

Beyond wild and tame: Soiot encounters in a sentient landscape. Alex C. Oehler. 2020. New York, Oxford: Berghahn. ISBN 978-1-78920-679-1

“Beyond Wild and Tame: Soiot Encounters in a Sentient Landscape” is a piece of anthropological literature fitting the genre of multispecies ethnography. The book was published in 2020 by Berghahn as part (volume 2) of a series titled “Interspecies Encounters”. Its author, Alex C. Oehler, is an environmental anthropologist trained at University of Aberdeen and a former team member of the university’s Arctic Domus project (see: <https://www.arcticdomus.org>). In “Beyond Wild and Tame,” he focuses on human–nonhuman relations in central Eastern Saian mountains in an attempt to ethnographically (re)examine the categories of tame and wild in an anthropological discussion of domestication.

The research behind the book took place between 2012 and 2018 in Okinskii district (Buriatia, Russia) and to a lesser extent in Nizhneudinskii district (Irkutsk Oblast, Russia) – home to two historically connected indigenous peoples: the Soiots and the Tofa, respectively. It amounted to 13 months of fieldwork and archival research, including 10 months of ethnographic research with a Soiot community at its core.

In terms of social-scientific jargon, the unit of analysis of this study is the household. However, what is taken here to constitute a household is radically different from that of a conventional household-level study, even more so of a survey. Oehler’s concept of the household “is a version of an indigenous practice of knowledge” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, p. 42). Drawing on Soiot and Tofa perspectives, he takes Saian households to be in the fullest sense more-than-human, with human and nonhuman masters and members alike. This allows for a radically ethnographic approach (or anthropological in his own terms) to domestication, focused on how relations are established and maintained with seemingly tame and wild beings within and outside of (or rather between) these more-than-human households.

Elaborating Ingold’s reconceptualization of domestication not accompanied by morphological change as tameness, Oehler breaks down the dichotomy altogether by demonstrating how within Saian household’s domesticity is a relation of negotiable approachability and reliability rather than docility and proximity. In this context, seemingly wild traits are valued on par with tame ones, extending domestication as a relation beyond the dichotomous categories.

First, Oehler introduces (see Chapter 1) the reader to a world, where human-mastered households are mirrored by spirit-mastered ones. The latter comprise apparently wild beings and exhibit apparently natural traits (to draw on another dichotomy). What is wild is thus domestic to nonhuman-mastered households and vice versa. Tame and game are perspectives, grounding a reciprocity between human and nonhuman-mastered households.

However, a balanced reciprocal relationship is not a given, but a matter of practice. In a further elaboration (see Chapter 2), Oehler discussed the varying Buddhist and shamanistic approaches to domestication in the Saians. The former aimed at domesticating spirit masters, converting them into benevolent and harmless beings (here the notion of domestication is stretched the thinnest, employed as metaphorical as possible). However, where conversion succeeded, reciprocity has been disrupted from a shamanistic point of view, since the spirit would no longer engage in a hunting reciprocal relationship with a Soiot hunter. I would say that this narrative strand stands out and reads somewhat like a spin-off, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the world’s “mechanics,” but adding less to the point than the other chapters.

After this slight detour into the influence of competing cosmologies, Oehler turns to an examination of Saian domestication species by species: the reindeer, the yak and the khainak (yak-cow hybrids), the horse, and even the wolf. Drawing on historical reconstructions, recent history, and observation of Soiot and Tofa reindeer herding (Chapter 3), he suggests that the introduction of species other-than-reindeer to households and their co-presence might have been a feature of rather than impediment to the Saian way of life. This is particularly the case of horses (Chapter 5) and khainak (Chapter 4). Each species subverts the wild-tame dichotomy in its own manner: the reindeer – by constant transition between the forest (wild) and the encampment (tame), the khainak – by its very hybrid nature (cow/yak = tame/wild), the horse – by features conventionally sought to be bred out (among them are unruly, seemingly wild features). The cases of horses and reindeer particularly expose the negotiable nature of Saian domestication, where material implements serve to communicate intentions.

Finally, wolves (Chapter 6) put the household to test: infiltrating encampments, attacking herds, intimidating dogs, and contesting herders. At the same time, they appear somewhat cosmologically ambiguous: at times acting as hunters and emissaries of spirit-mastered households, at times – as competitors in their own right. It is quite surprising then that in his exposition of wolf packs, Oehler does not put the concept of household to work. It is even more so, since one of the cited Soiot interlocutors used the word “dom” in relation to a female wolf. Oehler translates it as “house,” which is generally correct; however, it may also be understood as “a home,” “a household.” He himself relates the household concept to the Roman “domus,” and the latter is etymologically related with the Russian “dom.” Nevertheless, the point remains that human–wolf relation demonstrate that proximity may be a threat rather than a benefit to domestication.

Overall, the author does well to convey his main point. The book reads like an extended argument with each chapter being a contribution to a novel conception of domestication alternative to ones reliant on a wild-tame dichotomy. The book is ethnographically rich and theoretically challenging at the same time. It is a rare example of Soiot ethnography and an original anthropological treatise on domestication that goes well beyond wild and tame, as well as beyond domestication itself.

In a book published the same year, renowned British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (2020) keenly pointed out an expositional impasse that arises in studies of multispecies relations, when they simultaneously take a critical stance toward classical conceptions of individuality and retain “species” as terms to a

relation inadvertently individualizing them in description (pp. 169–174). Oehler’s multispecies ethnography seems to slip into this impasse. Implicitly criticizing individualism by pointing to the intertwinedness of humans and nonhumans within households, it nevertheless retains species as terms to the relation under study – domestication. However, the latter, despite being taken here to instantiate a human–animal relation, also presents a theoretical opening, a hint at overcoming the said impasse, although not evident in the book’s structure (somewhat a list of species: spirits, reindeer, yak, horses, wolves). If domestication is what is going on within a household, then maybe the latter is the relation to be exposed?

“Beyond Wild and Tame” will be of most interest to anthropologists and students of human–animal relations, as well to anyone seeking out possibilities of a non-anthropocentric way of life (Slava Kovalsky , Department of the North, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology RAS, Leninskii pr., 32A, 117991, Moscow, Russia (sokovalsky@iea.ras.ru)).

References

- Strathern, M.** (2020). *Relations: An Anthropological Account*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. V.** (2014). *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*. Minneapolis: Univocal.

DOI: [10.1017/S0032247421000085](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247421000085)