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Economic Anthropology

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What are the advantages and/or disadvantages, in a modern economy, of applying anthropological awareness of indigenous and traditional approaches to the relationship between human communities and their ecological habitat, locally and globally?

INTRODUCTION

As the global ecology deteriorates, in large part due to accelerated methods of capitalism, Indigenous communities and anthropologists alike have both encouraged looking to Indigenous and traditional modes of knowledge in an effort to repair the relationship between human communities and their ecological habitat (Reddy 2013, Reiter 2017, Rhoades & Nazarea 2009). Realistically, however, while these forms of knowledge are without a doubt integral to healing the current ecological crisis, the state of today's political economy will ensure that any major transitions will not easily succeed. In this essay, I will explore how Indigenous knowledge has been approached in regard to maintaining ecological habitats, how local and global sciences have interacted with traditional environmental forms of knowledge, as well as how anthropological awareness has allowed for the recognition of a necessary ideological shift in how the globalized community conceptualizes and connects with the earth's ecology. I hope to explicate how applying these knowledge systems, not just on the surface but also on a deeper ontological level, will be advantageous and could potentially be imperative to the survival of our global ecological habitat.

APPROACH AND APPLICATION OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE & TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

The economic disparity between how contemporary western applications of thought are perceived as opposed to those of Indigenous communities can, to a certain extent, be traced back

to enlightenment ideals. Irwin (2022) emphasizes how such ideals “have shaped the modern world and enabled corporate freedom to exploit all ‘resources’ in the name of consumerism and global trade,” and how, “in contrast... indigenous ways of knowing are emerging as better exemplars of the interrelationship between individuals, communities, and organic and anorganic life forms” (Irwin 2022, 1). The growing consideration of Indigenous knowledge and the willingness to utilize alternative methods of interacting with local and global ecologies has been propelled by obvious damage being done as a result of the current climate crisis, which directly correlates to “expressions of global capitalism” and the complete disregard of long term ecological consequences by big corporations, not mention the increasing wealth gap and the opportunity hoarding being executed by the global elite (Reddy 2013, Reiter 2017). In fact, Zent (2009) directly states that the recent attention being paid to traditional environmental knowledge is “fueled by the combination of diminishing supply of biological resources, due to the advancing pace of tropical deforestation, agricultural modernization and attendant loss of biodiversity” (Zent 2009, 36). In this case, it seems rather obvious that developing alternative economic approaches to dealing with the global ecology is an immediate necessity, and learning from Indigenous communities may be invaluable in the effort to achieve environmental sustainability.

It should be noted that this subject has not remained entirely within a political nor academic sphere, and that mainstream media has actually played an interesting role in contextualizing how non-Indigenous communities perceive Indigenous culture, particularly in Euro-American societies (Zent 2009). Whether in animated children’s films or in holistic healthcare alternatives, it has become relatively commonplace to see “sympathetic” references “to traditional ecological and cultural wisdom” (Zent 2009, 19). Unfortunately, this has created a rather warped and idealistic westernized version of Indigenous peoples that generalizes them as old, wise, and deeply connected to nature – a stereotype that, while likely not intentionally demeaning, places Indigenous peoples into the role of a romanticized and exoticized “ecologically noble savage,” ultimately failing to recognize or respect the lived realities of such peoples as well as how culturally diverse Indigenous communities around the world still are (Dove, et al. 2009, 141; Zent 2009). This pattern in mainstream media continues to ‘other’ Indigenous knowledge, and by placing them outside of the globalized socio-cultural norm, characterizes Indigenous lifestyles as

‘simple,’ disconnected, and often as a representation of past humans, all of which perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Indigenous peoples. I would argue this contributes to various assumptions that disregard the potential alternatives that traditional modes of environmental knowledge could offer global economies and their treatment of the global ecological habitat, particularly considering the rapidly deteriorating environment due to the acceleration of climate change.

Academics from various areas of study have been pushing for the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into contemporary modes of political economy since the late twentieth century in an effort to combat the rising ecological crisis (Alexiades 2009, Zent 2009). Zent (2009) discusses how “scientists, politicians, [and] activists” have made a point to recognize traditional knowledge as relevant and useful, and Alexiades (2009) furthers this by pointing out “ethnobotanists, ethnoecologists, [and] anthropologists” from the nineteen-eighties have even collected “detailed accounts of the sophisticated resource management strategies developed by rural non-industrial societies” that prove traditional environmental knowledge to be a crucial opportunity in achieving sustainability (Alexiades 2009, 72; Zent 2009, 19). And yet, as Zent (2009) emphasizes, “the attitudes of the scientific community towards IK [Indigenous Knowledge] are still marked by considerable ambiguity, skepticism, contention, and debate” (Zent 2009, 19). I believe that this partially stems from an assumed elitist pedestal that is rooted in white supremacy in which modern western science is unwilling to consider traditional strategies or techniques because they resemble something ‘primitive’ and fail to align with notions of what colonial western progress looks like. Of course, the actual issue here runs much deeper than that; Zent (2009) references biologist Lori Ann Thrupp, who asserts that “western scientific knowledge is a powerful ideological force that provides the rationality of exploitative capitalist and modernist institutions, delegitimizes and displaces IK [Indigenous Knowledge] through domination of education and development policies, and appropriates and scientizes particular bits of IK to further its hegemonic spread around the world” (Zent 2009, 43). Additionally, this analysis sheds light on the growing exploitation and commoditization of Indigenous knowledge, which not only decontextualizes the information but reinforces this damaging corporate cycle that prioritizes accumulating money over any genuine attempt at healing the root of our economic and subsequent ecological issues (Alexiades 2009; Zent 2009).

On the other hand, Dove et al. (2009) actually explores how, because of increased globalization, traditional and modern knowledge is much more blended today than might be assumed, though this is integrated more on a local level than global. In fact, they illustrate how “Western and non-Western traditions are increasingly intermingled and both also encompass multiple, diverse, and sometimes conflicting paradigms. What appear to be non-Western systems of environmental knowledge typically prove to have been hybridized with or otherwise related to Western systems of knowledge” (Dove, et al. 2009, 147). Of course, this does not negate the fact that the global ecology still desperately needs a more intentional and direct effort at helping it to heal, and it is various forms of traditional environmental knowledge that could help to achieve this. In doing this, however, there must be a conscious recognition and consideration that Indigenous communities “have their own vantage and their own time frame from which they view and evaluate the changes in land... We need to take their perspectives into serious consideration, or better yet, use them as points of departure, in our effort to arrive at a negotiated future visioning of the landscape” (Rhoades & Nazarea 2009, 252).

LOCAL VS. GLOBAL SCIENCE

When discussing Indigenous or traditional environmental knowledge, there exists an overlap in which practices tend to shine a light onto two categories: local and global sciences. These ecological approaches vary, and while global science covers more of an all-encompassing modern scientific mode of information, local sciences are much more diverse and specific to the local landscape; while this would include Indigenous knowledge, local sciences also include a broader spectrum of local communities (Sillitoe 2009). Dove et al. (2009) takes a focus on a small group of migrant farmers in the Amazon who, while not Indigenous, make for an interesting example of local environmental science in which they “started to develop their systems of environmental knowledge, drawing on their background, culture and society; on their experiences at the frontier; and on knowledge acquired from other groups there” (Dove, et al. 2009, 142). This blending and experimenting of local and traditional environmental practices, I would argue, is not only a step in the right direction, but illustrates a significant and successful example of blending, the overall hybridization of practical approaches to environmental sciences, and should be integrated and applied in efforts to heal the global ecology. Anthropologist Paul

Sillitoe (2009) makes an incredible point when considering local ecological upkeep and hybrid sciences, emphasizing the importance of diverse ecological strategies, and stating that “we need to draw on the full range of the human heritage as we seek ways forwards in the future that might benefit all humankind and ensure the continued well-being of the planet we inhabit” (Sillitoe 2009, 19).

In doing this, it could also be valuable to take a look at the far past, particularly at the history that Graeber and Wengrow (2018, 2021) essentially rewrite to disprove widely held assumptions about past societal organizations. They highlight how new evidence suggest that various groups and communities would experiment and switch between different political economies and governmental set-ups as the seasons changed, occasionally joining bigger communities for a season and then dispersing again months later (Graeber & Wengrow 2018, 2021). All of these cases, between Indigenous and traditional environmental knowledge, local and global sciences, and even past societies, all display alternatives to the current status quo that could help to alter the course of our ecological crisis, as well as the damage that accelerated global capitalism has been causing on a fundamental level to the lives of people living in countries that care more about big corporations making money than about the health and safety of the citizens or the land that they reside on. As Alexiades (2009) concludes, then, the “central question... is not whether indigenous environmental knowledge has value and application outside of its own particular context, but rather how it is used, represented or appropriated, by whom, to what ends, for whose benefit, and under what conditions” (Alexiades 2009, 82).

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND A SHIFT IN IDEOLOGY

Taking an anthropological approach to cultural relativism, especially in regard to how different communities interact with their ecological habitat, helps to further recognize just how disconnected modern Euro-American societies are to their local landscapes. The willingness to use and destroy the environment as if it is our right as human beings is a reflection of our culture, and not one we should be proud of as it is exceedingly anthropocentric and harmful not only to the global ecology but also to our own relationships with the environments we live in and interact with. I believe that even if practical aspects of Indigenous and traditional knowledge are

adopted and implemented, real change may seriously necessitate an ideological shift. We must change the approach because the root of the issue lies in how we conceptualize the connection between humans and the earth's ecology.

Of course, there is no one ideal way to re-conceptualize these connections, but the New Materialities Movement in anthropology is making a solid effort. Most notably, Bennett (2010), Barad (2003, 2007), and Ingold's (2011) work have all explored in depth how matter and material things, both human and non-human, interconnect and blend together to create the world we live in. They take a critical step away from anthropocentrism and delve into the agency of matter, how human beings are intrinsically and deeply woven into the fabric of earth's ecology and the material universe, just as everything around us is, and more importantly, how the disconnect between humans and the rest of the world is entirely rooted in perception and not physical reality.

An interesting example of re-envisioning how matter and the environment interact can be seen in the Nickel Materiality and Dark Ecology Project (Gorbachewskaja & Larina 2015; Morton 2016). The city of Nickel, Russia was once a prosperous industrial center but experienced a serious collapse in the nineties and because of the extreme weather conditions, forced the local ecology to adapt and integrate with the remnants of the city itself. Nickel has since been described as a large flowing organism in which the infrastructure, the residents, and the local ecology all mesh together to create a vibrant materiality and a distinct flow of energy between each point of interaction as the city grows and adapts into something unique. Nickel's ecological habitat is particularly noteworthy due to the obvious ways in which the surrounding environment has connected and become distinctly part of the city as a whole, but while Nickel's situation may be more physically noticeable, this project emphasizes a distinctly New Materialities approach to understanding how each aspect of the city interacts with one another. We connect and are connected to various pieces of matter and materiality at all times, just as we ourselves are matter as well, constantly in the process of becoming, shifting, and changing. We are extensions of our environment, affect and are affected by our surroundings at all times, and recognizing the depth of these connections is integral to an ideological shift that values both global and local ecologies.

Outside of more theoretical New Materiality approaches, there are a multitude of Indigenous communities whose ontologies follow similar patterns of interconnectedness and engagement within their environments. The Kogi of Columbia, for example, have a very strong sense of responsibility to the state of the global environment. In fact, they “believe they exist to care for the world – a world they fear we are destroying,” which has prompted them to reach out from their usually isolated community to make contact in an effort to convince the global community that the earth’s ecology is in jeopardy (Reddy 2013). For them, the earth is very much alive and maintaining a healthy equilibrium is of great importance. Similarly, the Mbuti from the Congo region of Africa tie their community to the forest in such a way that ensures everything from kinship, economics, politics, and religion are all linked and connected to the forest they live in (Mosko 1987). The forest, for them, is considered family and an integral part of the community, so it makes perfect sense that they would take care of it, just as it provides and takes care of them.

Even more compelling, Reiter (2017) explores the approach that the Wintukua, who reside near the Kogi, take to their local ecology. They practice a deliberative democracy in which the focus is much more so on responsibilities to their community than to the rights they hold as individuals, and it should be noted that “social and political life is not separate from the spiritual life and nature” (Reiter 2017, 87). In this case, everything and everyone that makes up their community, including their local ecology, is quintessentially connected at every level of their society. Sustaining a balance, or working to restore it and heal when issues arise in the community, is a crucial aspect of their assumed “responsibilities toward the collective, toward nature – even toward human kind” (Reiter 2017, 89). My point in bringing up these examples, all of which hold core similarities in their relationships with the local ecology despite their cultural differences, is to illustrate current alternatives that demonstrate the sort of ideological approach to the environment that may help to heal it. If we can understand that our “community includes the ocean, the sky, the land, and all the life species inhabiting those areas,” then perhaps people in the global north might be more inclined to take care of it (Irwin 2022, 15). A shift in the ideological approach to how non-Indigenous communities treat and consider the landscape, global and local ecologies, and how we as human beings interact with and connect to our environments, in my opinion, treats the issue of the ecological crisis at its theoretical source. If

we can alter the exceedingly anthropocentric and uncaring perspective on how we affect and are affected by the land we live on, then instituting and applying alternative techniques in our treatment of the ecology may actually pave the way for lasting and meaningful change.

CONCLUSION

Altogether, working with Indigenous and traditional environmental knowledge in an effort to restore the relationship between human communities and their ecological habitat seems to not only offer numerous advantages but may also prove to be vital considering the current ecological crisis. Between the practical and wide range of local environmental science applications that offer better suited alternatives to handling local landscapes and various different ideological approaches that require an understanding and respect of the earth in regard to our ecological habitat, there are many valuable options that the global community could take in the endeavor of achieving a sustainable future.

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