

BOOK REVIEW

Anthropology and Cryptozoology: Exploring Encounters with Mysterious Creatures edited by Samantha Hurn and Chris Wilbert (in the series *Multispecies Encounters*). Routledge, 2017. 263 pp. £120. ISBN 978-1-4094-6675-8.

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Show me a Sasquatch body. (Michael Shermer, 2009, p. 35)

Anthropology and anatomy professor Jeff Meldrum gave a lecture at the 2016 PA/SSE conference entitled “Sasquatch and Other Wildmen: The Search for Relict Hominoids” (Meldrum, 2016). As one of the few established academics interested in cryptozoological topics, he spoke about footprints of different provenance, their evaluation and anatomical classification. He mentioned the reactions of his colleagues to this field of research and the placement of his books in bookstores for economic reasons—booksellers put them on the esoteric shelves, where sales are expected to be higher for such topics. With reference to the skeptic Michael Shermer, he says the attitude of his colleagues toward the subject area of cryptozoology can be characterized by the sentence “The science starts once you have a body.”

This aptly shows the problematic situation in which cryptozoology finds itself. The first sentence of the article “Cryptozoology” in the English *Wikipedia* asserts: “Cryptozoology is a pseudoscience and subculture that aims to prove the existence of entities from the folklore record, such as Bigfoot, the chupacabra, or Mokele-mbembe.”¹ As is often the case with anomalies research, a general judgment is made about the field of research and the people who are actively interested in it. Without a discriminating perspective, critics equate the former with the latter (“pseudoscience and subculture”). The volume *Anthropology and Cryptozoology: Exploring Encounters with Mysterious Creatures* shows that there are other ways to look at this field.

This high-priced book, edited by anthropologist Samantha Hurn, was published in 2017 by the scientific publisher Routledge. The combination of anthropology and cryptozoology in its title shows a shift in academic approach to this topic from zoology and biological anthropology to ethnology and social sciences, evidenced in the book blurb:

Cryptozoology is best understood as the study of animals which, in the eyes of Western science, are extinct, unclassified, or unrecognised. In consequence, and in part because of its selective methods and lack of epistemological rigour, cryptozoology is often dismissed as a pseudo-science. However, there is a growing recognition that social science can benefit from engaging with it, for as social scientists are very well aware, 'scientific' categorisation and explanation represents just one of myriad systems used by humans to enable them to classify and make sense of the world around them.

This view characterizes many of the contributions in the volume and reflects a development of the so-called *ontological turn* in anthropology since the 1990s. The idea of a unified world as a basis of all people's experiences is abandoned. Differences in the views of the world are therefore not simply based on different representations of this world, but on the perception of different worlds. At first glance this may not have much to do with cryptozoology, but in the course of reading one is taught better. For the researcher, the essential aspect is that he takes the observations, stories, and myths of indigenous peoples seriously and does not consider his own view of the world to be the only true one. The editor writes in the Introduction:

Rather than prioritising 'science' as the arbiter of truth and the ultimate product of human social development, the accounts of the contributors to this volume reveal the currency and value of so-called 'indigenous ontologies' which do not necessarily lend themselves to scientific interpretation and analysis, but instead offer alternative ways of being in, engaging with, and understanding the world. (p. 7)

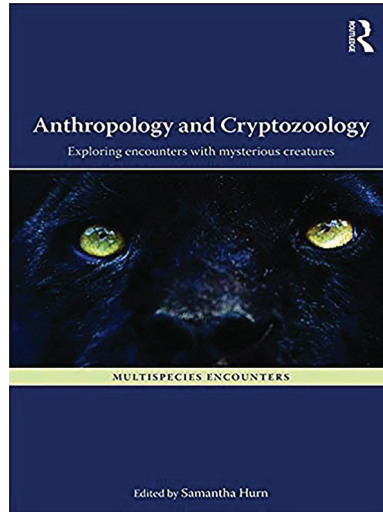
This expands the field of the possible and softens the (implicit or explicit) ethnocentric view.

In the Introduction by Samantha Hurn and the first chapter “The place of cryptids in taxonomic debates” by Stephanie Turner, historical questions and definitional problems of the research are presented. The outlined history of the subject—the International Society of Cryptozoology was founded in 1982, the term “cryptid” was introduced in 1983—shows an increased interest in cryptozoology in recent years. It became, for example, a subject of exhibitions in museums. Furthermore, the archive of Bernard Heuvelman, considered the founding father of cryptozoology, was taken over by the Musée de Zoologie in Lausanne (Switzerland). But questions of validity also are gaining in importance, for example when the astrobiological project Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) and NASA’s mission to search for life on Mars are to be attributed to cryptozoological research (p. 19f.). Parallels are clearly visible, at least on a structural level. Turner points to a connection between the increased interest in cryptids and the rapid destruction of animal and plant species by modern civilizations:

The irony here is the post-extinction discovery and documentation of so many species that have been coexistent with humans all along. Despite all of this documented loss, the lack of knowledge of species remains considerable: Estimates for the number of unknown species range from 3 million to as many as 100 million [. . .]. What is more certain, though, is that a mass extinction of all kinds of species, both known and unknown, is currently under way [. . .]. This gap in our knowledge of life forms, along with the rapid rate of their extinction, indicates that an abundance of species may forever remain cryptids, known only to themselves and lost to human history and knowledge. (p. 20f.)

Chapter 2, “Cryptids, classification and categories of cats” by Gregory Forth, and Chapter 3, “Cryptids and credulity: The Zanzibar leopard and other imaginary beings” by Martin Walsh and Helle Goldman, cover comparatively “classical”, i.e. zoology-related topics. The first article deals with the question of whether a predatory cat

species exists in an area in eastern Indonesia, which is reported by the indigenous population but whose existence has not been scientifically proven. The author emphasizes the importance of taking eyewitness accounts, including the sometimes very precise descriptions, seriously. The common assumptions of the academic discipline about what is possible and what is not possible should be suspended. He points out the need to consider the indigenous distinctions between the “natural” and the “supernatural” domain.



Walsh and Goldman’s contribution explores whether the Zanzibar leopard is extinct or whether indigenous witness accounts of its occurrence should be taken seriously. But at the beginning the authors discuss the “boundary problem” and quote from a cryptozoological handbook by Eberhart (2002) that lists ten categories of “mystery animals” and gives a good impression of the range of “mystery animals” (p. 55). With regard to their own investigation, they stress the inadequacy of a one-dimensional cryptozoological approach (“do they exist or not”) and note: “[. . .] we argue that only careful anthropological and ethnozoological research can unravel the complexity of cases like that of the Zanzibar leopard and other so-called cryptids” (p. 56). Using indigenous taxonomies and names as examples, they show how a naïve cryptozoological approach that adopts such concepts without a differentiated knowledge of culture must fail. Some designations do not relate to beings that can actually be observed in nature, but to imaginary beings and refer directly to ideas of witchcraft and supernatural characteristics of such animals.

The authors point to an important aspect that is directly related to the field of cryptozoology. By declaring that a species is considered extinct or does not form a species of its own, conservation programs are discontinued. This shows the ecological and political dimension of the research area, of which I became aware only after reading this book.

In a rather critical look at the community of cryptozoologists, Walsh and Goldman write in their conclusions:

Cryptozoologists form a community with a special interest in speculation about the reality of particular kinds of imaginary being, including species that mainstream zoologists consider extinct. They are notoriously selective, focusing on salient creatures like the Tasmanian tiger but ignoring the vast majority of species that remain to be discovered and/or described by science. Cryptozoologists also typically only make selective use of the methods and literature of anthropology and the specialized discipline of ethnozoology. (p. 80)

As in ufology, in cryptozoology it is necessary to distinguish between the subject and its representatives.

The next two chapters deal with topics that, from a Western point of view, are easily located within the field of magical thinking. The social anthropologist Michael Heneise describes the connection between human species and the tiger through a “soul transfer” in which a man is possessed by a “tiger spirit” or transforms into such an animal, in “The Naga tiger-man and the modern assemblage of a myth”. Mette High, also a social anthropologist, reports on the “wolf people” in Mongolia, who should not be confused with werewolves (“Human predation and animal sociality: The transformational agency of ‘wolf people’ in Mongolia”). The chapter offers an ethnographic and historical analysis of the significance of the wolves in Mongolian cosmology, which play a special role in the founding myth of the Mongolian people. But many of the aspects addressed concern topics that are also relevant in other cultures, because the fascination for and ambivalence about the wolf predator are deeply rooted in other cultures (in the European psyche, for example, “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf”).

Chapters 6 and 7 lead the reader to Benin and South Africa. They thematize mystical beings which, in contrast to the beings in previous chapters, are not based on known species or species that can be easily integrated into the zoological system of order, but are linked to the realm of fairytales and fantasy. Sharon Merz in “Enigmatic bush dwarfs of West Africa” writes about “dwarfs” (*siyawesi*) that can harm and help

humans and are indispensable for divination—“Without the *siyawesi*, the diviner knows nothing” (p. 128). She reports how certain children are selected by the *siyawesi*. They suddenly disappear into the bush, can no longer be found, and then return after a few days or sometimes weeks, well-fed and healthy, but with a different perception that enables them to divine. As part of her field research, Merz came across other events that, from a Western point of view, are understood as potentially paranormal, questioning her own understanding of reality. Referring to her experiences, she quotes Hill:

One limitation to the majority of the research [. . .] is that the scientists do not believe in the reality of the spiritual or psychic world. Discounting the supernatural, all is reduced to sociological or psychological causes. Their theories contain truth, but they are partial explanations. (Hill, 1996, p. 325)

And elsewhere: “Inconsistent responses lead me to doubt the logic of my questions rather than the logic of the African worldview” (Hill, 1996, p. 334).

Penelope Bernard also refers in her text “Suspending disbelief and experiencing the extraordinary” to the *ontological turn* in ethnology, which leads to a “more elastic understanding of reality” and takes indigenous concepts seriously. Her starting point was a series of extraordinary dreams of snakes and “mermaids”, which also included concrete location information: “[. . .] what perplexed me was that the dreams offered details of the geographical location of where these aquatic deities were to be found, none of which I had ever known existed or had been to in physical reality” (p. 141). She was told by a Zulu healer that it was now her job to locate the pools, lakes, and springs seen in her dream and visit them. Her amazement was great when she found these places in the real world and heard legends about them. The cryptozoological aspect (“mermaids” and snakes with strange behavior) is rather in the background in this contribution, while the methodological questions of “radical participation” and the difficult objectifiability of working with dreams as data material come to the fore.

The next two contributions, “Mermaids in Brazil” by Bettina Schmidt and “Ganka: Trickster or endangered species?” by Tanya King

also are not decidedly cryptozoological. While the former is a classical contribution of religious studies describing the development and reception of water deities in Brazil, the latter investigates the myths about the sea monster Ganka, which is apparently part of the folklore of shark fishermen. It fulfills a specific social role, as King finds out in the course of her investigation. The author sees her task in preserving the secret of the Ganka myth. She closes: “Obviously [. . .], I see academic value in documenting the existence of the ganka. However, to undertake further research into the ganka may destroy its efficacy on the wharves, and thus the waves, of New Jersey” (p. 182).

Chapter 10, “Far from the madding crowd: Big cats on Dartmoor and in Dorset, UK,” and Chapter 11, “Land of beasts and dragons: Contemporary myth-making in rural Wales,” bring us closer to typical cryptozoological themes, namely the so-called “Alien Big Cats,” which have been sighted in Great Britain. These are not about animal species whose existence is unclear or doubted, but which appear in places where they are not supposed to be. Sociologist Adrian Franklin carried out a field study of the sighting of dark, big cats in the south of England, in Dartmoor and in Dorset, in which he conducted 40 interviews with people. One of his goals was to examine the thesis of geographer Henry Buller. According to this thesis, the sighting reports of black panthers were primarily due to the fantasies of city dwellers who, due to the changed environmental conditions—“What we are left with is safe and sanitised nature” (Buller, cited by Franklin, p. 187)—have a need for ferocity from which they can distinguish themselves, “[. . .] we still need the wild” (ibid.). This thesis was mainly based on urban newspaper reports and is strongly questioned by Franklin’s findings. The testimonies and opinions he received on-site provide a different, more lifelike picture. He also found plausible explanations for the existence of big cats in the respective areas. Furthermore, he can draw a methodical lesson from his research efforts: “Most of all it reaffirms the value of qualitative fieldwork and ethnography as a corrective to armchair theorizing” (p. 201).

Samantha Hurn, the editor of the volume, treats the “Alien Big Cats” topic from a broader perspective, namely that of the relationship between anthropology and relativism, science and imagination, as they are also the subject of the already-mentioned *ontological turn*

in anthropology. Among other things, her chapter emphasizes the social function of myths—in this case, the relationship between England and Wales. In Wales there were sightings of such alien big cats. In the author's view, the question of the "reality" of such animals is less important than their "role as trope or archetypal figure in a politically charged narrative concerning the place of marginalized rural communities in a globalized world" (p. 204). What fascinated me more about her contribution, however, was the fact that her dog was a constant companion during her field study. It was an unusual methodological measure that was very beneficial for access to the rural population, although it was not deliberately used for that reason. She also addresses the problem of "protected communication" (Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2015), which field researchers encounter in the field of anomalistics, i.e. caution and restraint in the reports on extraordinary experiences—"Many had kept their experiences to themselves precisely because of a fear of how their accounts would be received by others" (p. 206). The fact that the researcher had an uncanny encounter with such a big cat during a night stroll during the time of her field study helped her considerably with the data collection. Here, too, the value of field research is clearly evident, although perhaps not everyone wishes to have a close encounter with the researched object in every case, as happened here.

In the last chapter, "Digesting 'cryptid' snakes," written by Luci Attala, the field of cryptozoology is, in my opinion, largely abandoned, because it deals above all with the symbolic and archetypal quality of the (giant) snake and the often-reported snake encounter after the intake of the psychotropic substance ayahuasca. This author also refers to the *ontological turn* in anthropology, according to which hallucinatory visions are regarded as real, comparable for instance with the "psychic reality" of Jungian archetypes.

I think the contents of this book and its different thematic emphases make clear the discomfort of some anthropologists with a scientific view, according to which "nature" is treated as *an objective reality*. It is almost obvious that one can find here a natural alliance to the field of cryptozoology. At least, if you take it in an expanded understanding that goes beyond the simple "Show me the Sasquatch corpse," as the editor of this book does:

Cryptozoology is not, therefore, just the search for animals that are unknown to science. It can and should be about the process through which cryptids come to be known, and they come to be known by the variety of means by which we come to know about any other being in the world. (p. 213)

Through this broad (and for many: extended) perspective on the subject, texts are presented that do not consistently meet the expectations of a “hardcore” cryptozoologist. However, they represent a collection of contributions that can also inspire readers with non-specific cryptozoological interests by addressing epistemological questions as well as fundamental problems of ethnocentrism.

NOTE

- ¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cryptozoology> Even if more balanced positions are added, skeptical opinions repeatedly emphasize a pseudo-scientific status for this research field and equate the researchers with, for example, creationists, Holocaust deniers, and UFO kidnappees.

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