BOOK REVIEW


The divisive issue of animal rights is typically discussed on the ethical, scientific, and pragmatic aspects of humanity’s treatment of animals. The claims and arguments of both the animal rights and animal use advocates are evaluated by scholars for their internal coherence, utilization of the evidence, and ultimate impact on the quality of life for humans and animals.

In Killing Tradition, Simon J. Bonner approaches the topic from a decidedly different perspective than other books. Rather than adopting an abstract and theoretical stance to the animal rights debate, Bonner investigates the subject as an anthropologist embedded in the community of a newly discovered tribe of aborigines. Bonner, a folklore specialist, seeks to understand the beliefs of the use- and anti-animal-use advocates by studying their oral and behavioral traditions (The American Folklore Society 2009). By analyzing the stories and practices of these 2 groups, Bonner endeavors to determine the unspoken, and sometimes unrecognized, metabeliefs that constitute their respective worldviews. In essence Bonner delineates the behavior and interactions of the members of these groups and then constructs a framework that explains how the members of each group perceived the world. In this regard, Bonner takes a decidedly bottom-up approach in that he wishes to explain the beliefs of these groups through their behavioral and spoken culture. Bonner states, “I probe the way symbols and rituals are formed, enacted, gendered, and reshaped in animal rights controversies to deal with foundational traditions that appear to simultaneously destroy and regenerate life” (2009:11). Bonner avoids making statements that suggest hunters or anti-hunters are ethically preferable. He does not avoid ethical problems such as, how much say should urban residents have over how rural residents use their land?, and to what extent should landowners have control over their land? But he focuses primarily on description and explanation of the views rather than on evaluation (Oring 2006).

To illustrate the cultural divide between hunters and animal rights activists, Bonner discusses deer hunting, pigeon shooting, and hare coursing (i.e., a competition among greyhounds involved with chasing and directing hares in a large enclosure). He discusses the first 2 topics in an American context, whereas the third topic provides an international flavor by delving into a very controversial debate in England. Bonner approaches each topic in a similar fashion. He first sets the cultural stage for the tradition by providing background information including statistics regarding the tradition, an outline of the tradition’s role in society, and the controversy surrounding the tradition. Then Bonner transitions to the specific customs inherent in each tradition. For example Bonner describes how shirt-tail cutting, blood smearing, and hunting stories function within the culture of the deer hunting camp. Finally, Bonner analyzes the customs to explain their place within the broader hunting tradition, their role in maintaining order in the community that supports hunting, and their intellectual role in buttressing the community’s worldview. Throughout this analysis, Bonner juxtaposes the views of the animal rights community and explains why the anti-use community believes animal-use traditions should end.

As someone more familiar with scientific and philosophical approaches to the animal rights debate (Vantassel 2009), I found the folklore approach to be, at times, bewildering yet intriguing. I questioned the strength of the connection between behavior and belief: how does one’s behavior accurately exemplify one’s understanding of the world, and how does one accurately interpret the metameaning of those behavioral traditions? I was taken aback by Bonner’s employment of sexuality, which seemed almost Freudian, to interpret the symbolism of hunting practices. For instance, he interpreted that the hunting-camp custom of cutting the shirt-tail of a hunter whose bullet missed the deer as homoerotic by arguing that the custom exploits the masculine fear of having one’s buttocks exposed to other men (2009:44). In addition, the cutting ceremony was said to symbolize castration thereby adding additional humiliation to the victim. I was not certain if Bonner concurred with every sexual interpretation, because he frequently stated the claims of other researchers without explicitly providing his own view. However, because the sexual analysis is so pervasive in the text, I suspect he does agree with at least some elements of this line of inquiry. At times the diversity and complexity of the ideas and customs under discussion can cause the reader some confusion. For example, Bonner argues that hunting exemplifies a male combat ritual (man vs. buck) in which the fight is to the death (2009:80). Later, he suggests that hunters oppose anti-hunting legislation out of concern that such legislation violates their dominionist world view (2009:91). How should the reader understand the relationship between these ideas? Is one subordinate to the other or do they stand in parallel? I think the addition of concept maps and more subheadings would have assisted reader apprehension of the material. Nevertheless, I have to sympathize with Bonner because I am sure the symbolic and indirect nature of the topic made for difficult writing.

My dispute with sexual interpretations of hunting centers on the difficulty of disproving these interpretations. To deny the view that a rifle is an extension of the hunter’s phallus would likely be countered by the assertion that such a denial provides evidence of one’s repressed sexuality. Yet I suggest that the rifle could be understood as an extension of one’s tongue as the hunter is extending his tongue to consume the deer. Readers may smirk at this suggestion, but because