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Indigeneity – Identity, Politics and Culture in a globalized World

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Reconnecting With Nature

„Reconnecting with nature [therefore] requires more than cultural reprogramming: it requires cultivating a consciousness attuned to the natural processes that have shaped human evolution over millennia.“

(Zylstra 2014: 46)

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1. Introduction

The Idea to this paper came to me when I read articles about the bushfires in Australia that were all over the media in the beginning of 2020. I stumbled across an article that talked about the habit of the indigenous way of burning, that could have saved the landscape from the big fires, as opposed to the Western way of burning (BBC, last accessed: 27.03.2020). Also I was fascinated about the indigenous coordinator of the Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad, Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, who was a speaker on World Economic Forum. She talked about why indigenous people are the key to protecting our forests, and talked about their people's knowledge about the environment, specifically her grandmother's knowledge and that she could predict the weather without having any technological devices (Youtube, last accessed 27.03.2020).

In an article about a study compiled by more than 500 experts in 50 countries by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform On Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), that speaks about the extinction of species, land degradation, biodiversity loss and climate change, Sir Robert Watson, overall chair of the study says about indigenous cultures: *“What surprised me the most about this study was that it became clear that the older cultures, like the indigenous peoples of the Americas, have different values which protect nature better [than Western societies],” said Watson. (Huffpost: last accessed 27.03.2020)*

Another online source published by newsweek.com said that North Americans have changed their environment very little and almost not interfered with it in the last 14,000 years, until the Europeans arrived. Contrary to popular belief a study by Elizabeth Chilton at Birmingham University found, that indigenous native Americans did not use large-scale fires or clear-cutting of trees to open the landscape to agriculture. Only after the arrival of Europeans, practices of large-scale cutting and burning of forests becomes used in the ecological record (newsweek, last accessed 27.03.2020).

I followed the thought about indigenous knowledge of nature and habit in nature, as opposed to Western ways of thinking and acting with nature, and came to many questions, like: What is indigenous knowledge and what are the ways to act with and in nature? How is indigeneity is defined by consciousness, or rather, how is a certain way of nature perception of

indigenous peoples defined by a certain consciousness? Is there an „indigenous consciousness“? Why is indigenous consciousness important for the ongoing ecological crisis? And how does it affect the relationship of humans and nature? How do indigenous people perceive nature and how are we differently perceiving it?

In my research I try to find some answers to these questions but obviously it is a very broad topic and these questions would require much more than a short paper to answer in depth. I do not have one specific research question, but decided instead to look a little but closer into the topics of: indigenous consciousness, indigenous relationships with nature and indigenous perception of nature, as opposed to maybe those of „the West“. I am using three authors: Matthew Zylstra, who is an integral ecologist, field lecturer and process facilitator focusing on human-nature connectedness at Stellenbosch University in South Africa and wrote his PhD dissertation on "Exploring meaningful nature experience, connectedness with nature and the revitalization of transformative education for sustainability“, Philippe Descola, a French Anthropologist and Tim Ingold, a British Anthropologist.

In the first chapter, I will try to describe the term consciousness, in a nature-related context, and in an indigenous context. I will explain and give examples on how Descola, Ingold and Zylstra use the term and what it means for them. I continue to go deeper into this connection by examining further the aspect of perception of natural surroundings by humans. How do indigenous people perceive their environment as opposed to Western or non-indigenous people? The third part will be about relationships with nature, and human interaction with non-humans such as animals and plants, or landscapes. I will look at Descola's ontology and in particular at animism. After this, I will in the last chapter point out the actuality and relevance of this topic for modern society and examine why it is necessary to look deeper into nature connectedness for us humans in the future.

Of course the topics would have to be researched a lot deeper than it is possible in the length of this paper to give real answers. What I want to do is to give a short insight into these issues, and to have an idea of where a more detailed one in the future could lead to. And basically I want to give a brief scientific answer to the media sources that gave me the idea of this topic.

2. Consciousness

„Reconnecting with nature [therefore] requires more than cultural reprogramming: it requires cultivating a consciousness attuned to the natural processes that have shaped human evolution over millennia" (Zylstra 2014: 46).

Ingold, who is stating an example of the Cree people in Northwest Canada, is giving an insight into indigenous interaction with nature through a caribou hunt. The caribou in their regard is offering itself up to the hunter and is giving its body to the hunter (Ingold 2000: 13). He speaks about the ecology of life as an ‚organism plus environment‘. He states that organism and environment should not be seen as mutually exclusive entities, which are brought to interact after being subsequently brought together. It should on the contrary be a whole-organism-in-its-environment, hence one invisible totality. *„We do not, in other words, have to think of mind or consciousness as a layer of being over and above that of the life of organisms, in order to account for their creative involvement in the world.“ (Ingold 2000: 19)*

In his dissertation, Zylstra is describing his view on the growing separation of humanity from nature. For him it is central in the convergent social and ecological crisis of the world. It is as much a psychological as it is a physical separation from each other, and is therefore to be understood as a crisis of consciousness.

Consciousness is a term that is often and in many ways used, has two important elements for Zylstra:

1. It consists of experience and perception, and is therefore grounded on the individual experiences of a certain surrounding, and is as such also correlating with his concept of CWN - Connectedness with Nature.
2. Consciousness is following attention and is always focused on certain stimuli, while it is fading out irrelevant stimuli.

Modern urban society consists of strong over-stimulation which is being connected to a

blindness towards nature. Western attention is mainly directed focal, and perceives what it is looking for – therefore it remains blind for what lies outside of this focus. From that perspective this type of directed attention away from nature could be central for a crisis of perception, which is furthermore funneling an even more fundamental crisis of consciousness (Zylstra 2014: 45f.).

"Contemporary human consciousness is therefore being distracted to the extent that many persons remain entrapped in the mundane, unable to perceive the full spectrum of phenomena arising in nature (Sewall 1995; Cohen 1997; Scull 1999; Morse 2011). This intimately ties back to the extinction of experience': without the direct experience of nature needed to form an ecological consciousness, we cannot expect an ecological conscience which motivates care and action (Cohen 1997)." (Zylstra 2014: 47)

Descola talks about interiority and physicality. Interiority for him means a variety of attributes such as: intentionality, subjectivity, reflexivity, affects or the ability to name or to dream. Also included could be immaterial principles of which is believed that they are creating lifelines, such as great of life energy. He states that interiority could also be described by what we call spirit, soul or consciousness. In short he describes it as the belief of what is responsible for a being's identity, its life duration and its typical behaviors. Physicality on the other hand is the outer form, the substance, also physiological perceptive and sensory processes, even temperament or the way of acting in the world, if they influence modes of diet, anatomical traits, or a certain form of reproduction. Physicality is therefore more than just the materiality of organic bodies (Descola 2013: 181f.).

When he talks about the ontology of animism, in which beings have a similar interiority, soul or consciousness, but a different physicality, form of their body made of feathers, fur or skin, as i will later explain in more detail, he quotes Sign Howell when he narrates about the Chewong in Malaysia: *„It is their consciousness, which makes a person „them“, independently from their external form (their „handling“ in Chewong-saying), if it is that of a gibbon, a human, a wild boar, a frog, a rambutan fruit, a bamboo leaf, a thunder being, or anything else“ (Howell 1996: 131 in Descola 2013: 200).* The Chewong are perceiving their surrounding as entities, that have a consciousness or not, and that are being categorized based on each of their species with each special form (Descola 2013: 200).

3. Perception

Ingold and Zylstra talk about the perception of the environment. Zylstra speaks about Connectedness With Nature (CWN) and Meaningful Nature Experience (MNE), while Ingold speaks about Sentient Ecology. Both have in common the approach, that we as humans are a part of nature and perceive nature with our senses and even more than that, with our emotions. The question of consciousness is for both of them a key element.

Ingold's approach seeks to overcome the division between a way of acting in an environment on the one hand, and the ways of perceiving it, on the other. The first of both seems to be a naturalistic approach that describes questions of how people interact with the resources of their environment, practically and technically, while the second talks about questions of how lifeworlds of hunting and gathering societies are imaginatively 'constructed': in myth, religion, and ceremony (Ingold 2000: 9). When he talks about cosmologies, he speaks about indigenous knowledge being embedded into objects like fungi or hills and waterholes, which stand as signifiers for elements of a comprehensive system of mental representations (Ingold 2000: 21). When it comes to meaningful nature experiences, Ingold speaks about the idea of showing, as important. Through touch, smell, taste or hearing, showing something to somebody is a form of experiencing it, and apprehend the environment directly. It becomes an *education of attention* (Gibson 1979: 254) (Ingold 2000: 21f.).

„Through this fine-tuning of perceptual skills, meanings immanent in the environment – that is in the relational contexts of the perceiver's involvement in the world – are not so much constructed as discovered“ (Ingold 2000: 22).

Moreover he talks about the knowledge that is drawn for us from attending the melodic inflections of speech, that hunters seem to draw from similarly close attention on movements, sounds, or gestures of animals. This is a part from his concept of *sentient ecology*, which he is introducing as following:

„It is knowledge not of a formal, authorised kind, transmissible in contexts outside those of its practical application. On the contrary, it is based in feeling, consisting in the skills, sensitivities and orientations that have developed through long experience of conducting one’s life in a particular environment“ (Ingold 2000: 25).

He also uses the word *intuition* as a descriptive term for this kind of sensitivity and responsiveness. He pledges for not losing the pre-objective, pre-ethical foundations, that lie for him in the intuitive skills, as a base for further scientific research. In the west, in a scientific surrounding of thought, intuition is widely regarded as knowledge of an inferior kind, even though it constitutes a necessary foundation for any system of science or ethics. Intuitive understanding also rests in perceptual skills that emerge through a process of development in a historically specific environment, and does not, as it is a broad belief, only appeal to instinct, and is not contrary to science and ethics. (Ingold 2000: 25)

For Zylstra, Meaningful Nature Experiences are more transcendent and sacred. He describes them as *„Non-ordinary experiences with/in nature that are particularly profound, significant, affective and difficult to wholly describe (Swan 2010; Morse 2011)“ (Zylstra 2014: 81).*

For him a Meaningful Nature Experience (MNE) can consist of a heightened state of consciousness and can involve sensory arousal, emotional intensity, or temporary shifts in perception. There can be an intimate sense of connection between oneself and a plant, animal, landscape, or celestial body, even a form of emotional bonding is possible (Zylstra 2014: 83). In Connectedness With Nature (CWN) this experience marks a dissolution of boundaries, and the sensing of a common or shared essence between the self, nature and others (Zylstra 2014: 48). Core attributes of Connectedness With Nature (CWN) are for Zylstra: *„inclusiveness; relatedness; belonging; interconnectedness; wholeness; inquisitiveness; aliveness; thankfulness; interaction; happiness; and continuity (Zylstra 2014: 53).*

4. Relationships

Zylstra uses the term of *biophilia* to describe the hypothesis of humans being biologically and

psychologically predisposed to affiliate with the natural world. In all times, humans have had intimate relationships with nature and lived in wild area, subsisted through hunting and gathering, herding and later on agriculture. *Biophilia* can describe the affection or love relationship, that humans instinctively seek with the rest of live, or as well the learned responsibility for nature (Zylstra 2014: 42).

Descola points out the importance of having relationships with a surrounding and to see the „other“ as „myself“. When he describes interiority and physicality, he speaks about four modes of connecting between the „me and the „you“. It makes no difference if the „you“ is a human or a non-human, but it can in both cases be suspected that it contains interiority and physicality, which may be identical with my own. This option he calls totemism. The option he describes as analogism is when i suspect their physicality and interiority to be different to my own. He calls it animism when i suspect my own interiority is similar to yours but my physicality is different, and naturalism when our inferiorities are different but our physicality's similar. He uses these old terms and gives them new meanings as ontological types (Descola 2013: 189 f.).

Descola is talking about indigenous ontologies like Totemism and Animism. He talks about the relationships between humans and non-humans in different societies in South America, North America, Siberia or South East Asia. According to that, it is possible both between humans and non-humans, that are animals and plants, equally possible, to retain relations through friendship, hostility, seduction, alliance or exchange of services. Non-humans do as much as humans have attributes such as internationality, subjectivity, affects, as well as language in certain cases (Descola 2013: 191). He describes the animistic worldview as one, in which humans are not conceptualizing the social order with non-humans, but instead they make use of elementary categories of social practices, to think the relationship between humans and non-humans. The Achuar women for example treat plants like children, whereas their men towards the animals they hunt in norms that are also used in marriage arrangements. Solidarity and friendship to non-humans are found within the Cree, marriage alliances between humans and wild animals in Siberia, and commensality among the Chewong. In all cases the human norms are being used to characterize the relationships with plants and animals, which are also perceived as persons (Descola 2013: 192). The acknowledgment of the animal's and plant's souls gives them reasonable agency in a shared

system of norms and ethical values, as well as to maintain communication with each other (Descola 2013: 197).

According to Ingold, cultural knowledge is transmitted through inscribing it in objects like waterholes and hills. These objects function as carriers or vehicles for meanings, that together constitute a cosmology or cultural worldview. He compares this inscription of knowledge with inscription of informations in sound. He declares that *„our knowledgeability consists, rather, in the capacity to situate such information, and understand its meaning, within the context of a direct perceptual engagement with our environments. And we develop this capacity, I contend, by having things shown to us“* (Ingold 2000: 21).

When Descola describes animism, he speaks about one of its most important attributes which is to acknowledge an identical interiority to humans and non-humans. (Descola 2013: 197) Native American Peoples for example, do not think of what we consider as culture, as a privilege of humans. Many animals and plants live in its norms, according to them. This plays a role in many myths and stories, in which animals were persons before they got their animal form. There was a time, when humans and non-humans were not different from each other. A few examples of Jivaro: it was normal that the nightjar would cook, the cricket would play musical instruments, the humming bird would clear gardens or a common swift would hunt with a blow gun. Animals and plants at that time would communicate with each other freely, and live by social etiquette and all rules of civilization. They kept the same interiority they had before the differentiation: subjectivity, reflexive consciousness, intentionality or the ability to communicate in one universal language (Descola 2013: 201). *„What differentiates the species, is their clothing“* (Taylor 1998: 323f. in Descola 2013: 200).

5. Actuality

According to Zylstra, the lack of Meaningful Nature Experiences (MNE) of the majority of today's people, and the accompanying lack of ecological consciousness create a loss of care for the environment. In his research, he is pointing out the positive influence of Meaningful

Nature Experiences (MNE) on over 90% of the people he interviewed, as they sharpened their view on nature and biodiversity, changed their general behavior towards nature and the ecosystem, and strongly changed their view of life in general. Connectedness With Nature (CWN) may, according to him, evoke empathy, a sense of relatedness and appreciation of the intrinsic value of life (Zylstra 2014: 5).

He approaches a social-ecological relevance of his work that is described when he compares ecological and social problems of today's world, which according to him may be considered a convergence of crises. Environmental problems escalated and can be seen as in a state of crisis, mainly in the fields of global climate change, toxification of the planet and the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services. He states the following indicators to ecological issues: *„accelerated species extinctions; declining water, air, soil quality and natural resource availability; proliferation of invasive alien species, habitat fragmentation, degradation and destruction; increased pollutant presence and concentrations, rising greenhouse gas emissions and global temperatures; and incidences of extreme and unpredictable weather events“* (Zylstra 2014: 27).

He connects this to a variety of problems in the social sector: *„rising poverty levels, population growth and inequities in standards of living; health and family breakdowns; increased crime; value crises; financial crises; education shortfalls; political polarization and institutional inertia; anger, alienation, apathy, discontent, stress and depression“* (Zylstra 2014: 27).

He calls for reconnecting with nature which is a call, that is already addressed in many sciences, and is found in much literature, but inside and outside the scientific world. The separation in perception, Zylstra says, is according to many, widely viewed as the main force behind the global environmental crisis. Ecophilosophy, public health, environmental education, nature-based tourism or outdoor-adventure are a few he mentions in that matter, but global society has not made much progress to achieve aspiration in the direction of behaviors that sustain biodiversity or healthy ecosystems. However, governments, businesses and the general populace seems to miss the significance of Connectedness With Nature and its relation to societal problems. There exists a huge knowing-doing-gap between empirical evidence and the call for society to reconnect with nature on the one hand, and a certain and critical amount of decision-makers and opinion-leaders on the other (Zylstra 2014: 39).

6. Conclusion

What differentiates an indigenous and a „Western“ handling of nature, can firstly be found in consciousness. If we think about the requirement of a consciousness that is attuned to natural processes, an ‚organism plus environment‘ is needed, instead of seeing organisms and the environment as two distinct entities. Consciousness of life or organisms should not be thought as over or above beings, but instead as inside beings. The separation of consciousness from life also separates humanity from nature. While consciousness is on the one hand a term that describes individual experience and perception, it is also a term that is always focused on certain stimuli, and excluding others. The over stimulation of modern society excludes a consciousness towards nature. The lack of focus towards perception of nature is causing an extinction of natural experiences, and therefore a lack of ecological consciousness and conscience that would create care and action for nature. The perception of consciousness in nature is rooted in ontologies like animism and totemism, as well as acting in a natural environment, and the relationship with it. When perceiving the environment, it is important to connect with nature on a deep level and feel it with all senses. Humans would have to emotionally feel and experience that they are a part of nature, and that they are implemented into the natural surrounding that they are discovering, instead of constructing it.

Intuition plays a major role in it, which is a kind of sensitivity and responsiveness towards nature which is based on skills, and should be a foundation for scientific research rather than being treated as knowledge of an inferior kind. The perception of nature as sacred. Sacred encounters with the natural world are perceived as meaningful, they can create an intimate sense of connection between a human and a plant, animal or landscape.

In all times, humans had intimate relationships with nature, and subsisted through nature. There should be an instinctive search for biological and psychological affiliation towards nature within human consciousness.

In the relationship with nature it is important to see the „other“ as „myself“, which is found in Descola’s ontologies of totemism and animism. In an indigenous relationship towards nature,

animism and totemism play a major role. In animism the interiority of myself is similar to a natural being's interiority, whereas the physicality is different, e.g. a tree has a tree-clothing and a tree-character whereas I have a human clothing and character, but our „soul“ or consciousness is the same. It seems important to have the meaning implemented into plants or hills, the cultural knowledge inscribed in objects that constitute a cosmology, shown to us. For example the role, animals play in myths and stories, is needed to be able to perceive these animals in a similar way in their environment.

In regards to the actuality of this paper it is important to look back to the introduction and all the media research that initiate the scientific research. Human separation from the natural consciousness might in fact be a core issue of all the problems that the media resources address. As it is argued in the Huffpost article about the rapid decline of the natural world, it is also argued in my own scientific research: which is, that environmental problems escalated strongly and are in a state of crisis, mainly in the fields of global climate change, toxification of the planet and the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services, and furthermore that this crisis, is in fact, rooted in consciousness. It is indeed important to reconnect with nature on a deep and meaningful level, on a global scale. The knowledge and awareness of this is absolutely available and omnipresent, but if the knowing-doing-gap will ever become smaller, we can only speculate and hope for the best.

7. Literature

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