

Ecological Anthropology

SANT 512

Lecture 3

Dr. Elias Alemu

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Topic: Nature and culture



Theorising on “nature” and “culture” in anthropology

- ▶ The nature-culture dualism or opposition or dichotomy in anthropology is an important aspect of d/t theories.
 - ▶ This dualism is also referred to as the nature-society dualism in the British School.
 - ▶ Theorists of different orientation used nature and culture to explain how d/t aspects of culture and society were formed and functioned.
 - ▶ These theories were found in the structuralism (Levi-Strauss), the materialist schools of Marxism and cultural ecology, sociobiology, as well as of symbolism.
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Nature and culture in anthropology

- ▶ We will focus on how nature and culture are theorised in cultural ecology based on ethnographic examples from the Dogon (West Africa), Kasigau village (Kenya, inhabited by mainly Wakasigau people) and the Cree (North America).
- ▶ **As you already know**, early ecological anthropologists argued that the environment influenced and even determined culture.
- ▶ Postmodern anthropologists, however, and not only ecological anthropologists, argued that there is a more ***reciprocal r/ship b/n nature and culture***, i.e. both nature and culture influence each other.



Nature as a concept

- ▶ The common idea in environmentalism is that nature simply exists, it is not man-made.
- ▶ Some early ecological anthropologists would have also said this, but most anthropologists have argued in the past that ***nature is culturally and socially constructed*** in some way.
- ▶ Therefore, anthropologists have argued that each society and each culture have their own concept/s of nature and relationships with nature.
- ▶ This is one reason that cross-cultural ethnographic analysis is so important in anthropology.



Nature (continued)

- ▶ Anthropologists have considered nature to be a “cultural construction”, an “invention” and a “social or historical creation”, the last is exemplified by the following quote.
- ▶ So ‘nature’ can be considered as “a historical, cultural and social construct with powerful emotional, moral and political associations” (Roepstorff and Bubandt 2003: 10).
- ▶ This is the position generally held by anthropologists today.
- ▶ We will look at how ‘nature’ is conceptualised and lived by the Dogon, Wakasigau and Cree people.
- ▶ First, though, we need to briefly look at the concept of nature in industrial society.



Nature in industrial society

- ▶ Ideas of control, protection and insulation underlie the view of nature and human practices in industrial societies.
- ▶ Paul Sillitoe argues that the ethos in the industrial North is that of control.
- ▶ If human beings can bring nature “under control they can direct its productivity to their benefit” (Sillitoe 1993:172).
- ▶ This is related particularly to subsistence so advanced technologies like irrigation in agriculture meant that we were not dependent on rainfall for growing crops, and we could use natural elements, in this case rain, in whatever manner we decided to use it.



“Protecting” the environment

- ▶ If humans are able to ‘control’ nature, to a certain extent, then as environmentalists argued, we are responsible for the destruction of the env’t.
- ▶ If we are causing the damage, then nature needs to be protected from destructive human practices.
- ▶ However, some anthropologists, like Kay Milton and Tim Ingold, have criticised this environmentalist position for its inherent ethnocentrism.
- ▶ Milton argues that this idea of people ‘protecting’ nature assumes that people are in a position to protect the env’t; thereby “the environment is amenable to their protection, which in turn implies that the balance of power lies with the people, not with the env’t”(Milton 1996: 123-124).



The notion of protection (continued)

- ▶ However, as Milton notes for Wakasigau people in Kenya and for Dogon in W. Africa, “the power of human beings to exert an influence on environmental processes is overshadowed by the environment’s power in their lives; the balance of power lies with the env’t, not with the people” (1996: 123).
- ▶ In these cases, it would be absurd for Wakasigau or Dogon people to even think that they could protect parts of nature because they are so powerless compared to nature.
- ▶ This kind of western environmentalist notion of ‘protection’ would not be useful or even relevant for the Dogon or Wakasigau.



Cross-cultural analysis

- ▶ It is therefore important to understand how ideas and relations to nature are culturally specific.
- ▶ Ideas are situated in a particular view of env't-human relations that may not always be applied usefully outside its context.
- ▶ In terms of activism as well, understanding emic views will help to create effective ways of advocating for/against particular events (See Milton 1993, Mende case in Gola forest, Sierra Leone).
- ▶ There is another point about popular and activist references to cultural diversity, particularly of small-scale societies like hunter-gatherers and horticulturists that idealises this 'simple' way of life compared to industrial society, what Milton calls ***"the myth of primitive ecological wisdom"*** (See p. 28-32, p.109-114, p.133-135 in "Environmentalism and Cultural Theory").



The notion of insulation

- ▶ This notion of insulation that underlies the view of nature in industrial society is worth mentioning here; and we will expand it in our discussion of conservation later on.
- ▶ Insulate and protect have similar meanings.
- ▶ The main idea is that with more advanced technology and increased social complexity, “human beings were able increasingly to insulate themselves against nature” (Diamond *et al.* 1987:325)” (cited in Milton 1996: 124).



The notion of insulation

- ▶ For ex. “biosphere people” do not directly depend on small scale farming for daily food.
- ▶ Instead, they go to the supermarket and buy food that is imported from all over the world.
- ▶ When certain kinds of food are unavailable due to poor crop yield, they are not hugely affected; b/c they can substitute some other kind of food since they have a variety of choices.



Dogon concepts of nature

- ▶ We will focus on the r/ship b/n the residents of a particular village (Tireli) and the “bush” (groups of trees).
- ▶ The bush includes all the flora and fauna living there.
- ▶ There are a variety of environmental features in the village such as “scree slope, flood plain, drift sand and fixed dunes” (Milton 1996: 119).
- ▶ The Dogon are mainly horticulturists and they use these different features to cultivate many crops effectively for subsistence and for sale, from onions to tobacco, as well as rearing small animals.



The bush

- ▶ In examining Dogon relations with nature, it is important to understand how they interact with flora and fauna in different ways.
 - ▶ Trees are used as sources of food, for example its fruit.
 - ▶ As a source of fuel, wood is burned to create charcoal, which has various purposes in cooking and heating.
 - ▶ For medicinal purposes, certain plants are used to treat certain illnesses.
 - ▶ For building, for example houses.
 - ▶ In farming, for example leaves are used as manure to enrich crops (See Milton 1996: 119-120).
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Trees

- ▶ Although trees are used for various purposes, the wood or leaves taken are not wasted.
- ▶ They do not attempt to replace the trees or plants used since:
 - ▶ *the Dogon take what they need from the bush without trying to replace it...It would be inappropriate for them to try to replenish what is the source of all power and life (Milton 1996: 120).*



The bush as a powerful entity

- ▶ The “bush” is the home of spirits that can be found in all living organisms such as plants, trees, animals as well as inanimate objects like rocks.
 - ▶ Spirits can be dangerous because they are powerful, for example an animal may attack a person or a plant may make a person ill.
 - ▶ Animals, especially, are powerful because they not only have the potential to harm a person, but because they are omnipotent to some extent and omniscient;
 - ▶ This means that they know everything. I.e.
 - ▶ They know everything that people do in the present and they know what people will do in the future.
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The Dogon and respect

- ▶ So animals and all inhabitants (living and non-living) of the “bush” must be respected.
- ▶ Respect is an important concept and manner of behaviour for the Dogon.
- ▶ Dogon can neither control nor protect nature, as opposed to the common underlying ideas in the r/ship b/n people and nature in industrial society.



The village of Kasigau

- ▶ Kasigau is a village in southern Kenya.
- ▶ Milton describes the area as “a large hill (with) a band of flat plain around the base of the hill” (1996: 121).
- ▶ It is inhabited mainly by people of the Wakasigau tribe, but the ethnography focuses on the village.
- ▶ Residents are mainly horticulturists growing maize and other crops with some small animal herding.
- ▶ In Kasigau “animals are both a store of wealth and a source of food” (Milton 1996: 121).



The village of Kasigau

- ▶ Animals are also seen as dangerous to people and also potential threats to farming especially.
- ▶ For instance: “monkeys raid the maize crops and large animals occasionally trample them. Snakes, which are common, are a real threat to life. Goats and cattle might be lost to lions or to illness” (ibid).



Wakasigau relations with nature

- ▶ Even when bad incidents take place, the “Wakasigau do not regard themselves as being in control of these events; they live in a world where things happen to them” (Milton 1996: 121).
- ▶ Simply put, they lack control and therefore power compared to animals.
- ▶ However, Milton also cautions against attributing a single perspective on nature-human relations in multi-ethnic Kasigau village.
- ▶ Instead she emphasises that “what many people in Kasigau share is an understanding that they are at the mercy of forces largely beyond their control” (1996: 123).



The Cree

- ▶ Although the notions of control and protection of the env't characterise the view of nature and state policies toward the env't in industrial society, where the Cree are located, their views of nature differ from the dominant perspective.
- ▶ The Cree are indigenous Americans in Quebec, Canada.
- ▶ They are mainly hunters, but there is a kinship between Cree persons and animals.



Cree hunting

- ▶ Both groups (people and animals) belong to a “single moral community whose members recognize and fulfil obligations towards each other” (Milton 1996: 127).
- ▶ This means that Cree are:
 - ▶ *aware of the needs and sensibilities of the animals and take them into account in their activities. Similarly, the animals are aware of the needs of humans and provide for those needs as considerate kin are expected to do. Individual hunters are helped by animal friends, with whom they form long-term relationships (1979:139-40) (cited in Milton 1996: 127).*



Cree hunting (continued)

- ▶ For ex. “the distribution of the meat and the treatment of inedible parts of the animal are important in the fulfilment of human obligations towards the animals (Scott 1989:203–4)” (cited in Milton 1996: 128).
 - ▶ So there is a relation of reciprocity between people and animals.
 - ▶ The most apparent instance of this is hunting because “animals give themselves as food to the Cree” (Milton 1996: 127).
 - ▶ ***Q- Reflect on ethnographic examples from Ethiopia that you may think of ?***
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END



Required readings

- ▶ “Hunter-gatherers in a giving environment” pp.116-131 in Milton, K. (ed.) 1996. Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse. London and New York: Routledge.



Appendix 1.

- ▶ A floodplain is “an area of low-lying ground adjacent to a river, formed mainly of river sediments and subject to flooding” (Oxford dictionary).
 - ▶ Scree is “the loose debris accumulated at the foot of a cliff comprising angular stones and boulders” (www.landforms.eu). The scree slope is the cliff from which the loose stones and boulders fall off.
 - ▶ A fixed dune (sand) – a dune is usually made up of sand. It is a mound of sand.
 - ▶ Drift sand is sand that blows away from the dune.
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