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“The goat that died for family”:

Animal sacrifice and interspecies kinship in India’s Central Himalayas

ABSTRACT

Animal sacrifice can be productively theorized as a practice of kindred intimacy between human and nonhuman animal. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in India’s Central Himalayas, I trace how the ritual sacrifice of goats in the region’s mountain villages acquires power and meaning through its anchoring in a realm of interspecies kinship. This kinship between humans and animals is created and sustained through everyday practices of intercorporeal engagement and care. I contend, in fact, that animal sacrifice is itself constitutive of interspecies kin relations. The spectacular act of violence at the heart of sacrifice—the beheading of the sacrificial animal—is crucial to the constitution of kin solidarity between human sacrificer and animal victim. From this perspective, animal sacrifice creates a world rich with the possibility of mutual response and recognition between different beings entangled in intimate and complex ways. [*sacrifice, human–animal, interspecies kinship, South Asia, relations of care, religion, Himalayas*]

In the summer of 2013, a series of cloudbursts, floods, and landslides struck India’s Central Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, causing thousands of deaths and devastating homes and entire villages. A few weeks after the rains abated, people flocked to temples across the region to seek an explanation for the destruction from their *devi-devta* (local goddesses and gods). At a temple dedicated to the local Hindu deity Golu in the eastern part of the state, I struck up a conversation with Devidutt, an elderly man accompanied by several members of his family.¹ With them was a goat intended for sacrifice, nibbling at the garland of roses that hung loosely around his neck. Everyone around us was trying to make sense of the devastation of the last few weeks, and so were we. I agreed with Devidutt that the recent boom in construction had weakened the mountains, and he nodded when I reviewed the theories of climate change circulating in the Indian press.

But, he said dismissively, such talk was mere speculation. There was another, undeniable, explanation for the destruction, and it had nothing to do with construction or climate change. “I saw on television that there are hundreds of corpses floating in the Ganga,” he said wearily. “What else could it be but a sign that our deities are angry?” When I asked what might have ignited this divine rage, he told me that, in the olden days, deities took human sacrifices until they were finally persuaded to accept animals instead. But in 2011, an Uttarakhand High Court ruling, in response to numerous petitions from animal rights organizations, announced that only animals whose meat was subsequently consumed could be sacrificed in temples. Devidutt suggested that this ruling had scared some people into abandoning sacrifice, which, in turn, had angered the deities. Thus, he concluded, the monsoonal fury of the last few weeks was divine revenge. The gods had resumed taking human sacrifice and would continue to do so until animal sacrifice was offered to them again.

Devidutt’s daughter-in-law, Neetu, spoke up. “Even this goat knows the gods are upset,” she said to me, gesturing at the animal that stood beside us. The old man nodded. He related how, for the last two weeks, every time he had taken the family’s goats out to graze, this particular goat had gone missing. The first time it happened, Devidutt had been afraid that the goat had strayed into a neighbor’s field, but he

had found him kneeling outside a little village shrine dedicated to Golu, as if he were praying. The same thing happened for several days in succession. “In the mountains,” he observed, “animals have a special relationship with devta. This goat is a devotee of Golu *devta*. This is a *devbhumi* (land of the gods), and animals play their own part in maintaining its sacred power. The disaster happened because the gods were unhappy. The goat recognized that and was telling me to do my duty and sacrifice him to Golu.”

I was intrigued by this explanation of the goat’s behavior and asked how the family knew that the animal was telling them it was time for him to be sacrificed.² Neetu responded first, saying,

It’s like this ... we raise them from birth. That’s how we know what they want ... Do this [she pulled the goat’s ear] and they go down instead of up ... when they nudge you here [gesturing to her hip] you know they want water. They cannot speak, but they have a language ... that’s how we know. You feel *mamta* (maternal love) for them as you do for your children. Nobody asks a mother how she knows that her infant is crying because it is hungry. You just know because you gave birth to it and raised it. We may not give birth [to these animals], but we raise them like mothers. They consider us mothers too. That’s how we knew the goat was telling us it was time to give *puja* (a devotional offering) ... Of course, it saddens us when our animals die. But in the olden times we would sacrifice our children, no? This is another form of that. These goats die for their family.

It would be easy to dismiss Neetu’s perspective as a self-serving response to claims that sacrifice causes unconscionable suffering for sentient beings. After all, one could point out, the comparison between children and goats is limited, as people do not kill their children. The question of asymmetrical power is urgent, and I return to it below. But to read Neetu’s and Devidutt’s words as disingenuous would prevent us from exploring the world of possibilities they open up for explaining the complex processes through which human and nonhuman animals come to be constituted as kindred subjects in relation to one another and to the gods in this mountain landscape.

What if, instead, we were to take these emic categories of experience as the starting point of analysis? What might adopting the perspective of Neetu and Devidutt reveal about sacrifice as a practice of intimacy between humans and nonhumans? Sacrifice is generally understood in terms of a set of ritual images, narratives, and acts that renew social relations through the displacement of societal conflict onto a scapegoat (Bloch 1992; Durkheim 2001; Frazer 1912; Girard 1977; Lambek 2007). Some theorists suggest that the basic principle of ritual sacrifice is substitution, the use of a surrogate victim for the original other (Doniger and

Smith 1989; Hubert and Mauss 1981; Lévi-Strauss 1966). What makes this substitution possible, they assert, is the “theoretical identification of the sacrificer and the victim” (Doniger 1988:99). But in what material and affective contexts does this theoretical identification between human and nonhuman emerge? Is it possible to trace, through thick ethnographic description, how an animal becomes an appropriate stand-in for a human victim in a sacrifice? What insights can the field that has variously been described as “multispecies ethnography” (Helmreich and Kirksey 2010), “interspecies” anthropology (Livingston and Puar 2011), and the “anthropology of life” (Kohn 2007) offer one of anthropology’s oldest and most enduring concerns—sacrifice—and vice versa?

An interspecies approach to the study of ritual animal sacrifice illuminates how the identification of human with nonhuman animal in sacrificial contexts is enabled by a sense of shared kinship fostered through the embodied experience of everyday entanglement in relations of care, attention, and subjection. These proximate intimacies, based in no small part on the embodied language that Neetu described sharing with her animals, create a realm of affective and relational kinship between human and nonhuman animals. Neetu invoked this kindred mutuality in her use of the term *mamta* to describe her feelings for her goats and their response to her maternal care. Ritual sacrifice acquires power and meaning through its grounding in precisely this world of kinship between human and animal.

Casting an interspecies lens on sacrifice, then, illustrates how this phenomenon is animated by a sense of interspecies kinship sustained by embodied and relational practices of intimate care. But what can an affective theory of sacrifice offer multispecies anthropology? I contend that animal sacrifice in Uttarakhand is itself *constitutive* of interspecies kin relations. When grappling with ethical dilemmas about the value of different lives and who has power over death, many villagers turn to the register of kinship to describe how sacrifice deepens the bonds of relatedness between them and the animals they offer to the gods. They speak of this ritual practice as the closing of a circle of kinship, a moment that cements the connection of individual goats to their human families. By dying in place of a human family member, some women said, goats repay the care they receive, much as children in the past consented to their sacrifice for the sake of the family. This (re)making of interspecies kinship is, no doubt, violent, but the role of sacrifice in establishing and strengthening connections and kin relations between human and nonhuman animals is undeniable. Interspecies kinship, thus, both crafts and is crafted by sacrificial acts.

To explore the creative possibilities and ethical dilemmas that arise in framing the act of sacrifice as one of interspecies kinship, I turn first to an examination of the material and affective conditions in which kin solidarity

emerges between disparate beings, focusing on the intersection of care and violence as a productive site for the creation of these bonds. I then address a question that is crucial to scholarship on sacrifice—the circumstances that allow for the identification of animal with human and the consequent substitution of the former for the latter as a ritual offering—by examining ideas of animal agency and selfhood. Following this discussion, I ethnographically trace how a sense of interspecies kinship emerges across two interconnected social realms in the mountain villages of Uttarakhand: firstly, in the shared status of humans and nonhuman animals as self-aware and reflexive subjects of powerful local deities who demand sacrifice from their followers and, secondly, through embodied practices of domestication that produce a sense of interspecies mutuality, what humans often cast in terms of *mamta*, or maternal love. Finally, in light of the experience of my ethnographic subjects, whose lives are intimately entangled with other lives in ways that bring questions of relation and ethics to the fore, I ask if sacrifice can be dismissed as an act of killing that frees the sacrificer from any obligation to relate to the sacrificial victim as one who also has life.

Care and violence: The conditions of kin solidarity

The idea that sacrificial animals share a bond of kinship with those who sacrifice them is not new to anthropology. In his work on early Semitic sacrifice, William Robertson Smith (1927) proposes that the original sacrificial animal was akin to a totemic animal, believed to be holy by those who sacrificed it.³ Through their communal consumption of sacrificial meat, human worshippers not only emphasized their blood relationship to the sacrificial animal and the god but also reaffirmed their blood bonds with one another. Sigmund Freud, summarizing Smith's work, writes that in prepastoral societies "the sacrificial animal was treated like one of kin; *the sacrificing community, its god, and the sacrificial animal were of the same blood*, and the members of a clan" (1998:117).⁴ While this work opens up a space for thinking about the kindred dimensions of sacrifice, the sense of interspecies kinship at work in Uttarakhand is closer to what Emile Durkheim describes for the Gewwe Gal tribespeople of New South Wales, who believed "that each person has within him an affinity for the spirit of some bird, beast or reptile. It is not that the individual is thought to be descended from that animal, but that a kinship is thought to exist between the spirit that animates the man and the spirit of the animal" (2001:192).

Though attentive to how kinship between humans, animals, and gods is crucial to the creation of sacrificial meaning and power, Smith, Freud, and Durkheim do not say much about what it is that leads to this kinship. What, then, are the conditions of possibility in which a sense of inter-

species kinship arises? What historical and contemporary structures shape affective attachments and disavowals? In the villages of the Central Himalayas, the kinship of spirit between human and animal is fostered by practices of domestication that rely on the embodied participation of one being in the life of another. It is through the everyday process of going "in and out of each other's minds and bodies," to borrow Maurice Bloch's (2012) evocative turn of phrase, that humans and animals come to be constituted as kin. Whether communicating with one another through a language of the body that requires understanding what a touch signals or quite literally entering the other's body, as I once observed a woman doing when she helped her goat give birth by gently pulling the kid out of the womb, the "intercorporeal" nature of care, which I consider in more depth below, is the condition of possibility for the slow emergence of kin solidarity between human and nonhuman animal (Ingold 2011; Al-Mohammad and Peluso 2012).

However, these relational, embodied entanglements that I call "kinship" are forged not only through practices of embodied care but also in the crucible of embodied violence. The spectacular act of violence that lies at the very heart of sacrifice in Uttarakhand—the beheading of the sacrificial animal—is as crucial to the constitution of a sense of kinship between human sacrificer and animal victim as is the everyday process of attending to and caring for that animal. What messy ethics emerge, then, from the complicated imbrications of care and violence that characterize these entwined human and animal lives? Many in the mountains are critical of animal sacrifice, whether animal rights groups who decry the cruelty of sacrifice, Hindu reform organizations who believe the practice is un-Hindu, or young *pa-haris* who are keen to abandon practices that, to them, reek of "tradition."⁵ These critics would be skeptical of the claim that interspecies kinship and love shape the act of sacrifice. They would perhaps argue that the undeniable violence of sacrifice—the cries of the animals in their last moments, the spasming of headless torsos, the gush of blood and guts—must force an engagement with animal death and human responsibility for it.

Some people who look to negotiate this ethical quagmire find ways to decenter death and violence by speculating about the possibility of life after death, a popular node for the relation of human to nonhuman in South Asia. In the course of a conversation in 2011, a young man named Bansi asked me if I remembered a particular scene from the Kumauni movie *Balivedna* (Sacrificial Pangs; see Bali Vedna Part 1.DAT 2013; Bali Vedna Part 2.DAT 2013), a stinging critique of animal sacrifice that we had watched together. The scene he referred to involved a conversation about animal souls between a temple priest and a village headman, on the one side, and, on the other side, a youth shattered by the sacrifice of his favorite goat. The priest and the headman, arguing with the youth about the importance of

sacrifice, assert that sacrificial death, unlike ordinary forms of death, releases animal souls from the cycle of rebirth and guarantees their happiness.

Bansi recounted how, watching *Balivedna*, he was reminded of a particularly rambunctious goat he used to take out grazing as a child. The goat led him down paths he had never followed before, and he recalled those afternoons of exploration with pleasure. He lowered his voice as he told me about how the goat was eventually sacrificed, leaving him bereft. “I liked that scene in the movie a lot,” he said after a few moments of silence.

I remember how much I cried when that goat was sacrificed. I didn’t take the animals to graze for days until my father slapped me hard across my face and told me I had to go. But what the headman said made me happy. I realized if I really loved that goat then I should be happy that his soul was *mukt* (released), not sad that he died. He died as puja, not at the butcher’s. Our deities will look after him. Thanks to that ... he might have been reborn as a human, who knows?

The obvious comfort Bansi derived from the thought that the goat’s soul might have been liberated from the cycle of rebirth as a result of local deities’ pleasure with the sacrifice, an idea ridiculed in the film, speaks to how difficult it is for those who live in intimate proximity with companion animals to come to terms with their deaths. While the intimacy Bansi recalled so poignantly does not stand outside power, it is a vivid reminder that human relationships with nonhumans are characterized by a plentitude of affect that complicates any convenient dualism between love and death, distress and pride, veneration and consumption.⁶ To invoke John Berger, a peasant can become fond of her goat and still be happy to watch him die a sacrificial death.⁷ Indeed, any attempt to explore the complex relationships between humans and nonhumans will be poorer for not taking into account how, in the interstices of power and violence, spaces for love, care, and mutuality flourish.

Sacrifice as an interspecies relationship: Materializing sacrificial matter

Anthropological writing on sacrifice conceives of it as involving three participating beings, objects, or domains: one who gives, one who receives, and one who is given or sacrificed (Carter 2003:4).⁸ In *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1981) define sacrifice in terms of the root *sacrē* that which “makes sacred.” They conceptualize sacrifice as a “religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it” (Hubert and Mauss 1981:13). For them, the sacrificial victim serves as a link between the sacred and the profane; its consecration goes beyond it to sacralize the person makes the offering. Other

scholars have suggested that the purpose of the sacrificial victim is not so much to link sacred and profane as to ransom the life of an original human victim. The human who sacrifices an animal is, in effect, “ransoming” him- or herself from death at the altar of the gods. It is this “sleight of hand,” this game of “displacement and replacement,” that distinguishes sacrifice from other forms of death, that deems it from criminality (Doniger and Smith 1989:189).

For the most part, this body of work emphasizes the symbolic significance of the sacrificial victim at the expense of a serious consideration of how sacrificial bodies and objects are lively “material-semiotic” beings (Haraway 2008:4). The question of why a particular animal or flower or vegetable is chosen as a substitute for a human victim is treated as a semiotic one: the ideal victim is as symbolically close to human as possible. One reason for this emphasis on semiotics at the expense of materiality, especially in the Vedic South Asian context, could be a reliance on sacrificial myths and texts, which, as Wendy Doniger notes, treat substitution not as a historical question but as one relating to “the nature of ritual symbolism, explaining how it is that plants or mantras stand for animals, and animals for humans, in the sacrifice” (2009:153).

Such systems of classification that allowed nonhumans to symbolically stand in for humans in sacrifice struck Claude Lévi-Strauss as “wanting in good sense” because they “adopt a conception of the natural series which is false from the objective point of view for ... it represents it as continuous” (1966:227–228). However, these continuities between human and nonhuman, which might seem inconsistent from an “objective point of view,” make more sense if we locate the production of semiotic meaning firmly in the world of lived interactions between different beings. To fully appreciate sacrificial substitution, in other words, these myths and rituals must be situated in a broader world of historical embodied entanglements between human and nonhuman, where animals are simultaneously good to eat, “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss), and good to “live with” (Haraway 2008). Sacrificial animals, furthermore, must be recognized as more than just sacrificial matter. Sacrificial identification is not with the “idea” of animals, as E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1953:185) declared in his work on Nuer sacrifice, but with lively corporeal animals who act “as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010:ix).⁹

Indeed, the “consequential materiality” of animals is a crucial component in people’s understanding of them as kin (Kosek 2006:23). The extension of kin relations to nonhumans is not a human projection of cultural meaning onto a fetish but a recognition that emerges from complex and constitutive lived relationships with individual animals who engage, exasperate, and enchant the humans whose lives are entangled with theirs. A variety of nonhuman animals traverse the rural landscape of the Central

Himalayas. Goats, leopards, buffaloes, birds, wild boars, cows, monkeys, and bears are among the many animals with whom humans share this landscape. The actions of these nonhuman animals often exceed people's expectations of them, animating social processes and relationships in unexpected ways. While their agency, like that of humans, does not stand in any easy relationship to what social theorists might acknowledge as intention, mountain villagers argue that many animals act with precisely what the former think of as perceptible intention.¹⁰ This imputation of intentional agency to animals is not restricted to livestock companions. Elsewhere I discuss how monkeys, especially translocated macaques from the plains, are spoken of as creatures who deliberately trouble humans, throwing clean washing in the dirt, stealing food they do not eat, and scaring people just for their own amusement (Govindrajan 2015). Similarly, women in the mountains often speak in excited whispers about male bears who desire human women, sometimes kidnapping and having sex with them. These desires are not ascribed to instinct but are framed as intentional acts of interspecies love and sex. It is to these willful, intentional nonhuman actors that humans extend the ties of kinship.

The recognition of animals as agents shapes the perception that people and animals are related in another way—they are both selves. I use the term *self* to capture people's belief that animals, like humans, are relatively reflexive creatures with an awareness of being in a world that they inhabit with humans, other nonhumans, and the divine.¹¹ This Kumauni (and South Asian) understanding of selfhood is not restricted to an autonomous, singular human body but is "mutable, multidimensional, nonlinear ... a moving part among other moving parts" (Smith 2006:xvi).¹² Two clarifications are in order here. Firstly, this shared sense of selfhood is hierarchical: Nonhumans are believed to possess a less-developed sense of self than humans possess. Secondly, not all kinds of animals are thought to possess selfhood in the same way or to the same degree. The intimate, embodied proximities of everyday life allow humans to attribute what can be called "selfhood" to livestock in a way that they do not to wild animals. However, despite these gradations, even wild animals can be reflexive beings with a "point of view" (Kohn 2007). For instance, some villagers said that leopards are such fervent devotees of deities that they know if a person has sullied a temple by transgressing rules of purity and pollution. Even if the transgression was inadvertent, I was told, leopards will sit in front of the temple in the middle of the day, terrorizing people until a purification ceremony is carried out.¹³

This understanding of selfhood as going beyond a human individual is consistent with notions of the self in Indic thought.¹⁴ Popular notions of the self and self-representation in South Asia are hybrid, contingent, and relational.¹⁵ Indeed, as William Sax points out, "Hindu

thought ... anticipates postmodern and poststructuralist 'deconstructions' of the person/self in the sense that it accords no ontological primacy to the phenomenal 'person' or 'individual', regarding it as a mere appearance, the temporary effect of a variety of underlying causes" (2002:11). Further, the significance of complex notions of selfhood is not restricted to ethnographic contexts alone. In his work on possession in South Asia, for instance, Frederick M. Smith notes that Vedic texts such as the Satapatha Brahmana insist on a "self that is constitutive of an intimate interplay between human, divine, and sacrificial bodies" (2006:9).

In Uttarakhand, the idea that animals are reflexive and self-aware beings both shapes and is shaped by the sacrificial substitution of animal for human. While this perception emerges organically from the everyday unfolding of lives, it acquires deeper significance in the context of people's belief that animals share a meaningful relation with local deities. People believe that the actions of mountain deities affect not just their own lives but also the lives of animals, bringing human and nonhuman together in a shared bond of supplication to the divine. Sometimes, villagers told me, the moods and experiences of deities are reflected in and mediated through the behavior of animals. A sudden spike in wild boar incursions into cultivated fields, for instance, could be a sign that the gods are upset. In other words, the experiences of deities and animals are thought to converge in certain moments, revealing an affective connection between them. Animals can act in ways that depend on and reflect divine preoccupations. As far as villagers are concerned, then, the selfhood of animals is constituted not only in relation to people but also in relation to the gods. It is to this world of entanglements between human, animal, and the divine that I now move.

"Gods expect the life of a devotee": Human–animal kinship in a sacred geography

In popular discourse, Uttarakhand is often called a "devbhumi," a land of gods. Vishnu and Shiva, Yamuna and Ganga, the "textual deities" of Hinduism (Babb 1975) who are called "bhagwan" to distinguish them from local devi-devta, reside in some of Hinduism's holiest shrines in the Himalayas. However, it is not just the high gods residing in the Himalayas who make this land a devbhumi but hundreds of local deities as well, who live alongside humans and nonhumans and are an integral part of their everyday lives (Berreman 1963; Sax 2009). Indeed, the presence of thousands of humble shrines dedicated to these deities ensure that this is truly a "sacred geography," a "living landscape in which mountains, rivers and forests are elaborately linked to the stories of the gods" (Eck 2012:5). These deities are perceived as agents, corporeal residents of the Hindu world who are "existentially coeval"

with humans and make decisions that affect human lives (Chakrabarty 2007:16; cf. Sax 2009; Singh 2011).

Blood sacrifice is an important part of the worship of these deities. During festivals, hundreds of animals are sacrificed over the course of one day, but a smaller number of animals are also sacrificed most weeks of the year. A portion of the sacrificial meat is given to the officiating priest who acts as the representative of the deity, and the rest is consumed by the immediate family and relatives who provide the animal. Most of the animal sacrifices I observed during the course of my fieldwork, whether in large temples or at more humble shrines in villages, involved goats. Goats are raised primarily for sacrifice and meat in this region, and it is common for people to earmark certain animals for sacrifice. The ubiquity of goats, and their consequential (over)representation in sacrifice, has been aided over the last few years by government rural development policies that encourage goat keeping as a source of livelihood.¹⁶

The practice of sacrifice has become the subject of (renewed) debate over the last decade, forcing people to evaluate and explain their relationship with local deities and the animals they sacrifice. Part of the unease over sacrifice comes from the growing influence of the pan-Indian gods of Hinduism, who have increasingly taken their place alongside local devi-devta in mountain homes. High gods have always traveled through this landscape with pilgrims and migrants, but they have become more prominent in the last few decades through television and other forms of media. Their interlocutors, whether traveling ascetics or gurus who preach from Sanskrit texts on television, argue that blood sacrifice has no place in the “traditional” Hinduism dominated by the divinities of the Sanskrit tradition.

Animal rights organizations share in the disapproval of sacrifice. Since 2009, many such groups have called for a ban on animal sacrifice in Uttarakhand on the grounds that it is cruel and has no ritual significance in Hinduism.¹⁷ Alliances with Hindu religious reform organizations who claim that Vedic texts contain no references to animal sacrifice have played an important part in buttressing the assertion that sacrifice is not religiously sanctioned and, further, that it deviates from the love of nature and pacifism that these groups believe are the hallmark of Hinduism.

In 2011, the Uttarakhand High Court ruled on a public interest litigation (PIL) brought before it by an animal rights group that has been vocal in its opposition to sacrifice over the last decade. The petition demanded a complete ban on animal sacrifice in the region. Instead, the High Court announced that any animal sacrificed had to be consumed by the sacrificers. In addition, animals could no longer be sacrificed in the open courtyards of temples but only in closed sheds set aside for the purpose. This ruling was interpreted by animal rights groups as amounting to a total ban, and they visited temples across the region to let people know that sacrifice was illegal. As a result, while everyday

forms of sacrifice went on unhindered, the number of animals brought to temples on festival days declined. It was this ruling and its effects that Devidutt referred to the day I met him, his daughter-in-law, and the kneeling goat.

What the monsoon proved to Devidutt and many others was that local deities, the devi-devta of the mountains, were still the most powerful forces to be reckoned with. The destruction was seen as visible proof of their *shakti*, their sacred power, and as a warning to their devotees, both human and nonhuman, not to ignore them. Even those ambivalent about sacrifice, who believed that it was barbaric and backward, were forced to acknowledge that the gods were demanding their due. Lakshman, a man who had not sacrificed an animal in years, sacrificed one of his family's goats a few days after the cloudbursts. Explaining his actions, he said,

Such things [monsoons] are held in check by sacrifice. People like me stopped giving sacrifice because of the court order and so this is happening. The gods are taking their sacrifice like this, and all their devotees are suffering. Do you think animals are suffering any less? Thousands of goats and cows are lying dead in rivers and gorges. This is a disaster for *everybody*.

He echoed a common refrain at the time. Many people worried about how to placate the gods, who were seemingly angry with everyone. As far as Neetu and Devidutt were concerned, even the kneeling goat seemed to recognize their anger and the need for conciliation. But the belief that animals are meaningful participants in this regional cosmology and subject to the dominion of deities predates and extends beyond the monsoon of 2013. People in the mountains think that animals are capable of talking, listening, and responding to deities, much like they themselves, and this belief plays an important part in their perception of animals as social beings with reflexivity and self-awareness.

The ability of animals to relate to and communicate with deities and humans alike is a crucial link in the sacrificial chain and is often considered a necessary condition for sacrifice to successfully appease the gods. In 2010, I joined a family of paharis on a trip to a powerful temple dedicated to the devi Ma Kalika, where they sacrificed eight goats. After the family had consumed a small portion of the meat as *prasad* (blessed offerings), an argument broke out between Neema, the matriarch of the family, and her nephew, Girish, who was visiting from the United States and had refused to eat the meat. Girish wanted to know why his aunt had not sacrificed flowers or coconuts instead of goats. “This is barbaric,” he said to her bluntly in front of assembled family. “The gods would be as happy, if not happier, with flowers or coconuts.” His aunt snorted derisively. In the old days, the gods would eat human sacrifice, she explained, ostensibly for my benefit but really for her nephew. The gods

relented when an old widow with only one child begged for mercy. In exchange, she promised to sacrifice something that was precious to her, the animals she had raised just like children. “Coconuts aren’t precious,” Neema said to her nephew. “There’s no loss when you give devi-devta coconuts. But giving an animal is like giving a person. A life is given in place of a life.”

An elderly uncle-in-law of Neema’s entered the fray by observing that “gods expect the life of a *bhakt* (devotee) because it tells them how much *bhakti* (devotion) they can command. A coconut isn’t a devotee, an animal is.” While this argument did not carry much weight with Girish, others in the room were impressed by the clarity of his statement. The sacrificial substitution of an animal’s life for a human’s life made sense in a way that substituting a coconut did not. A coconut is unlike a goat because a coconut does not have the capacity to pray that a goat, like humans, is believed to possess. For Neema’s uncle, and for a number of other mountain people, this lack of ability to relate to the gods as a self-aware being defeats any claim that the coconut might have to a sense of self.

The idea that goats are self-aware, subjective beings is especially powerful during that moment in the sacrificial process when they are thought by humans to consent to their own sacrifice. On the day of sacrifice, goats are first blessed by the priest of the temple dedicated to whichever deity is receiving the sacrifice. The goats’ foreheads are anointed with a paste of vermilion and turmeric. A drop of water is then touched to the mouth of each goat, inducting him into the *gotra* (lineage group) of the family dedicating him to the deity.¹⁸ A priest at the Ma Kalika temple in Kumaun explained to me that by being inducted into a family’s *gotra*, a goat takes a *samkalp*, a vow to complete a particular religious task. In essence, the priest continued, the goat takes a vow to sacrifice himself to a deity on behalf of the family of which he is now part. This *samkalp* is completed when the goat is asked for his final consent to sacrifice. A sticky mixture of rice and water is sprinkled on his back to make him shake his body (Figure 1). If he shakes, it is read as a sign that he has consented to the sacrifice and the deity has accepted it (Figure 2). He is then whisked off to the sacrificer’s shed to be beheaded, and his meat is subsequently distributed among family and friends. If he does not shake, he cannot be sacrificed that day since he is believed to have withheld consent and the deity is thought to have refused to accept his sacrifice.

When I asked the priest why some animals refuse to “consent,” he thought for a while before responding. “Some people bring animals for sacrifice without any feeling of piety or devotion. Just to display their wealth ... But animals are ... true *bhakts*. If they feel that the person who’s offering them to the god doesn’t understand the real meaning of a sacrifice ... doesn’t have true devotion and gratitude in their heart, then they refuse to consent.” From this

perspective, the ability of sacrificial goats to publicly authenticate the sincerity and devotion required of humans for a successful sacrifice derives from the fact that they are part of a “reflexive ensemble” composed of humans, animals, and the divine (Kockelmann 2011:440). As far as the priest was concerned, only animals with a measure of reflexive self-awareness can understand and consent to their death in the same way that humans understood the necessity of their sacrifice and consented to it in the past. Here, the “identification” that must precede sacrificial substitution is between reflexive and self-aware kindred subjects.

This understanding of particular animals as kindred reflexive beings does not always extend to the level of species. Mountain villagers share a sense of kinship with mountain animals. The subjectivity of these particular animals, like that of the humans they live alongside, emerges from their entanglement in a web of interconnections with the deities of the *devbhumi*. Dinesh, a migrant from the mountains, told me how his elder brother, with whom he shared a house in Delhi, had once decided to sacrifice a goat to Golu devta. Not having the time to make a trip to the mountains, he asked the family priest to come to Delhi and oversee the ritual. But the goat, a big male the brothers had bought at the market in Delhi, refused to shake. They kept soaking it with water, but the goat just stood there. “And my elder brother is a devout man,” Dinesh said. “Unlike me, he even observes rules of purity and pollution.” Finally, it was the priest who suggested that they send for a goat from the mountains. A month later, after some expense, the goat was secured and promptly consented to the sacrifice. The problem with the first goat, Dinesh explained, was that animals in the plains simply did not have the same power that mountain animals did. “Why would that poor goat shake when he didn’t have any connection with Golu devta?” Dinesh’s friend, who was listening to us discuss the episode, was initially dubious of this reasoning but eventually started nodding vigorously. “Yes, there’s something there. Things are just different in a *devbhumi*. The people are different, the animals are different.” In this case, the web of relatedness through which humans and animals become subjective, self-aware beings derives its strength from being rooted in a particular sacred geography that is infused with the sacred power of local deities.

The love of a mother: Domestication, love, and domination

Mutual subjection to powerful local deities is not the only factor that creates the potential for human–animal relatedness. The intimate embodied proximities of everyday life open up a realm thick with the possibility of kinship between humans and nonhumans. This domain of affective kinship is at once “actively material” and “irreducibly discursive” (Raffles 2002:8). Nowhere is this discursive



Figure 1. A mixture of rice and water is sprinkled on the backs of sacrificial goats to make them visibly perform what people understand to be consent by shaking their bodies. Photo by Radhika Govindrajan, March 2011, Ma Kalika temple at Gangolihaat, Uttarakhand.

materiality more evident than in the embodied language that humans and animals use to communicate with one another. This “language of mutual response” (Haraway 2008) spoken through the body is crucial to the creation and maintenance of this affective realm. The kin relationship that Neetu described sharing with her goats was, for her, grounded in the fact that not only could she touch her goats to communicate what she wanted from them but they could also touch her to signal desires and fears of their own. These embodied forms of communication reveal that the “becoming” of human and nonhuman is a process of “becoming with” and “becoming together” (Haraway 2008:208, 244; cf. Parreñas 2012; Smuts 2007).

In rural Uttarakhand, this process of becoming is one in which *mamta*, maternal love, plays an important role. The term *mamta* is culturally understood in Uttarakhand, and in India more generally, to describe the emotion a mother feels toward her child. In mountain villages, people’s use of this term in referring to their livestock companions speaks to the redoing of kinship through the extension of familial relations to nonhumans (cf. Cormier 2013; Franklin and McKinnon 2002; Haraway 2008). A surprising number of men, especially of an older generation, who are involved

in the daily care of animals also use the term despite its feminine markings (Figure 3). The *mamta* that paharis describe feeling for their animals is spontaneous and unplanned; they say it “just happens” (*ho jati hai*), much as a mother feels *mamta* for a child. The comparison with children is apt since it captures the everyday exasperations and annoyances that are such an integral part of raising both animals and children.

An incident that occurred one summer day in 2011 drove this similarity home for me. I was accompanying my friend Kusum and her herd of ten goats down a narrow village path lined on either side with stinging nettles and fruit trees. One little white goat with brown spots had climbed up a small tree and was making quick work of its leaves. Before Kusum could fling a stone at it, an elderly farmer appeared on the other side of the low stone wall that bordered the path and proceeded to scold Kusum loudly for not controlling her animals.

The week prior to this unexpected meeting, Kusum’s goats had ravaged a wheat field belonging to the farmer, whose name was Narinder Bisht. Kusum’s younger children had been with the goats that day but had fallen asleep while watching them. The goats promptly wandered into nearby



Figure 2. A woman pays obeisance to her goat, who has just shaken his body and is about to be taken to the sacrificial shed. Photo by Radhika Govindran, March 2011, Ma Kalika temple at Gangolihaat, Uttarakhand.

fields and set to work, where they were caught in the act by Narinder. He tied them to a post and sat next to them, waiting to scold the children when they appeared to collect their goats. Unfortunately for him, he too made the mistake of falling asleep, whereupon the children, who had been watching him from a distance, quietly untied the goats and took them home, flushed with triumph at having escaped a scolding. Having caught Kusum now, Bisht let loose, giving her an earful about her “thieving children” and “poisonous goats.”

That evening, Kusum told her husband what had transpired. “It’s these goats,” she said at the end, “always the root of conflict. *Dusht* (wicked) animals.” “Goats and children,” her husband grumbled, casting an eye on their two girls, who were watching television instead of doing their homework. “They’re both so troublesome. What can you do?”

Like Kusum’s husband, other farmers often draw comparisons between raising children and raising goats. They emphasize similarities especially when talking about what exasperating animals goats are, about their willfulness and tendency to run away when no one is watching them. “You have to scold both children and goats,” a woman told me

once, laughing as I struggled ineffectually to coax a goat away from a patch of garlic. “If you had children or goats, you would know this. They don’t understand anything without a beating.” She threw a stone at the goat, and it moved off lazily as if to prove her point.

The similarity between raising goats and taking care of children was frequently invoked when women tried to explain the emotional attachment they felt to their animals (Figure 4). Bhagwati, a woman who was pitied and admired for raising four young children, seven goats, and three cows all at the same time, told me that getting her animals ready to go out and graze was much like getting her children ready for school in the morning. She would get to the cowshed by five every morning, where the animals were awake and waiting for her. She would give them dried grass before sitting down to milk the cows. The goats, she said, would frolic around her, nuzzling and butting her from every side as she focused on milking. “They’re silly,” she laughed. “They want attention all the time. It reminds me so much of my younger children, who get jealous when I’m getting the older children ready for school. They keep running around me demanding that I focus on them. It’s annoying but also endearing.”



Figure 3. A man holds aloft a goat that he says treats him like a mother. Some men, especially of an older generation, use the term *mamta*, "maternal love," to describe how they feel about the goats they raise. Photo by Radhika Govindrajan, July 2012, Nainital District, Uttarakhand.

The daily ritual of raising both children and animals and watching them grow at the same time creates strong bonds of affection between caregiver and care receiver. "Just as you feel maternal love for your children, it's like that with the animals you raise," Bhagwati said to me once, trying to put into words the bond she felt with her animals.

Animals respond to this *mamta* much as children do, making it clear that this feeling of kinship is not a human projection onto unresponsive animals but a mutually enriching relationship. One woman became famous for being accompanied by a goat kid at all times. Even if she tethered him to a post in the cowshed, he would escape and follow her. On one such occasion, during a *bhajan* (devotional singing meet) at the temple, the kid curled up next to the woman, causing everyone to break into gales of laughter. The woman could not keep the smile off her face when she joked that the kid was her youngest child, one that still had not cut the umbilical cord. Indeed, many kids who are abandoned by their own mothers turn to their human "mothers" for milk, seeking them out among all the other members of the household. The bond between them looks, sounds, and feels like kinship on both sides.

The idea that livestock animals can demonstrate a need for human care, thus fostering a sense of mutual kinship, was reinforced for me by a conversation with an old man who spent most of his days taking the family's goats out to graze. One day he told me his goats reminded him of his grandchildren. "Sometimes they ignore you even when you call them until your throat is hoarse. They're very good at ignoring you when they want to. But sometimes, like when their father or mother butts them, they come running to you for comfort." One night, he recounted, somebody was careless enough to leave the door to the animal shed unlocked. A little after midnight, the sound of frantic bleating and thudding hooves woke everyone in the family up. "I think it was a jungle cat," he said, "that must have been trying to carry off one of the kids." The feline escaped when members of the household ran toward the shed banging pots and pans. One of the kids had puncture wounds in her neck, but no serious harm had been done. The family tied the kid up next to her mother, but she kept bleating. "Finally, I had to go out to the shed," the old man said. When he untied the kid, she ran toward him and huddled in the curve of his waist. Her hair was still standing on end and she was trembling uncontrollably. The old man murmured words of comfort to her until



Figure 4. A kid tugs at the saree of the woman who fed her after her mother refused to give her milk. Photo by Radhika Govindraj, 2011, Nainital District, Uttarakhand.

the trembling stopped, but she would not stay quiet without him. Every time he tried to leave, she would bleat nervously, and all the other goats would join in. “I just stayed there until morning,” he recalled softly. “You see, she’s used to being with me. My presence reassures her. I’m like her mother. She needed me more than she needed her own mother that night.”

I was surprised by the man’s use of the term *mother*, but it was a good reminder that the task of raising children and animals is still something that women normally do. The idiom of parental affection for children is very much a maternal idiom, probably a reflection that, in the mountains, women do much of the care work associated with raising children. The lack of a word for paternal love is evidence that the language of caregiving is a gendered one and that men who provide care assume female roles. This gendered language extends to caring for animals since women in this region do most of the work associated with raising livestock. Their tasks include cleaning out the cowshed in the mornings, cutting leaves and grass for fodder in the mornings and evenings, making hay to spread on the floor of the cowshed throughout the postmonsoon season, and taking animals out to graze on an everyday basis. Animal-related work is women’s work.¹⁹

The intimate, embodied proximities described above, which are the source of mutual kinship binding human and nonhuman animals, play an important part in making sacrifice feel “real.” On a festival day in 2010, when hundreds of goats had been sacrificed at a devi temple, I sat down next to a young woman with red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks. Concerned about her state, I asked what was wrong. She explained that her family had sacrificed a goat that morning, one of three goats she had raised herself. “I’ll feel terrible tomorrow,” she said with a wry smile. “The cowshed will be so empty. But this is *real* sacrifice.” When I asked her what she meant by “real sacrifice,” she responded with a question of her own. Did I know that the gods used to demand human sacrifice? I nodded. In those days, she continued, children used to die to save their parents; they went willingly to their death so that everyone else could be safe.

Today things are different in some ways. Nobody sacrifices children anymore, we sacrifice animals. But in some ways it’s not that different. When you live with animals and raise them, they are like your children. And when they shake [to consent], you feel that sense of pride in knowing that your children will die willingly to repay the mamta they receive. That’s a real sacrifice, when you offer a goat you love almost as much as your child, and he repays your love by dying.

The young woman’s words, whose sentiment I heard repeated by many others over the course of fieldwork, are a vivid reminder that animal sacrifice is rooted in a realm

of affective sociality characterized by the mingling of domination, domestication, and love (cf. Tsing 2012). But the sense of pride that mingled with her sadness when the goat shook to indicate what the young woman read as consent illuminates something else about the nature of sacrifice: it is not just predicated on a sense of interspecies kinship but is also constitutive of it. For the young woman, the goat’s sacrificial death cemented her belief that she and the animal were united by a kin relationship. As she understood the situation, the goat had repaid the maternal love with which she had raised him by agreeing to die on behalf of his human family. Sacrifice is, no doubt, a violent making and affirmation of interspecies kinship. But, then, all relations of intimate proximity, to some degree, are inflected by power. Nor can the complex coexistence of love, guilt, pride, and death in ethnographic sacrificial contexts be captured by the idea that the logic of sacrifice entails no obligation or responsibility to any living being other than the human (Haraway 2008).

Recognizing that sacrifice rests on and fosters a complex copresence of human and nonhuman subjects entangled in embodied and mutual kinship relations with one another is particularly crucial in a South Asian context where, increasingly, *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and, by extension, vegetarianism, is idealized as the only acceptable Hindu mode of relating to nonhuman animals (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012).²⁰ Rituals like animal sacrifice are under attack by animal rights activists and Hindu reform organizations as “corruptions” of Hindu practice as a result of influences from other religions, particularly Islam.²¹ Much is at stake politically in acknowledging the diversity of human relationships with animals and reclaiming sacrifice as part of Hindu practice. Recognizing that acts of sacrifice can be acts of interspecies kinship, characterized by responsibility and domination, guilt and relief, and love and death opens up a world in which it is possible to trace a multiplicity of forms of being and becoming.

Conclusion

I asked at the outset of this article what the field of interspecies ethnography and the anthropology of religious sacrifice can offer each other. In response, I have argued that the literature on sacrifice in anthropology and religious studies has, for the most part, emphasized the symbolic nature of the relationship between sacrificer and sacrificial victim and focused less on the affective, corporeal dimensions of their engagements. Drawing on the ethnographic context of the Central Himalayas, I argued that sacrifice in Uttarakhand derives meaning and power from its location in a realm of interspecies kinship that is embodied and relational. The intimate proximities of humans and animals that are the hallmark of domestication are facilitated by an embodied language of mutual response, a language

that allows humans and animals to “speak” without words. Further, this kinship is predicated on Kumauni villagers’ understanding of the animals they tend to and sacrifice as subjective beings with reflexive self-awareness. It is this sense of embodied relatedness, with its hierarchies and incompleteness, that gives meaning to sacrificial substitution.

But what can the understanding of sacrifice as an act of interspecies kinship offer the field of human–animal studies? The answer is not immediately apparent. Scholars like Donna Haraway, while optimistic about the potential for “shared suffering” in complex copresences characterized by the relative unfreedom of animals and by “nonsymmetrical suffering and death” (2208:77), argue that the idiom of sacrifice forces it outside this realm of complex mutuality. The “solace of Sacrifice,” a guilt-free form of killing, cannot capture the contingent and complex nature of inequality between two beings who “have face” (Haraway 2008:76). Following Jacques Derrida, Haraway contends that the logic of sacrifice works only because “there is a whole world of those who can be killed, because finally they are only something, not somebody, close enough to ‘being’ in order to be a model, substitute, sufficiently self-similar and so nourishing food, but not close enough to compel response” (2008:79).

Where does this leave us, then, on the question of what an interspecies theory of sacrifice can offer the field of multispecies ethnography? Let us put aside the idea that the logic of sacrifice is transcendental and pure, a claim that is complicated by the related literature, which notes that sacrificial idioms and practices are contingent on their location in particular ethnographic times and places. What of Haraway’s more serious claim that sacrifice turns the animal as somebody into the animal as something that is not close enough to command a response from the human? The complex sacrificial practices and relationships at work in Uttarakhand, far from bearing out this understanding, open up a world rich with the possibility of mutual response and recognition. The sacrificial animal is not something but a recognizably self-aware and responsive being with whom humans share affective, intimate proximities. People’s awareness that the animal killed in ritual sacrifice dies for them and in place of them both fosters and validates the affective bonds of what I have described as an interspecies kinship. Nor is the solace of sacrificial death uncomplicated for these people who are intimately entangled with animals who not only have face but also voice and feeling. For Bansi, the young man who talked about his distress at the sacrifice of his goat companion, solace came only many years after the animal’s death and was sparked by the hope that the abrupt and violent cessation of an interspecies friendship would be made up for by the liberation of the goat’s soul. With the same sense of uncertain hope, I close with a reminder that isolating the violence of sacrifice from its companion constituents—love, guilt, grief, and devotion—

would be to do fundamental injustice to the complexity of the interspecies encounter it entails. To reject the possibility that the kneeling goat might be something other than a scapegoat would mean rejecting an invitation to enter this world of entanglements and the promise it holds not just for those living in it but also for those who aspire to more ethical relationships with nonhumans.

Notes

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1. Uttarakhand is split into two divisions (*mandals*), Garhwal in the west and Kumaon in the east, where I carried out research for this project. The two regions are culturally and linguistically distinct even though they are politically unified, and, more significantly, Garhwali and Kumauni people see each other as somewhat distinct (Berreman 1963; Sax 2002). For an account of the mass regional movement that led to the creation of the state as a new political entity in the Indian union in 2000, see Mawdsley 1998.

2. I use the male pronoun to refer to sacrificial goats since only males are selected as ritual offerings.

3. The holiness of the animal, Smith argued, was reflected in the fact that its life could not be taken by any one individual but only through the consent and participation of all the members of the clan.

4. Some scholars have questioned whether the sacrificial victim Smith described was as totemic as he claimed (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1954; Lévi-Strauss 1966).

5. *Pahari* literally means “of the mountains,” from the word *pa-har* (mountains), and is generally used to refer to the non-Tibetan, Indo-European-language-speaking Hindus who inhabit the lower elevations of the Himalayas in north India and throughout Nepal. This region comprises what the anthropologist Gerald Berreman calls a “cultural area” (1960:774). While the term *pahari* is often used derogatorily by plains people to index cultural backwardness, it is the term that mountain people use most often to signal their distinct cultural identity.

6. In recent years, social theorists have devoted a great deal of attention to affect. Brian Massumi (2002) uses the term to describe an embodied intensity that is distinguished from emotion and language. For him, affect is asocial but not presocial. It pertains to matter and is usually thought of as emergent and dynamic. Exposing the concept of affect to critical scrutiny, William Mazzarella notes that contemporary theory puts in place a binary between immediacy and mediation that obscures how the latter “is at once perhaps the most fundamental and productive principle of all social life precisely because it is necessarily incomplete, unstable and

provisional” (2009:302). With his observation in mind, I think it worth noting that the affective relations between people and animals in Uttarakhand are not presubjective or prelinguistic but mediated through an intercorporeal language between bodies that are inextricably material and discursive. For more on affect, see Parreñas 2012, Rutherford 2012, and Stewart 2007.

7. Berger writes that “a peasant becomes fond of his pig *and* is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant . . . and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*” (1980:7).

8. A rich body of philosophical work addresses the psychological, semiotic, ethical, and gendered dimensions of sacrifice and the sacred. Given this article’s ethnographic focus, however, I do not focus on this body of work. See Keenan 2005 and Carter 2003 for reviews of this literature.

9. In his work on sacrificial rituals among the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard (1953) is careful to situate the relationship between sacrificer and sacrificial victim in the broader context of social life. He observes that sacrificial equivalence, the idea that two beings are of the same order and can therefore be substituted for one another in sacrifice, had always been between a man and an ox. This equivalence, Evans-Pritchard insists, can be understood only in terms of the broader identification of the Nuer with their cattle in daily life. The use of ox names for men, the place of oxen in rituals of initiation, the value attached to cattle for their milk and as bridewealth are all emblematic of the identification of men with cattle in sacrifices. The significance of cattle in sacrifice was thus inseparable from their material and symbolic prominence in Nuer social and economic worlds. Despite his focus on the embodied, affective relationships that the Nuer shared with their cattle, ultimately, for Evans-Pritchard, it was not the particular “ox of initiation” but, rather, the “idea of oxen” with which people identified. He writes, “Any ox will therefore serve the purpose, or, indeed, no ox at all—only the memory, or rather the idea, of an ox” (Evans-Pritchard 1953:185).

10. In an essay on what interspecies ethnography can learn from indigenous standpoints, Kim Tallbear (2011) points out that recent scholarly interest in human relationships with nonhumans and the power of nonhumans to shape human political, social, and cultural words echoes, in some ways, an “American Indian metaphysic.” However, she argues, this work falls short of taking indigenous standpoints seriously in its insistence on framing indigenous peoples’ understandings of animals they live with as metaphor rather than reality. Following from that, to separate the question of animal agency from that of intention does not quite capture the radical nature of mountain villagers’ insistence that animals are thoughtful and conscious beings who act in considered and intentional ways.

11. Conceptions of self and person are tricky to define, as several scholars have noted, leading to inconsistent and problematic understandings of what exactly selfhood entails (Sax 2009; Smith 2006). The only certainty is that one can say nothing certain about the “universality or the absolute cultural relativity of notions of self, personhood, individual, and the like” (Sax 2009:7).

12. For more on the self in a South Asian context, see Ewing 1990, Sax 2002, and Smith 2006.

13. In an article on state efforts to control a man-eating leopard in neighboring Garhwal, Nayanika Mathur notes that villagers believed the leopard was a devotee of “the Hindu god Shiva, given his circumambulation of the town’s Shiva temple” (2014:163).

14. Human recognition of the personhood and selfhood of animals is not restricted to the South Asian context. The theory of Amazonian multinaturalism and monoculturalism put forth by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004) points to the modalities through

which many Amazonians recognize the personhood of nonhumans. Similarly, Eduardo Kohn notes that for the Amazonian Runa, “all beings, and not just humans, engage with the world and each other as selves—that is as beings that have a point of view” (2013:4).

15. This is not to suggest a dichotomy between East and West, with the West represented by individual persons and the East represented by relational persons. As Sarah Lamb points out, “a focus on relationality does not mean that no notion or experience of individuality or individual autonomy exists” (1997:282).

16. Goats were not the only animals sacrificed. Chickens were, on occasion, offered to a malevolent spirit named Masan, who is worshipped near bodies of water around midnight. Women are not allowed to attend these nocturnal rituals for fear they might be possessed by malignant spirits. I never saw chickens sacrificed at large temples but only at smaller shrines on a few occasions. One reason chickens were not commonly sacrificed in the villages where I conducted fieldwork is that only a handful of families raised them. One had to travel some distance to procure a live chicken, whereas goats were always in ready supply and could be acquired either from one’s own sheds or, at a pinch, from a neighbor. People also spoke of having sacrificed buffaloes in the past, especially to goddesses as part of the reenactment of the killing of the buffalo demon, Mahisasura. However, by the time I started fieldwork in the region, it was rare for people to sacrifice buffaloes, for reasons related to the recent legal controversy over animal sacrifice. People claimed that a sacrificial buffalo was thrown off a cliff after its death; its meat, unlike that of a goat, was never consumed because of its ritual impurity, although upper-caste villagers gossiped about the supposed fondness of lower-caste villagers for buffalo meat and claimed that its consumption reinforced the latter’s inferior status (cf. Sax 1991). Much more could be said about people’s relationships with buffaloes and chickens, but I restrict my focus here to relationships with goats, who dominated the sacrificial arena in my ethnographic experience.

17. Groups seeking a ban on religious sacrifice must make this argument since the constitution of India allows religious groups freedom to profess and propagate their religion.

18. The term *gotra* refers to a group that includes all persons who trace descent in an unbroken male line from a common male ancestor.

19. The gendered nature of people’s relationships with domestic animals, and the ways in which the trope of *mamta* reinscribes and normalizes forms of gendered labor, is a fascinating and important topic and one that deserves closer attention than I can give it in this article. For further reading on the gendered dimensions of care, see Haraway 2003, Parreñas 2012, and Freccero 2011.

20. In his work on anti-Muslim pogroms in the Hindu-dominated Indian state of Gujarat, Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi makes the important point that *ahimsa* began as a “protective technique against the effects of the necessary violence” in the ritual of sacrifice (2012:12). However, contemporary forms of Hindu nationalism in the state, while advocating *ahimsa* toward the animal victims of sacrifice, have replaced the original animal victim of religious sacrifice with a Muslim victim. During the Gujarat pogrom of 2001, Ghassem-Fachandi notes, “people invoked the symbolic technologies of killing and sacrifice” in their attempts to exterminate Muslims and create a united Hindu community (2012:12).

21. The disassociation of sacrifice and meat eating from Hinduism has, as Ghassem-Fachandi (2010:161) points out, deeply disturbing implications. In Gujarat, Hindu agents of violence were able to argue that they were simply doing to Muslims what Muslims were identified as doing—slaughtering animals and consuming meat.

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