

Week 2 Assignment Essay – Contrasting and Comparing Conceptions of the Environment

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A person's conception of the environment is also a question of how they relate to the self. There is some difference of Ontology (philosophy of self) and Cosmology among hunter-gatherer (who I shall call gatherer-hunter) and horticultural groups, and thus there are differences in conceptions and outlooks on the environments which I will unpack.

Richard B. Lee (Lee, 2005, p 4) pointed out, among many Gatherer-Hunters like the Ju/'hoansi, the Mbuti and also the Yanomami, one strikingly common view is that the worlds of nature are animated with mystical and moral force. Many of the Gatherer-Hunter tribes themselves had a view that they (which would include culture) and their environment (what would often be described as nature) are one and the same (Ingold, 2000, p 42) and that they have an ontology of dwelling as a result. For instance – the Mbuti concept of the world is that it is a sphere akin to the design of the *Ndu* – the women's womb (Mosko, 1987, p 899). They see. Thus, is it not surprising that the way they describe their ontology – how they situate themselves in existence and in relation to their environment – involves many parental terms (Mosko, 1987, p 898).

According to Kogi mythology, the Mother is both the physical world and the intelligence that shaped it (Dodd, 1997, p 78-79). The mother is a goddess who is not merely material immanence, but also mind, intellect, creativity (Dodd, 1997, p 79). Dodd found that the cosmic mythology did not seem to have the dualism of male intellect and of female materiality that the west did. It is therefore ironic that Dodd reports according to the BBC documentary *From the Heart of the World* that the Kogi have ended up with a matrifocal cosmology in a patriarchal culture (Dodd, 1997, p 80). There were a number of factors as to why the Kogi ended up with a hierarchical patriarch system of governance, with only men allowed to be the *Mamas* – the spiritual shamans who preside over the rituals of observing the Mother Earths health (Dodd, 1997, p 83). However, it is admittedly difficult to separate whether this onset of patriarchy was a result of the mythical belief system or the influence of the Spanish conquest itself (Dodd, 1997, p 83). Dodd even suggests that the perpetuation of the concept of gender-stereotyped goddess or earth mother imagery itself in many ways reinforces patriarchal sex-typing (Dodd, 1997, p 78).

It's also interesting that while both the Kogi and the Mbuti view the world they live in in parental terms, the Kogi have a more specifically defined maternal feministic concept of the world they live in, while for the Mbuti the environment is conceptually fluid and varied so that sometimes masculinist paternal – and sometimes terms suggesting kinship and even romantic love – are used (Mosko, 1987, p 898). The difference is almost that the hunter-gatherers see the subsistence of the world they live in as in many ways unconditional, like that of a parent-child relationship, while the horticultural farmers see that care as more conditional (Ingold, 2000, p 43-44) – which why the Kogi seem to be more anxious about maintaining purity and absolute standards of behaviour to their environment. Why the Kogi appear to perceive masculinity as especially more volatile and dangerous than the Mbuti is interesting (Dodd, 1997, p 81) – the Mbuti seem to regard their masculine roles as natural to themselves. Perhaps the feminine-focused mythology might explain why – the Kogi see their masculinity as something that has to be regulated to a high degree simply to be able to appease and harmonise themselves with the Earth Mother.

Contrast this kind of cosmological feminist-worship to the way the Yanomami see women. They regard men as being descended from Moonblood – blood that fell from a moon – and thus men were the only original people (they were also inherently *waiteri* or fierce because of coming from the moon) (Chagnon, 1983, p 95). The first woman was only a *Wabu* fruit – and when she was plucked by the Yanomamo, she turned into a woman – one with a long and hairy vagina. caused them to be overcome lust (Chagnon, 1983, p 95). The men, overcome by lust, immediately rushed and dragged her back to the village where all the men frantically copulated with her – she ended up mothering the rest of the Yanomamo women (Chagnon, 1983 p 95). In correlation there has been much documentation that during the warfare the Yanomami engage in, it is very much common-practice to kidnap each other's women (Chagnon, 1983 p175-177). They are pretty much seen as trophies and much of the Yanomami do regard most of the conflicts themselves primary over women (Chagnon, 1983 p 176).

The Kogi feel that westerners – whom they refer to as 'younger brothers' - were going to destroy the earth through their rapacious use of technology and preferred to remain aloof to the westerners, desiring little to no contact with them (Dodd, 1997, p 79). You can contrast this to the Yanomami, who eagerly traded with western Anthropologists for equipment to aid them in their warfare among each other (Padilha, 2012). They appear to be less preoccupied to ensure that they respect the world that they live in – they Shabono (the village) is more aimed at keeping the forest (nature) out and keeping 'culture in' (Chagnon, 1983, p 52); they are preoccupied with keeping themselves safe. They, unlike the Mbuti, do not see the forest as unconditionally caring for them at all and don't feel obligation to protect it. My personal questions are not only why the Yanomami have a cosmology which sees the world more hostile than the Kogi - it is whether they developed their cosmology in response to their social environment with each other or whether their society is the way it is due to such cosmology. It's very much a chicken-and-egg question.

In conclusion I feel that notion of gender and perceptions of human nature seem to influence mythology among indigenous people described here at least – and then has a knock-on effect in how they relate and behave to their surroundings. What causes the other is unclear – it could be both – and that would need especially clever research and evidence to tease out any answers.

Reference List:

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