

How the Environment Can be Understood

'Environment' is a multifaceted word which can allude to social, physical, or spiritual environment. Environmentalism is a critical and important topic of discussion throughout the world today, with many people recognising the necessity for positive change in aim of protecting and preserving our environment. But what exactly is our environment? How can it be understood? It is an important prerequisite to understand that which we are trying to save, and different societies possess different perceptions of this vast entity which we refer to as the environment. Exploring these different perceptions can offer advantageous insight that can aid attempts to preserve the environment.

The Nayaka are a jungle dwelling tribe of approximately 3,000 people who reside in the Nilgiri hills of South India. In an article published in 1990 entitled "The Giving Environment", Bird-David argues that hunter-gatherers' perceptions of the environment influence their economic conduct. She describes the Nayaka view of the environment as perceiving the forest as a parent (Bird-David, 2008), meaning that the forest provides for and nurtures its inhabitants. However, the Nayaka view of nurturing isn't comparable to Western definitions of the word. 'Nurturing' carries implications of a relatively one-sided interaction and fails to describe the active role Nayaka infants take in being nurtured. For example, Bird-David observed how breastfeeding babies had almost constant access to their mother's breast, allowing them to feed themselves whenever hungry, rather than the mother responding to the baby's cries and taking the initiative to feed them. Incidentally, this element of accessibility means that Nayaka babies seldom cry for food, they simply help themselves.

This is an important observation as it highlights how differently the concept of nurturing manifests in hunter-gatherer culture, and consequently how the notion of the forest acting as parent is misleading in English understanding. The Nayaka see the forest as a parent, but take from their environment and instigate their own nurturing the same way as does a nursing infant. The Nayaka view reveals a way of perceiving the environment that relates the individual to it and recognises the symbiotic relationship between the two entities, which is considerably unlike the Eurocentric view of one's environment being a separate thing we simply exist in.

The Yanomami are a group of approximately 20,000 indigenous people residing in the Amazon rainforest. They occupy between 200-250 villages dispersed on the border between Venezuela and Brazil (Chagnon, 1992). In his ethnography, Chagnon explains the distinction made by the Yanomami between culture and nature, between the village and the forest. Whilst their village is constructed using natural materials obtained from the forest, human intervention transforms it into something cultural. They reside in constructions called a shabono, which are designed to enclose its inhabitants, separating them from the outside forest. Both their village and the surrounding forest constitutes the Yanomami's environment, but they have a dichotomous conception of their environment, which differs from the Nayaka's connection with nature. This dichotomous view extends to how the Yanomami view animals. They see themselves as separate from animals, for they have culture and animals do not.

Another aspect of the Yanomami's environment is their spiritual environment. They possess a rich and intricate mythology which consists of many interesting and exciting ideas and beliefs about the cosmos. They believe the wider environment, what one

might refer to as the universe, to consist of four layers. The top layer is thought to be “pristine”, empty and no longer fulfilling an obvious purpose. The next layer down is the sky, where deceased souls roam. They believe we can see the bottom of this layer when we look up at the sky. The next layer is earth, where humankind resides. Below this layer is a place where people referred to by the Yanomami as Amahiri-teri reside. In this layer there is no jungle, and consequently no meat, so the Amahiri-teri resort to cannibalism. This paints an interesting picture, illustrating how the Yanomami perceive the environment beyond earth.

The Kogi are a mountainous group that reside in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains in Columbia (Ereira, 1990). The mountain consists of 3 different microclimates, including subtropical, temperate, and mountainous alpine tundra. Each separate climate on the mountain possesses its own ecosystem, and the mountain is rich in flora and fauna. The rich diversity of the Kogi’s physical environment makes it rather unique, and in this way, they differ from how other indigenous groups live.

The Kogi refer to themselves as the Elder Brothers of the human race, and to outsiders as Younger Brother. Ereira worked with the Kogi to deliver a message to Younger Brother, to state that we are killing the Mother and the heart of the world. They predict suffering and catastrophe if Younger Brother doesn’t change his ways. The Kogi, rather unlike other indigenous groups, have an acute awareness and understanding of the world outside of their immediate environment. They understand how gravely destructive Western lifestyles are, and how detrimental our actions are to mother nature.

“Zhigoneshi” is a Kogi concept of symbiosis, which describes the connectivity and interdependence of all living forces (Attala and Ereira, 2021). It is a concept of mutuality and collaboration, and one which vastly contrasts Western capitalist ideology. It is an important concept in understanding the Kogi’s message, for it highlights the fundamental difference in perception of the world which fuels Younger Brother’s destructive actions. The Kogi believe that whilst Younger Brother unsettles the balance of the cosmic structure, taking resources without repayment, the earth will enforce repayment resulting in misfortune among humanity. This demonstrates the importance of “Zhigoneshi”.

Both the Nayaka and the Kogi perceptions of the environment describe how the relationship between the individual and the environment is a symbiotic one. Our environment nurtures us, to which we owe a debt. The Yanomami’s dichotomous view offers a different perspective which separates the individual and the environment. However, all of these perspectives illustrate how the environment is both a physical and conceptual thing. It is important to understand the various concepts of the environment in order to understand and benefit our physical environment.

References

Attala, L. and Ereira, A. (2021) ‘Zhigoneshi: A Culture of Connection’, *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities, Cappadocia University*, 2(2 (1)), pp. 7–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.18>.

Aria Anderson

Bird-David, N. (2008) 'Feeding Nayaka Children and English Readers: A Bifocal Ethnography of Parental Feeding in "The Giving Environment"', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 81.

Chagnon, N.A. (1992) *Yānomamö*. 4. ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publ (Case studies in cultural anthropology).

Ereira, A. (1990) *The Heart of the World*. London: J. Cape.

The Heart of the World (1990). Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfSnTUc52C8&ab_channel=AlanEreira (Accessed: 28 September 2022).