

Using examples from personal experience and the wider academic literature discuss the relevance and contribution indigenous practices and cosmologies can make in addressing ecological challenges

Indigenous voices. Voices of the Earth

Colin Campbell, raised in rural Botswana and carrying on his back the wisdom of four great lineages now in extinction, travels wherever he is invited to transmit the voice of the earth. Colin accepts with pleasure and modesty this commitment. He is one of our teachers in this module. Here he is in the Morning Room of the Elmhurst Centre, standing, unable to express sometimes all the wisdom of his teachers in one language, English, so alien to his African soul. He looks at us and his mother tongue comes to his rescue and he starts speaking in Setswana or another minor language of his land for several moments.

In the last week of the module, we got up in circle one more time to welcome Pat McCabe, also known as 'Woman Stands Shining', and her peculiar voice of her Diné or Navajo tradition. For this event and to introduce Pat into our porous and extensible circle, Colin sang a song slowly, like a soft moan, his tremulous voice due to the novelty spoke softly and directly to our hearts with an ancient, natural tongue, full of twists and sounds that the heart interpreted directly.

At some point of high communal chant, Pat McCabe, to the surprise of everyone present, breaking the line of the circle, stepped forward following a spiral pattern, with one hand on her heart and other extended with open palm to each of us, walked inside the circle in receiving with gratitude for our sincere chant lead by Colin. When she came back to her position, closing the circle again, from deep in her abdomen, from deep in the bowels of the earth, like an immense lament, like the tongue of a volcano that, when erupting, came down to the valley licking everything in its way, she began to articulate a song of her people; a song that was a litany, a prayer, a medicine for the soul.

The neocortex of the whole class was suspended, reasoning could not speak about the voice of the land that Pat used to thank Colin, to thank us all, to connect heart to heart as the prophecies of her land sings ('when the southern condor meets again with the northern eagle, the tears that spring from their hearts will heal the old wounds, strengthen the native peoples and the earth will awaken') accompanied with her heart-beating drum.

More than a few of those present in the room were brought to tears admiring the strength of nature expressed through a culture that after centuries of domination and rejection in some cases, extermination in others, plundering in all, continues to keep its spirit alive.

Words could never express better than those songs, the intimate network of profound respect among these traditions for the elders, repositories of the ancestral memory of their people, their sense of community and their morality. Words could never have told us the role of mankind as a bridge between heaven and earth like those songs did. Colin's voice, his eyes

half-closed and his foot-steps marking the rhythm, Pat's voice, her drum and her presence, made us understand deep within our being that everything is connected in a consciousness that unifies everything, that mankind with their open potentialities can speak again the language of animals, the language of plants, the language of the earth and elevate it with their moan to heaven and through the wind their transforming prayers.

Profane science / sacred science

The "voices of the earth" can be interpreted by many sciences. Western science, exclusively rationalist, interprets it from mechanistic and materialist parameters, creating a culture of relationship with nature tinged with exclusive practicality. For Western science the forests or the waters are only resources to cover human needs. This particular way of seeing nature as a raw material, an enemy to subdue, domesticate or conquer, have determined all our institutions. As Lynn White established, the way in which people conceive of nature and the environment and our place within it determine how we use natural resources and impact the world around us (White 1967).

In the absence of an intangible and transcendent element present in the science with which the West knows the world, and that is believed to be of vital importance to restore the lost balance between man and the earth, I want to dedicate this paper to that other science, the traditional, typical in diverse native peoples. People who, in their purest expressions, increasingly scarce, but yet are still capable of listening to the language and the current needs of a mother, the earth, which they have learned to love deeply, because their cultures relate to them and allow them to capture the essence that lies behind each phenomenon, be it the sudden storm in the forest, the flight of the eagle or the opening of a flower, which they will later use in their ancestral medicines. Cultures that having lost a lot of their splendour by the sign of the times – their decadence by the absence of the sacred meaning of existence – can still read between the lines of the primordial writing that is nature. '[...] Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything' (Shakespeare).

According to the worldviews Colin and Pat have shared with us, this decadence that invades everything began thousands of years ago, in a time before classical antiquity and involves a gradual obscuration of the primordial spirituality as the manifestation moves away from the principle from which it comes. This decadence affects all the worlds and not only the modern world, it has ended up killing our spirit with progressive materialization, which then moved on to the rest of the globe, with the number of victims surpassing neoliberalism: a transnational capitalism taken to the extreme.

Today, in the midst of this time when intelligence has been obscured, and thanks to the search for balance that is always present among the opposing forces that constitute this manifest universe, it is still possible that several hundred million people, followers of the primordial religions, which are branches of the archaic and primordial religions of humanity, still survive throughout the American continent, in New Zealand, Australia, India or Africa, despite European colonization, and that they barely keep their traditions alive before innumerable

interior and exterior enemies. These millions of beings are, in addition to being a revulsive or a balancing factor in the face of so much Western demagoguery, an example of conservation of their habitats, so in some environments people are beginning to re-examine what these guardians of the Earth have to say in addressing the current ecological challenges. An example of this is Schumacher College and some of the programs and short courses they offer, to promote the initiative of bringing together several voices from different native peoples and traditions to share and keep alive some sacred stories that predict the awakening of the "cultures of the earth" in the face of the collapse of the Old World.

John Grim is a leading expert in Indigenous traditions and environment, in particular Native American perspectives. He has studied and identified themes that emerge from the understanding between indigenous religions and their ecology. Some of these themes are: kinship 'emphasizing the integrity of all reality as well as the intimate relations maintained with the natural world', 'spatial and biographical relations with place', 'traditional environmental knowledge', and cosmology as 'the context in which humans reflect upon their own bodies, the collective social order, and their understanding of how the world works' (Grim nd, 2001, 2010).

Like Grim, Jack D. Forbes, a Native American scholar, finds the theme of kinship central in the Native American attitudes towards environment, and identifies it as an antidote to a reductionist and materialist understanding of nature. He concludes 'Eurocentric' science like Ecology must include 'the realistic study of how living centers of awareness interact with all of their surroundings' (Forbes 2001). This refers to a different cosmology, or sacred science, where human beings belong to a greater totality within the natural world.

Intertwining voices

We have shared three weeks with some representatives of different peoples. Peoples who keep millenarian traditions that have allowed them to maintain harmony in their community and in the territories they inhabit, at least better than where Western rationality has influenced the most. It is a fact that there is a strong correlation between indigenous lands and areas with a high level of biodiversity. Even in some places the ecosystem remains without substantial variations for thousands of years. Something we will have to learn, as Westerners, from these ancient peoples.

This exemplary knowledge is born of that sacred science of which we spoke before, endowed with a spontaneous perspective that sees appearances in its connection with essences. That is, not seeing things on the surface, but above all in depth, which penetrates the invisible; that silent sound that to this day remains veiled for Western science, that denies the possibility of other sciences and of other levels of understanding.

The fact that Western science begins to echo these messages is a sign of a deep reverence and respect for the people who still live close to the earth, who still understand the language of life

and that still treasure a wisdom from immemorial time, people who integrate a sense of belonging to the earth totally within their way of life, but also a joint vision that we are part of a whole. As Grim defines, the indigenous lifeways are embodied in an inseparable dynamic of four components: the self, the society, the larger community or nature, and the cosmos represented by myths, rituals and narratives. In their wisdom we can see coordinates, the compass of the return home, the possibility of regaining a sense of harmony with the earth (Grim 2010).

Of course, we are no longer in the Palaeolithic and we are neither naive nor want to sustain a romantic return to a virgin nature which no longer exists, or to "do the Indian" in the style of certain New Age groups or some integral ecologists with an idealized vision of the indigenous, when they themselves admit that the "evil of the modern West" is already in their hearts, ruining what remains of their communities. As Shephard Krech III (1999, 2005) explains through the icon of the 'Ecological Indian', which is the same as 'the image of North American Indians as first ecologists', reality is far more complex than the stereotype would suggest (Krech III 2005: 42).

Being aware that one of the objectives of the spiritual life, whatever form it acquires, is to rediscover a state of perfect simplicity, accompanied by a feeling of gratitude, to listen to these people – which talk of balancing in some way all that nature gives us: water, fruits... through an offering, a gratitude, with an act that requires inner balance – can evoke without prejudice a desire to deepen in that direction that is clearly marked, and look for our own way of approaching that necessary conversion of the gaze.

I feel in love with the ecological wisdom of the peoples that Colin and Pat have shared with us: of that immense love of nature that respected all living beings, that did not kill more than what they needed, that they were aware of being from the same community. For that love, for being aware of the difficulty of the moment, and although modern science insists that it will take us out of the quagmire that it itself has created from the use of power, not wisdom, confusing science with industry, we want to explore all possible ways, and above all the forgotten ones, without neglecting good science, which also exists in the West, and which has been warning us about the state of ecosystems for a long time. Our work is to raise awareness of the need for total renewal, that is why we dare to defend, as these cultures do valiantly, against the secularization of the world that destroys visions based on the sacred, that fractures the social fabric, that dehumanizes the humanity, that causes an unprecedented destruction of nature. This needs a comprehensive critique; a critique of the modern civilization that tears our soul at the same time as nature and that can not be established as a norm to follow, globalizing us with a single thought, a single vision of the world and a single system of values based on the ephemeral nature of the market and not in lasting truths and spiritual values.

Facing the desacralization of the world, these peoples summon again and again, in each of their gestures, the sacred aspect of nature, because they know that this is only the infinite reflection of a creator principle that has absolute value and two dimensions when it manifests: immanence and transcendence, that is to say that its spirit is in all things and

beyond all forms. Only that – call it Pachamama, Wakan Tanka, Great Spirit, Tao, Nirvana – can give meaning to every drop of water spilled, to every life lived, to the function of man on this planet, because it is the mortar that unites all kingdoms, animals, plants, minerals, stellar realms, humans, in a unit of deep meaning. A single sacred law, immutable, pre-existing, primitive and surviving to all. The world could exist or cease to exist without altering in the least the essence of that law, which constitutes the universal thought of the unmanifest, the sole origin of life. In awareness of the crucial historical moment and the urgency of change in the face of the global crisis: let's raise, add and interweave voices.

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