

Comments on van Ginkel

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At a historical juncture where ecological problems are increasingly understood as having planetary-level consequences, the distinct practices of environmental engagement that people pursue around the world seem to be under closer scrutiny than ever before. This scrutiny has created the conditions for the emergence of a new controlling post-colonial gaze, whereby middle class inhabitants of North America and Central and Western Europe have come to passionately criticize the environmental practices of other societies and cultures while closing an eye on their own. Ironically, North Americans and Europeans often show deep emotional responses to the plights of animals and ecosystems around the globe, while at the same time they remain oblivious to the environmental problems that either affect other human beings or which unfold within their own backyards – and many seem particularly impervious to the issues of human-social-justice that environmental problems accentuate.

Ideological and neocolonial premises regarding differential degrees of ecological enlightenment, fuel ethnocentric dichotomies that arbitrarily separate supposedly wise and developed people from presumably destructive and underdeveloped selves. Such prejudice, in turn, has permeated many of the eco-political discourses and neo-liberal forms of governance that have appeared over the past three decades. To be sure, many of the discursive formations that have emerged in response to contemporary ecological challenges rely on, and further (re)produce, the divide between North-American and European idealized and globally dominant conceptualizations of environmentalism (Agrawal 2005; Carrier 2004) and the needs and worldviews of people around the world – but most notably in Africa, Asia, and South America – who must live with the materialization of hegemonic environmental programs and politics. Such dilemmas are certainly present when nature conservation parks are created partly for tourism purposes at the cost of displacing entire human communities (for example Brockington and Igoe 2006); in the politics of denial that are commonly found amongst inhabitants of Western rich

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countries in relation to their own oil-dependent economies (for example Norgarrd 2006) but who, nevertheless, still see themselves as 'better educated and ecologically wiser' than people in other societies; or in the blatant tension that exists between protecting endangered species and securing the subsistence of human societies that depend on these species (for example Epstein 2006) – and this, to name but a few examples.

Within the context described above, Professor van Ginkel's article 'Gentle Giants, Barbaric Beasts and Whale Warriors: Contentious Traditions, Eco-Political Discourse and Identity Politics' makes an important and timely contribution towards a better understanding of the complexities and the nuances that are entailed in the discursive and political conflicts that emerge between practitioners of 'traditional' and/or 'subsistence' forms of whale hunting and the opposition they face from environmental organizations and the constituencies that support them. The article considers the practices of whale hunting in two distinct societies: in the Faroe Islands where subsistence whale hunting has been pursued continuously since about 800-900 AD, and amongst the Makah Indian Tribe in the United States, who have fought to re-instate whale hunting after a seventy year hiatus. The differences between these two cases are most interesting. As van Ginkel demonstrates, however, despite the substantive differences that render each case unique, both deploy similar strategies for legitimizing whaling activities, and both face similar types of pressure and condemnation from non-governmental environmental organizations (ENGOS) and from the North-American and European public. These similarities are most revealing when it comes to understanding the politics of currently globalizing eco-political discourse.

Supporters of Faroe and Makah whale hunting justify these practices as being deeply embedded in these societies' cultures and in their traditions of procuring means of subsistence. Defenders of whale hunting within these two groups argue that whaling is inextricably related to their people's sense of identity, that it is a core dimension of their religious, cosmological, and symbolic systems, and that whaling provides crucial stimuli for their economies; in short, they perceive whale hunting as being integral to their socio-cultural and economic survival. Arguably, one of the most innovative aspects of van Ginkel's analysis is to show that both cases entail notions of subsistence that expand far beyond the word's connotation with nutrition and access to whale derived products, to included notions of socio-cultural, economic, and even ecological resiliency.

In both the Faroe and the Makah case whale hunting has been – and continues to be – vehemently opposed by ENGOS and by North-American and European citizens who disapprove of whaling. One of the main issues of contention is the very notion of 'traditional subsistence' that

both whaling societies deploy to legitimize their whaling activities. Indeed, a key argument in anti-whaling eco-political discourse is precisely that neither of these societies needs to kill and harvest whales to secure their subsistence – which is indicative of a narrower understanding of ‘subsistence’ in the sense of nutrition and resource needs. Consequently, ENGOS commonly accuse whaling practices of being ill-adapted forms of socio-cultural atavism, or in van Ginkel’s words, they describe ‘tradition as an anachronism that does not fit in a modern welfare society with a high standard of living’. Moreover, insofar as whalers in the Faroe Islands and within the Nakah nation have adopted ‘modern western’ technology ENGOS have also attacked the authenticity of these societies’ whaling traditions.

With this article, van Ginkel’s major contribution rests at level of a critical analysis and theorization of extant concepts of ‘tradition’, ‘(re)invention’ of ‘tradition’, and ‘modernity’ and how they play off each other in the context of clashing glo-calised environmental discourses and practices. He convincingly demonstrates that ‘traditions’ are simultaneously rooted in people’s histories and, constantly re-enacted and re-created within the multi-leveled sets of political relations in which people find themselves. Within such settings, tradition is at times essentialised and attacked by some constituencies (for example ENGOS), and at times creatively re-produced and defend by others (for example the Faroe and the Makah whale hunters). Nevertheless, van Ginkel also demonstrates that the essentialisation and re-invention of ‘tradition and modernity’ entails fluid and dynamic processes that are not necessarily attributable to specific constituencies but rather, to the political articulation that takes place between these different groups.

As van Ginkel points out then, notions of tradition, authenticity, and modernity have become key elements in contemporary eco-political discourse and have, hence, become key aspects in the political relations that unfold between distinct socio-cultural constituencies. In the final instance, the main question I see emerging from Professor van Ginkel’s article can be stated as follows: to what extent are such eco-political discourses – which produce a hierarchical distinction between ‘anachronistic-barbaric tradition’, or a primitive thus inferior ‘Other’, and modern wise environmentalism, or a developed thus superior ‘Us’ (Fabian 1983; Said 1978) – part and parcel of new forms of neo-colonialism that promote neo-liberal interests under the guise of environmentalism? In other words, to what extent do these eco-political discourses (re)produce old formations of colonial legitimation and rule, and to what extent are they also different?

Notes

- ⁱ See Neves-Graça 2004 and Neves-Graça 2006 for a related analysis in relation to whale hunting in the Azores , Portugal.

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