
Game Killing and Killing Games: An Anthropologist Looking at Hunting in a Modern Society

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In modern urbanized and densely populated societies – such as the contemporary Netherlands, which forms the geographical setting of the present analysis – hunting has lost its meaning as a mode of subsistence to become a symbolic strategy. Hunting is a cultural enclave in which the boundaries between humans and animals are blurred and the relations of dominance and submission symbolically reversed. Hunting challenges the legitimacy of apparently “given” power relations between humans and animals. Hunters construct, reproduce and legitimize hunting by crossing the boundaries between humans and animals. Hunting “for pleasure” is regarded as truly pleasurable only if it allows a reversal of the asymmetrical power relations between humans and animals, attributing almost human characteristics to the game-species. In their cognitive schemes hunters measure their power and abilities with strong, cunning and preferably male opponents. Game-species share an ambivalent status between the human and the animal realms, the tame and the wild, and between their instrumental and expressive significance. Hunting “for pleasure” is justified by this very ambivalence.

A concern for boundaries and ambiguous marginal situations is universal to human culture as the basis for moral order and for structuring and perceiving social reality. Obvious transgressions are hardly met with indifference, but are causes of cultural controversy and sometimes even anxiety and repulsion (Douglas, 1966). In our modern society the difference between humans and animals seems firmly established. People define their being human by distinguishing themselves from other people as well as from animals. Transgressing this boundary in speech or behavior is regarded as a serious violation of the moral code (cf. Liliequist, 1990; Leach, 1964). In human society human-animal boundaries are symbolically expressed, commented on and reaffirmed in pet shops, zoos, circuses, menageries and wildlife resorts, presenting “man” as the master of all animal life (Yi-Fu, 1984; Thomas,

1983; Ritvo, 1987). Animals are manipulated by and subject to human will; “man” is in control, at least according to popular perception.

However, there is a cultural enclave where the boundaries between humans and animals are willingly blurred and the relations of dominance and submission symbolically reversed. Hunting challenges the legitimacy of apparently “given” power relations between humans and animals and the hierarchy of human dominance and animal subordination. Hunting involves the material and symbolic consumption of animals (defined as game) by humans (defined as hunters). Whereas the relationship between hunter and game is an asymmetrical one, this inequality is not as self-evident and firmly established as it may seem (Dahles, 1990a). In some classic accounts of hunting strong ties between the hunter and the hunted culminate in a “mystical” union and “immersion” with nature (Ortega y Gasset, 1985). A remarkable paradox arises: whereas in everyday perception human-animal boundaries are strictly obeyed and surrounded by moral restrictions, hunters deliberately submit to a mystical union with the game-animals, blurring the culturally constructed human-animal boundaries for the sake of a good sport.

In this article I look at the changing construction of human-animal boundaries in a modern society, reflecting critically on the way existing power relations between humans and animals are reproduced and legitimized. I derive my empirical data from a society that I am most familiar with, contemporary Netherlands.

Anthropological Research on Hunting

The terms and the strategies humans use to discriminate among humans form a major topic in anthropology. However, research on how animals figure in human thought and behaviour has been neglected. Anthropology is generally defined as the science of *anthropos* – man. At a closer look, anthropologists have been exploring human-animal boundaries since their science became established in the nineteenth century (Dahles & Marks, 1990). Human superiority is not a given fact; it is a human construction which emerges, develops and changes in the course of time and within different cultural contexts. The very fact that in modern, post-industrial societies human-animal boundaries are still constructed, reproduced and legitimized makes us aware of transgressions of these boundaries being a continuous concern.

Almost a decade ago, Eugenia Shanklin (1985), looking at the direction that current studies on human-animal relations were taking, pointed out that the

meaning of animals was a relatively unexplored field. Although a wealth of material has been gathered since then, the study of animals in metaphor and symbolic representation still is a “growth industry” within anthropology. As several scholars have pointed out (Howe, 1981; Thomas, 1983; Löfgren, 1985), the meaning attached to and the classification of animals differ according to social class and vary with changes in social structure. Reflecting on human-animal relations in the past and present reveals the changes in symbolic representations of human-animal boundaries, and the connectedness of these changes with social and economic developments in society as a whole.

As a subsistence strategy (in hunting and gathering societies) hunting has been a major field in anthropological research. As a leisure activity, however, hunting forms a young and rather marginal area of anthropological inquiry although an exciting and innovative one (Segalen, 1986; Dahles, 1990a). To understand why hunting is not vanishing despite the pressures of modern society and the absence of the necessity of hunting for subsistence, and to analyze the cultural codes and self-inflicted restrictions that modern sportsmen obey, I conducted six years of extensive field-work (1983-1989) among hunters in the Netherlands.

To gain access to the world of hunting, I attended a course preparing for the hunting exam, became a member of the national hunting association, participated in all kinds of shooting as beater and jack-of-all-trades, but never killed an animal myself. At first, my fieldwork was restricted to the hunting elite – landed gentry, board members of the hunting association and politicians – who were strongly interested in manipulating the outcome of my research for use in political campaigns. As it turned out, my writings were quoted by hunters as well as the anti-bloodsports league, causing the elite to lose their interest in my research. In the second phase I participated in all kinds of hunting and talked to different kinds of hunters, including farmers, poachers and game-keepers. During my fieldwork I was coached by two key informants – one with excellent connections with the elite, the other with a firm base in a rural setting. In the last phase my fieldwork was extended to “hunting-related” groups such as the police, nature protectors, and members of the anti-bloodsports league.

Periods of intensive participant observation – while assisting the game-keeper, collecting the shot animals, preparing the kill, practising clay pigeon shooting, attending the course or visiting meetings – alternated with ethnographic

interviewing and analysis of historical records to trace changes in nineteenth and twentieth century hunting. Learning about the scope of social differentiation within the world of hunting, I established a cultural map by applying domain and taxonomic analyses (Spradley, 1979) to the indigenous classifications of hunters. Six years of data collection resulted in an ethnographic account of the changing identity and world-view of modern Dutch hunters (Dahles, 1990a).

Hunting in Contemporary Dutch Society

In contemporary Dutch society, hunting forms a world apart that distinguishes itself from “ordinary life” by a complex internal differentiation, its own organizations, different classifications of and sensibilities towards nature, specific rituals and a particular terminology and code of honour (Dahles, 1990a). Hunting has recently come under considerable strain, as “bloodsports” are severely criticized in public opinion. Since the seventies more and more voices are heard demanding the abolition of hunting by law. These voices contributed to a more restrictive legislation and a more reserved state policy regarding the lease of hunting grounds.

Notwithstanding the fact that they are facing increasing difficulties in securing hunting facilities, the number of Dutch hunters has grown significantly. After a modest increase in the first half of this century when it rose from about 7,000 in 1900 to 12,000 in 1940 there was a boom in number of hunting permits granted after World War II, amounting to almost 41,000 in 1977, declining to 33,000 in 1988 and stabilizing ever since (Dahles, 1990a, p. 96). In the Netherlands each hunter disposes of 1.2 km², which is the largest area in north-western Europe. In Denmark there is only 0.25 km² per hunter left, in West-Germany 1.0 km², in the Republic of Ireland 0.6 km², and in the United Kingdom 0.3 km².² The popularity of hunting in the highly industrialised and densely populated countries of north-western Europe cannot sufficiently be explained by external factors such as population growth, increasing welfare and leisure. As I discussed elsewhere in more detail, the taste for hunting did not grow in Dutch population in general, but only in certain social groups that I would call the “new leisure class”: middle-class and middle aged professionals living in a rural community where they exert a strong influence on local politics and policy (Dahles, 1990a, pp. 116-128; 1990b, pp. 11-17). That hunting, despite the opposing forces in Dutch society, attracts a large number of men (males significantly more than females) is related to the intrinsic attraction the quest for game has to offer.

Classifying Game

Hunters emphasize that they pursue hunting “for the love of animals” (Ortega y Gasset 1985; Dahles, 1989). However, this “love” is restricted to the category of game animals. In the hunters’ terminology, game denotes all “hunnable” animals, which are distinguished from “wild animals” and wildlife. “Wild animals” usually are considered inedible; most “game,” however, is consumed. The category “game” cuts across the general division between the wild and tame, between wildlife, livestock and pets. What game and wildlife have in common is the natural state, living outside human settlements. However, in spite of this physical distance, game is protected and cared for by hunters. An important aspect of wildlife management in this century, this care and protection is similar to the way livestock is treated. Hunters provide feeding-grounds and cover for the game, they decimate its natural enemies and rear it to enlarge the game-population. Similar to livestock, game is considered edible. Even though they consume it, hunters claim to have affective ties with game-animals, as other people cherish their pets. Thus, hunters kill and eat the animals which they love and care for, giving evidence of an ambivalent attitude towards the animals which they define as game. This relationship is characterized by dominance and affection (Yi-Fu, 1984).

Besides the hunters’ classificatory schemes we are concerned with the legal classification of game that forms the framework within which the hunters’ classification is operative (Dahles, 1990a). The Dutch Game Act of 1977 defines game by three criteria: edibility, utility and damage to the crops. The Game Act distinguishes between four categories of game: big game, small game, waterfowl and “other” (see Table 1).

Permission to hunt these species is restricted. Only licensees are qualified to shoot game; a license being granted to persons of eighteen years and older who have passed the Dutch hunting exam and who own or, which is more common, lease at least 99 acres of hunting territory. Hunting is limited to hunting-seasons which differ according to the species involved. In some cases the season is permanently closed, or open only to holders of a special license that is granted on request by the Ministry of Agriculture. The species defined as game in the Dutch Game Act form but a small part of wildlife in the Netherlands. Most other wildlife is protected by various other laws. Thus, most birds come under the Birds Protection Act. Mammals not defined as game, reptiles, amphibians and some fish are protected by

Table 1. Game according to section 2 of the Game Act (1977):

Big Game	red deer	fallow deer	roe deer	
	mouflons	wild boar		
Small Game	hares	pheasants	black grouse	
	partridges	woodcocks		
Waterfowl	all kinds of geese and ducks		golden plovers	great snipes
	common snipes	jack snipes	coots	
"Other Game"	wood pigeons	carrion crows	hooded crows	rooks
	jackdaws	jays	magpies	rabbits
	foxes	wild cats	cats run wild	polecats
	ermine	weasels	squirrel	badgers
	pine and stone martens		otters	seals

the Nature Protection Act. Some animals have no legal protection, as for example most insects and some rats and mice. Animals that are called "Exotics" or introduced species such as racoon, coypu and mink, also lack legal protection.

Hunting and the Instrumental Argument

Traditionally, Dutch hunters distinguished between edible and inedible and between useful and harmful animals. Only the herbivorous, edible animals were called "noble" game by the sportsmen (Hermans, 1947, p. 97). This qualification in fact was a projection of social characteristics which distinguished sportsmen from other social groups, most of them being of noble birth. The privilege of the nobility to shoot edible game is peculiar in that this social class depended on the meat less than did the poor. Historically, venison played a prominent part in the meals of the nobility throughout centuries (Farb & Armelagos, 1980, p. 185). At the beginning of this century, edibility, and more generally, utility were the reasons why a number of species were chased and trapped for food or for their fur or

feathers. Before World War II professional hunters made a living of catching waterfowl and fur-coated animals. Waterfowl was cheap food for the lower social strata. However, the exploitation of wildlife became unremunerative as modern farming developed and the attitudes towards the consumption of game changed. At present there is disagreement on the status of game as food. On the one hand it is regarded as “natural” meat unspoiled by agri-business, on the other hand it is despised as an unnecessary delicacy, or worse, as a culinary perversion. Undoubtedly these attitudes are connected with modern sensibilities concerning the way game usually is killed – shooting being associated with violence and bloodshed. However, most edible game shot on Dutch hunting-grounds is consumed, by the sportsmen themselves, or after being sold to venison dealers (Dahles, 1990a, pp. 195-198, Kruyt et. al., 1987).

Most hunters regard game as a delicacy. The recipes to prepare game, which are recommended by sportsmen, emphasize certain subtleties, which sometimes make the dish expensive. In fact, consuming game is a form of conspicuous consumption. One example of this is snipe, which is prepared and eaten with the entrails. The fowlers of previous centuries did not take the trouble to catch this bird, for it is not “meaty” enough. Among the Dutch gentleman-hunters, however, it was (and still is) ill-mannered to value game according to the amount of meat it yielded. The very category of hunters that claimed exclusive rights on the “noble” game, considered it “uncivilized” to hunt for the meat. This attitude applies to modern hunters as well. The terms “shooter,” “skinner” and “pothunter” are employed to denote fellow-hunters who offend these standards of good behaviour (Dahles, 1988, p. 18). As sportsmen giving priority to the meat are treated with contempt by their peers, it seems unlikely that edibility forms an outstanding motive of modern hunters. This criterion, however, has not lost its meaning entirely. It is still of importance – not as a major incentive to kill game, but as an ideology to legitimize hunting.

Whether hunting is the appropriate strategy to reduce game-damage is controversial. Game-damage is of current interest, as evidenced by the amount of financial compensation annually paid to farmers by the Game Fund. Farmers, policy-makers and nature protectors usually consider shooting but one possible solution to this problem. The idea that sportsmen are partly responsible for the damage caused by game arose after World War II. Being increasingly dependent on the goodwill of farmers leasing their land to hunters, sportsmen have to reckon

with the farmers' wishes. Previously, it was beneath the sportsmen's dignity to destroy pests and the farmers had to do so themselves. However, hunters did not despise all so-called ignoble species. When telling tales of hunting rabbits or foxes and shooting pigeons, for example, they do not mention the damage these animals cause to agriculture. Partly this is connected with the Game Act which does not differentiate between species that cause damage to agriculture on the one hand, and species which do so to "noble" game. Thus, the game which is considered harmful by farmers does not necessarily share this status in the opinion of hunters.

The attitude towards rabbits can illustrate this point. Although those species are regarded as extremely harmful to forestry, hunting rabbits is considered the "music of hunting." When a couple of years ago rabbits had almost disappeared from many hunting grounds because of an epidemic, sportsmen reared and released young rabbits, although this is forbidden by the Game Act. On the other hand, the legal obligation to prevent game-damage did not stimulate Dutch sportsmen to hunt those species more passionately in which they traditionally lack interest. Their attitudes towards crows and jackdaws are illustrative. The numbers of these birds have increased considerably during the last two or three decades as they live on the waste of our modern society. Moreover, crows and jackdaws are threatening the population of gamebirds as they consume their eggs and even the young birds. Despite bonuses to kill them, sportsmen remain very reluctant to do so. This attitude is deeply rooted among Dutch sportsmen as it is quoted in the sportsmen's aphorism: "shooting crows is not worth a bullet" (Hermans, 1951, p. 303). Generally referred to as pests, foxes, however, are hunted with great passion, not because of their harmful effect on nature, but because they make an excellent sport.

Neither edibility, nor utility or damage form valid motives to explain why sportsmen are interested in specific game-species. This is not to say that those criteria have lost their meaning entirely. Nowadays game is appreciated as a delicacy and the prevention of game-damage has become a legal obligation to hunters. However, these are subordinate facets of hunting, not the major drives. It is not the meat hunters are after; and many species which are classified as "harmful" in the Game Act are hunted in spite, not because of, the legal obligation. What exactly attracts sportsmen to certain game-species is examined next.

The Expressive Significance of Hunting

Strong and Fighting

When sportsmen tell about their observations and experience in the field they elaborate on the behaviour and characteristics of the animals they are chasing. What they usually appreciate them for is strength, beauty, perfection of fur or feathers, keen perception and intelligence, a massive trophy, quick and unpredictable movements, cleverness, alertness and courage. According to hunters these features make hunting game attractive to them. The common denominator of these different features is fighting spirit. Only fighting game makes a real challenge to sportsmen. In their opinion shooting "defenseless" animals does not even deserve to be denoted as hunting. According to the dictionary of sportsmen's aphorisms (Hermans, 1951, pp. 807-808), "fighting spirit" is characteristic of game-species as an opponent. The opposite, defenselessness, refers etymologically to being "without weapons to defend oneself" (p. 809). There is one game-species which is praised for its fighting spirit above all others. According to some hunters wild boar is the only indigenous species which deserves this predicate. This is because wild boar, male as well as female, possess strong canine teeth. Especially the males develop a pair of tusks which are visible outside the snout, sticking out like "guns." Wild boar is also considered to have a fighting spirit because it is said to attack people.

To the degree that other game-species conform to these aspects, being offensive and wearing "weapons," they are also perceived as fighting. This applies especially to males. Thus, the antlerwearing buck of roe, red and fallow deer is the favorite quarry of many a well-to-do sportsman. Notably, the hunting season for those animals coincides with the rutting-time. This is not by coincidence, as these animals are in perfect condition by this time, wearing full-grown antlers and acting aggressive towards their rivals, whom they are fighting with vigor (Antonisse, 1978, p. 49). It is at rutting time that these animals correspond most to the image of the "truly male," being strong, aggressive and virile. The preference for male animals even extends to small game and birds. According to sportsmen this is because they are more difficult to shoot than females. The pheasant-cock for example, being taller and more colorful than the hen, is said to be more cunning, too. Even if the male does not differ from the female in outward appearance, sportsmen claim to perceive behavioral differences, the male being more offensive and quicker than the female. For example, this is said to apply to hares (Antonisse,

1978, p. 87).

Hunters' high esteem for "fighting" game cuts across the classification of the Game Act. It does not matter whether a game-species is edible or damaging according to this classificatory scheme; the priority lies with the "fighting" ones. This applies especially to reviled beasts of prey, such as foxes. Sportsmen regard them as competitors and try to kill them with all legal and sometimes even illegal means. However, the cunningness of foxes commands their respect.

The Tame and the Wild

While wildlife exists independent of human interference, domesticated animals degenerate by living close to and being manipulated by humans (Thomas, 1983, p. 288; Brehm, 1939, p. 49). Although controversial, this perception of domestication is strongly adhered to by hunters (Ortega y Gasset, 1985; Dahles, 1990a, pp. 205-209). Tame animals have lost their fighting spirit and are considered unfit for hunting. However, the boundaries between the tame and the wild are not fixed and are increasingly being blurred. Human interference with nature has changed the living conditions of many species. As a consequence, some have diminished in number or disappeared altogether, while others have benefited from the changes and increased in number to become a nuisance to people. This last category loses its shyness and lives close to human settlements. They interbreed with the tame species of the same kind (as ducks do) or invite them to run wild (as carrier-pigeons stay with half-tame town-pigeons). Hunters feel that hybrids endanger the purity of type, blurring the clear-cut distinction between the tame and the wild. They counteract this process by killing hybrids. This interference with nature they perceive as an act of "extinction," not as an act of "hunting."

The preoccupation of hunters with purity explains their passion for hunting migratory birds as those species are less subject to human interference than are indigenous species. Due to the association with the tame and the degenerate, hunters show little interest in shooting animals which have become a nuisance to farmers and townspeople. Although the Game Act imposes less restrictions on killing these species than on killing others, hunters refuse to do so. "We are not the garbage collectors of this society," one of my informants commented. Although hunters are worried about the advancing domestication of game, they themselves interfere with the game-population to increase its numbers and improve its physical condition. Through wildlife management, hunters supply food on a regular basis,

rear animals and release new species to enrich the variety of game. Some of the most prosperous hunters even reconstruct the landscape and kill off other species to create the perfect ecosystem for fowling, stalking or bird-shooting. In the hunters' perception, the concept of wildlife management is applied only to the active interference in the ecosystem for the benefit of their favorite game-species. In the Netherlands wildlife management is conducted by the hunters themselves, sometimes in co-operation with a paid professional or a game-keeper. As propagated by organizations involved in nature protection, wildlife management is not accepted as *proper* management by Dutch hunters because it is not directed first and foremost at game-species. On the contrary, many nature protectors plead against the artificial maintenance of certain game-species, such as pheasants, which are reared and released for shooting, and fallow deer and mouflons, which are kept on the royal hunting grounds.

At first sight the measures taken by hunters are difficult to reconcile with their preoccupation with purity and fighting spirit. As the opponents of "blood-sports" have noted, these measures can be compared to intensive livestock agriculture. However, in the perception of hunters this management is not incompatible with their notions of the wild. On the contrary, most measures are directed at the maintenance of the species which conform to their ideal type of game. As conducted by Dutch sportsmen, wildlife management is meant to yield stronger animals of a bigger size, with more robust bodies and wearing bigger trophies. Thus, to improve the population of hares on Dutch hunting-grounds, a number of individuals from Eastern Europe were released a couple of years ago. As those "foreigners" were bigger and stronger than the indigenous ones, interbreeding was supposed to improve the population, rendering hares that were more apt to the sportsmen's demands.

A Playful Fight

"Wild" and "fighting" are the characteristics of the animals which occupy a special place in the Dutch hunters' perception. This especially concerns gamespecies which dare to face their human attackers, behaving like opponents, thus attaining almost human characteristics. Most appreciated are those animals which can be manipulated in a way that they seem to play the game according to the hunters' rules. Sportsmen enjoying "a good sport" are especially attracted by birds. Of all game-birds pheasants can be most easily manipulated. Dutch hunting-grounds are

transformed into shooting areas with belts of trees, woods, hedges and small coverts. When pheasants are driven across these obstacles, they have to “climb” in the air, which renders “tall birds,” as the saying among sportsmen goes (Page, 1977, p. 147). Sportsmen have always shown a considerable inventiveness in developing techniques to have the game presented in an attractive way.

In this respect it is significant that the term “game” denotes certain species of wildlife as well as forms of play. This double meaning reveals what shooting is about for them. It is a game first of all, i.e. a structured activity which is implemented and explored for its own sake, rather than being directed at an ultimate goal (Huizinga, 1938). In shooting it is not the bag that counts, but the way it was obtained. It is not the killing, but the effort it takes to do so which makes shooting attractive to sportsmen. Many of them consider the killing an anti-climax after a challenging and exciting chase. Transforming the landscape, manipulating the game, submitting oneself to self-inflicted restrictions (Dahles, 1988) are strategies to delay the killing and heighten the attraction of shooting. The more the game rises to the challenge and the more it makes high demands on the hunters’ proficiency with the rifle, the more it is appreciated. It is no coincidence that the characteristics which are highly valued – aggression, courage, vigor, strength – are associated with manliness in our society. Hunters, mostly men, measure their strength or cunningness by comparing themselves to their animal competitors. For this reason, sportsmen prefer those animals which behave like an equal (human) opponent – a male, wearing “weapons” and fighting back. Their opponents become enemies as shooting is a metaphor of warfare (Page, 1977, p. 136; Dahles, 1991).

Game and Power Relations

Nowadays game is considered a national property which is carefully guarded by the Dutch people. Many perceive hunting as a fatal threat to this national property. In the seventies and eighties the opposition against hunting escalated into a fight between Dutch hunters and members of the anti-bloodsports league. Both used violence against persons and property, pressed charges against each other, and competed for the support of the media (Dahles, 1990a, pp. 31-63). Hunters have lost the battle, being denounced as “murderers” in public (p. 283). This is why policy makers speak of wildlife management, regulation of the game population, conservation and prevention of damage whenever it comes to killing wildlife. Green policy and legislation prefer the instrumental legitimization. This attitude is not shared by

hunters, among whom utilitarian considerations never played a prominent part. The stress is rather put on the “playful” aspects of hunting.

The strained relationship between the public and the hunters’ perception coincide with changing power relations in our society. When at the beginning of this century Dutch gentlemen-hunters claimed exclusive rights to edible game, they did so not because they were dependent on its meat, but because they wanted to make a point about their social position. Controlling access to the hunting grounds and the game, they controlled the people who depended on these resources. When power relations between landlord and peasants changed, the gentlemen-hunters were obliged to have regard for the interests of agriculture. These changes were enforced by the Game Act, which in 1923 was altered under the pressure of agricultural organizations. After World War II, again, radical changes took place in the social composition of the world of hunters. With different social groups obtaining access to hunting, the rich and powerful lost ground. With nature protection exercising influence on policy-makers, sportsmen were subjected to more restrictions from 1954 onwards – a tendency which has grown even stronger since the mid-seventies, when the movement against bloodsports began.

The changing perception of game among Dutch sportsmen reflects the democratizing processes that occurred in hunting. When in 1923 farmers gained influence in the Game Act, they obtained the right to kill animal species they classified as pests. As a consequence, these species acquired a lower status in the perception of sportsmen. Throughout the first half of this century the social differences between farmers and gentlemen-hunters were expressed by the terms “farmers’ game” and “noble game.” However, by the Game Act of 1954 all hunters were forced into co-operation with farmers regarding game-damage, as the state-subsidized compensation was granted to farmers only after both parties had proven their inability to prevent the damage. Under these condition the strict distinction between “noble” and “ignoble” game vanished. Instead a number of new concepts were used, some derived from biology (such as “predators”) to avoid pejorative implications.

At present, hunters are responsible for the protection of some species which in earlier times they would not even call game. The Royal Dutch Hunters’ Association, which up to the sixties used to represent mostly the elite among Dutch sportsmen, is promoting different ways of hunting. The preference for “fighting” game, measures to enlarge the game-population artificially, and the propagation of

the “art of shooting” is rejected as “elitist” and “anachronistic.” Instead the Association, which organizes 23,000 of the 33,000 Dutch licensees, advocates modesty. Hunting, not shooting, is defined as “harvesting” a small amount of game which has been maintained by intelligent management of the resources of cultivated nature. This attitude approaches ways of hunting which traditionally have been characteristic of Dutch peasants and farmers, but which were denied the status of “hunting” by the sportsmen of noble birth exercising cultural dominance among Dutch hunters. The changing attitudes among Dutch hunters reflect the decline of the game-population and the scarcity of hunting-grounds in times of increasing numbers of aspiring hunters. This is why modern hunters have to accept the tasks which are imposed on them by the Game Act: they are becoming professional wildlife managers, subscribing to the demands of modern nature conservation – which does not alter the fact that there are conflicting objectives in wildlife management and nature conservation. On the one hand Dutch hunters have to keep the game population within limits to prevent damage to the crops; on the other hand they have to maintain a varied game-population, being aware of their responsibility for a “national property.”

Dutch hunters derive a new identity from this legal assignment, presenting themselves to the world as wildlife managers. In the light of increasing opposition against hunting, this image forms the front stage in the presentation of self, a strategy of survival. However, this new identity suffers from the powerful back stage presentation of hunting. Dutch sportsmen still try to get around the obligation to kill pests, refuse to clean away “animal nuisances,” and hesitate to shoot those animals which they consider “defenseless”, weak or tame. Hunting “for pleasure” is regarded as truly pleasurable only if it allows at least a cognitive reversal of the asymmetrical power relations between humans and animals, attributing almost human characteristics to the game-species.

In their cognitive schemas, hunters measure their power and abilities against strong, cunning and preferably male opponents. Dutch hunters derive their right to kill game from the blurring of human-animal boundaries. What makes animals game is the ambivalence of their classificatory status between the human and the animal realm, the wild and the tame, between dominance and affection, and between their instrumental and expressive significance. Hunting “for pleasure” is justified by this very ambivalence.

 Notes

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2. I am indebted to Jaap Beekhuis for providing the statistical data from records of FACE (The European Association of Hunters) 1984.

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