

Contrasting Landscapes, Conflicting ontologies. Assessing environmental conservation on Palawan Island (The Philippines)

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As a result of a flawed appeal to universal human values by conservationists, debate on environmental protection is trapped in western categories with detrimental implications for the lives and well being of indigenous communities. Recently the Philippine government has embraced a new discourse of caring environmentalism, much influenced by Western/Northern conceits, where these problematic categories are only strengthened and even given legal standing. Cosmologies like that of the Batak of Palawan Island can be profitably examined to help us escape these impasses of ecodiscourse (See Map 3 page X). Specifically, they shed light on the false dichotomy between technocentric and ecocentric environmentalism, where the technocentric variant is understood as optimistic but arrogant towards nature, and the ecocentric is generally characterised as pessimistic and romantic (O’Riordan 1981). Batak cosmology does not fall into this trap.

One does not need to look far to understand some of the principles underlying the basic tenets of the conservationists' 'faith'. For instance, the well known slogan 'think globally and act locally', appears to be based on the assumption that the whole of humanity strives for a common goal, that is the protection of the world's natural system. Of course, I am not disagreeing with the noble objective of saving the Earth. Here, I am questioning the epistemological status of notions such as 'respect' and 'responsibility for' the environment regarded by conservationists as universal, and thus applicable cross-culturally.

The ethnography I present here suggests the Batakⁱ have always been thinking 'globally', in the sense that they normally draw a causal connection between certain actions (over-hunting,

over-harvesting, sexual improper behaviour, etc) and the impact that these may have on the world (see Cosgrove 1993). *Prima face*, attributing responsibility for the fate of the world to humans seems to be endorsed by both conservationists and Batak. However, what differs is the perception of ‘globality’, how the cosmos is imagined and, indeed, the way in which the relation between causes (human actions) and effects (ecological consequences) is apprehended, vis-à-vis the role of non-human subjectivities like animals, plants, other entities. Unlike conservationists, Batak do not project into the world a generalised fear that humanity’s destructive power can bring life as we know it to an end, and that ‘culture’ can take over ‘nature’. Rather, they are more concerned with how socialisation between human and non-human agents come into being, and about the repercussions (both positive and negative) that the latter may have on the world.

This chapter shows that Batak cosmology presupposes that humans, animals and other non-human agents possess an ‘intangible essence’ (*kiaruwa*), the source of thought and action. This introduces a distinctive perspective of the relation between Self and World, one where the common denominator of all beings is not nature (physical substance) (cf. Descola 1986, Viveiros De Castro 1998)ⁱⁱ but rather, this ‘intangible essence’, because of which living entities are, and behave, as autonomous subjects. This is a reversal of western cosmology where nature (substance) enjoys a status of ontological supremacy and universality. For Batak, to be and act as subject is not the sole prerogative of human beings, but is rather shared by non-humans agents holding distinctive points of view about the world, what I call co-apprehension. Batak too, like conservationists, have a ‘global’ perception, but one where social relations, not nature or biodiversity are its fundamental constitutive elements.

Furthermore, this paper argues that conservationists’ tendency to define local environmental problems as global problems, and to propose internationally concerted managerial solutions to ‘regional’ ecological issues (e.g. zoning of protected

areas on Palawan islandⁱⁱⁱ), have the effect of ideologically disempowering indigenous communities while jeopardising their livelihood patterns. To support my argument, I contrast Batak cosmological principles and perceptions of landscape with the presuppositions underlying the classification and implementation of protected areas systems. I first review Batak ways of relating to non-human agents, giving particular attention to the role of the shaman in the 'healing of the world' and in the re-distribution of resources. I then discuss the way in which environmental laws in Palawan rationalise the landscape. Finally I elaborate on the position in Batak ideology of *kiaruwa*' as the source of will, self-assertion and desire. Again, this contrasts with western cosmologies which 'postulate a physical continuity and a metaphysical discontinuity between humans and animals' (Viveiros De Castro 1998:479), where humans are considered unique in possessing an intangible essence (the soul), and thus superior to other beings. Batak regard *kiaruwa*' as the source of intentionality, power of agency and a point of view. It follows that it is at the heart of human-non-human interactions.

This observation introduces an ontological argument which takes the form of asserting that there is no universal human ethic about the use and management of the environment. Here, the key point is that metaphysical presuppositions underlying Batak understanding of ecological imbalance, species decline, and the role of humans in saving the planet are based on culturally specific notions of interaction between humans and non-humans, whose incorporation in global environmental discourse would be untenable or at least problematic. Batak do not regard environmental degradation as an object of managerial solutions per se. Emphasis is placed, instead, on the social dynamics which have lead to environmental damage. This is blamed not so much on people inadequate technologies or destructive subsistence practices, but rather on their incapacity to maintain appropriate relationships with non-human agents and among themselves.

Batak cosmology and perception of landscape

Conscious agents, human and non-human

The Batak live in a tropical forest environment. The forest encompasses the village, with its plants, animals, rocks, rivers, patches of fields under fallow, but it is also inhabited by *pany'en*, entities and super-human beings which may dwell in trees, rocks, water pools, etc. Certain trees are embedded with social relations through genealogies and settlements' histories. The Bataks' close interaction with a tree-covered landscape 'imposes a reorganisation of sensibility' (cf. Gell 1996) and emphasises the fact that experience is not only visual, but the environment is also apprehended through olfactory, auditory and other senses. For instance, among the Batak it is not the visual appearance of a stranger that can make a child sick, but rather its smell (as of perspiration) to which the child is not accustomed. In a similar way, malevolent non-human agents can be attracted by the smell of newcomers and react accordingly.

The forest environment not only affords seeing and smelling, but also listening. Monkeys and birds are generally heard before being spotted and chased. Understanding and interpreting the sound of the forest is perceived by the people as a prerequisite for survival. According to my Batak informants, the whistle of the *sagguai* bird or the sound of the gecko are the most common warning signs informing the people about the presence of a *panya'en*. Ignoring such signs can lead to illness or even death. Overall, while walking in the forest, a Batak is not only aware of his own perception of the world, but also of how his locomotion, smell and the sound he makes may be perceived by other living entities sharing that same landscape.

For the Batak, procuring certain resources not only depends on their physical availability, but also on the way they provide affordances to humans. Specifically, affordances or capacities for, (Gibson 1979) are strictly linked with the quality of the relationships that people are able to establish with their environment, with the masters of animals, plants and other non-human entities. To cite an example, during collective fish-

stunning with a poisonous vine, a specific elder is in charge of co-ordinating all members of the fishing group (Novellino 1997, 1999a). Then, super-human beings and various entities are invited to take part in the fishing, as well as the aforementioned *panya'en* who dwell in trees, rocks etc. The elder invites all men to participate in a group-discussion). That same night, the shaman, accompanied by his assistants, will spend several hours on the river shores, chanting and falling into trance. During his 'out-of-body' experience, the shaman claims to be able to see the quantity and the type of fish in the river. The shamans' landscape coincides with, but also transcends the tangible landscape. The *kiaruwa'* of the shaman can locate precious resources that the naked eye cannot detect. It flies and sees the world from above, or dives into rivers and sees the world from below. He may share a vantage point with birds and fish, and thus perceive the landscape from different perspectives. He shares these visions with the participants and admonishes them not to break certain prohibitions.

This introduces a concept of alterity where the social attributes of many living beings are those of *kiaruwa'* as this interacts with other conscious agents (cf. Lima 1999). Thus human experience also is characterized by complex interactions between different 'subjectivities', ones which apprehend the common environment in different ways through their distinctive physical bodies and *kiaruwa'*.

Before describing shamans' practices for re-establishing the social/cosmic balance, I will provide a brief outline of Batak views of the cosmos. The Batak envision a cosmos of seven layers consisting of a central tier, inhabited by humans, animals, plants, super-human beings and aggressive entities, layered between an upper world and a lower world. There is a cosmic axis crossing the seven layers, around which the world rotates. The sun shines through the different layers, and when it lights up in the lowest level, the rest of the world is in the dark. The lower world is 'the land of the dead', a sort of purgatory, where 'dead people' lead lives resembling those of the livings. After an unspecified period, their *kiaruwa'* will ascend to the seven upper

level, where the creator God dwells. Stars and the moon are imagined to be steady in the sky. Often, stars are said to be the roots' tips of a shining tree growing in the seven upper level. The central layer is believed to be shaped as a large disk, surrounded by sea and sky. *Puyus*, the highest mountain in 'Batak land', is regarded as the original place of all malevolent *panya'en*. The upper layer of the universe is the domain of other immortal super-human beings. The *gunay gunay*, at the edge of the universe, is the place of origin of the master of rice, the female deity *Bay Bay*, and that of the master of bees, *Ungaw*, who are believed to be husband and wife.

'Correct' use of the common environment

Now let us return to the significance of shamanic practices. Not only fish-stunning, but also other activities such as hunting, the clearing of new fields, and honey gathering are accompanied or preceded by divination. Like all animals, bees are imagined to have their own master, *Ungaw*, a 'mystical' beekeeper in charge of their welfare. Batak envisage a kind of cyclical system in which the seasonal production of honey and rice depends upon the flow of bees and of the *kiaruwa*' of rice from the *gunay gunay*. Bees need to be explicitly requested by the people during a ceremony, and they must be well received.

The continuity of co-operative behaviour and reciprocal exchange, the maintenance of good relationships with the other entities are all associated by the people to what is perceived as a 'correct' use of the common environment shared with animals, plants and non-human agents. In contrast, over-hunting, over-harvesting of plants and animals, and wasting the meat of killed game, are said to offend the keepers of animals and certain *panya'en*. In this respect, the role of the shaman (*babalian*) is of vital importance. He helps to mediate between the tangible and intangible landscapes, he works to restore relationships between humans and other entities and to maintain the social/cosmic order, hence ensuring access to natural resources (Novellino 1997, Novellino 1999a).

Particularly relevant to shamanic practices of 'healing the world' is the *burungan*. It is believed to be located in the central

layer of the universe, and it is also defined as heart of the sea or as root or base of the sea, from which water is expelled into the world. When storms and floods ravage the world, this is because the *burungan* is 'open' and thus water flows out freely and abundantly. Two enormous stones are believed to regulate the flow of water at the *burungan* entrance. The more such stones are distant from each other, the more intense the flow of water will be. When the stones touch each other, the *burungan* is said to be 'closed', and the world is blessed with sunshine and good weather. According to my shaman informants, a chicken 'big like a house' rests on a huge metal bar, on top of the *burungan* opening, and an enormous dragon, known as *tandayag*, dwells in the deep sea. When incest and other improper sexual behaviours are committed, the *tandayag*-dragon will wake up, beginning to shake; then, if no proper rituals are performed, it will initiate its search for the incestuous couple. The shaking of the *tandayag* will cause the water to overflow from the *burungan* and to reach the terrestrial portion of the world, in the form of flood. The outflow of the water will make the metal bar wet and, as a result, the rooster will slip off the bar, remaining attached by one claw only. Losing its balance, the animal will begin to flap its wings. The shamans claim that should the rooster slip off the bar completely, the entire universe will collapse and disappear. The wind produced by the flapping of wings is said to be the source of storms damaging crops, village huts and causing dead branches to fall on the ground.

This particular condition of the Earth requires shamanic intervention, and a specific ritual is performed in order to heal and 'to renew' the world, so that the sun will shine again. Because ecological imbalances are also attributed to the infringement of customary norms, phenomena such as storms and floods may be perceived as the outcomes of social problems, whose direct repercussions are observable in the environment. A practical example will illustrate my point.

In August 1999, while I was on a visit to the Batak of Tanabag, the very inclement weather was attributed by the village shaman to human misbehaviour in general, and

particularly to a severe case of incest, which had occurred in the community. A former shaman had eloped with the wife of his son, who had died of tuberculosis the year before. Their union was considered illicit because their case had not been evaluated by the 'council of elders', neither had they paid the appropriate tribute or offering to the *tandayag* dragon. According to Batak practices, in case of incest, the tribute should consist of a large offering of plates, money, chickens, and the blood of the incestuous couple.

To then 'renew the world', the most important phase of the ritual is the trance performed by the shaman. The shaman holds coconut oil in one hand, while dancing. During the trance the *kiaruwa*' of the shaman will move in search of selected spirit guides, and will require their help to reach the *burungan*. These spirit guides are associated with animal species, and they represent their 'spiritualised' version. They are the *kiaruwa*' of animals 'of the water' and 'of the higher up', and include the swallow, the otter, the monitor lizard, and the river turtle. The *kiaruwa*' of the river turtle is considered the most enduring and capable of confronting the fury of the water at the *burungan*. It will also play a shamanic role by dancing the same dance as the shaman, thus fostering the closing of the two boulders over the *burungan*. While the turtle's *kiaruwa*' dances, the shaman smears the two boulders with coconut oil, facilitating the coming together of the two stones above the *burungan* opening, thus stopping the water outflow. According to the informants, a particular malevolent *panya'en* appears at the *burungan* site in the form of an attractive woman, and she will try to call on her the shaman's attention. It is said that if the shamans looks back at the malevolent *panya'en*, he may be hit by the water outflow, and fall inside the *burungan* hole. Finally, with the assistance of the spirit guides, the shaman will try to place the rooster claw back on the metal bar. In so doing the rooster will stop flapping its wings and, the storm will end.

Kiaruwa' and relationships between human and non-human agents

Now, let us explore the Batak notion of *kiaruwa'*, and some crucial aspects of the perceived relationship between human and non-human agents. Elsewhere (Novellino 1999e) I have defined *kiaruwa'* as 'life force', the vital principle associated with breath. However, I find this definition too narrow since it fails to convey the complex meanings that Batak attribute to this notion. *Kiaruwa'* is, in fact, not only the vital principle but the source of individual will and self assertion. When it is separated from the body, the *kiaruwa'* of a human retains the 'character' and 'quality' of the person. According to the Batak, the *kiaruwa'* is believed to enter and fill the body through the whorl of the hair (the region of the fontanelle). It is compared to a knife entering its sheath, so that a *kiaruwa'* of a certain species can only be contained within the body of that species (i.e. that of a human cannot enter an animal body and vice versa). Also animals as well as rice (because of its human origin), are said to possess *kiaruwa'* though the qualities it confers vary qualitatively between humans and animals.^{iv} In relation to humans, *kiaruwa'* is also the focal point of illness aetiology and curative treatments. Temporary departures of the *kiaruwa'* can cause lassitude or sickness. Death coincides with a longer separation of the *kiaruwa'* from the physical body. The separation of the *kiaruwa'* is a threat to the integrity of the 'self' (cf. Roseman 1991); on the other hand, it allows humans to establish contacts with the intangible world.

In Batak society animals and also *panya'en* entities are mainly classified by the habitats they share, land, fresh water, sea, up high, people's houses, etc. Communication between humans and benevolent *panya'en* (e.g. the master of bees, the master of rice) is conceived as possible by virtue of the fact that they are all regarded as 'persons' (*taw*), and their *kiaruwa'* is the source of a 'human way of thinking'.

Out of the trance and dream experiences, humans will attempt to affect animal behaviour through the use of specific techno-

symbolic devices. A large number of such devices are employed for example in connection with honey gathering where the plant *eya' eya'* (*Mimosa pudica* Linné.) is employed to reduce bees' aggressiveness. The informants explain that bees will become weak like the *eya' eya'* leaves kept by the gatherer. *Mimosa pudica* is a sensitive plant; when touched, the leaflets immediately fold together upward and the main stalk folds down, giving the impression that it is losing strength. Batak also claim to be able to direct swarms of bees from one place to another. To this purpose, they use *suway suway*, which are wooden sticks to which a fibre is tied to form a semicircle, resembling the shape of the honey comb. According to informants, the way in which *suway suway* are positioned and inserted into the ground will provide indications to the master of bees of where he should disperse his children (the bees). The utilisation of *eya' eya'*, *suway suway* and similar tool-signs is also based on the principle that certain actions, or the utilisation of natural or human-made objects may produce desired outcomes, due to their analogy, affinity or opposition to something else. These 'charms' may be perceived by Batak as forms of communication between humans and super-human beings, for instance, the master of bees.

The human ability to communicate with animals and other entities is fully expressed when a shaman undergoes an 'out of body' experience. Behind their physical appearance (the body) and, at the level of the *kiaruwa'*, both human and certain non-human agents can simultaneously apprehend different realms, and thus share similar points of view on what each realm affords. When the *kiaruwa'* is separated from the body, possibilities for co-apprehension increase, and humans can move and enter dialogue with the Masters of Animals and other benevolent *panya'en* across different ontological realms. It is important to point out that co-apprehension, or mutual intelligibility between different species and entities, is also perceived by Batak as possible by virtue of their common 'human origin'. Batak have several myths narrating how certain animals (e.g. a species of black snake) and plants (rice and other

crops) have experienced the condition of being a human, or better, are 'ex-humans' (Viveiros De Castro 1998).

Having drawn out these points, I should make clear that Batak cosmological principles and their idealised relationship with non-human beings is not necessarily reflected in peoples' daily behaviour towards animals and plants. In other words, cosmologies and myths are not the sole framework for imbuing experience with meaning, and determining the way in which all actions are carried out (cf. Vayda 1996). Batak, in fact, do not seem to place any particular emphasis on moral obligations towards other species. Only the killing of pets (dogs and cats, to the exclusion of chickens) is regarded by the people as a bad custom. Remarkably it seems that Batak do not show restraint from hunting certain species, such as the hornbill whose numbers are visibly diminishing, and which is thus particularly vulnerable to local extinction. Flying squirrels are killed by smoking their holes in tree trunks, causing the death of both adults and very young specimens. *Anibung* palms (*Oncosperma sp.*), 10 to 15 years old, are felled down to extract a couple of kilograms of edible bud heart, just enough for one meal (Novellino 1999d). And river turtles, in spite of their position in myths and cosmology, are subjected to the most horrifying death. According to the Batak, the most common way of killing the turtle is to drop it alive into the fire (Novellino 1999c).

Undoubtedly, from the standpoint of conservationist ideology, Batak practices do not reflect the romanticised idea of the noble savage living in harmony with nature (Novellino 1998). Batak do not practice conservation for its own sake, neither they are interested in the protection of single species. Moreover, the environment is not imagined by them as something which is sustained through the ethically sound behaviour of a superior species, but rather through the maintenance of social relationships between 'species-bound identities' (Howell 1996).

Let me provide a practical example to further strengthen my argument. In 1989 a group of indigenous people from Pinatubo area (Zambales, Northern Philippines) were relocated through

the assistance of a German citizen to the Batak territory. For the first time Batak were confronted with a very unusual situation: another group of indigenous people was blatantly violating customary food taboos in their own territory. In fact, these people were capturing snakes and frogs, consuming them as food. It is interesting to note that the fact that they did not die from eating such food (which the Batak regard as poisonous) did not modify people's perceptions about these animals. What is relevant here, is that Batak were neither interested nor curious to witness the possible effects of frog and snake meat on human health. On the contrary, they were concerned that the breach of food taboos by the newcomers would have angered a number of *panya'en*, with possible and dangerous repercussion on Batak population, and their environment as a whole. This is to say that eating customarily inappropriate food, over-hunting and over-harvesting are perceived by Batak more as asocial behaviour rather than ecological unsound activities.

Environmental laws: the landscape of non-Batak others

I now wish to turn attention to another 'cosmology', that of the Filipino environmental laws inspired by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The analysis of such laws indicates that western projects to conserve natural habitats and indigenous perceptions of the environment do not stand in some taken for granted relation one to another. On the other hand, government options for environmental conservation such as the ban on shifting cultivation and the establishment of national parks are based on a poor understanding of indigenous practices and worldviews. As a result, such options can produce grotesque and rather dangerous outcomes for the survival of local communities.

I need to point out that, in Palawan, conservation is influenced by both ecocentric and technocentric approaches to environmentalism, to the extent that it is often impossible to make a neat distinction between the two. Supposedly ecocentric and romantic ideas, for instance seeing the Batak as closer to

nature and thus perhaps less fully human, easily coexist with more technocentric projects such as zoning the landscape.

The National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) and the Republic Act 7611, also known as the SEP (Strategic Environmental Plan) are relatively new laws, enacted in February and June 1992 respectively. Such laws establish the legal basis for the protection and management of the environment in Palawan (SEP), and nation-wide (NIPAS). Protective measures proposed by the laws include the demarcation of areas either as off-limits to the human population, or reserved for local 'indigenous cultural communities' ^v (ICC), or both (Novellino 1998, 2000a, 2000b). As illustrated for instance by Anderson and Nygren (this volume), such categories of protected areas have also been implemented elsewhere. Local communities are expected to limit or refrain from certain subsistence activities when their territory becomes divided into management zones with different levels of protection (from strictly non-touchable to controlled use).

As established by the NIPAS (Republic of the Philippines 1992a), total protection is likely to be enforced in areas defined with the following categories:

- Strict Nature Reserve 'possessing some outstanding ecosystem, features and/or species of flora and fauna of national importance'
- Natural Park: 'relatively large areas not materially altered by human activity where extractive resource uses are not allowed';
- National Park: 'forest reservation essentially of natural wilderness character which has been withdrawn from settlement, occupancy or any form of exploitation'
- Wildlife Sanctuary: 'areas which assure the natural conditions to protect nationally significant species, groups of species, biotic communities'.

On the other hand, human occupancy and resource utilisation are contemplated in categories such as:

- Protected Landscape/Seascape: ‘areas of national significance, which are characterised by the harmonious interaction of man and land’
- Natural Biotic Area: ‘an area set aside to allow the way of life of societies living in harmony with the environment to adopt the modern technology at their pace’.

As it can be easily anticipated, conservation measures based on land zoning, such as those provided by the NIPAS disintegrate the unity of the indigenous country. Land categories by being cut off from the whole, become meaningless to the Batak. People do not perceive their country as an enclosed and atemporal island, but rather as a continuum of indivisible features (Ingold 1986) which are the repository of previous experiences, past events and social relationships (Rosaldo 1986). In NIPAS law, indigenous communities represent one of the patchwork pieces to be placed in the most appropriate spot (a Natural Biotic Area), provided they continue to live ‘in harmony with the environment’ (Republic of the Philippines 1992a:3). In other words ‘the harmonious interaction of man and land’ (Republic of the Philippines 1992a:3) is almost viewed as a precondition for residing in ‘areas of national significance’, such as Protected Landscape/Seascapes (Republic of the Philippines 1992a:3). Undoubtedly, a policy such as NIPAS, treating both indigenous communities and wildlife as species which need protection, is far from being innocent. It is rather, a political act to *‘ontologize’* cultures, to assign a different existence to indigenous populations. This has the effect of removing the people from the space they occupy (Fabian 1993), thus depriving them of agency and history. In a similar vein, in this volume, Ellis has neatly demonstrated how conservation biologists negate both local history and subsistence needs (see also Adams and Chatty). Following a parallel line of argument Halder (this volume) has placed additional emphasis on the incomensurability between Lakota Sioux and official perceptions of sacred places.

The same criticism of NIPAS, applies as well to the Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan, and to projects pursuing similar objectives (e.g. the EU financed Palawan Tropical Forestry Protection Programme). The SEP law, also known as the Republic Act (R.A.) No.7611, provides a comprehensive framework for sustainable development and contains a package of strategies on how to prevent further environmental degradation. The centrepiece of the strategy is the establishment of the Environmentally Critical Areas Network (ECAN), which places most of the province under controlled development. The areas covered by ECAN include three major components: Terrestrial, Coastal/Marine and Tribal Ancestral Lands. Core Zones are defined as areas of maximum protection and consist basically of steep slopes, first growth forests, areas above 1000 metres elevation, mountain peaks, and habitats of endemic and rare species. The law establishes that core zones ‘shall be fully and strictly protected and maintained free of human disruption ... exceptions, however, may be granted to traditional uses of tribal communities of these areas, for minimal and soft impact gathering of forest species for ceremonial and medicinal purposes’ (Republic of the Philippines 1992b:101). Interestingly enough, the ECAN core zone coincides with significant portions of the Batak hunting and gathering ground. For instance, the resin of *Agathis* trees is usually extracted in commercial quantities around 1000 metres above sea level. In addition, several game animals, especially flying squirrels, are trapped for food around these altitudes. A similar situation was identified by Ellis (this volume), who claims that most of the environments defined by biologists as untouched by humans are in fact anthropogenic landscape *par excellence*.

Buffer Zones represent the most elaborate component of the ECAN and are designed to serve a multiplicity of purposes. According to R.A. 7611, they fall into three categories known as Restricted Use Areas, Controlled Use Areas, and Traditional Use Areas where ‘management and control shall be carried out with the other supporting programs of the SEP’ (Republic of the Philippines 1992b:101). The only area within the so-called

Terrestrial Component which mentions agricultural practices is the Multiple/Manipulative Use Zone: ‘areas where the landscape has been modified for different forms of land use such as extensive timber extraction, grazing and pastures, agriculture and infrastructure development’ (Republic of the Philippines 1992b:101). It is crucial to point out that a large number of indigenous communities are occupying marginal upland areas, which fall under the wider definition of buffer zones. Furthermore, the law never mentions indigenous swidden farming practices; hence we may easily come to the conclusion that only imported methods such as terracing and hillside farming will be allowed in Multiple/Manipulative zones. There is no specific indication of where such zones are located, but it is legitimate to anticipate that these areas are occupied by a vast majority of migrants, rather than by ‘traditional’ indigenous communities.

It is important to point out that Section 11 of R.A. 7611 includes Tribal Ancestral Lands among its categories. The law specifies that ‘these areas, traditionally occupied by cultural minorities, comprise both land and sea areas identified in consultation with tribal communities concerned and the appropriate agencies of government’ (Republic of the Philippines 1992b:100). It is frustrating to learn that even Tribal Ancestral Lands ‘shall be treated in the same graded system of control and prohibitions except for stronger emphasis on cultural consideration’ (Republic Of The Philippines 1992b:100). At the same time we are assured that ‘the SEP...shall define a special kind of zoning to fulfil the material and cultural needs of the tribes, using consultative processes and cultural mapping of the ancestral lands’ (Republic Of The Philippines 1992b:100). It is clear that SEP, with a high degree of naivety, proposes the protection of indigenous culture on the one hand, and the implementation of western zoning criteria in tribal lands on the other. So far, the law and its promoters have been unable to provide a convincing argument of how this can be achieved.

As of now, in Palawan, the zoning of protected areas is still in the process of being implemented and finalised. Presently,

government teams composed by foresters, Filipino scientists, and local guides are surveying the area, carrying out biodiversity assessments, measuring elevations, demarcating boundaries, marking trees and boulders. However, no evidence is yet available on what impact the actual implementation of ECAN (Ecologically Critical Area Network) will have on residents of the region. However, one can almost predict tragedy. This is suggested by an examination of the outcomes of a local government ban on swidden cultivation, and the way in which local Batak and Tagbanuwa communities have been excluded from the management of the St. Paul Subterranean National Park. In the first case, the ban has irredeemably altered the whole indigenous agricultural system. Secondly, it has also affected the genetic diversity of cultivated plants and local crop varieties are becoming rare and even extinct. Ultimately, the prohibition is placing an insupportable burden on the surrounding forest. In fact, to compensate for the loss of agricultural products, Batak have been forced to over exploit their own resources (e.g., the resin of *Agathis* trees, rattan, and honey). As far as concerning the 'St Paul Park', the hands-off style of strict protection has curtailed the customary food-seeking practices of the affected Batak and Tagbanuwa communities. (Similar degrees of environmental injustice seems to be taking place in the biological reserve of Indio-Maíz and in the Lakota Black Hills, as Nygren and Halder describe in this volume).

In 1991, one Batak named Paya Paya, and two Tagbanuwa were arrested and detained for allegedly having burned primary forest inside park boundaries. Later, investigations showed that the area utilised for agriculture by the three individuals was located outside the boundaries of the park, and consisted of secondary and scrub vegetation.

Batak often talk amongst themselves about government ordinances and laws imposing limitations on the use and access to forest resources. I recorded one of such spontaneous discussion on August 1999 in the settlement of Kalakuanan. Catalino, a Batak in his 30s stated, 'if you come close to the

government, the government say: 'you must learn this... you must learn that... so that you can live well'. The more you come close to the government to get rid of your poverty, the more the government squeezes you, making you poorer and poorer'. Padaw, the local shaman remarked 'You are right! They squeeze us by prohibiting everything. The Government claims that it wants to help us, in reality they even forbid our people from planting rice... They ask us to sign agreement to define what has always been ours, from the time of our ancestors!' As external pressures increase, Batak are left with no other alternative but to come to terms with a number of new and increasingly complex issues such as environmental laws, whose rationale is not immediately comprehensible to them.

Evaluating Batak' and conservationist 'cosmologies'

At this point in my argument, ironically the reader may be tempted to compare Batak view of a layered universe to the way that environmental discourse makes layers on landscape. However, from another perspective, I contend that Batak cosmology is similar neither in structure nor content to the conservation logic of zoning. Firstly, Batak do not perceive landscape and the 'cosmos' as a *tabula rasa* which can be inscribed, measured, and experienced accordingly. As I have previously suggested, Batak perceive landscape (the *burungan*, the universe with its multiple layers, etc.) as it simultaneously occurs to them and to the other living beings with whom humans share overlapping ontological domains. Thus, it is 'the point of view of the others', which also serves to define one's own position in the world. Conversely, zoning creates an ego-centred and perspectival landscape of views and vistas, where it is only the expert's perspective from which seeing occurs (Bender 1993). Secondly, in environmentalist discourse, the zoning system through its categories of protected areas, tends to introduce an anonymised and *ahistorical* image of the ideal relationship between humanity and nature. Here, I want to insist that Batak landscapes and cosmological layers are perceived by

the people as having histories, but ‘nature’, epitomised in protected areas, does not.

Another crucial argument that I have advanced in this article is that in Batak understandings of the interaction between human and non-human, it is not the ‘intangible essence’ (*kiaruwa*), but rather the body which represents the ‘great differentiator’ (Viveiros De Castro 1998). Then, what does Batak spiritual undifferentiation between humans and certain non-humans tell us about the ontological supremacy and universality of nature, envisaged in much of contemporary conservationist discourse? To begin with, the Batak worldview challenges the *naturalist* perspective, typical of Western cosmologies, which supposes that ‘the nature/society interface is natural...[and that] social relations...can only exist internal to human society’ (Viveiros De Castro 1998:473). If in conservationist discourse human societies are modelled after an idealised notion of ‘nature’, in Batak cosmology the environment is modelled after an idea of society which is itself based on the notion that human- and the majority of non-human beings, are all endowed with the capacity to act as autonomous agents. This is to say that Batak universe is mapped by a complex network of social relations, which are not imagined as different manifestations of ‘nature’, but rather as different expressions of ‘*kiaruwa*’ which varies from one species to another, manifesting itself through different ways of thinking and behaving.

This does not, however, mean it is possible to draw a parallel between the Batak perspective of human-non-human interactions, and the recognisably ecocentric ‘deep ecologist’ approach. In fact, the latter argue that not only do humans share a common physical substance with the other beings but, they also share a basic, intrinsic spiritual equality. Arne Naess (1989), the Norwegian philosopher most clearly associated with Deep Ecology, maintained that there are no ontological divides in the field of existence and that there is no dichotomy of values between humans and non-humans. Then, can this spiritual

equality envisaged by deep ecologists be compared, by any means, with the Batak notion of *kiaruwa*'?

We should be careful not to merge Batak perceptions of animals and plants with the position of radical conservationists claiming that all sentient beings are worthy of moral consideration in the same way that humans are. As I have proposed, in Batak thought the diversity of life forms has no value in itself outside the field of relationships in which humans and non-human agents are enmeshed. So, contrary to the Deep Ecology approach, Batak do not ascribe other living beings with intrinsic values but rather with relational values. Moreover, in Batak logic, the connectedness of all things is perceived as possible not by virtue of an abstract spirituality, but as a result of the individual beings' capacity 'to be a subject'. It follows that 'to be a subject' is the commonly shared condition, having its source in the *kiaruwa*'. A strong case can be made that biological egalitarianism endorsed by ecocentrists is not reflected in Batak ethic.

As we have seen, the way in which Batak shamans monitor the universe requires direct engagement with the world rather than 'distancing' and 'detachment' (cf. Ingold 1993), and thus the ability to travel across a landscape of social relationships where the common denominator of all living beings is not 'nature' (physical substance) but 'being subjects' (cf. Descola 1986, Viveiros De Castro 1998).

What is at stake becomes clearer, when we think of the 'healing of the world' as the result of a 'complex agent'^{vi} at work. In fact, those taking part in this ceremony are all agents in their own right, since they contribute by understanding and interpreting the shaman's gestures and words during his trance, and express statements and opinions on how he is performing his task at the *burungan*. However, no single statement or opinion can have control over the others, and interpretations and suggestions are always open to contestation. Remarkably, if the ritual is not successful, and the storm persists, no one will impute the responsibility for failure to the shaman. In brief, Batak practices to 'heal the world' are not carried out by a single

expert (the shaman), but involve a complex network of agents. This argument highlights a point of fundamental importance about the way in which agency is represented (Novellino 1999b). For it is not only the shaman, but other entities and community members also who are knowledgeable about local cosmology and myths, and about how these stipulate a set of social and economic principles. Re-establishing the socio-ecological balance thus also depends on the proper behaviour that community members and the guilty couple are expected to follow during the course and after the ‘healing’ ceremony. The incestuous couple is not a passive patient of the actions carried out by the shaman, rather they actively participate in the ‘healing’ performance (cf. Hobart 1993) offering chickens, plates and their own blood to the *tandayag* dragon.

A wider issue arises out of this discussion: local practices of ‘healing the world’ constitute local people as potential agents. This contrasts with how scientific knowledge, as often operationalised in ‘global environmental management’, represents conservation options (e.g. zoning) as technically superior, and the ‘target beneficiaries’ as passive recipients of such options (cf. Hobart 1993:10).

Conclusions

The Western division between Nature and Culture takes an interesting guise when it is rehearsed under the framework of ‘global’ and ‘local’ debate. Nature, and all that it implies in modern conservationist discourse is a universal resource, whose ‘global’ enjoyment and appreciation goes much behind the particular cultural context of those who have privileged access to such resources. ‘Nature’ is hence perceived as inherently public, objective rather than subjective, given rather than socially instituted. On a parallel level, it would appear that, in the Philippines, the enactment of environmental laws is not so much the product of a new political awareness but rather a cosmetic move to shift the terrain of discourse, so that national sovereignty becomes a form of ‘caring for’ rather than ‘controlling’ indigenous communities and their natural

resources. In this way, state power has not been challenged, but its vocabulary has simply been re-framed in environmentally friendly and politically accommodating terminology. This has legitimised the transformation of the indigenous territory into land categories systems, while maintaining the deceptive illusion that ‘peoples’ rights’ are still retained in so called ‘tribal zones’ (Novellino 1998, 1999a, 2000a, 2000b).

By and large, conservationist ideologies, both ecocentric and technocentric, seem to agree that ‘nature’ is the common denominator uniting humans with the rest of the living world, in a ground of a common physical substance. There can be little doubt that any form of dualism of ‘humans’ and ‘environment’ makes little sense when the perceived reference point for both humans and non-humans is the capacity to act as subjects, rather than ‘nature’ as the common denominator. I would like to suggest that Batak are neither anthropocentrics nor ecocentrics. Indeed, in their metaphysics, the scope of ‘humanity’ extends to a wide range of entities, including rice even, which are regarded as *taw*, or persons. Similarly, Batak are not ecocentrics, because they do not postulate humans and the rest of the cosmos as one undifferentiated set of mind and matter. More importantly, they do not regard themselves as elements of an ecological chain but rather as participants in a complex network of social relations, taking place across overlapping ontological domains.

Regrettably, indigenous cosmological views are still being regarded by project planners and policy makers as merely folklore or legends. For Batak they are real: the migration of bees from the mythical *gunay gunay*, the revenge of the *tandayag* dragon, the shaman’s voyage to the *burungan* are facts rather than assumptions. Equally true is that, during the last few decades, Batak perceptions of the ‘world’ have widened up due to the increasing contacts with other societies. Their territory has dramatically shrunk because of land encroachment, creation of protected areas, and the limitations imposed on resource use by government ordinances and environmental laws.

Today, threats to the forest environment come unexpectedly from everywhere, and shamans feel that it is impossible for

them to re-establish the cosmic balance, when the sources of ‘imbalances’ are neither known nor detectable. People have come to realise that the world is much bigger than what the ancestors told them. Palawan is no longer the central layer of the universe, but an island, surrounded by many other ‘islands’ having different names: America, Europe, Japan, etc. As the people try to locate these worlds in their imagined map of the universe, they also begin to reflect on new questions: How far are such places from Palawan? What are the animals and plants living there? Are the bees visiting these places in the same way that they visit Palawan? And when the *burungan* is ‘open’ are such places also ravaged by storms and floods? These are questions that Batak have asked me, and to which I had great difficulties to reply. Others, however, felt that such questions represented the long waited opportunity and an ideal ground to enlighten the ‘savages’ on the issues of ecology, and on scientifically indisputable realities. To Batak, as of now, such realities remain painfully incommensurate.

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ⁱ The Batak are found scattered on a land area of about 240 square kilometres in the north-central portion of Palawan island (Philippines). Their population was estimated to comprise 380 individuals (Eder 1987), and continues to face demographic decline. They have a heterogeneous mode of food procurement, mainly centred on swidden cultivation and integrated with hunting, gathering and commercial collection of non-timber forest products. The case study at stake concerns the Batak community living between the territorial jurisdiction of Barangay Tanabag and San Rafael.

ⁱⁱ My analysis of Batak cosmology has benefited of the work of Howell (1984), and Viveiros De Castro (1998). Writing on Amerindian perspectivism, Viveiros De Castro has argued that 'the ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul, and non-humans are subjects in so far as they have (or are) spirit; but the differences between viewpoints...lies not in the soul. Since the soul is formally identical in all species, it can only see the same things everywhere, the difference is given in the specificity of bodies' (1998:478). A comparative study of perspectivism in both Amerindian and Asian cosmologies would highly advance anthropological understanding of indigenous metaphysics. For instance, Batak do not regard 'intangible essence' as the same in animals and in humans. Conversely, *kiaruwa* 'is species-specific and endowed with a distinctive 'way of thinking'. On the other hand, human beings, masters of animals, benevolent *panya'en*, and even rice are all regarded as *taw* (persons), and thus capable of interacting on mutually intelligible grounds.

ⁱⁱⁱ Palawan, is the fifth largest island in the Philippines, and has the highest percentage of forest cover in the archipelago, between 38% and 44% of the island surface (Serna 1990; Kummer 1992). Fieldwork carried out after this chapter was written will help further elaborate Batak cosmology.

^{iv} Different people may hold different opinions on whether plants have both *giinawan* (the breath) and *kiaruwa* ' (the life force, the intangible essence). As I was told by my informant Pawat 'all plants, as long as they are alive in the ground, they have the *kiaruwa*'. Without *kiaruwa* ' they could not grow' (tape no. A, 9/3/1993). This same view has been confirmed by others. Further interviews have also revealed that the *kiaruwa* ' of certain entities (*panya'en*) can dwell inside trees, bamboo and other plants. In relation to this Ubad, an elder from Tanabag, claims: 'if you cut a branch of a tree, and you see blood flowing out, it is a real person that you have cut!' (tape no. 1b, 11/8/1999. Furthermore Padaw, the shaman residing in Kalakuanan, maintains that in the area of Tagnipa there is a large log which is believed to be occupied by the *kiaruwa* ' of a *tandayag* dragon (tape no. 28b, 21/5/1998). Overall, no everyone among the Batak is capable of providing detailed opinions on the most

profound aspects of their worldviews, especially those dealing with the ‘intangible components’ of plants and other living beings.

^v In 1997, the ‘Indigenous Peoples Rights Act’ (IPRA), also known as the Republic Act No. 8371, was enacted with the primary objective of recognising, protecting, and promoting the rights of indigenous cultural communities. Under the Estrada administration the IPRA law has finally sunk, and all pending applications for Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC) have been frozen.

^{vi} Hobart is referring to a 'complex agent' when 'decisions and responsibility for action involve more than one party in deliberation or action' (1990:96).