

ARNE KALLAND

## ENVIRONMENTALISM AND IMAGES OF THE OTHER

Human beings share with many other social animals the ability to discriminate between one's own and other groups, but to legitimize this distinction in terms of moral evaluation is probably uniquely human. The Other has always been important in order not only to define ourselves as human beings – whether the Other is defined biologically (humanity vs. animality), socially (e.g., sex, age, clan), spatially (e.g., community, tribe, nation) or temporally (past, present, future) – but also to put forward claims of a moral order. In a chapter for a book entitled *Nature Across Cultures*, the main focus will be on the spatial, contemporary situation.

The Other is frequently portrayed in negative ways in order both to build a positive self-identity and to legitimize one's own superiority and even conquest and domination of the less “civilized”. From this comes the widespread idea of the savage or barbaric outsider or stranger.<sup>1</sup> There has been a tendency to describe an “Ignoble” Other in terms of what they lack – depicting them as filthy and ignorant people hardly living better lives than beasts. They were allegedly steeped in superstition and were under the tyranny of witch doctors and medicine men, and their cruelty included human sacrifice and cannibalism. Such a view has legitimized both physical extermination as well as military conquest and attempts to “civilize” the Other. But the Other may also be portrayed as innocent and uncorrupted by civilization and market forces. This positive image of a “Noble” Other has served as a powerful, internal cultural critique, not least in the industrialized West. It has even been claimed that such images are fundamental to the radical environmentalist critique of industrialism (Milton, 1996: 109).

Inspiration for formulating new concepts and perceptions of human-nature relations comes from a wide variety of sources. Two sources have in particular been harnessed to construct these images, i.e. the noble savage – first of all represented by Native Americans – and the noble Oriental. Whereas mostly small populations of technologically simple hunter-gatherers and rainforest peoples living in marginal areas have given rise to the image of noble savage (Ellen, 1986), technologically advanced and highly urban cultures in East and South Asia have given rise to the noble Oriental counterpart. Although both

these images have served important roles in western cultural critiques and thus share some underlying characteristics, there are also, as we will see, important differences between them, not least in how they relate to practice.

Not surprisingly, this positive interest for the ecologically Noble Other has not been left uncontested. A wide spectre of criticism has been raised against what has been claimed to be an unjustified romantic view of the Other, ranging from uncovering empirical evidence of environmental destruction caused by these allegedly ecologically wise peoples to theoretical discussions about the relationship between perceptions and praxis. This criticism has often been confused with the image of the Ignoble Other but should be recognized for what it is: i.e., a third position that tries to humanize the Other by refuting the relevance of moral evaluation, accounting for both cultural pluralism and moral relativism. It is the aim of this chapter to summarize how images of the Other have been used, mostly in contemporary western environmental writings.

#### THE NOBLE OTHER

Within the environmental movement there is a widely held notion that one of the roots for current environmental problems is the inadequacies of the Judeo-Christian and Cartesian worldviews (e.g., White, 1967), which are blamed for having alienated modern man from nature. A new ecological paradigm is therefore frequently called for, a paradigm where “man” and “environment” no longer are seen as separate and opposite entities but where “organisms and environment form part of one another” (Dickens, 1992: 15). Some people (e.g., White, 1967; Passmore, 1980; Kalupahana, 1989; Booth and Jacobs, 1990) suggest that the solution to the environmental crisis may be sought in re-interpretations of western concepts and perspectives, whereas others – both scientists and laymen alike – have searched for new inspiration to correct these ills from outside western traditions. A large body of scholarly as well as popular literature offers alternative worldviews to the prevailing western ones – usually depicting man as an integral part of nature instead of being separated from it and trying to dominate it. They portray man and environment as a harmonious unity of mutual respect, complementarity and symbiosis built on profound ecological wisdom; their views are holistic-organic rather than atomistic-mechanistic as in the industrial West (Callicott and Ames, 1989: 5).

The notion of the noble savage, a term mistakenly attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Fairchild, 1961; Ellingson, 2001), is by no means new. It predates Romanticism by more than a millennium, and goes back at least to the Roman historian and praetor Tacitus (*ca.* 56–120), who described the Germanic tribes to the north of the Roman empire as environmentally friendly and living in harmony with their forest environments (Olwig, 1995). But it was during the late Renaissance that the notion of the noble savage became important as a cultural critique, first in France not least through the writings of Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century (Berkhofer, 1978: 75), although Marc Lescarbot allegedly coined the term itself in 1609 (Ellingson, 2001: 21–22). The savages are here depicted as living closer to nature without being imprisoned in artificial cultures.<sup>2</sup>

With the growing concern, particularly in industrialized countries, about the present rate of degradation of the physical environment and a perceived looming global environmental crisis, the ecological Other has in recent decades got new meanings, not least reinforced by the notion of sustainability (WCED, 1987). Typically, indigenous peoples are depicted as living in harmony with nature, in fact so close that humans and other forms of life constitute a single society, the whole world being one's extended family (e.g., Nash, 1989: 117; Posey, 1999: 5). It is precisely the assumption that non-industrial indigenous societies live sustainably in their environments that makes them a powerful argument that industrialization is the cause of environmental destruction (Milton, 1996: 109). The notion of sustainability, however, resembles models developed within rather outdated functionalist and neo-functionalist schools of anthropology, depicting man and nature co-existing in some kind of homeostatic equilibrium, thus giving support to the functionalist trap of equating perceptions with practice.

It is common both in the environmental and anthropological discourses to read conservational motives into the practices and worldviews of local peoples. Orlove and Brush (1996: 335) have suggested four reasons why indigenous peoples often are depicted as living in harmony with nature: (a) they have a long history without apparently disrupting ecosystems, (b) they have a rich inventory of traditional environmental knowledge, (c) they have specific management practices based on such knowledge about nature, and (d) they have religious beliefs about ritual uses of animals and plants that safeguard their sustainable use. The interest in what has variously been labelled "indigenous knowledge" (IK) or "traditional ecological knowledge" (TEK) – i.e. (b) above – has been particularly intense. [Editor's note: See the article by Dudgeon and Berkes in this volume.] This interest is more than academic. Indigenous knowledge is often seen by non-government organizations (NGOs), media and the public as an alternative to scientific knowledge, an alternative better able to address urgent problems of resource management. But, as pointed out by Peter Brosius (1997), indigenous knowledge tends to go through a transformation in environmental discourse. Analysing the discourse on the Penan in Sarawak (East Malaysia) he noticed that rhetoric from an Amazonian context had informed the discourse on the Penan. Doing fieldwork in the 1980s, Brosius had been surprised that the Penan paid so little attention to medicinal plants. But the narrator in the film *The Penan: A Disappearing Civilization in Borneo* (1989) nonetheless claimed that "with more than 40,000 years of experimentation and observation, the Penan have enormous medical knowledge which Western science cannot duplicate" (quoted in Brosius, 1997: 61). Brosius also noticed that their rather down-to-earth knowledge of their environment was reduced to a question of the sacred or ineffable. More generally he claims that, "one is imposing a falsely universalized quality on a range of peoples, and thereby collapsing precisely the diversity that defines them. The Penan are transformed into a homogenous 'indigenous people', or 'forest people'" (Brosius, 1997: 65). Some anthropologists (but by no means all) have contributed to this transformation and thereby to the stereotyping of the ecologically

Nature Across Cultures

Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western  
Cultures

Selin, H. (Ed.)

2003, XXIV, 482 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1235-8