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On the Border with Culture: or who are the "Green" Natives?¹

In this paper I address an old anthropological problem of the relationship between nature and culture, this time not as ontological qualities, but as political concepts that shape current forms of political struggle in certain parts of the world. I have tried to show that the persistence of the idea that "primitive people" are green is the consequence of many interrelated factors and that it is necessary to see native groups within a concrete historical context instead of simply labelling them as more natural than we are. Still, my aim it is not to say that industrial societies do not have anything to learn about environmental responsibilities from the non-industrial ones, but following Milton (1999), to show the value of more nuanced and historically situated approach to the understanding of the ways different societies understand and interact with their environment.

Key words:

nature-culture,
"green natives",
ecological
wisdom

Introduction

In this paper I want to address an old anthropological problem of the relationship between nature and culture, this time not as ontological qualities, but as political concepts that shape the form of political struggle in certain parts of the world. In that sense, I am interested in the ways those concepts are used and constructed in the various political movements as a starting point for action and the possibilities of anthropological engagement with those practices. My main focus is at the two major groups that use the idea of 'ecological wisdom' of native groups in their political agenda: Environmental Nongovernment Organizations (ENGO) and various self-

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organized native groups. Both groups use the idea that

“nonindustrial societies possess a ‘primitive ecological wisdom’ which could offer pointers towards sustainable future ways of life, or that detailed indigenous knowledge of soils, plants, animals, and so on offer vital resources for global struggles to develop sustainable food-production systems, conserve biodiversity and so on” (Leach and Fairhead 2002: 213).

Thus, the main aim of this paper is to present major examples of the two-way process of construction and appropriation of ‘green wisdom’ for various political aims. First, the way ENGO (Environmental Nongovernment Organizations) construct the idea of green wisdom and use it for their own purposes and second, the ways some native groups use those some ideas for their own political struggle.

Following those principles, the essay is structured in a way that shows this two way appropriation process. First, we will deal with major reasons for describing certain native groups as ‘environmentally wise’ (while others are not) and the ways those ideas are politically appropriated on a global scale. Second, we take a look at the anthropological critique of those ideas and their political appropriations and the ways anthropology itself helped the shape of some of them. Finally, we consider some major examples of the adoption of these ideas among various political actors and the native groups themselves.²

From noble savages to international development project

If we look carefully to the current literature on ‘ecological wisdom of the natives’, it seems that only groups with predominantly a gather-hunting economy are seen as ‘environmentally wise’. It is presumed that they make little impact on their environment, due to the very characteristics of their economy. In traditional western social sciences, the transition from a gathering-hunting economy toward sedentary economy is seen as part of the evolutionary progress of humanity from the imagined ‘natural state’ toward the greater stage of civilization. Consequently, people in a ‘lower’ stage have to be closer to nature. In the very heart of this idea is a “fundamental ambivalence about modernity” (Wade 2005: 75), perpetuated by modernist colonial project, that sees modernity simultaneously as progress toward the higher degrees of “civilization” and regression in “the real humanity of the mankind” suppressed by the development of science and technology.³ In this vision, “primitive people” are seen as “noble savages” that are currently at the evolutionary stage of Europeans prior to modernity (cf. Soper 1995). This is all part of the well-known story and while the

2. My main argument is theoretical and my main concern is about possibilities of political appropriations of green wisdom in general and for that reason it is impossible to classify ethnographic examples used in the paper by geographical principle. Those appropriations appear in certain parts of the world (while not in others) and the most prominent examples and reasons of those appropriations are dealt with here. In that sense I will focus on an overlap between environmental and indigenous movements in the last decades of 20th century.

3. Modernity and primitivism are mutually dependent, as civilization needs primitivism to establish difference and hierarchy (Taussig 1993).

concept has long been discredited in academia, it seems that in its disguises it persists in some environmentalist discourses.

The understanding of native people as ecologically wise became so common within the discourse of various environmental movements, that it even became part of international development discourses and UN declarations. Thus, The Rio Declaration of UN Conference on Environment and Development (1992) published in a volume produced by IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) on Indigenous People and Sustainability in 1997 states that “Indigenous people and their communities, and other local communities, have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices” (IUCN, p. 42, quoted in Wade 2005). In the same document, it is further claimed, “Indigenous communities possess an ‘environmental ethic’ developed from living in particular system” (quoted in *ibid*, 73). The authors of the quoted document assume that a holistically imagined category of indigenous people have a qualitatively different approach to the environment from western societies which enable them to preserve ecological balance.⁴

I suggest that we should not take those documents lightly, regardless of their real power, as similar kind of ideas figure prominently as arguments in political struggle of various environmentalist and native groups. But before we return to some of the major examples of those struggles, let us take a brief look at contemporary anthropological engagements with the applications of these ideas among environmental groups and other political actors.

Deconstruction of the concept of ‘green natives’ in anthropology

Roy Ellen (1986) in his famous essay that marked the begging of more critical anthropological engagement with ecological movements based on the various ideas of ‘green natives’, defines three interconnected reasons for the persistence of the primitive people environmental wisdom. First, some societies have ideologies and cosmologies which stress environmental harmony. Second, some native societies really have had very little impact on their environment. Third, “because at particular times anthropologists and others have appeared to describe societies which have sometimes approaching an ecological self-sustain economy” (*ibid*, 10).⁵ I propose two additional, closely connected reasons important for our discussion. One is that various environmental groups and different other institutions (political or economic) use those ideas for different political aims and, finally, many indigenous groups themselves

4. In accordance with that approach, the Inuit group of North American Indians has an international organization called Inuit Circumpolar Conference, which have had observer status in the UN since the 1970s (Vitebsky 2005). Their collective knowledge, as an official UN document states, “forms a data base for predictive modeling, for forecasting, and for selecting harvest areas” (*ibid*. 199).

5. The third argument is sometimes connected with the widespread use of a Darwinian concept of adaptation as the best explanatory model for human society.

appropriate the idea for their own purposes.

All of these explanations are closely intertwined and cannot be easily discussed separately (for example, some environmental movements are based on some of the anthropological ideas about the environment that are more or less close to some versions of evolutionary adaptationism), but for the sake of the argument and its clear presentation I will try to tackle each argument on its own.

I will start from the third reason suggested by Ellen (1986) dismantling anthropological ideas that lead some authors (anthropologists or not) to make a connection between environmentalism and native groups. Traditional anthropological analyses that dominated discipline throughout the twentieth century assumes that culture and nature are two separated categories, and that nature exists as an objective category upon which humans build their culture, thus transforming nature into culture (Leach and Fairhead 2002; cf. Ingold 2000). It received its peak during the 1960s when anthropologists largely employed an ecosystem approach in their analyses, emphasizing 'cultural' adaptive abilities within the environmental understanding of cultures, as some kind of unconscious environmental adaptation strategy (Leach and Fairhead 2002). This explanatory framework was widely used in different political and development programs that interceded on behalf of preservation of 'cultural diversity' by organizing 'cultural reserves'. However, there are several problems with this approach. First, it views 'cultures' as holistic bounded entities of homogenous populations who share the same interests. Second, concentrating on indigenous knowledge could completely underestimate the actual political surroundings in which people live and which could shape their actions in ways that seem environmentally friendly to western scholars.

This leads us to Ellen's (1986) first and second point – the idea that some societies have cosmologies based on environmental harmony that shapes their actual actions, and that some native societies really have had very little impact on their environment. Many anthropologists show that the connection between the mythological system of a society and its social practice is far more complicated than some environmentalists would like to believe, since mythology does not tell us much about the actual practice of the society in question. To mention just a few examples from authors concerned with this specific problem. Howell (2004), for example, shows that the Chewong people of the Malay tropical rainforest have a quite different categorization of humans and animals from western people, as they understand other living beings also to be self-conscious.⁶ However, that does not mean that "human beings have some a priori moral responsibility towards other such living beings, or that every being is in principle of equal importance and with equal rights" (ibid, 142). Arhem (1999) writes that the Makuna in North-West Amazonia have a cosmology that see humans as part of nature and the process of hunting as an exchange process between animals, people and spirits. However, from Arhem's description the conclusion that the Makuna do not hunt as much as they can, does not follow. Thus, it is not difficult to show that

6. The same idea persist in wide range of Amazonian societies (Arhem 1999).

the use of cosmology as a leading explanation for sustainability of native society is flawed and that there are some more 'profane' reasons for their small impact on the environment.

One of the reasons that some native societies seem to be 'green' even under more careful observation is that they are small and therefore have very little impact on the environment since their size in relation to their particular environment is negligible. For example, for a traditional Nuaulu society from Indonesia it is said that the current process of modernization is destroying traditional "environmental wisdom" (Ellen 2005). But, the Nuaulu do not have any special sets of beliefs that would lead to the rational usage of the forest; for example, they cut some trees only to obtain their bark or clear areas of wood to provide clear-views for animal drives. Ellen (2005) thus concludes that "traditional" modes of rainforest extraction have sometimes been underestimated, but that a low population density, the forest vastness, and low rates of extraction have ensured that the techniques used, minimized forest damage (ibid, 137). In addition, Ellen argues that some of those groups have a huge variety of subsistence strategies and usually are quite isolated which makes a control over land and therefore of the position of the human population in the ecosystem much easier (Ellen 1986, 12). This makes destabilization resulting from rapid change less likely. Finally, Ellen (1986) argues that small scale societies tend to invest in environmental resources only in short term cycles and thus "the degree to which they modify the environment is for the most part partial and temporary" (ibid, 12).

There is no human society that has a privileged access to environmental knowledge in the abstract and the environmental strategies of the small-scale societies must be understood in their original social and historical context. I will now turn to the ways in which various environmental groups and different other institutions (political or economic) use the ideas of 'native environmental wisdom' for different political aims and, finally to the similar tactics that many indigenous groups themselves use in their own political struggle.

Political appropriation of 'green wisdom' by ENGOS

Harries-Jones (2005) defines ENGOS (Environmental Non-Government Organizations) as organizations of social advocacy understood as "a positive form of protest carried out by a defined network or group" (p. 44). This definition embraces a diverse range of environmental groups that are united with the same set of ideas. He divides all groups into three types: the first type supports conservationist-type advocacy (organizations that work with the government), the second type urges for radical activism (groups working against the government) and the third type connects environmental movements with First Nations land claims.

All these groups basically implements two major types of environmentalism suggest by Vitebsky (2005). One that sees people as qualitatively different from the rest of the animal world and somehow superficial to the environment, and one that sees people as a part of their surroundings. These approaches are further reflected in

two basic principles of environmental movements: urge for conservation (the first one) and preservation (the second one) (cf. Spore 1995).⁷

The first approach “considers humanity as distinct from ‘environment’ and amounts to a strategy for the management of that environment as a ‘resource base’” (ibid. 196). This approach is frankly anthropocentric to the point of being utilitarian: the entire landscape is seen as a farm, a mine or a supermarket. It sees humanity as superficial to the environment, as the environment, the Earth or nature are given realities before the appearance of humanity who then, what could be seen as colonial discourse, “conquered” them. Or, as Tim Ingold puts it,

“We have inherited the Earth, it is said, and so are responsible for handing it on to our successors in reasonable good condition. But, like the prodigal heir, we are inclined to squander this precious inheritance for the sake of immediate gratification. Much of the current concern with the global environment has to do with how we are to “manage” this planet of ours” (Ingold 2000: 214).

In that sense, Ingold argues that both dominant discourses in current environmental politics – that of destruction and limitation of the environment and that of construction and control are grounded in a notion of intervention that evokes the idea that as people we are superficial to the Earth, rather than a dwelling part of it. Ingold (2000) argues that both discourses (that can be labelled as anthropocentric and ecocentric) make the two side of a same coin – they are global in their perspectives identifying the environment with an order of nature that is alien to human experience, and humans as those who live on the Earth rather than to live in the environment.⁸ In other words, humans inhabit the Earth as beings separated from it (living on the Earth, on the globe), while at the same time they are imagined as its guardians or protectors.

Most environmental groups that claim to use native ideas about environment, base their politics on the concepts of humans as dwellers rather than as ‘guardians’, which is the second type of environmentalism in Vibetsky’s typology (2005). Thus, environmentalists who incline to various ideas of ‘native wisdom’ usually do not separate nature from society; rather they mix them up showing their mutual interdependence. Those kinds of accounts are usually found in various environmentalist New Age movements, and some other similar groups (like some Amazonian rain forest groups). Environmental activists in these groups use the term ecology, apart from nature and environment, “to soften the harsh dualism which pitches humans against their surrounding” (Vitebsky 2005: 196). Thus, Harris-Jones (2005), for example, quotes the authors of the Pollution Probe document signed by Canadian government after the negotiation between the government and Ontario Environmental Network, that says, “the difference between environment and ecosystem is equivalent to that

7. However, this is a quite schematic division that hazes the diversity between different environmental movements and their complex relations with indigenous, feminist and a wide range of leftist movements (cf. Guha 2000 for global history of environmental movements). I am using the above classification as a general typology, which as every typology is quite abstract.

8. In that sense, history itself comes to be seen as a process wherein human producers, through their transforming action on nature, have literally constructed an environment of their own making (Ingold 2000, cf. Ingold 2002).

between house and home. House implies something external, home, something that we see ourselves in even when we are not there” (p. 53), preferring the latter term.

Soper (1995) writes that contemporary environmental movements moved more toward those types of ideas about nature that is seen as value within itself, independent of human purposes or perceptions and “that this provides the compelling reason why human beings should revere it and as far as possible leave it be” (p. 252). This is very much in accordance with Ingold’s dwelling approach. However, it is hard to separate those ideas as neatly as Ingold does in his theoretical accounts. As Vitebsky (2005) shows both approaches see the environment as some kind of economy that should be sustainably managed, even if humans are seen as ‘dwellers’ (in Ingoldian terminology). It is well explained in the following quotation from Fairhead (2005) who when writing about rain forests as an exemplification of nature today, argues that “if homogenization is the late twentieth century’s anxiety, forests have come to represent its antithesis, the guardians of diversity, not merely ‘bio-diversity’, but also social diversity that tends “to conserve ‘protected people in protected places’” (ibid, 102) keeping them in the ‘state of nature’. This goes hand in hand with similar ‘preservationists’ ideas, including those of ‘cultures’ of indigenous groups. However, it does not necessarily help local people and their current political and environmental struggle and tell as even less about their previous and contemporary environmental attitudes⁹, and that is exactly the point I am turning to in the final section of this paper.

Appropriation of ‘native green wisdom’ by the very natives

Indigenous people are seen as possessors of the knowledge that could be sold as “native wisdom” and as a solution for a global environmental problems, and there are many native groups around the world that use environmental movements for their own purposes.¹⁰ There are numerous examples of this kind politics and I will focus on the more famous ones, sticking to the already mentioned examples from Canada (Canadian Native Groups are among those who are readily seen as ‘green wise’ and who have been political active in fighting for their rights in the previous decades) and those of Amazonian groups, that attained great attention both from the public and from anthropologists. Finally, I will discuss appropriation of old shamanic wisdom by Yaukts from Siberia who use environmentalists’ traditional knowledge for their land claims. All those battles fought by native groups were at the same time part of the political struggle for power and recognition, and part of the wider environmental struggle, sometimes defined only in the former terms, but sometimes in both.

Let us start with the Canadian example. Hornborg (1994) shows how Mi’kmaq traditionalists of Cape Town in Canada used (and to the great extent produced) the

9. That does not mean that some of the ideas described above are not valuable and more than desirable in the contemporary world, but rather that we should look at the ways in which they are put in use taking into account transformation of small scale societies and political struggles of indigenous people worldwide.

10. As Vitebsky (2005) writes, “indigenous knowledge, whatever this is, could filter through this process only as a thing and not as a way of doing or being. And as a thing, it is clearly local people’s strongest card in cutting political deals” (p. 200).

debate about proposed granite quarry in Kelly's Mountain to redefine their identity as native people. Hornborg quotes an article in the Micmac News that says that "Micmac leaders view the proposed rock development as a cruel and disrespectful way to treat Mother Nature and the Great Spirit" (ibid. 250). One of the traditionalists quoted in the Hornborg article refers to the environment as Mother Earth and explains the native people's relation to it as follows: "we don't live on it like a parasite; we live with it" (ibid. 251) comparing Europeans' impact on the Earth as that of parasites (cf. Ingolidan debate from the previous session). In the public debates that followed, Mi'kmaq traditionalists succeed in reframing the old environmental debate from 'jobs-versus-the-environment' or 'jobs-versus-health' to the concept of sanctity, that is radically opposed to modernity and commoditization as "irreplaceable and incommensurable" value (ibid. 263). However, the discourse of modernity is intrinsically opposed to the concept of wholeness (and holiness) promoted by Mi'kmaqs and it tends to submerge all local systems of meanings into the public images of 'environmentalists' and/or 'natives' (ibid). In that way, it opens up both local communities and environments to the outside exploitation of modernist institutions. In other words, to conform to modernity (and its public discourse) generally means to be absorbed to it through a niche created for its very opposition: those of the natives, or indigenous.

Hornborg's argument is that the inherent character of the modern state enables it to marginalize these movements, even if they succeed in particular actions, such as that in Cape Town. Both environmentalists and indigenous movements are intrinsically anti-modern in their holistic assumptions, but their position in the modern world allows them to work for the state's own purposes (in order words, to become co-opted to the current state agendas). The only way out would be to turn modernist strategy of encompassment of the local against itself, to encompass encompassment (in way similar to Bourdieu's strategy of 'objectifying objectification' in the Logic of Practice). There is no easy way out of this predicament. The simple fact of state power embodied in the financial dependency of environmental groups from founding and donations does not enable them to work independently. Some of the Mi'kmaqs that Hornborg worked with were quite aware of those quandaries, but could not find the space (outside modernity) that will enable them to raise different strategies apart from those offered by the modernity itself. Thus, Hornborg (1994) concludes that both environmental and indigenous rights movements are "victims" of subsumptive character of modernity that uses environmentalists' critique of the modern world as a modern state's self-critique and a part of modernistic self-reflection.

Similar to Hornborg's ethnographic account is Fisher's (1994) analysis of Kayapo movement in central Brazil in which he emphasizes "linkages that exist between the structure of regional political economy and forms of political action undertaken by indigenous people" (p. 221) (cf. Nugent 1996). The Kayapo were among the groups who directly and effectively opposed the construction of a hydroelectric dam complex, which would have flooded vast areas of forest occupied by Amerindians, through protests in Altamira (the major town on the Transamazonic Highway) and other activities.

Kayapo have been very active in promoting their indigenous and land rights, using, among other arguments, the very concept of 'culture' as tool for negotiation with Brazilian state (cf. Turner 1991a, 1991b; in home academic literature Simić 2012). Still, that does not mean that Kayapo leaders naively adopted traditional anthropological concept of culture passed from the institutional state power, but rather they were using it as a tool for challenging current power relations. Thus, Fisher suggests that we need to deconstruct the essentialist idea of indigenous Kayapo culture as a precondition to Kayapo environmental behaviour. As he explains it

"the issue is not whether the Kayapo have specialized environmental knowledge, but whether that knowledge comprises a distinct interpretative framework that explains the political stance of the Kayapo (or any of the other dozens of indigenous peoples in Brazil) in the face of diverse threats to their livelihoods, society, or survival" (ibid, 221).

In other words, we need to understand Kayapo's current political actions as consequences of the Kayapo understanding of the present political situation and the possible gains that they can take from it.

Fisher's analysis shows particular links between the Kayapo people and the larger social networks of Brazil, which through the last part of the twentieth century enabled them to actively participate in the country's economy on their own behalf.¹¹ Internalization of the Amazon helps the Kayapo to develop further their influence to the Brazilian government. Fisher explains that

"Indigenous protests are powerful not because they shake the basic institution of economic production in this case but because they call into question the government's intervention in the Amazon. [...] It is under these circumstances that Kayapo protests stand a chance of winning lasting concessions from the government" (p. 228).

The typical analysis of Kayapo society as firmly bounded to tradition is one of the stereotypical and misleading characterizations of native societies as static and opposed to dynamic western ones. Instead of this type of analysis, we should try to place the society in question in their contemporary social and political context in order to understand their current political agendas.¹² In a double ironic twist Kayapo managed to remain Kayapo (whatever that means for them, of course) only when they entered the decomposing discourse of modernity that produced them as natives and 'environmental wise' at the first place. By endorsing the game of modernity they "encompassed encompassment", as Hornborg (1994) would put it and succeeded in the political game in which they were forced to participate.

I will give one final example of the similar attempt of encompassment, this time from the former Soviet Union, where the dissolution of the socialist state opened a

11. Nugent (1996) shows that Amazonian societies more broadly were involved in different economic transactions in the modern meaning of the term for the long period.

12. However, Fisher's description does not take into account possible diversity between different Kayapo groups leading us to conclude that their society is coherent and without mutual tension, giving a very broad picture of Kayapo politics that prevent us from seeing how the Kayapo themselves view their environmental movement.

space for new forms of state appropriations. Writing about Sakha people from Siberia (known by the Soviet term Yakut in anthropological literature), Vitebsky (2005) explains the way in which local politicians and intellectuals urge for the development of Yakutia (one of the Russian federation republics in which most of the Sakhas live) based on the “traditional wisdom” of Sakhas’ and shamanism in particular. One of the supporters of that type of development writes

“The Sakha have believed that one must respect the silence of the forest, not pollute Nature and wound the Earth. The world and man’s soul are both made up of three corresponding elements. In polluting Nature, we are polluting our own flesh and blood” (ibid. 190).¹³

However, appropriations of those ‘environmental friendly’ ideas are by necessity only partial. Official politics of Yakut republics makes indigenous knowledge into a commodity rather than into a way of doing, as it used to be the case with Shamanistic beliefs among Sakha. It further “ensures that it could never take deep root in a new context” (ibid, 201), but rather becomes part of nationalist rhetoric used in daily political struggle. It takes local knowledge and practices away from the local concerns and bring it into international market, where it can only be sold if it is offered as something “less distinctive and valuable, but also far less trouble to come to terms with, than what it really is” (ibid, 204).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that the persistence of the idea that “primitive people” are green is the consequence of many interrelated factors. I argue that anthropologist should approach environmentalism and environmentalist movements as “a cultural perspective in the sense that it reflects particular ways of understanding the world and one’s place within it” (Leach and Fairhead 2000: 222). In the globalisation of environmentalist discourse certain perspectives are represented and some other are excluded (ibid). Thus, although the idea that “primitive people” are green could be used for the benefit of some indigenous groups (“strategic essentialism”, as it is called by some postcolonial writers), it is clear that the idea of native people as possessing “environmental wisdom” could be used equally well for their disadvantage. Insisting upon the indigenous people’s “environmental wisdom” could be used by the state as a means for keeping native people away from equal participation in the state economy. Therefore, it is necessary to see native groups within a concrete historical context instead of simply labelling them as more natural than we are. As Milton (1999) puts it

“The point of testing the myth is not to suggest that non-industrial societies have nothing to teach the industrial world about how environmental responsibilities might be defined and implemented. It is to demonstrate the value of a more sensitive awareness of how human societies understand and interact with their environments.

13. In this concrete case, “native wisdom” rhetoric is placed against the Russian state in claims for territory rights, but the very same language is used by Yakutia’s minority of Even (Tungus people) against Sakhas.

In this enterprise, the potential roles of anthropologists as students of human ecology and as theorists of environmentalism come together” (p. 112).

In other words, I do not argue that it is not desirable to build a rational society that should be less damageable to environment and that there is much to be learned from non-Western cultures. On the contrary, I argue that there is a need to take a more serious look to the wisdom of native groups and their current struggles. In that sense, anthropology can play an important role in understanding the ways in which the knowledge about natives is produced and used in the political struggle worldwide.

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