STORY
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ON BIOCULTURALISM, SHAMANISM AND UNLEARNING THE CREED OF GROWTH

Bioculturalism is the acknowledgement that biological diversity is linked with cultural diversity in knowledges, languages and practice, and that sustaining both is necessary for ecological and cultural well being. It is an emerging term and concept that marks a radical step to bring varied cultural values explicitly into debate and practice regarding nature conservation

There is an ancient Greek myth that could be a potent parable for our times. Demeter, goddess of grain, fertility and the rhythm of the seasons, appears as a mortal priestess to the imperious King Erysichthon, suggesting he refrain from cutting the trees of a sacred grove planted in celebration of all she embodies. He ignores her and continues to cut, hungry for timber to build a new banqueting hall for his palace. Demeter, revealing herself in her full splendour, condemns the King to perpetual hunger however much he consumes. Unable to sustain a hunger that is never satiated, he becomes a beggar in the streets, reliant on handouts and eating dirt.

Permanent dissatisfaction and unfulfilled desire similarly are a zeitgeist of the freedom to produce and consume that characterises the creed of growth of state corporate capitalism. From the monstrous inequalities in the distribution of material wealth and resources, to tragic reductions in cultural and biological diversity, perhaps we are now experiencing the inevitable inability of contemporary structures to sustain that hunger. As central banks bail out the excesses of failing asset markets, it also seems, as one commentator puts it, that we are witnessing a rapid reduction of 'the King' of market triumphalism to the public begging bowl of bailouts from state coffers.

But the heart of the myth above is that all these ailments are due to the King's inability to pause in wonder and respect in relation to the beings constituting Demeter's sacred grove. This is the fall from grace of 'Man's' seemingly irrevocable break from Nature; a conceptual divorce that is normalised and naturalised in modernity, and that makes possible the fundamentalist instrumentality of our (non)relationships with the 'non-human' world. In modernity, nature is a thing to be measured, mapped, modelled, commodified, conserved, used. 'It' is not felt, celebrated, danced, or given gifts. Even in the arena of biodiversity conservation, policy and practice is guided by quantifiable measures of desirable rarity and endemism, of numbers conserved, of percentages of the earth's surface under protected area estate, and of money generated via such endeavours through tourism, trophy hunting, and now via global markets in the burgeoning area of Payments for Ecosystem Services.

'Bioculturalism', the acknowledgement that biological diversity is linked with cultural diversity in knowledges, languages and practice, and that sustaining both is necessary for ecological and cultural well being, is an emerging term and concept that marks a radical step to bring varied cultural values explicitly into debate and practice regarding nature conservation. It is implicit in the adopted United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which affirms, for example, that 'Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas…' (Article 25). And an exciting initiative in Peru's Cusco Highlands, the Potato Park or Parque de la Papa established by Inca descendants to preserve the astonishing diversity of potato varieties developed through cultural practice, has been named explicitly as a Biocultural Heritage site.

These are major conceptual and pragmatic steps towards reentwining the domains of culture and nature, and of mind and body, that have been so violently wrested apart in two thousand years of patriarchal social organisation. But as the myth above suggests, the key for unlocking a healing of this trauma also is a resurgence of the connectedness that flows from knowing that we inhabit and are part of a spirited, soulful and rhythmic earth, and of a revolutionary adjustment of practice in the wake of this knowing.

Given the disciplining discourses of mainstream 'environment and development' rhetoric under modernity, which would reduce all identified problems to technofixes and tweaks in policy, rather than countenance radical changes in consumption and other practices, the sharing of stories and experiences that run counter to this flow becomes a significant intervention in the possibility of doing and becoming different.

Nathan ≠ Ûina Taurob and family greet and gift the spirits of the land in |Giribes plains, north west Namibia.

I have an experience I would like to share here. It took place in the drylands of north west Namibia in the 1990s. At that time, I was a young and enthusiastic PhD student in anthropology researching peoples' uses of, and relationships with, the landscape. My particular focus was on plants, but I soon realised that these are woven with, and inextricable from, all the other beings that make up the landscape. I was learning from Damara people, whose name for themselves is ≠Nū Khoen.

The story is in the photograph above. It was taken in 1995, at a place called |Giribes which are large open grassy plains to the north west of a larger settlement called Sesfontein or !Nani|aus. We had driven out there early in the morning, and the sun was starting to burn. I had my notebook and plant press at the ready, and was keen to get going with the resource-use documentation that I hoped to do that day. But the first thing that these three people did – they are Nathan ≠Ûina Taurob on the right, his daughter and her partner – was to move some way away from the car, sit down and start talking out at the landscape. I remember feeling slightly impatient at the time, anxious to get on with the 'realwork' of knowledge collection. But I was curious enough to ask what they were doing. The answer I received was that this was *aoxu*, the practice of connecting with and giving something away to the ancestors of the land and of their family, to ask for safe passage and for success in finding the foods they wished to gather. They were giving away tobacco - ≠Nū Khoen, particularly of Sesfontein/!Nani|aus, have long been known regionally for the pungent tobacco they grow in small gardens. And also the leaves of *tsaurahais* or *Colophospermum mopane*, valued locally for their healing properties. The

PHOTO COURTESY: SIAN SULLIVAN

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direction that they were facing was to the north, towards the settlement of Purros. This was the land where Nathan ≠Ûina grew up, and where his ancestors remain. They were no longer able to live there, but at that time they continued to return to these areas, sometimes for several weeks at a time. Most of this movement was completely invisible to the various formal administrations of the region. And some of it meant moving into tourism concessions, run by commercial enterprises, to which they officially no longer had access.

I have been meditating on this and other experiences in the years that have passed. I knew from the quality of attention they gave that something significant was going on. But the rationalist academic tradition and culture that I came from had left me with enormous blindspots, and it has taken quite an effort of 'unlearning' to arrive at a sense and sensation of understanding.

I think and feel now that what this experience taught me is that it is possible for human beings to embody and to feel an implicit logic of reciprocity in the flow of relationship with the other beings that make up what we now call biodiversity. In this logic, all resource-use practice is simultaneously a negotiation and an exchange that binds people into multilayered and multifaceted reciprocal arrangements with ancestors, spirit and with other species. It is not just about something that is taken to be used; it is also about something that is returned. I now understand that this practice and logic is encountered in the remaining and resurging shamanic cultures worldwide; cultures that interestingly also seem to be those who have maintained the currently much sought after biodiversity.

What I notice, however, is that under today's globalising culture of neoliberalism, much biodiversity conservation policy and practice seems to promote and embody a very different logic. This is a logic of accumulation, whereby

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It is as though nature now is to be experienced through the windscreen of a vehicle, the lens of a camera, the barrel of a rifle, or on the Discovery Channel. In all of these it is a kind of disembodied vision that is prioritised, mediated via technology that separates more than connects.

value is determined by the market, by what can be bought, sold and monetarily profited from. Under this logic, the creation of value for biodiversity increasingly seems to be entrusted to the creation of new markets and of new buyers for 'it'. The most recent expression of this is in the area of Payments for Ecosystems Services. The Katoomba Group's Ecosystem Marketplace website, for example, states that 'markets for ecosystem services [including biodiversity] will one day become a fundamental part of our economic and environmental system, helping give value to environmental services that have, for too long, been taken for granted.' But I want to ask is who is it who has not valued these environmental services? And when they speak of 'our' economic and environmental system, who are they speaking about?

I think that what we are seeing here is another significant and accelerating wave of enclosure and primitive accumulation to liberate natural capital for the global market, such that commodification now extends from genes to species and to ecosystems, i.e. to all the domains of diversity that are delineated by the Convention on Biodiversity. It also seems to me that the freedom espoused by this free market environmentalism simultaneously closes off possibilities for other freedoms - other choices regarding relationships between human and non-human worlds - to be maintained.

In tandem with these marketisation processes is the ongoing transformation of experience of the non-human world into the touristic consumption of conserved nature - promoted for the generation of income in most conservation initiatives. It is as though nature now is to be experienced through the windscreen of a vehicle, the lens of a camera, the barrel of a rifle (if you're into trophy hunting), or on the Discovery Channel. In all of these it is a kind of disembodied vision that is prioritised, mediated via technology that perhaps separates more than connects. As such, this continuing neoliberalisation of nature sustains the creed of growth that drives the cultural colonialism of modernity; further transforming nature into a commodity and a spectacle, and capturing the participation and labour of diverse locals in order to do so. The question remains: will biological and cultural diversity be enhanced via this trajectory?

To return to the opening of this article, there is another myth with which Demeter is more commonly associated. This is of the violent capture and rape of her daughter, Persephone, by Hades, guardian of the underworld in collusion with his brother Zeus, king of the gods. Demeter, in her distress, bids the earth to be barren until her daughter is returned. Sensing the serious threat for both humans and gods, Zeus capitulates and remonstrates with Hades. Persephone is restored to Demeter, but she returns having consumed seeds of the pomegranate, the food of the dead. She has lost her innocence, and ever after remains conscious of and partially tied to her knowledge of the dark, dangerous and entrancing excesses of the underworld.

Perhaps, like Persephone, our innocence also has been abducted by a cultural creed of cynicism and growth obsessed exploitation that fractures relationships and sucks the magic out of everything. But perhaps we also can reconnect with Demeter's fertile life, with the seeds of the knowledge of what this exploitative beast is capable of, planted firmly in our psyches.

In international biodiversity conservation, bioculturalism has become a pragmatic conceptual framework that reconnects nature and culture. By (re)animating this relationship with spirit and appreciation, it might also offer a more radical break with the dominating creed of economic growth and its continuous commodification of life. In so celebrating the mutually nourishing connections that may exist between people and the environment, it might be bioculturalism rather than money that confers incentives to equitably sustain diversity.

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