

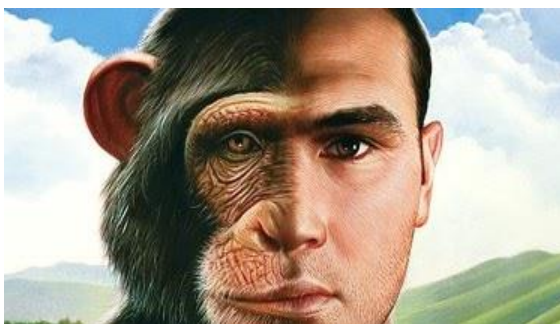
SENSITIVE AREAS - RELATIVISING UNIVERSAL CONCEPTS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE PET

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The literature rarely offers transcultural reflections on the relationship between the individual and the pet, but this theme, as well as highlighting similarities and common traits of different societies, brings out a clear distinction between Western and non-Western societies, highlighting, in the case of the former, intrinsic ambiguities. The reflection involves scientific, anthropological, cultural, religious and sociological fields. It is mainly thanks to the research of Sabrina Tonutti¹, professor of cultural anthropology, we can now get a picture of the relationship between man and pet on different continents. Since the late 1990s, the anthropologist has been studying the question of whether there are pets in non-Western societies.

'Pet' means favourite, favourite, darling. The term to pet in English means: to caress, cuddle and spoil. Hence the use of the term "pet" to identify companion animals or pets.

Prototypical pets are dogs and cats. Animals with which it is possible to have a form of affective, playful and communicative exchange and which have particular tactile and morphological properties that make them suitable for a certain type of contact (being held, stroked, cuddled).



In most cultures there is a clear distinction between humans and the animal world, and the identity of the human being is often formulated in terms of a denial of animality. In many cultures there are intermediate categories (pets) between humans and animals.

¹ Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Udine, he studies the relationship between humans and other animals, works on vegetarianism and is a Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. His publications include: Animal Rights. History and anthropology of a movement (Forum 2007)

The class of pets, whose position within the generic and heterogeneous category of “animals”, appears to be quite particular both in terms of morality and in terms of affective enjoyment and symbolic use by humans.²

The traits that define a 'pet' are the following:

1. The pet is not killed
2. It is not eaten itself
3. It is the object of an affective investment and a process of humanization
4. It is placed within man's living space
5. It mediates between man and the natural world
6. It has its own name
7. It can act as a status indicator or convey information about the personality of the owner³

Pets can not be killed, and the explicit moral condemnation of violence against pets in our society is also evidenced by the evolution of laws⁴ on the subject recognizing not only the material damage suffered by the owner of the animal, but above all the 'biological' damage of the suppression of a life. However, this general rule presents critical points and contradictions. First of all, the euthanasia of pets is permitted (also by the law⁵, a form of life-suppression to avoid suffering to a sick animal. The second critical point concerns the contrast between the right to life recognised for pets and the vivisection to which many species are subjected: while on the one hand we have animals, such as dogs and cats, that are super-protected and 'humanised', on the other hand a good number of other animals are subjected to torture in the laboratories of the European Union.⁶

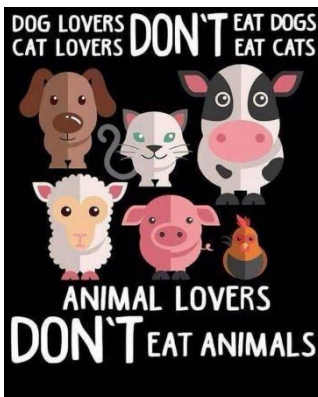
² S. Tonutti, “Esistono “pet” nelle società extra-occidentali?” La Ricerca Folklorica, N° 35, Antropologia dell’interiorità, Aprile, 1997, Grafo Spa, p. 111

³ *ivi*, p. 112

⁴ An Italian law of 20 July 2004, No 189, entitled 'Provisions concerning the prohibition of ill-treatment of animals, as well as the use of animals in clandestine combats or unauthorised competitions' has profoundly changed the legal framework on the subject of animals. After Title IX of Book II of the Criminal Code, Title IX-bis was inserted, 'Crimes against the sentiment of animals'. (www.lav.it)

⁵ In Italian legislation, Article 189/04 prohibits any cruel or unnecessary killing. (Art. 544 bis C.p.)

⁶ *Dogs, horses, rats, mice, cows, pigs, sheep, pigeons, ferrets, reptiles, fish, birds, from farms or caught in the wild, like 56% of primates: in Italy there are almost 700,000 animals used in laboratories, over 12 million in the European Union, to test drugs, chemicals, pesticides, detergents and more.*
<https://www.lav.it/aree-di-intervento/vivisezione/quali-e-quant-animati>



In Euro-American culture, some animals are subject to implicit food taboos, the root of which is a cultural choice. Pets are not 'thought of' in terms of food, these animals are perceived as 'non-food'.

The pet is called upon to act as a mediator between man (culture) and the natural world (nature). As far as mediation with nature is concerned, it should be noted that our species, while refusing to belong to the animal kingdom and distancing itself from the natural kingdom, at the same time tries to recover the broken links in various ways. To recompose this unnatural fracture, Western people are emotionally invested in animality.

The pet has two ideal aspects for acting as a mediator: it certainly retains its animal nature; while it also shows the cultural imprint of man making it an anomalous and ambiguous being. The pet is a 'quasi-person' that has carved out a space of its own and a precise role in the circle of human relations.⁷



In anthropology, this is referred to as domestication⁸ understood as a multifaceted concept applied to plants and animals, where 'domestic' is opposed to 'wild'. Interestingly, those who study animals

⁷ *ivi*, p. 113

⁸ For further reading: Hodder (1990) manages to draw on virtually all meanings of domestication in his *The Domestication of Europe*. The term refers more to the importance of the home and the domestic sphere (his *domus*, as opposed to *agrios*) in Neolithic Europe. However, he too builds an argument that the importance of the *domus* lies in its power to domesticate people, more precisely to control the savage nature in men by bringing the savage into the domestic female sphere of home and hearth. Moreover, she follows Cauvin (1972) in arguing that this symbolic domestication of the savage precedes the domestication of plants or at least animals in the conventional sense. Indeed, he suggests that the domestication of plants and animals might be a by-product of the changes in attitudes towards nature brought about by the symbolic control of the wild. Hodder's *domus* model has been widely criticised on various grounds (e.g. Tringham 1991; Davis 1992), in particular by some suggesting that the obsession with controlling the wild may be more a modern than a Neolithic concern (Halstead 1996).

generally distinguish between tamed animals⁹ and domesticated animals¹⁰. Taming refers to a relationship between an individual animal and a human, whereas 'domestication' involves successive populations and generations¹¹.

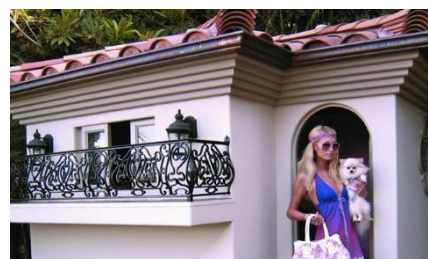
The presence of the pet solves what Savishinsky¹² defines the “empty nest syndrome”¹³ (the sad feeling parents have when their children grow up and leave home) by annulling the void and filling the nest. It restores an emotional exchange, a substitution which is often all that remains.



Usually the pet plays the role of a child. Man tends to perceive the pet as an infantile, innocent being, dependent on the man-parent, who, as we have seen in the extreme case of euthanasia, chooses and decides for him. But in the westernised societies, the affective investment in the pet is often accompanied by a process of anthropomorphising by virtue of which human gestures, desires and needs are projected onto

*the animal*¹⁴.

The choice of the type of animal we want next to us in life and in society determines social position, economic status, etc. It is part of a process of self-definition and corresponds to an externalization of signals concerning how others should perceive us.



The dog house of P. Hilton

And what happens when a pet dies?

Here an example of a cultural Shock, presented by Oumar (cultural mediator of Senegalese origin) during a training

⁹ A tame or trained animal is one whose individual is made docile and obedient, but whose species remains wild and genetically the same as the tame animal.. www.eticoscienza.it

¹⁰ DOMESTICATION (from domus: home) is the process by which an entire animal species adapts to humans through various genetic modifications over generations and through a series of adaptive events produced by the environment. In the case of the dog, this has happened over 15-35 thousand years and is still happening. Over many thousands of years, only a few species have been domesticated, while others may never be, even after many generations of selective breeding. www.eticoscienza.it

¹¹ The Domestication of Anthropology (Nerissa Russell) Cassidy, R., & Mullin, M. (2007). *Where the wild things are now: Domestication reconsidered*

¹² Professor of Anthropology, Ithaca College

¹³ “empty nest syndrome” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>)

¹⁴ S. Tonutti, “Esistono “pet” nelle società extra-occidentali?” La Ricerca Folklorica, N° 35, Antropologia dell’interiorità, aprile, 1997, Grafo Spa, p.

“One day I happened to see a colleague of mine crying. I didn't know what was wrong with her. I was very worried and tried to find out what had happened to her. At one point she told me that her dog had died. I was so surprised by her answer that I started laughing. She looked at me furiously, blurted out "what are you laughing at?" and then threw a list of swear words at me that I did not expect from her.”

The Case of new Guinea



In the social organisation of the people of New Guinea, the woman forms a unit with her young children, with whom she lives in a hut together with the pigs.

For the women of New Guinea, the pig plays a role very similar to that of the dog

in the West. The Papuan woman raises the pig's young as if they were her own children and breastfeeds them. Pigs also have their own name¹⁵.



However, in these cultural systems, there is the possibility of killing for food those same animals women suckle and raise as children. The killing and slaughtering, however, is the responsibility of men, i.e. those who have not built up any emotional relationship with the animal.



Cooking a pig

The killing of pigs is linked to ritual ceremonies (e.g. weddings). These rituals involve the sacrifice of pigs, as well as illness and accidents of various kinds, death and rituals associated with war. As Paula Brown states¹⁶, *ritual pig feasts are 'part of a total ecological-economic- social-political-religious system'*¹⁷.

¹⁵ *ivi*, p. 116

¹⁶ Paula Brown Glick, anthropologist, professor and writer who spent much of her career studying the Papua New Guinea Highlands

¹⁷ S. Tonutti, *“Esistono “pet” nelle società extra-occidentali?”* La Ricerca Folklorica, N° 35, Antropologia dell'interiorità, aprile, 1997, Grafo Spa

The custom of eating the remains of an animal bred by others and which, as a result, has no emotional connotations, and is depersonalised, avoids the crucial and potentially dramatic issue of killing an animal bred by oneself.



The Masai - Kenya

This attitude is also widespread elsewhere: Masai never kill animals by their own hand, but call in men from the neighbouring tribe. The aversion to killing farmed animals also



The Lapps - Sweden



The Samoyeds - North Central Asia

manifests itself in different ways among other peoples, for example among the Lappon (reindeer herders of sub-Arctic Europe), the Samoyed (Northern Asia), the Tungusi (Manchuria), the Koriaki (Chamchatka)



The Tuareg - Sahara Desert

and many other groups from the African continent (such as the Tuareg of the Sahara) and the American continent (e.g. the Aymara indians).

The composition of the roles played by the dog in the West and the pig in Papua New Guinea takes on a particular significance because both animals are edible: the differences in their treatment are the result of cultural choices that take into account many factors, not least of which is the ecological and economic. In the rich western society, there is an economic situation that makes it possible to do what some other societies cannot afford to do. But it's important to underline that the matter is complicated and delicate, in fact people are not always making utilitarian choices. For example, the Wayana (an ethnic group of Brazil), never eat animals raised in the village, not even hen and chicken. Their symbolic classification is stronger than their hunger.

The dog in Australia and Polynesia

In this part of the world, the dog is treated as a pet for all intents and purposes, except one: it is considered edible food. Australia is home to the dingo, a type of dog whose puppies, caught and bred in captivity, are not uncommon in Australian Aboriginal villages. While in the village, the dingo lives in very close contact with humans: it sleeps with them at night to protect him from the cold.



The Aboriginal people treat the dingo as a member of the family, giving it its own name and

pampering it with kisses, caresses and kind words: Aboriginal women breastfeed the dingo cubs just as Papuan women breastfeed their pigs and Polynesian women breastfeed their puppies¹⁸.

Even in Australia it happens that the same animal that is being cared for is at the same time killed for food. Despite the social legitimacy of this killing, there are restrictions that are strongly felt by the entire Aboriginal community: they would not eat their own dogs under any circumstances.

Australian Aborigines and the Dingo

In Polynesia, men eat dog meat, but not their own dogs. This food is taboo for women of all classes and has an economic value that in the past made it, along with pork, a medium of exchange for needed goods. In Polynesia, before contact with Westerners, the dog was sacrificed during royal ceremonies and divination rituals¹⁹.

What is Forum Theatre? The dog in North-East Thailand

In Thailand, although the dog enjoys certain privileges compared to other animal species, it does not receive any special attention from family members: it is a kind of scavenger that eats human waste and faeces, and is therefore seen as an 'inferior being'; as food it is explicitly taboo, as for the Thais it is a dirty animal and whose sexual habits are clearly incestuous. Incestuous spouses are called 'dogs'. The dog is "the clear demarcation between the human and the non-human sentient world" (Leach)²⁰.

¹⁸ *ivi*, p. 117

¹⁹ *ibidem*.

²⁰ *ivi*, p. 118 trad.: il cane è la chiara demarcazione tra il mondo umano e il mondo senziente non-umano

What is Forum Theatre? Arara and other domestic animals at the Bororo



The Araras

The Bororo population of central Brazil has a special affection for the arara. The status of the arara is privileged compared to other domestic animals (e.g. dogs) and it ranks first in a hypothetical ranking of animals. This type of parrot with its impressive colourful plumage is considered to be a manifestation of the *aroe*²¹. This



The Bororo of Brazil

*term sometimes refers to the immortal spirit of all creatures; in other cases it means all the souls of ancestors; in its third meaning, 'aroe' indicates a category of spiritual beings. The arara is a personal property, inherited by the family: it receives a series of cares in feeding and maintaining its plumage, as well as a proper name; it is very close to the children of the house, who play with it, and to their mother, who raises it and looks after it in a maternal way, mourning it after its death*²². Wild araras are killed to obtain the feathers needed for rituals, while domestic araras are never killed, either for rituals or to be eaten: this animal is considered non-edible and the thought of eating it is repugnant to the Bororo. The Bororos identify themselves as the araras.

*The case of the Nambikwara*²³



I Nambikwara del Brasile

The daily life of the Nambikwara, a population of the Brazilian Amazon forest of Matogrosso, includes a number of domestic animals, bred for fun and treated like children: dogs, roosters, chickens, monkeys, parrots, etc. They receive affectionate

²¹ <https://www.dicionarioinformal.com.br/ar%C3%B3e/>

²² S. Tonutti, "Esistono "pet" nelle società extra-occidentali?" La Ricerca Folklorica, N° 35, Antropologia dell'interiorità, Aprile, 1997, Grafo Spa., p. 118

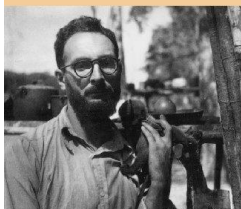
²³ *Ibid.* p. 119

attention, participate in the group's diet and although there is a chronic food shortage, they are never deprived of their daily food ration.

They receive affectionate attention, participate in the feeding of the group and, although there is a chronic food shortage, they are never deprived of their daily ration. Adults converse and play with them. Pets are never eaten.

NAMBIKWARA, gli animali

«In viaggio, fatta eccezione per gli animali capaci di camminare, tutto il serraglio viene trasportato insieme ai bagagli. Le scimmie, aggrappate ai capelli delle donne, le incappucciano di un grazioso casco vivente prolungato dalla coda attorcigliata attorno al collo della portatrice. I pappagalli e le galline si appollaiano in cima alle gerle, altri animali sono tenuti in braccio.



Nessuno riceve un abbondante nutrimento ma anche nei giorni di scarsità ciascuno ha la sua razione. In cambio, sono motivo di distrazione e di divertimento per il gruppo»
(p. 43).

Claude Lévi-Strauss

What is Forum Theatre? Pets in Western and non-western societies

The presence of the complexity of the fundamental traits of the pet phenomenon is generally typical of Western societies, where there is a tendency to associate prohibition of killing, non-edibility, admission to the domestic space and affectionate treatment. However, several intrinsic ambiguities remain.

Some non-westernised societies generally show a *contextualisation of the rules of behaviour in the sense that they must always be adapted on a case-by-case basis, while the tendency in our society is to elaborate universal rules, theoretically abstract and free from particularities: consequently human behaviour in western culture is more likely to be incoherent and to get lost in the recesses of contextual particularities*²⁴. What in our society (eating a dead pet) would represent an inconsistency with the defining traits of the pet, in other societies *may find coherence with other elements of the relationship between man and animal and create a phenomenon that is both different and familiar*²⁵.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120

²⁵ *ibid.*

Insights: Animals in Islam

A dog in the group of saints (Shahrazad Houshmand Zadeh) ²⁶

Chapter 18 of the Qur'an is entitled The Cave and tells the story of the journey of a small group of young believers, who seek God's mercy and spiritual growth, fleeing from their persecutors. In this miraculous story, the Lord puts them to sleep for a long time and then wakes them up to make them understand the Mystery of the Resurrection. The company of their dog is important here. The Koran presents the dog as part of the group of believers: "You would have thought them awake, but they were asleep. We turned them on their right side and on their left side, while their dog was at the entrance, with its paws stretched out. (...) Then it will be said: "There were three of them, and fourth their dog." And it shall be said, conjecturing, "Five, their dog sixth." And it shall be said, "Seven, and their dog Eight." Say: "The Lord knows their number well. Few know it." (The Qur'an 18:17-22).

The animal community as well as the human community

The Qur'an presents the human being as God's lieutenant and successor on earth: the Khalifa. "I have placed a successor on the earth," it says, a lieutenant of the creator, and the Lord God of the universes should make man aware of this enormous responsibility. Therefore, guarding the world with wisdom, fairness and love is the true fulfilment of this role. This means that the human being has a very important task: to guard with care and love. To look after Life, his own, animals, plants and the whole Earth. This role is of such great importance that it could sometimes lead the human being to an erroneous pride. The Koran in a pedagogical language explains and educates instead to a different reality. Animals are similar to human beings, even in their communal form: "Every animal that goes on the Earth, every bird that flies with its wings is like you in community. We have omitted nothing in the Book. To the Lord shall they be brought back" (The Qur'an 6:38).

²⁶ Shahrazad Houshmand Zadeh: *Theologian, linguistic expert in Persian at La Sapienza University, member of the women's council at the Pontifical Council for Culture*. https://www.notedipastoralegiovanile.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15044:gli-animali-nell-islam&catid=103&Itemid=1048

Pets are allowed in Islam



Keeping and raising pets is something permitted in Islam and there is nothing wrong with it.

Al-Bukhari (6203) and Muslim (2150) narrate Anas (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Prophet (pbsdl) was the best of people in attitude. I had a brother whose name was Abu 'Umayr.

He (the narrator) said: I think he said: He was a wean.

When the Messenger of Allah (pbsdl) came and saw him, he said, "Abu 'Umayr, what happened to the *nughayr* (nightingale)?" He used to play with him.

Al-Hafiz Ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said: This indicates that it is permissible for children to play with birds, and it is permissible to spend money on permissible things, which entertain children, and it is permissible to keep birds in cages and the like, and to clip the wings of birds, because one or the other was done in the case of Abu 'Umayr's nightingale; and whatever the case, the other comes under the same rule. (Fath al-Baari (10/584).

Below are the conditions and guidelines on animal care dictated by Islam:

1. The animal being kept should not be a dog, because Islam has forbidden keeping dogs except for guarding and hunting dogs. This was explained in the answer to question No. 69777. The Prophet (pbsdl) said: 'Angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog'. Narrated by al-Bukhari (3225) and Muslim (2106). Would the Muslim be happy if the angels of mercy did not accompany him into his house because of an animal he is keeping?
2. This issue (keeping pets) must not reach the stage of guilty extravagance. We have seen some people paying thousands and even millions competing to buy a certain animal or to take care of it. Some have even bequeathed them their wealth. In some countries there are festivals and shows for all kinds of animals, on which huge sums of money are spent. All this is madness and lack of common sense.

3. The animal must be treated with kindness. If a Muslim keeps an animal, he must provide it with adequate food and drink, and not cause it any harm or injury by mistreatment; he may not use it for target practice or animal fighting or expose it to heat and cold.

It has been narrated by Abu Hurayrah that the Prophet said: *While a man was walking on the road, he became very thirsty. He found a well so he went down into it and drank, then came out. He saw a dog panting and biting the ground out of thirst. The man said: This dog feels the same thirst as I do. So he went down into the well and filled his shoe with water, then held it in his mouth until he came up, and gave the water to the dog. Allah appreciated (his action) and forgave him. They said: O Messenger of Allah! Will we have a reward for these animals? He said: "In every living thing there is a reward".*

See how the believer will be rewarded for caring for animals; he may even enter Paradise for his kind treatment of a single animal, as was the case with the man in this hadith. Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, loves those who do good.

And the Prophet told us of a woman who went to Hell because of the abandonment of a cat, which she kept and which died of starvation; she did not feed it and did not let it go and eat of the fruits of the earth.

And Allah knows more²⁷.

In conclusion, there is a profound harmony in all creation. The human being who is capable of knowing almost everything is presented as the lieutenant and successor of the Creator, and this should make him the true wise guardian of life. All animals have the same value, from the smallest to the largest, they are beings endowed with life, and with knowledge. They are gifts, signs and even teachers for those who know how to meditate.

²⁷ Islam Q&A Fatwa nr. 124154

Ressources (Who invented this activity or who inspired it)

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