashes on its central section, possibly to represent a face (Rainey 1941:520–521). Similarly, several OBS harpoon heads with side blades found at the Kukulik Site on St. Lawrence Island, categorized by the excavators as Type J, are indicated with round eyes and eyelashes. Depicted in Figure 1 is Specimen 3-1935-0075 of the University of Alaska Museum of the North (UAMN), using paired concentric ellipses to form eyes, above and below, which are eyelash patterns. The Type K harpoon head UAMN Specimen 1-1934-1481, also found at the Kukulik site, has large, open eyes and a toothy mouth to form a face above the blade slit (Fig. 2) (Geist and Rainey 1936:78, 188, 206, 218).

A similar theriomorphic face also appears on some counterweights and other ivory artifacts. A counterweight excavated from Burial 302 at the Ekven Cemetery on the Chukchi coast depicts a toothy face flanked by a pair of eagle heads (Fig. 3). A piece of ivory blubber scraper excavated from the Okvik Site is engraved with a face with large round and bossed eyes, nostrils, and a toothy mouth (Fig. 4).

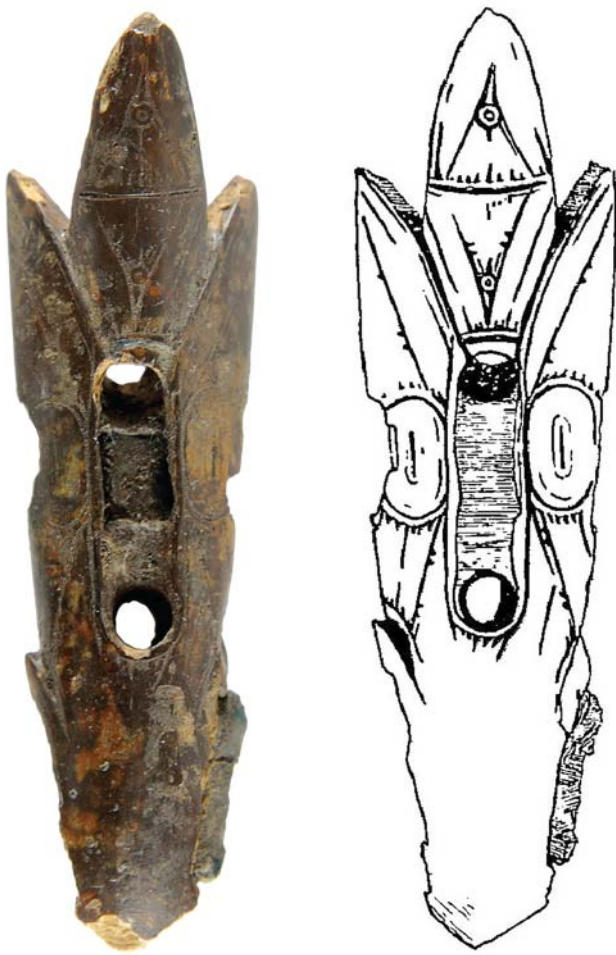


Figure 1. Type J ivory harpoon head from the Kukulik Site. UAMN collection 3-1935-0075, OBS II, 8.1 cm length. Photograph by Feng Qu. Drawing after Geist and Rainey (1936:206, Fig. 38). Courtesy of University of Alaska Museum of the North. The three prongs of the harpoon head are supposed to represent a bird's tucked plumage (Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982:79, 81).

The tradition of engraving was prevalent in historical Yup'ik culture in southwest Alaska. Many Yup'ik wooden masks carry face images similar to those on prehistoric Inuit ivories. Fitzhugh (2009a) points out that the Yup'ik people maintained many of the older traditions, beliefs, and art forms of the Okvik/OBS cultures into the historical period. Many motifs on the Yup'ik masks are similar to art designs on ivory objects of early Bering Strait peoples (Fitzhugh 2009a). However, since over 1,000-years gap between the OBS and historical Yup'ik cultures, it is outside of this paper's purview to explore the cultural homogeneity between them. Rather, this paper attempts to provide heuristic explorations of the prehistoric ontologies in the Bering Strait region based on ethnographic analogy.

Fortunately, numerous Yup'ik masks and other ethnographic artifacts were collected by ethnographers in the 19th and 20th centuries and are now stored in many museums throughout the world. The ethnographic reports provide rich information about the Yup'ik traditional hunting knowledge, material culture, cosmology, and ritual practices. This ethnographic literature includes Edward Williams Nelson's (1900) monograph *The Eskimo about Bering Strait*, Weyer's (1932) *The Eskimo: Their Environment and Folkways*, Lantis's (1946) reports of the Nunivak Island Eskimos, Oswalt's (1967) monograph *Alaskan Eskimos*, Hawkes's (1913, 1914) observations of the Yup'ik dance festivals at St. Michael, and Sonne's (1988) ethnographic analysis of Nunivak masks. In addition, Ann Fienup-Riordan (1988, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2005, 2007) spent many years recording the Yup'ik elders' explanations of the purposes and meanings of their tools, utensils, and artworks. Also, Alaskan anthropologist Dorothy Ray (1967) provides specific studies on Eskimo masks. These documents constitute the ethnographic backbone of this study.

***Yua* Images on Yup'ik Masks**

Ethnographic accounts reveal the relational ontologies among Alaskan Yup'ik groups (Fienup-Riordan 1994; Lantis 1946; Nelson 1900; Weyer 1932). In Yup'ik cosmology, humans, animals, plants, artifacts, places, and landscapes all possess thought and senses of sight, smell, and hearing. As Lantis (1950:320) notes, "Geographical features, all the animals (except the dog, in some areas), lamp, entranceway and other items of structures and furnishings, tools, clothing, all have souls." According to Nelson's record (1900:437–438), souls or spirits residing in things and animals could take a human-like form. They were called *inua* by the Inupiaq and *yua* by the Yup'ik. The *inua* or *yua* existed in all places, animals, things, and the elements. Hunters at sea often offered sacrifices to *inua/yua* with food and fresh water. These spirits were believed to be visible to the interceding shamans. Weyer (1932:299) provides an etymological interpretation of the *inua* concept:

According to Eskimo belief, souls reside not only in human beings but in animals and even lifeless things. In view of the haziness of the notions regarding human souls we cannot expect the concept of other souls to be definite and consistent. At the outset, however, we see that the key to the subject lies in the nature of the human soul; for even the word *inua*, which is used to designate the soul even of an inanimate object, means "its man." *Inua* is simply the possessive of *inuk* meaning "man," or "person," the nominative plural of which, *inuit*, is the term by which Eskimos refer to themselves as a people.

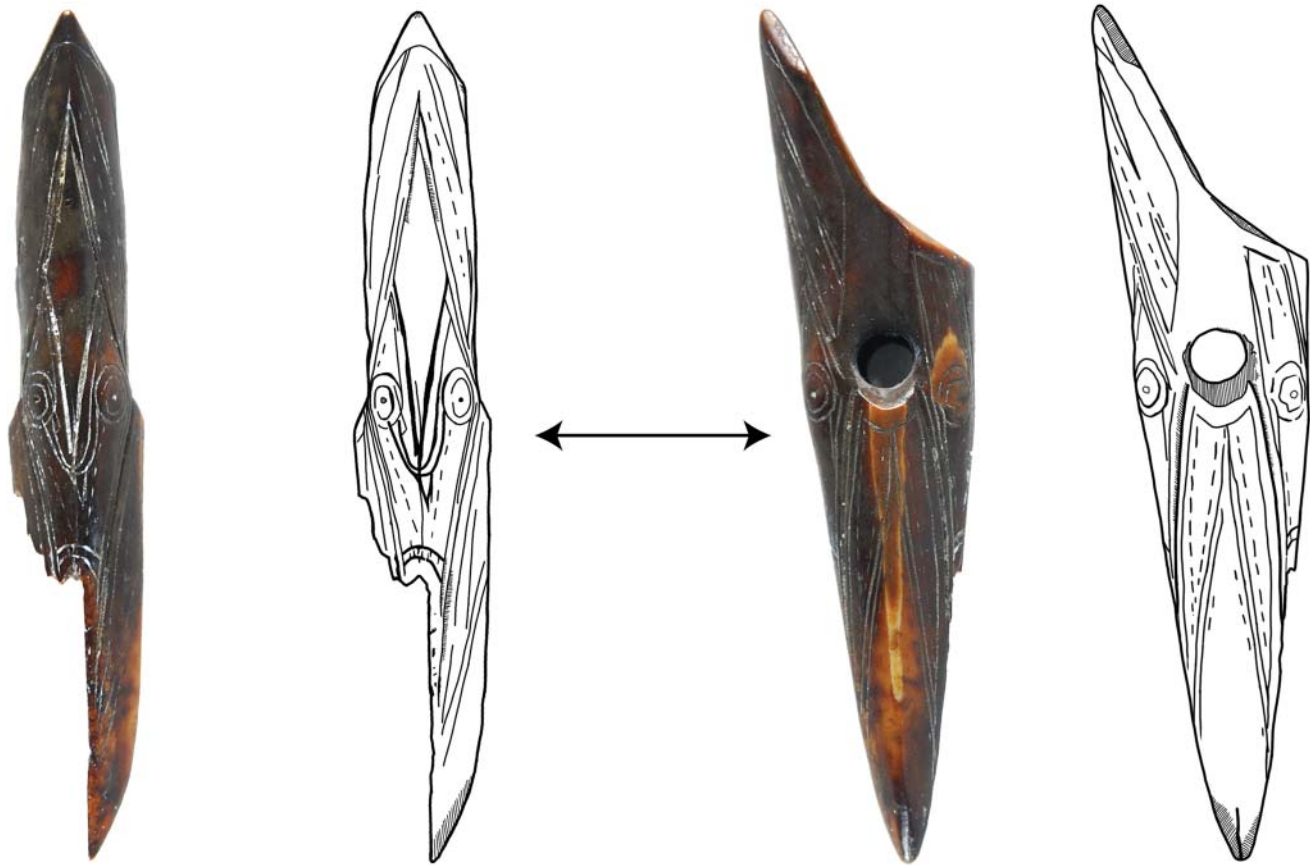


Figure 2. Type K ivory harpoon head from Kukulik Site. UAMN collection 1-1934-1481, OBS II, 8.5 cm length. Photograph by Feng Qu. Drawing by Kailiang Zhang. Courtesy of University of Alaska Museum of the North. Eyes and a toothy mouth of a theriomorphic face are depicted on the two narrow surfaces.

Arguably, boundaries between humans and other-than-human beings were shifting, permeable, dynamic, and transitional. Humans and prey animals were harmonious members of a society, and their relationship was built on reciprocity. While animals gave their bodies to hunters, humans treated them with respect, such as giving thanks and honoring in ceremony. The animals were often honored by masked dances in annual festivals such as the Bladder Festival and the Inviting-In Feast. The Yup'ik shaman served his community not only as a ritual presider but also as a mediator between human and other-than-human persons. However, shamans were not the only actors in the Yup'ik masked dances. Hunters and other community members were also wearing masks to perform during the annual ceremonies, in which the boundaries between humans and other-than-human beings, the living and the dead, and the human and spirit worlds were breached. Spirits were able to enter the bodies of dancers, and dancers might see the unseen (Fienup-Riordan 1994). According to Nelson (1900:395), when a shaman

or a hunter was masked in dancing, he was believed to “become mysteriously and unconsciously imbued with the spirit of the being which his mask represents.” Therefore, the purpose of the masks was not to conceal the human entities but to manifest the spiritual entities and to activate their supernatural powers (Fienup-Riordan 1994, 1996; Lantis 1947; Ray 1967).

Nelson (1900:359) also notes that, during the Yup'ik Inviting-In Feast, those animal persons were invited to participate in the ceremony, where they enjoyed the human persons' performances and were honored with food and drink offerings. The animal persons who received good treatment would reciprocate with hunting success. However, if not well treated by human persons, they were not willing to provide food (Nelson 1900:391).

According to Hawkes's (1913:12) field investigations of the St. Michael Inviting-In Feast and Lynn Wallen's (1990:14) observations, Yup'ik masks have two general types: those for the secular purpose to excite merriment and those for the spiritual purpose to honor animal persons and other spiritual

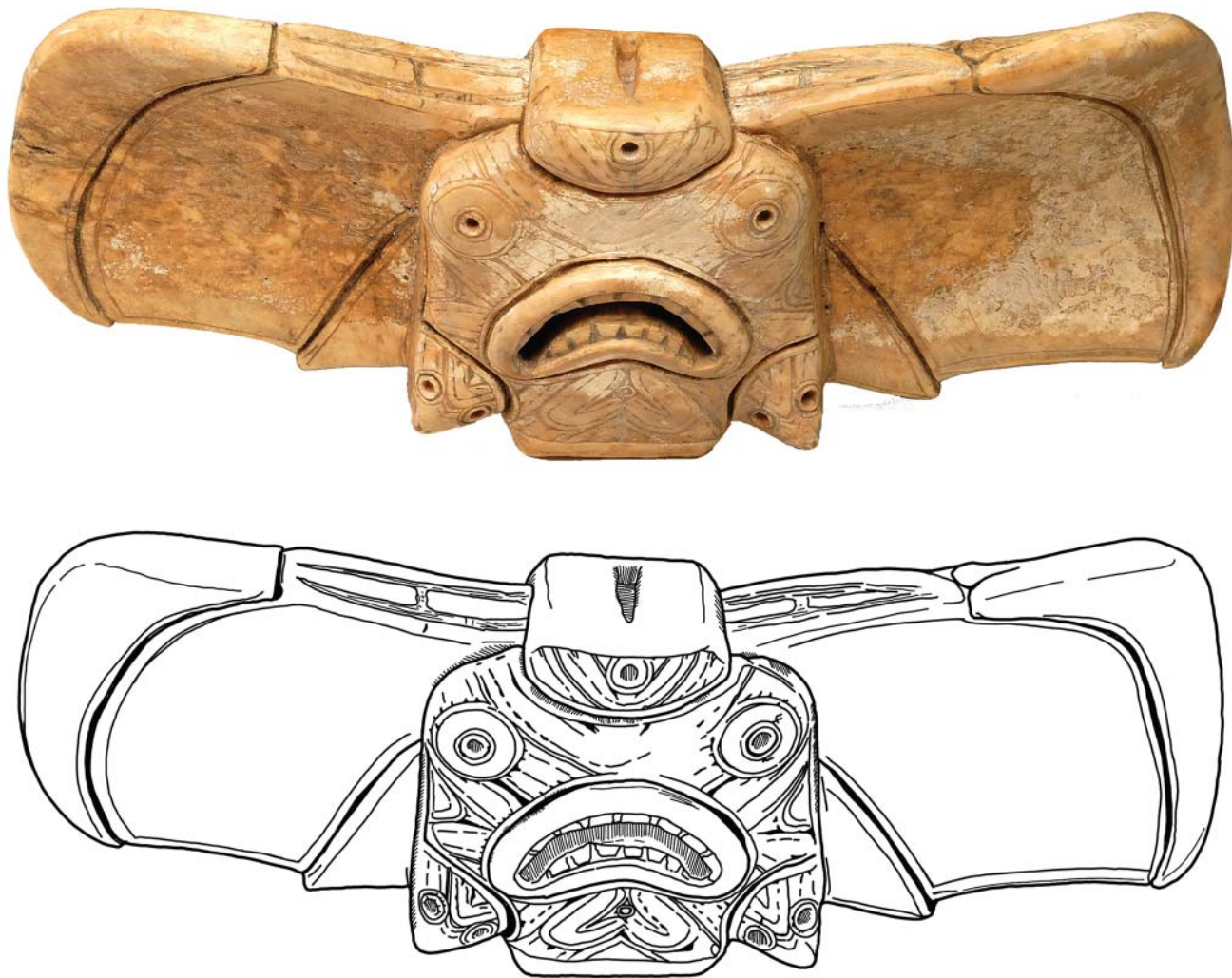


Figure 3. Ivory counterweight of OBS culture from Burial 302 at Ekven Cemetery. State Museum of Oriental Art collection 396, 19.0 wingspan. Courtesy of Chukotka Archaeological Expedition of State Museum of Oriental Art. Drawing by Kailiang Zhang. A toothy face flanked by a pair of eagle heads is depicted.

beings. However, Fienup-Riordan (1996:60) argues that “it is unlikely that Yup’ik mask makers divided their creations into rigid types”; therefore, one “cannot read back from the unmarked masks in museum collections to general functional categories.” Fitzhugh and Kaplan (1982:196) also point out that Inuit masks are “marked by their extreme diversity of style and form.”

Many animal masks are combined with a theriomorphic face. The faces on these masks, according to ethnographic accounts, usually represented the animal’s *yua* (Fienup-Riordan 1994, 1996; Fitzhugh 2009a; Nelson 1900; Ray 1967). This suggests that “[t]he concept of shared personhood is fundamental to masking” (Fienup-Riordan 1996:69). These animals carved on masks include both human game and predators, which constitute interac-

tional relations and share the same society with human persons. Here, I categorize this type of mask as a “*yua* mask.”

Nelson’s collection includes bear *yua*, caribou *yua*, fox (or wolf) *yua*, salmon *yua*, seal *yua*, bird *yua*, and *yua* masks of other spiritual beings (Nelson 1900:395–415). A black bear mask, collected from Sabotnisky on the lower Yukon, has a human-like face covering the right side of the bear face overhung by tufts of human hair, which is identified as the representation of the *yua* of the bear (Nelson 1900:396). A very large puffin mask, collected from south of the Yukon River mouth, has a face in the bird’s open mouth, representing “the supposed features of the bird’s *inua*” (Nelson 1900:397). A similar design is also seen on a seal mask in the Burke Museum collection. The face-



Figure 4. Ivory blubber from the Okvik site. UAMN collection 1-1931-0993 (blubber scraper), Okvik Site, OBS II, 7.2 cm length. Photograph by Feng Qu. Drawing by Kailiang Zhang. Courtesy of University of Alaska Museum of the North. Round and bossed eyes, snout, and a toothy mouth of a theriomorphic face are depicted.

looked *yua* of the seal is placed in the animal's open mouth (Fienup-Riordan 1996:70).

Bird is a frequent motif among Yup'ik *yua* masks. Except for puffin, Nelson's collection also includes owl and sandhill crane *yua* masks. UAMN collection 0314-4354 is a large owl mask collected by the American trader Frank Waskey in 1946 from a village in the southwest region of Alaska. It bears a human-like face on its back to represent the *yua* of the owl (also see Fienup-Riordan 1996:300–301) (Fig. 5). A loon mask, collected by Johan Jacobsen in 1883 and now stored in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, has a human-like face on its back. According to Jacobsen, the face represents the shaman's *tuunraq*—the shaman's helping spirit. The loon has the ability to move between worlds as a creature of the land, air, and water and is thus often figured as the shaman's *tuunraq*, which could take the form *yua* (Fienup-Riordan 1996:68).³

The Amazonian, Arctic, and Subarctic ethnographies reveal that all humans, other-than-human beings, and things are endowed with an animating essence. The continuity in the interiority of beings contrasts with the discontinuity in the outer forms of various species. Thus, the corporeal form is the criterion to differentiate between human persons and other-than-human persons in relational ontologies (Århem 1996; Descola 2013; Fienup-Riordan 1994; Hallowell 1960; Taylor 1996; Vilaça 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004). That is to say, the spirits or souls “of plants, animals, and humans can take a variety of material shapes and thus penetrate various life worlds and manifest themselves as different classes of beings” (Århem 1996:188). While the internal essence of a spiritual type is fixed, the outer bodily form as clothing or an envelope is “changeable and removable” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:471). Because different-shaped persons share subjectivity or interiority, Descola (2013:136) argues that there is “interchangeability” between human and other-than-human physicality; thus, certain individuals, such as shamans and ritual dancers, could transform their physicalities into other-than-human forms. From this perspective, the Yup'ik *yua* masks were critical elements for rituals, “endowed with the power metaphysically to transform the identities of those who wear them” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:482).

Body metamorphosis is characterized by two dimensions. The first is that other-than-human persons reveal their interiority by taking on the form of a human-like physical body. The second is that humans transform the form of their physicality into that of the other-than-human person (Descola 2013:138). Both ontological dimensions can be seen in Yup'ik *yua* masks. The human-like face revealed the spiritual essence of the animal person. When a hunter or a shaman was donning the mask, he transformed his human body into the animal's shape. In this way, body metamorphosis constitutes an interactional relation between man and animals. Humans performed masked dances not only in order to honor animal persons and to ward off evils but also to take animals' perspectives and powers in creating “a conduit for communication and control between beings or realms” (Betts et al. 2015:100). When body appearances set up the boundaries between the human and other-than-human persons, the rituals create passages between worlds, and boundaries were thus “dynamic and transitional” (Fienup-Riordan 1994:49).

Therefore, when Yup'ik shamans or hunters were donning masks in rituals, these artifacts actually afforded humans the ability to rebuild their extra-bodies. Similar to Darhad shamanic costumes in northern Mongolia, Yup'ik masks were also “imbued with the capacity to momentarily transform the bodily appearance of the hunter's



Figure 5. Owl mask from Waskey's collection. UAMN collection, 0314-4354. Photograph by Feng Qu. Courtesy of University of Alaska Museum of the North.

person” (Pedersen 2006:158). As Viveiros de Castro (1998:482) puts it, it is not that “the body is a clothing but rather that clothing is a body”; thus, “there is no doubt that bodies are discardable and exchangeable and that ‘behind’ them lie subjectivities which are formally identical to humans.” In this way, Yup’ik masks provided the shaman or the hunter with an additional body, a “perfected” body as theorized by Pedersen (2006:158), which ontologically enabled the human person in the masked dance to traverse the boundaries between the worlds.

***Yua* Artifacts and Body Metamorphosis**

Both American and Russian archaeologists have argued that Yup’ik beliefs and lifeways share similarities with those of Okvik/OBS cultures (Arutiunov 2009a; Fitzhugh 2009a; Fitzhugh and Crowell 2009). According to Fitzhugh’s (2009a:162) analysis, Okvik/OBS cultures in the Bering Strait region and the Yup’ik cultures of southwestern Alaska both have “a passion for artistic embellishment of all types of material culture, ranging from items of daily use to hunting equipment, clothing, and ceremonial objects.” Almost all animal motifs on Yup’ik *yua* masks can be seen on the Okvik/OBS ivory artifacts. The design combining a mask face with an animal is also a common style in prehistoric art of the Bering Strait. Images of mask faces frequently appear on surfaces of Okvik/OBS harpoon heads and counterweights, as well as other artifacts. Surprisingly, most harpoon heads were “carved in the form of a bird of prey” (Fitzhugh 2009a:176). Arutiunov (2009b:132) has noted that the harpoon heads in the Okvik style are usually engraved with basal spurs, which take “the form of bird feathers” and were possibly energized with “the power of a winged predator.” Both Arutiunov (2009b:132) and Fitzhugh (2009a:176) point out that many OBS harpoon heads have sharply defined spurs resembling a bird’s wings with clearly delineated feathers. Bird imagery is also represented by the three-pronged harpoon heads (Fitzhugh 2009a:176), categorized as Type J by Geist and Rainey (1936:206). Similar to some historical Yup’ik harpoon heads (Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982:79, 81), the three prongs of Type J harpoon heads represent a bird’s tucked plumage. Many images of the mask face were carved on these bird-shaped ivory objects (Figs. 1 and 2), suggesting a resemblance to Yup’ik bird *yua* masks.

The Okvik/OBS counterweights were previously called “winged objects” or “winged figures” because of their wing-like shape and bird form (see Collins 1937; Rainey 1941). A counterweight

excavated from Burial 255 at the Ekven Site on the Chukotka Peninsula has feathery treatment of its wings and a face with round paired eyes and nostrils on the rear panel (Fig. 6). Another counterweight from Burial 302 depicts a toothy face, which resembles the face images on the harpoon heads and the Yup’ik *yua* masks. The face is flanked by a pair of eagle heads, indicating that it might reveal the eagle’s *yua*, its inner person (Fig. 3).

The bird shape of harpoon heads and winged objects provides few hints about what species they might have represented. Fitzhugh (2009a:176) hypothesizes that the Okvik/OBS harpoon heads as bird predator may relate to a mythic being—a giant thunderbird which can carry whales and caribou. According to my observations, the blade slot of many harpoon heads is closer to the seabirds with long bills such as loon, gull, tern, and godwit. The *yua* face on the loon mask collected by Jacobsen (Fienup-Riordan 1996:68), mentioned in the previous section, has similarities with the face on those prehistoric harpoon heads, characterized by large eyes, nostrils, and a toothy mouth. Ethnographic data demonstrate that seabird images such as the loon were powerful symbols decorated on ritual clothing and headgear (Driscoll-Engelstad 2005:33; Hill 2018) and hunting equipment such as hunting hat and *kayak* (Fienup-Riordan 1990; Lantis 1946:239–240), suggesting that the human-bird relations are crucial in prehistoric Inuit and historic Yup’ik ontologies.⁴

These theriomorphic faces with large, round eyes and a toothy mouth do not seem to show obvious resemblance to the human visage; instead, they more likely bear “the underlying character and personal idiosyncrasies attributed to the spirit that has assumed its form” (Ingold 1998:197). In Viveiros de Castro’s (1998:483) point of view, such art designs reveal “the form of the Other as Subject” or “the second person” as other subject. Therefore, these depictions on Okvik/OBS ivories have “the look of non-human being” rather than “the look of human being” (Ingold 1998:196). Ethnographic records usually emphasize that the *yua* of an animal or a thing is in “human or semihuman” form but “with grotesque features” (Nelson 1900:437). However, here, I argue that these *yua* images reveal the animals’ or things’ inner persons rather than a “human” essence. Therefore, a *yua* is not “human or semihuman in form” as stated by Nelson (1900:437), but the other-than-human being’s own interior form. Such artifacts, which are “not to represent but to reveal” (Ingold 1998:204), are conceptualized as “Revelatory-Style Art” in my previous research (Qu 2019). From my point of view, this revelatory art plays a significant role to animate objects to be becoming ontologically independent beings. In this vein, whether *yua* masks or Okvik/OBS artifacts, they are “Made Beings” as

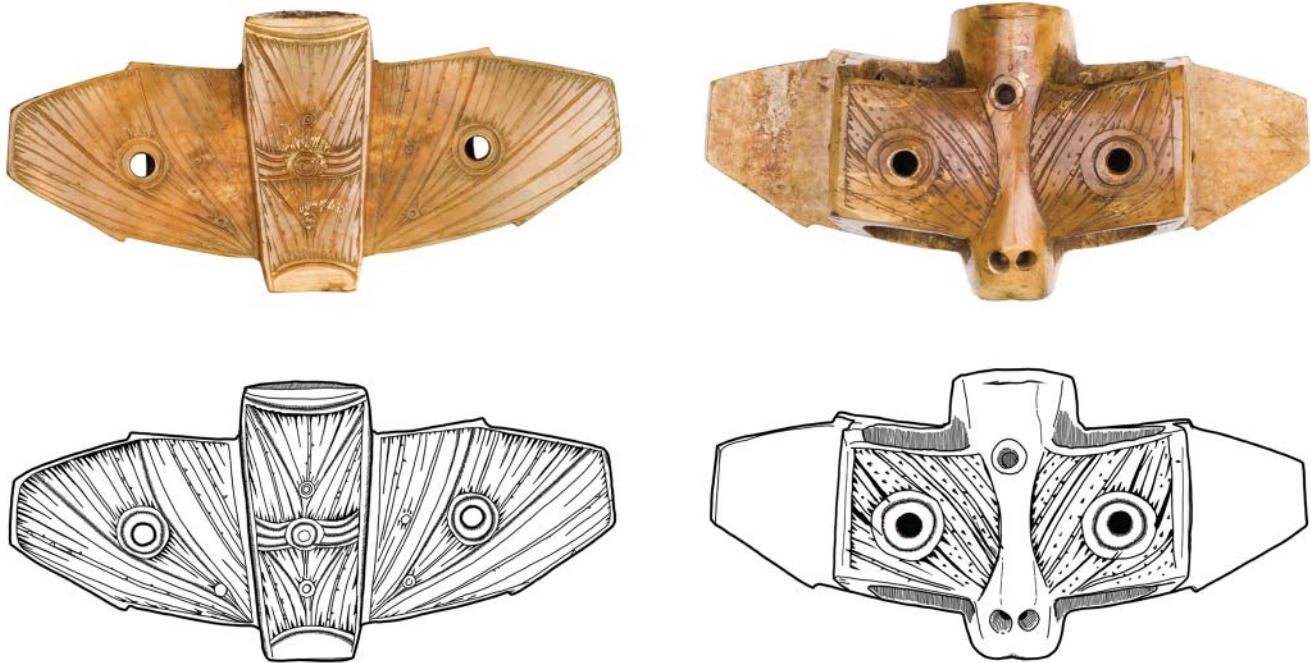


Figure 6. Ivory counterweight of Okvik/OBS I culture from Burial 255 at Ekven Cemetery. State Museum of Oriental Art collection 132, 12.4 cm wingspan. Courtesy of Chukotka Archaeological Expedition of State Museum of Oriental Art. Drawing by Kailiang Zhang. Feathery treatment is present on one side (above), and a face with round eyes and nostrils is depicted on the other side (below).

active agents (Vanpool and Newsome 2007:250) and thus possess “a meaningful, possibly coequal or dominant, relationship with humans” (Vanpool and Newsome 2007:246).

It is worthwhile to note that the *yua* images were only depicted on sea hunting implements as well as working implements related to sea-mammal butchering, skinning, and hide sewing, but never shown on weaponry for wars, land hunting implements, and other working tools, suggesting there seem to be a “sea-mammal hunting centralism” embedded in prehistoric Inuit cultures (Qu 2017:98–102).

Both the *yua* harpoon complex and Yup’ik *yua* masks reveal the way in which humans depended on the artifacts to manipulate the body metamorphosis. Like *yua* masks, harpoon heads and counterweights in prehistory also embody the idea of transformation between humans and animal persons. Hunting implements thus functioned as masks to some extent. Hill (2018:10) states that “hunting and shamanism were analogous activities” because both of them are “social practices involving humans and other-than-human persons.” Such an idea has also been proposed by Fitzhugh (2014). While the masks were donned by the Yup’ik shaman or hunters, the artifacts as “Made Beings” or an active agent right away established an ontological engagement between beings. In the

same way, while the harpoons were directly linked by the harpoon line with the float in the hunter’s control, the artifact was intimately tied with the person, just like masks on dancers’ bodies. Through the action of wearing the mask and the ritual dance accompanied by drumming, the Yup’ik dancer could enact the body transformation in which human bodies could engage with the other-than-human essence. Like the masks, the *yua* harpoon heads and counterweights are not to hide a human essence beneath the animal envelope but rather to “activate the powers of a different body” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:482). If the dancer was provided by the *yua* mask with an additional body, the hunter was also vested by the *yua* harpoon heads (and counterweights) with a perfected, extra body. Furthermore, like the *yua* mask, the harpoon does not only provide the hunter with other corporeal forms but instead enabled the hunter to be engaged “within a whole series of nonhuman bodies” (Pedersen 2006:158). Therefore, this rebuilt corporeal form as the hunter’s renewed body, as noted by Willerslev (2004:638), represents “a kind of double-negation”: the renewed person is “not the species he is imitating” and also “not *not* that species.” The body thus became a “perfected” entity (2006:158). In his paper on Siberian Yukaghir human-animal transformation, Willerslev (2004:638) writes,

Taking on an alien body, therefore, does not imply making one person into another in any absolute sense. Rather, it permits the person to act in-between identities. It gives him a new potential for action, free as he is from the bodily limits of both his own species and those of the species imitated.

Ethnographic data have demonstrated that the *yua* concept was deeply rooted in the Inuit cultural tradition and thus must have a time depth (Fienup-Riordan 1994, 1996; Lantis 1946; Nelson 1900; Weyer 1932). When both hunting tools and ceremonial masks were perceived as things capable of personhood, it is not surprising that prehistoric Inuit artifacts could be manipulated to carry *yua* images like historical masks.

While I have noted that prehistoric hunters and historic dancers had similar ontological strategies to manipulate relationships with animal persons, I have also realized that ancient hunting activities and Yup'ik ceremonies have obvious differences in social contexts. On the one hand, both hunting and ceremonies were conducted to assure that animals come to the hunter. On the other hand, the ritual performances were held for future hunting success, associated with stereotyped public ceremonialism, in which singing, drumming, and dancing were performed. Thus, historic rituals inevitably differed from those hunting activities on the sea for the immediate harvest. Dancers and mask-wearers in the historic ceremonies included both hunters and shamans, as well as other community members. However, actors in the prehistoric hunting activities are only hunters. For these reasons, Hill (2013:411) suggests that our "reconstruction of hunter-gatherer ontologies must involve considerations of the roles of non-ritual specialists," because hunters, like shamans, "could and did interact with other-than-human persons and experience 'non-empirical' phenomena." According to Dowson (2009:385), beings of different kinds such as humans, animals, and things were situated in the "day to day engagements with each other" and were "intimately and actively involved in world-renewing activities." Therefore, a broader ontological concept in prehistoric societies was inevitably embodied in the complexity of social life, but not only in rituals.

Interspecies Relations in Okvik/OBS Ontologies

As discussed in the previous section, there is no doubt that the human-bird relations played a central role in prehistoric Inuit ontologies. However, while archaeological perspectives on relations between humans and other-than-human persons are well-established in contemporary ontological studies (Boyd 2017:299), unfortunately, the intersub-

jective relations between other-than-human species have been neglected.⁵ It is worthy to note that the Okvik/OBS harpoon complex represented an engagement between the loon-like bird and the bear-like creature. While the Okvik/OBS harpoon head and counterweight featured the master bird of prey, the socket piece behind the harpoon head gripping the socket end was usually carved in the form of a ferocious bear-like animal with teeth and fangs bared. Arutiunov (2009a:54–55) proposes that socket pieces were characterized with the feature of a toothy predator, which can be recognized as a polar bear by its fangs. Such polar bears are spiritual, capable of transformational power, and distinguished from a normal bear. This bird-bear combination recalls Rainey's ethnographic record. Among Tigara Iñupiaq at Point Hope, every hunter had his own animal helpers, which were usually powerful diving creatures such as polar bears and loons (Rainey 1947:254).

The bird-bear engagement suggests that intersubjective and interactional relations could also be built between other-than-human persons. That is to say, the bird took on the predator's point of view and power to transform into a bear-like predator. The predatory behavior and power of the bird person were thus enabled by the bear person. Simultaneously, the socket-piece predator adopted the bird's characteristics, capable of flying abilities in the air, diving abilities into the water, and extraordinary vision beneath the ocean. The bird-bear engagement is clearly shown on an ivory counterweight excavated from Burial 285B, Ekven cemetery, Chukotka (Fig. 7). A theriomorphic face with paired large, round eyes, nostrils, and a toothy mouth is carved on the bird-shaped artifact. Above the face is a tiny crouching human figure, flanked by a pair of bears (Bronstein 2009:139). This masterpiece of ivory art represented the hunter's perfected extra body comprising perspectives from multiple beings such as the bird, the bear, the hunter, and the artifact itself as a "Made Being."

A prehistoric Inuit hunter's extra body hence embodied multiple interactions: the intersubjective relations between the hunter and the bird, the hunter and the bear, the bird and the bear, the hunter and the bird-bear hybrid, the bird and the hunter-bear hybrid, and the bear and the hunter-bird hybrid. These human and other-than-human beings "continually and reciprocally" brought "one another into existence" (Ingold 2006:10). While the harpoon complex comprised objectification of both bird and bear, the hunter's extra body was momentarily created through an ontological "continuous birth" (Ingold 2006:11). Here, we may recall what Willerslev (2004:638) has called "double-negation." The hunter's extra body was not the bird, not the bear/wolf, and not the hunter; also, it was not *not* the bird, not *not* the bear, and

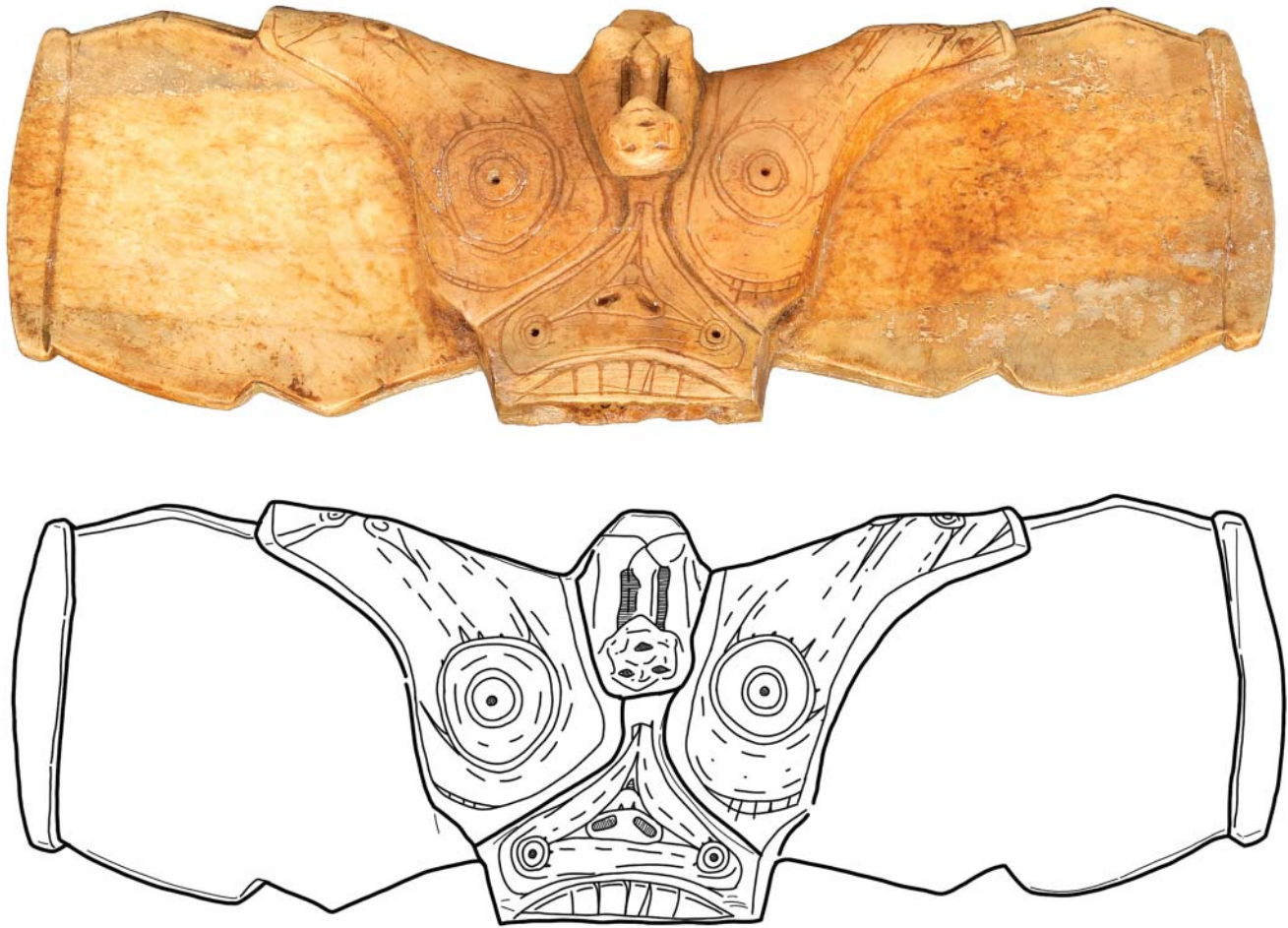


Figure 7. Ivory counterweight of OBS culture from Burial 285B at Ekven Cemetery, Chukotka. State Museum of Oriental Art 188, 20.0 cm wingspan. Courtesy of Chukotka Archaeological Expedition of State Museum of Oriental Art. Drawing by Kailiang Zhang. A theriomorphic face, a human figure, and a pair of bears are present.

not *not* the hunter. All these beings were thus free from the bodily limits of their own species. This corporeal form can also be seen as “a new assemblage of bodily effects” that “relates to the world in a new way” (Conneller 2004:50).

The idea of interspecies transformation was also represented on many other artifacts in both prehistoric Inuit and Yup’ik material culture. Numerous effigies of animals, as well as parts of animal remains (such as bird skins, animal teeth, and bone), were found in the Bering Strait prehistory. According to ethnographic analogies, Hill (2011, 2013) argues that they were possibly used as amulets attached to the harpoon rod, the kayak, and the hunter’s hat and clothing. Okvik/OBS animal carvings include polar bears, whales, walrus, seals, and birds. They are either the freestanding sculptures as attachments to some hunting implements or carvings on some artifacts (Qu 2013). The hunters on St. Lawrence Island were required to bear a

charm belt if taking part in the seal hunt, and the belt usually carried beads, used harpoon heads, human faces, and prey animal effigies (Jonaitis 1998:166–167). Fitzhugh and Kaplan (1982:61) emphasize that “[t]he kayak is not ready for sea until it has been given personal and religious marks and symbols,” and each hunter had his own identification marks including painted images on the paddles and boat, the dried bird parts, carvings of sea beasts and prey, and human-like faces of spiritual beings. The seabird beak effigy was the key element on the Yup’ik hunting hat for harvesting. UAMN specimen 0361-0001 (Fig. 8) is a bentwood hunting hat collected from Nuvivak Island, decorated with an ivory walrus flanked by two gull heads with long bills. In Yup’ik traditional knowledge, hunting hats are generally in the shape of a bird, which can disguise them in the eyes of seals (Fienup-Riordan 1990). Whether harpoon complex, hunting hats, or *kayak*, these implements provided



Figure 8. Yup'ik hunting hat. UAMN collection. 0361-0001, from Nunivak Island, 28 cm height. Photograph by Feng Qu. Courtesy of University of Alaska Museum of the North. A seal and a pair of gull heads are present.

the hunter with a sort of polymorphous form embodying many bodies, not only enabling hunter persons but also animal persons to traverse ontological divides. Beings of different kinds and the hunter were situated in a complicated social network comprising various relational interactions.

In studies of Dorset polar bear effigies in Canadian pre-Inuit cultures, Matthew Betts et al. (2015) suggest that these effigies as instruments were used to channel abilities and power to assist hunters in seal hunting. They allowed humans to adopt the bear's hunting abilities and perspectives and thus achieve "a perspective shift" from bear person to human person (Betts et al. 2015:105). The social, cosmological, and historical contexts of human-bear interactions were inextricably linked with natural ecology in which humans and bear persons shared similar biological behaviors and hunting strategies to capture seals. As Betts et al. (2015:96) has stressed, polar bears "hunted same prey at the same locations, in a similar manner, and even shared some physical attributes and ways of movement" like human hunters. For Hill (2011:416), whether effigies or animal remains, they were used to materialize the intersubjective relationship between man and prey animals through invoking the *yua* of animals. Both Bettes and Hill focused their analyses on human-animal engagements but failed to address interspecies relations between predators and prey. In my view,

the intersubjective relations between other-than-human persons were inevitably joined with human-animal relations. While human hunters interacted with prey animals based on "mutual respect and principles of reciprocity" (Hill 2011:409), the same principles were probably also used by predators to interact with prey animals. Both predatory species (such as bears and certain birds) and prey species (such as whales, seals, and walrus) together led to social entanglements associated with human hunting life on a daily basis. The abovementioned hunting hat, decorated with a seal image flanked by a pair of gull heads (Fig. 8), inevitably revealed a reciprocal relationship between the predatory bird and the prey animal beyond the human-prey relation. These multiple relations between beings were growing threads weaving into "a domain of entanglement" or a "meshwork" (Ingold 2006:14), creating "the multi-natural entity" (Pedersen 2006:159) during every hunting journey of the prehistoric Inuit hunter.

Whether a harpoon complex or a hunting hat and a *kayak*, these artifacts as "Made Beings" actualized and socialized multiple interspecies relations. Humans and artifacts, artifacts and predatory animals, artifacts and prey animals, artifacts and other artifacts not only depended on each other but also produced each other (see Hodder 2018:90–91). Therefore, we cannot only say that artifacts are products of humans; rather, we may also say that

artifacts are products of animals, and even humans and animals are products of artifacts.

Conclusion

Based on the theory of relational ontologies, I have approached a relational framework in which human-animal relations can be understood as bodily fluid and permeable. A comparison between the Yup'ik masks and prehistoric Inuit hunting gears employed in this research has demonstrated that *yua* artifacts or what I have called "Revelatory-Style Art" (Qu 2019) in both prehistoric Inuit and historic Yup'ik societies were made to mediate social engagements and intersubjective relations between humans and other-than-human persons. Two dimensions are crucial in understanding this revelatory art. First, *yua* artifacts reveal their status as "Made Beings" (Vanpool and Newsome 2007:250). They were perceived as active agents capable of consciousness, intentionality, and abilities who shared personhood of humans and animals. They not only experienced but also actively participated in hunting practices through everyday interactions with humans and animals as social members. Second, *yua* artifacts provided prehistoric hunters with a transformed, perfected, extra body "as a fabrication of social relations that take effect among an assortment" of human persons and animal persons (Watts 2013a:5). A *yua* artifact as the thing came to "flesh" in "multiplicity of forms" and became "an inherently polymorphous and labile entity;" it was never a "singular form" but "always moving along the inchoate path defined by its propensity to transmute from one form to another" (Pedersen 2006:156).

The human-animal relations played a fundamental role in Arctic Indigenous ontologies (Betts 2016; Betts et al. 2015; Discoll-Engelstad 2005; Fienup-Riordan 1990; Hill 2011, 2018). However, we must be aware that human-predator relations and human-prey relations were ontologically engaged with many intersubjective relations between other-than-human persons within the social partnership. These multiple relations were reconfigured to arrive at a corporeal form through "its interspecies entanglements" (Boyd 2017:307). Armstrong Oma (2010) has proposed a notion of "a social contract" between humans and animals through her explorations of Bronze Age cultures in southern Scandinavia. Such a contract is negotiable and can take many forms in producing asymmetrical relationships. Following this notion, in this paper, I argue that such a social contract existed not only between human persons and animal persons but also between other-than-human persons in prehistoric Inuit societies.

Okvik/OBS *yua* artifacts represented body metamorphosis that was deeply embedded in pre-

historic Inuit cosmology, signifying rebuilding of affects and capacities of both human hunters' and animals' bodies. By using *yua* artifacts, multiple social actors, including hunters, predators, and prey animals, could activate powers of different physical forms and share the same interior properties to actualize intersubjective communications between them. Inspired by ontological studies of the body (Descola 2013; Ingold 1998; Viveiros de Castro 1998), especially by Pedersen's (2006) approach on the Darhad Mongolian shaman's "two bodies," I contend that the prehistoric *yua* artifact not only engaged the human hunter "within a whole series of nonhuman bodies" (Pedersen 2006:158), but also engaged each social actor (such as a predatory animal or a prey animal) within a whole series of other beings' bodies. In this way, a polymorphous form represented by the Okvik/OBS artifact was not only the hunter's but also the other-than-human entity's perfected, extra body.

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Footnotes

1. The definition of the Bering Strait region in this article includes the northwestern and southwestern coasts of Alaska, the coastal areas of the Chukchi Peninsula, and the islands between the two sides of the strait.
2. The chronological data about Okvik culture and OBS culture have been widely debated (see Gerlach and Mason 1992), but for the sake of clarity, they are defined here from Dumond (2009) and Fitzhugh (2009b). However, the latest research places the Okvik phase and allied Ipiutak culture from AD 300 to 600, and the OBS florescence from AD 650 to 1250 (Mason and Rasic 2020).
3. Nelson (1900) believed that the *tunraq* or *tunghat* (the shaman's helping spirit) could take the form of *yua*. Fienup-Riordan (1996:69) clarifies

that “*yua* is not different from *inua*,” and both words mean “its person” in Yup’ik and Iñupiaq.

4. Fienup-Riordan (1990) argues that marine bird species are of greater importance than terrestrial bird species in Inuit cosmology because of their spiritual abilities. She writes,

it was neither the image of Raven nor powerful birds of prey that were represented, but ocean birds of less renown In fact, oceangoing birds had their own special abilities. They were diving birds that, unlike Raven and Thunderbird, could swim as well as fly and thus had ties to both the upper and watery worlds (Fienup-Riordan 1990:27).

Ethnographic data indicate that the loon was employed by the Inuit shaman in Alaska and Siberia as a prevalent predatory spirit (Blodgett 1979:50). Inuit ritual clothing and headgear usually included seabird skins, beaks, and heads (Hill 2018:7). The Copper Inuit in the central Canadian Arctic used the tapered beak of the yellow-billed loon on their dance hats (Driscoll-Engelstad 2005:33). The seabird beak effigy was the key element on the Yup’ik hunting hat for harvesting. In Yup’ik traditional knowledge, hunting hats are generally in the shape of a bird, and this can disguise them in the eyes of seals (Fienup-Riordan 1990). According to Lantis’s (1946:239) observations of Nunivak Yup’ik in the southwest of Alaska, the hunter possessed some *ingos* (animal helpers) and painted an *ingo*—usually a bird—on his kayak cover, *umiak* cover, and double-bladed paddle. Fienup-Riordan (2007:211) notes that “[t]he eagle and loon were two of many powerful animals painted on and used to empower a man’s kayak.” Therefore, while “riding in a kayak and wearing a bentwood hunting hat,” the hunter could become “a bird in the eyes of the seals he sought” (Fienup-Riordan 1990:27). Hill (2018:5) has stressed, “[O]f the many birds used by inhabitants of the Western Arctic, the loon had particular salience.” Morrow and Volkman (1975:150) emphasize that the loon is “a common shamanistic helper among peoples in the circumpolar area.” For Collins (1973:12), the loon “was a creature, the earth-diver, who brought up bits of the primordial ocean bottom to form the world,” and it was also the principal helping spirit “who conducted the Siberian shaman on his journeys to the underworld.”

5. Kristin Armstrong Oma (2016) has addressed specific social entanglements between humans, dogs, and sheep during the Norwegian Bronze Age.

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