

Management by totemization: Whale symbolism and the anti-whaling campaign

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The anti-whaling campaign has been with us for about two decades by now, and—not surprisingly—the arguments against whaling have changed during these years. The ecological argument that the whales are endangered is losing ground, and the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) has made it clear that the stocks of some of the 75 odd species of whales can sustain regulated harvest. "Therefore", says Robbins Barstow, who is the director of Cetacean Society International, "now is an appropriate time to face and discuss the moral and ethical issues involved in the commercial harvesting of whales" (1989:10).

Recently also organizations that hitherto have claimed to be concerned solely with ecological issues, have questioned the ethics of harvesting whales. World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in a press release before the opening of the 43rd Annual Meeting of the IWC in Reykjavik in 1991, stated that "as more and more people worldwide become aware of the remarkable qualities of whales, there is increasing doubt about the ethics of killing whales for commercial profit even if it could be guaranteed to be both sustainable and humane" (IWC/43/OS), and WWF leaders have repeatedly argued that commercial whaling is unethical. In an article entitled "Havets mennesker" ("The humans of the oceans") the former leader for Greenpeace's anti-whaling campaign makes use of John Lilly's and Lyall Watson's words—but without acknowledging any credit for them—in his praise of whales and dolphins (Gylling-Nielsen 1987). There can be little doubt that WWF and Greenpeace have joined the ranks of animal welfare organizations.

Whales have come to hold a special place in the animal kingdom. This raises three fundamental questions which will be addressed in this paper. Firstly, the process by which whales are turned into a powerful symbol—a "super-whale" which in several ways resemble a totem—will be discussed, before I move on to analyse *why* whales have such great potential as a symbol to an ever increasing number of people, particularly in western urban societies. In their zeal to protect this "totem" animal

against all "consumptional" usage, whalers and eaters of whale meat are often depicted as savages or reckless capitalists. This dichotomization of mankind into whale-haters and whale-lovers is the third aspect to be discussed in this paper.

The Creation of a *Super-Whale*

Whales are, according to Barstow (1989), special in four different ways: e.g. biologically, ecologically, culturally, and politically. Many of his claims have already been refuted by others, but it is nevertheless necessary here to give a brief summary of his arguments in order to show how an image of a "super-whale" is constructed by lumping together traits found in different species of whales.

Biologically Special

Firstly, says Barstow, the whales are biologically special. The blue whale is the largest animal on earth, which is of course true, but this does not justify veneration of the small common porpoise which measures less than 2 meters. He continues by stating that the sperm whale has "*by far* the largest brain of any creature ever to have lived on our planet" (1989:12, emphasis added), but fails to say that the brain is only slightly bigger than that of an Asiatic elephant, and constitutes only 0.021% of the animal's body weight, as compared to 0.08% for a cow, 0.15% for the elephant, and 2.1% for human beings (Freeman 1990:112). Then he postulates that several species have more complex brains than human beings. Others have carried this argument further, like Mikael Gylling-Nielsen (1987:11), who writes that "by now it is generally accepted that the structures of the dolphin's and human brains, both regarding size, the number and area of convolutions of the brain and cellular organization are identical".¹

The cetaceans' apparent ability to communicate is also taken as a indication of

¹ Frequently claims for the high intelligence of whales are wrapped in a mystical language rending the meaning almost uncomprehensible and bordering to complete nonsense. An example of this is John Lilly, quoted and taken as a proof of the whale's unique intelligence by D'Amato & Chopra (1991:21-22):

"If a sperm whale, for example, wants to see-hear-feel any past experience, his huge computer [brain] can reprogram it and run it off again. His huge computer gives him a reliving, as if with a three-dimensional sound-color-taste-emotion re-experiencing motion picture".

their intelligence, and that the humpback has a rich repertoire of sounds, inspired Heathcote Williams to write the following poem about whale songs and oral traditions going 50 million years back (1988:17):

"Webs of elegant cetacean music stretch around the globe;
Lyrical litanies on the bio-radio
That draw on an oral tradition of submarine songs
From a living memory bank, founded fifty million years ago."

Another aspect which fascinates many, is the ability at least some species have for echo-location and scanning by ultrasonic waves. Here some authors' imagination appears to have no limits. "When we human beings say that we feel fine although in fact we do not", writes Willy Johannsen in his book *Hvalernes verden*, "the dolphins can perhaps see, or rather hear, whether another dolphin is really ill or healthy". Lloyd Abbey writes in similar vein in his novel, *The Last Whales*. When a group of dolphins surrounded a male whale, who was not feeling healthy, one of them scanned the blue whale and diagnosed it as having "worms in the whale's kidneys" (1990:41).

It is by no means generally accepted that the dolphin and human brains are identical, however. On the contrary, many scientists have questioned the great intelligence of dolphins (Prescott 1988, Pryor 1981) while others have argued that dolphin brains are more similar to brains of hoofed animals (Bryden and Cockeron 1099:161). Margaret Klinowska (1988), who is a special adviser to IUCN, concludes in her paper "Are cetaceans especially smart?" that the dolphin's brain has not evolved since the cetaceans left land for a life in the oceans, and that dolphin brains are more similar to those of hedgehogs and bats (1989:46). The whales' ability to communicate, moreover, does not necessarily imply high intelligence, as the rich repertoire of signals among the honey bees testifies. The echo-location is obviously a device cetaceans use to navigate under water and is a part of their genetic heritage, as it is among bats. That "the whales *invented* ultrasonic scanning" (italics added) millions of years before we started to use the technology in our hospitals, as is claimed by Willy Johannsen (1990:45), falls on its own absurdity.

Ecologically Special

Barstow is also of the opinion that whales are ecologically special. Again it is stressed that the whales are 25 million years old, "long before the development of human beings

and the latter's intrusion in the ocean ecosystem" (Barstow 1989:12). But other animals have existed even longer without being the object of the same veneration. Furthermore, Barstow claims that the whales are at the top of the food chain. The baleen whales are the largest eaters of zooplankton and the killer whale is the largest non-human predator. This is hardly controversial, nor is the claim that that we all depend on oxygen in the atmosphere. But his assertion that "the proper balance in the amount of oxygen in the earth's atmosphere produced from the plankton ... is kept in check most critically by whale consumption" (Barstow 1989:13) is not substantiated in any way.

The leap from this kind of "ecological" argument to the following letter written by a U.K. woman to the Faroese government is not that great (quoted in full in Sanderson 1990:199):²

"The Slaughter in the Faroes of the dolphins and whales is causing untold damage to the ozone layer. The special sound the dolphins and whales emit holds the ozone layer together. It is the outmost importance to stop this terrible slaughtering of these wonderful creatures, so many of which are far more evolved than man...

PS: The dolphins are the guardians of this planet."

Let me immediately stress that any species has a special role to play in the ecosystem, *homo sapiens* included. In a way we are all unique and necessary. At the same time it is difficult, and dangerous, to argue that certain mammals are more important than others for the ecological balance. On what criteria should we base such a ranking among living species?

Many people believe that whales are endangered. But there are millions of whales in the oceans. That only a few of the more than 75 species of cetaceans are endangered is concealed by animal rights groups. That the minke whale—which Greenland, Iceland, Japan, and Norway want to harvest—is not endangered and might be more abundant in the Antarctic than ever (Gulland 1988:44), is not mentioned.³ Nor is the fact that there are—according to American estimates (Aron 1988:104)—about 2 million sperm whales even though they are on the list of "endangered species". That a few species, such as the blue and bowhead whales, are endangered does not justify

² Compare this with the view of Simon Lyster, a senior officer of the WWF, who refers to a theory that the ozone depletion kills off the plankton which whales feed on (*Keighley News*, 17 May 1991).

³ The latest estimate for the population of Antarctic minke whale is set at 760,000.

a total moratorium on all killing of all whales. After all, the fact that the white-tailed eagle seems to be endangered does not mean that we should protect all birds, chicken included. When the WWF continues its "SOS Save the Whale" campaign, its leaders must be fully aware that the organization deceives large groups of people in an effort to increase its income. Barstow is more honest when he confesses that scientific data show that "at least some species of whales could *easily* sustain a resumed, strictly-regulated harvest, without threatening species survival" (Barstow 1989:10, italics added). It is this fact that has forced him to take up moral and ethical issues involved in the commercial harvesting of whales.

Culturally and Politically Special

To Barstow whales are culturally unique, not only because living whales more than any other animal "have an almost unbelievable capacity for enriching the lives of human beings with whom they come in peaceful contact", but also because "they are supremely photogenic", they have special aesthetic qualities, and they play an important role in education (Barstow 1989:13).

Whales have made a great impact in popular culture, and "contribute to television, radio and motion pictures; records, tapes and live performances; books, magazines, paintings, posters and sculptures; the pro-rated income of environmental organizations; whale-watching tours; and observational (or non-invasive) research" (Scheffer 1990:17).⁴

"To top it all off," Barstow continues his praise,

⁴ Dolphins, in particular, stir people's imagination, and have become popular in science fiction literature. But whereas the "neo-dolphins" in David Brin's SF novel *Startide Rising* are intelligent enough to crew a space craft only after some gene engineering, D'Amato and Sudhir K. Chopra pretend to write non-fiction, but their imagination can match that of any SF writer (1991:21):

"[w]riters of science fiction have often speculated about what it would be like to discover, on a planet in outer space, a much higher form of intelligence. .. Stranger than fiction is the fact that there already exists a species of animal life on earth that scientist speculate has higher than human intelligence".

Taking John Lilly as their source—and ignoring all scientists of a different **opinion—D'Amato** and Chopra forget that this is speculation and they continue their argument as if it was an established fact that the dolphins are that intelligent.

"whales appear to have a unique affinity for human beings. Despite their overwhelming size and power, and despite the centuries of their being victimised by human predation, whales in the wild are proving to be uniquely tolerant of the peaceful proximity of human beings and indeed are increasingly demonstrating not merely passive coping but deliberate initiating of positive interaction."

Politically the whales are regarded as special because they do not know national borders, which is the reason why it is claimed that whales must be managed by international bodies. But this is not unique to whales. The same should be equally valid to migratory fish and birds.

If whales are culturally and politically unique, this is so not because some unique qualities in whales *per se*, but is a result of how we *perceive* whales. In other words; the perceived cultural and political uniqueness of whales is an effect of human activities and thus a cultural product—created mainly by urban people in the western world under certain economic and political conditions. In other words, what is culturally and politically unique about whales is no more than an invention of the human—or certain humanas'—mind.

Let us summarize what the claimed uniqueness of "the whale" is all about. We are told that the whale is the largest animal on earth (this applies to the blue whale); that the whale has the largest brain on earth (sperm whale); that the whale has a large brain-to-body-weight ratio (bottlenose dolphin); that the whale sings nicely and varied (humpback); that the whale has nurseries (some dolphins); that the whale is friendly (grey whale); that the whale is endangered (bowhead and blue whale); and so on. By talking about *the* whale, an image of a single whale possessing *all* these traits emerges. But such a creature does not exist. It is a mythic creation — a "super-whale".

Why Whales?

Why do some environmentalists spend so much time and energy on creating this image, and why does this image of a "super-whale" have such an appeal and sell so well? Why have whales become a symbol to many organizations? There are a number of answers to these questions, ranging from economy to politics and information management.

First of all, we should face the fact that animal rights groups live by collecting

money from people, and they therefore tend to exaggerate crises. Such organizations typically urge sympathizers to donate more money before the annual IWC meetings when they give the impression that the present moratorium is in danger of being lifted. They do not tell their supporters that with the present constitution of member states in the IWC the required three-quarter majority for resumed whaling is completely out of the question. Gulland (1988:45), who is an advisor to the IWC, has pointed out that whales "make excellent fund raisers" and writes that "[t]here may no longer be urgent reasons of conservation for continued pressure to strengthen the control of whaling, but there are sound financial reasons for groups that depend on public subscription to be seen to be active in 'saving the whale'". Of course, "environmentalists" have learned that whales and seals open people's purses, and they skillfully play up to this tendency, cf. the fake photograph of Brigitte Bartod with seal pup. But the question remains why people attach so much importance to whales and therefore more readily donate money in order to "save" them rather than endangered bats, for example.

The Symbolic Power of Whales and Salt-Water

First, whales are animals which easily can be ascribed symbolic significance. In the way in which we categorise the world around us, mammals usually have four legs and walk on land. But whales—and seals—live in the sea and not on land, and they have fins and not legs. Unlike fish, their tails are horizontal, rather than vertical, and they have no scales but are, like human beings, covered by very thin body hair. Whales form an anomalous category of animals (Kalland and Moeran 1990:5) since they do not fit into our simple categories of mammals and fish. Whales are "betwixt and between", and it is, according to the well-known British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966), exactly those animals which are difficult to fit into our cognitive maps that become the object of myths and taboos.⁵

On the other hand, mythical creatures—such as mermaids, *trolls*, and *ninja* turtles—also fall in this "betwixt and between" category because by definition they have traits found in various species. Our mythical super-whale is even more "betwixt and between" than its real cousin, in that animal-right people have cleverly created an image of an animal which is both large *and* smart *and* fond of music *and* friendly *and* caring and so on *ad infinitum*. The less we know about real whales the more can be left

⁵ That seals also fall into the "betwixt and between" category is ably shown by Einarsson (1990:37).

to our imagination, and the more "betwixt and between" the super-whale can be made.

Second, whales—and seals—move in salt water. Both salt and water are important purifying agents and are used in religious rites throughout the world. The ocean, consisting largely of these two purifying agents, becomes *the* symbol of purity—of untouched nature—and thus stands in sharp contrast to the polluted soil on which we land mammals tread. It is we, who move on land, who pollute the pure sea. Pollution of the oceans seems to draw much more attention than land and air pollution. No wonder that when the Danish chemical company BrØste wanted to improve its green image and "bought" a sperm whale from the WWF, the whale was called "BrØste's pioneer whale loves pure salt water" (*BrØstes pionerhval elsker rent saltvand*).

But there are other qualities with salt water, of course. We all started our lives in the uterus submerged in this kind of water, and salty water is thus indispensable for our own existence. Taking up an idea from psychology, a member of the Danish delegation to the IWC, suggested that people's attitudes to whales and seals are reflections of an unconscious memory of, and yearning for, life in the mother's womb (Lyng 1990:60). But despite having lived our first months in water, we are unable to swim like a whale. Without technological aids such as diving gear and submarines we are confined to life on land. Human beings harbour a feeling of envy toward whales, as there is a feeling of envy toward birds for being able to move freely in the skies.⁶ And again, we know very little about what is going on in the oceans, which turns the sea into a good "issue" on which to focus (Kalland and Moeran 1990:7).

⁶ It is in order here to direct the attention of the readers to the mythical "flying humpback", able to bridge sea and air. The real humpback is able to jump out of water, waving its long flippers like wings. Greenpeace's inflatable humpback has been flown in anti-whaling demonstrations around the world, while countless humpback whales fly through the air in Japanese advertisements, often carrying children on their backs. The flying whale is also a topic in Williams' poems, and in one he links the lives of whales, birds, and humans in the womb, thus giving credence to the claim that we yearn for life in the mother's womb.

"Whales play, in an amniotic paradise.
 Their light minds shaped by buoyancy, unrestricted by gravity,
 Somersaulting,
 Like angels, or birds;
 Like our own lives, in the womb." (Williams 1988:12)

Since Ancient Times

Third, as many of the protectionists never fail to point out, the cetacean brain developed 25 million years ago or more (but, according to Klinowska, has not progressed since), which is "long before the development of human beings and the latter's intrusion in the ocean ecosystem" (Barstow 1989:12)—or to use Watson's words, (1985:48): "When men were insignificant nocturnal insectivores" (an expression "stolen" by Gylling-Nielsen [1987]).

With this long time perspective in mind, Lilly wants "to find out if [the dolphins] have sagas, teaching stories, histories" (Linehan 1979:539). Although it will, according to Lilly, "take a lot of work ... before we get to the point where they can tell us stories we can understand", such trouble might well be justified if it is true—as Lilly wants us to believe—that dolphins administer knowledge which has been accumulated through an oral tradition of more than 25 million years. Such communication must be particularly rewarding for geologists, paleoethologists, and historians who here might have a large potential store of knowledge.

With this capacity for story-telling, it is no surprise to find that dolphins are supposed to have a rich and ancient culture, and that they "represent the closest approach to civilization, not as defined in terms of machine or technology, but as realized among all intelligent beings, cetacean or human, where communication and social bonds transcended the mere exigencies of life" (Abbey 1990:80). Composing and playing music are also cultural activities, and Willy Johannsen claims that "the humpbacks have *certainly composed* for millenia, before the first stone age man even got the idea of beating two bones in rhythm" (1990:xx, italics added).

One may wonder why it is so important to stress that whales have lived on this planet for about 25-30 million years or more.⁷ In a sense it seems to place whales above humans. They are our teachers:

"We, as relative newcomers, may be asking too much of ourselves to communicate meaningfully with minds as ancient as those of whales and dolphins ... the whales and dolphins may have more to teach us than we have to teach them" (Lilly 1961, quoted in Williams 1988:113).

⁷ There is quite a lot of disagreement among whale protectionists as to the question of when whales first emerged. Some are satisfied by claiming a 25-30 million year history for whales, while others write 50 or even 70 million. It seems that the more ancient whales can be made, the better.

Perhaps it also is significant that many of these claims are made by white Americans, a nation with a very short history. It might even be thought that, by claiming that even ancient cultures in Asia and Europe are young compared to that of the whales, the American feeling of inferiority towards ancient cultures may lessen. Or perhaps Barstow has the clue: human beings have *intruded* on to the territory of whales. The whales emerge as the "aborigines" of the sea, leading ultimately to their closing the oceans for many human activities in the same way as aboriginal land in Australia has been closed to white people.

Lost Paradise

While the whales have lived in peaceful co-existence with their surroundings for 25 million years or more—or so conservationists would have us believe—human beings have played havoc on the earth and have lost their Paradise after only a fraction of that time. Rapid urbanization has been seen as leading to alienation and loss of purpose in life, to collapse of social networks, to soaring crime and divorce rates, and to the young increasingly turning to drugs. Our social skills have been undermined. In much of the arguments about the peculiarities of whales we are presented precisely with the qualities that urban men and women seem to have lost. Or perhaps we never had these skills in the first place because, according to Lyall Watson (1985:48):

"our best-developed areas are those which deal with the elaboration of motor skills made possible by our hands, while cetaceans seem to concentrate on areas of social perception. Dolphins show marked development of those parts of the brains responsible for orientation, social skill, emotional self-control and perhaps even humour".

Closely related to this is the question of caring for each other. While commercialization has penetrated most human relations, whales are depicted as the guardians of old values. The whales allegedly care for the sick and dying, while people in the urbanized western world pay hospitals and old people's homes to take care of ageing relatives, thus removing the sick and dying from sight. Moreover, the super-whales take care of each other's calves. They baby-sit and run nurseries, without charging anything for these services. Not only do they care for their own kind, time and time again, cases of whales rescuing humans are told. It is also claimed that swimming with dolphins is a therapy for handicapped children and for people suffering from

depression (Hatt 1990).

Men and women might also have behaved nobly, but that was in the past. Today money rules, and urbanites carry with them a nagging bad consciousness; bad consciousness for not taking care of aging parents and for not giving the children the attention they need.

Whether we have lost our social skills through rapid social change, or whether we have never been very clever in handling social relations—as implied by Watson—the message is the same; we are in these respects inferior to whales. Whales are endowed with all the qualities we would like to see in our fellow men; kindness, caring, playfulness. We have something to learn, and whales are therefore used for didactic purposes, just as "good" birds have been used to educate the children in bourgeois values (Löfgren 1985). The whales, and "nice" birds, have become models for us to emulate and people do not eat their teachers and models.⁸ Whale meat has to be tabooed, and eating it becomes a barbarous act close to cannibalism. Whales are taking on the characteristics of a *totem*.

Bad and Good Guys

Levi-Strauss (1966:37) has pointed out that "[t]he beings which native thought endows with significance are seen as exhibiting a certain affinity with man". The "super-whale" has this affinity with men. It is our counterpart in the sea; it is the "human of the oceans". It has qualities which we would like to see in humans, qualities we have either lost or never have had because our brain was made to steer our hands (Watson 1985:48). In fact, according to Barstow, "whales appear to have a unique affinity for human beings" (1989:13). They love us and like to entertain us, thus enriching our lives. But we can also enrich theirs, for Barstow continues:

"Anyone who has had personal contact with cetaceans in their home environment knows how incredibly enriching this experience can be for the human psyche. By the same token, dolphins riding bow waves and sporting

⁸ We do not approve of Mediterraneans eating *our* small birds (Löfgren 1985), and Brian Davies does not like Philipinos eating cats and dogs (a letter to "friends", October 1985). Dogs and cats are for the western world pets, preferably to be given human-like funerals, and not for eating. And during a meeting in Copenhagen in December 1990, a former chairman of the Department of Anthropology, an American, strongly deprecated whaling since he used the whales to educate his children.

The rest of the world is ordered to follow our western, urban norms, as usual.

in the seas of surrounding ships, friendly, gray whales nudging small surface crafts and inviting human hand strokes, acrobatic humpback whales of their own accord approaching whale watch vessels and performing close-up manoeuvres to the cheers of onlookers often for more than half an hour at a time — all of these repeated manifestations clearly demonstrate that, at least on some occasions, humans are in fact providing a not unwelcome added dimension to cetacean lives. Surely this constitutes a form of mutual enrichment". (We could have added "like most domesticated animals".)

Discussing the relation between man and his totem animal, Emile Durkheim (1976:139) makes the important point that this relation is not that of a believer towards his god, but rather that between two beings on the same level, between equals. The whales are claimed to be our equal, if not our superior. They mate "face to face, like man" (Williams 1988:41), and whale songs are carried together with those of humans on Voyager I and II through space. We are told that whales are at least as intelligent as we are, they are more skilled in handling social relations, they deserve "whale rights" and there are talks about "whalekind" as a counterpart to mankind. But the whale—or rather the "super-whale"—has taken on other characteristics of the totem as well.

Often, but not always, a group of people regard their totem as their ancestor. Few people claim that the whales are our ancestors (although it has been heard that we are all evolving into dolphins), but by stressing the antiquity of whales and by claiming that whales might be placed on a higher level than *homo sapiens* on the evolutionary pyramid (by being more intelligent, more apt at handling social affairs etc.) it can be argued that they have come to play the role of pseudo-ancestors. Moreover, a totem is frequently regarded as "the guardian spirit and helper" (Freud 1960:2), and the many stories of whales—particularly dolphins—rescuing people at sea clearly testify to this ability among cetaceans.⁹

In return for their services, people come "under a sacred obligation .. not to kill

⁹ Note the letter writer from the U.K. who claimed in her letter to the Faroese government that "The dolphins are the guardians of this planet".

Beliefs in the supernatural powers of whales have been quite common, not only among environmentalists but also among fishermen. In Norway, for example, whales were long regarded as "gifts from God", who chased fish towards the coast (Wexelsen 1985). Significantly, in those days it was taboo to catch whales in some of the coastal areas in Norway. It should be added that whales are by no means only friendly. Odd Solhaug (1977) gives several examples of Norwegian fishermen being killed by malicious whales overturning their boats apparently unprovoked.

or destroy their totem and avoid eating its flesh" (Freud 1960:2). Although this prohibition is not absolute or universal in totemism (Durkheim 1976), protecting the whales has become the most sacred duty of some environmentalists. But, unlike in traditional totemic societies—as found among the aborigines in Australia and Indians in North-America—where prohibitions extend only to the group with that particular totem, and unlike the Hindus who in no way try to impose the prohibitions of killing and eating cows on the rest of mankind, whale protectionists try to make the prohibition universal. In their zeal they continue a form of western cultural imperialism initiated by Christian missionaries. It is the merger of totemism and cultural imperialism which has sparked strong nationalist sentiments in some of the protectionists' target societies.¹⁰

Finally, the totem plays a leading role in the ritual life of its human fellows. Most spectacular are the much publicized actions against whalers and sealers. They are usually carefully staged and the mass media play a crucial role in transmitting a rather theatrical performance across the world. Although a nuisance to whalers and sealers, these actions are not meant to bring forth an immediate termination of these hunting activities. What these rituals do is to tell the world that the activists are concerned about the environment, that the issue is urgent and cannot wait, and that they fight against great odds. The activists are always depicted as underdogs; it is the small zodiac against the big catching boat, or two swimming greenpeacers in front of a Japanese factory ship. The effect is the same as when a stubborn Chinese on Tiananmen Square stops a tank. It arises enormous sympathy to their cause. But the picture is false. Environmentalism is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and as long as the issues are whales and seals—and perhaps dogs and cats—they secure official backing from the Anglo-Saxon world. It is rather the whalers and the sealers who are the weak party.

Once a year leaders of animal-right groups gather at the annual meetings of the IWC, displaying their whale art objects and emblems (a typical totemic trait, Durkheim 1976, esp. pp. 13-119) on badges, T-shirts, posters, and so on. Although the outcome of the meetings in recent years is more or less known, the meetings themselves give those concerned the opportunity to meet like-minded politicians and journalists. At the

¹⁰ This is perhaps clearest expressed in Japan. ~~Being the only country in the world where whaling is still legal, Japan has a long history of whaling. This is the only country in the world where whaling is still legal. This is the only country in the world where whaling is still legal.~~
 S o m e Japanese s e e whaling i n t h e context of trade friction and general anti-Japanese feelings in the West This, together with the much believed myth that the Japanese are unique in eating whale meat, has also made whales an important symbol for Japanese culture (Kalland and Moeran 1990:197-199).

IWC meetings the world is divided into two groups, the so-called "like-minded group" and the "whale supporting group". Through this ritual the whaling issue is brought to the news headlines once a year and solidarity and a feeling of involvement in a common cause are reinforced.

There is also whale watching tourism, which has grown into a multi-million-dollar industry, and which opens the whale rituals to a larger audience than spectacular actions at sea or IWC meetings can do. Here affluent people can observe whales first hand. Not only can they "save" whales, but they can "meet" them, "engage" them, and even "touch" them. For them, as for the writer of the history of Greenpeace, there can be a "transcendent element lying at the center of the undertaking". They, too, can be said to be in search of their "Holy Grail" (Hunter 1979:150). Whale watchers there have confirmed by guides what they have already read in the many gorgeous magazines and illustrated books published, often on non-recycled paper, by various environmental groups.

Through these rituals "like-minded people" are brought together, and solidarity and group-identity are maintained and strengthened. But totemism and its accompanying rituals are more than a means to integrate groups of people. Totemism is a taxonomy where Nature is used to classify people (Levi-Strauss 1966). Totemism implies opposition between groups of people. In the words of Levi-Strauss (1966:115)

"[t]he homology [the totemic institutions] evoke is not between social groups and natural objects but between the differences which manifest themselves on the level of groups on the one hand and that of species on the other" (Levi-Strauss 1966:115).

Where there once was no opposition, one must be created, so that an opposition between "like-minded people", on the one hand, and "whalers", including their supporters, on the other, has been formed. The world has been divided between good guys and bad guys, the good guys being the "like-minded people" who fight to save their peaceful whale friends against the bad guys who want to kill for greed. Whalers are depicted as "butchers willing to wipe out the world's last whales for profit" (*Today* 28 May 1991).¹¹

¹¹ The whalers are in general portrayed as greedy and thinking only of money and profit. It seems that this rhetoric is aimed at creating money as a kind of totem to the whalers, and thus making the following set of binary oppositions:

protectionists	whalers
whales	money

A few examples of the rhetoric used in creating this dichotomy are in order here. That whalers are cruel and use inhumane methods in killing whales, is quite universally claimed, and headlines like "Blood on the water", "Fresh call to kill", or "Whale killers defend their crime" are also common. One of the more extreme expressions—which plays on the contrast between peaceful, innocent whales and savage whalers—comes from Brian Davies, the founder of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). In his words Faroese pilot whaling is

"a savage harvest... the most *brutal festival* you can imagine. *Peaceful* pilot whales are herded together and then *lured* close to land through their *loyalty* to a captured comrade from their pod or *family group*. And there they are simply hacked to death" (Letter to Friends, October 1985, underlines as in original, italics added).

At the same time, the moral integrity of the whalers and their supporters is questioned. They are also potentially violent towards men, if we are to believe Erik Claudi, who wrote Greenpeace's history in Danish. On the pretext of being a scientist he was welcomed onboard a Norwegian minke whaler, but went ashore after a couple of days because (1988:91):

"I think I have never been so afraid in my entire life. Sitting at the table hour after hour with a crew for whom Greenpeace was the lowest thing they could tread on. Playing the role of an unbiased marine scientist fully aware that they might stab me with their knives if I revealed my true identity. They are tough people, those living at the top of Norway".

The lawyers, Anthony D'Amato and Sudhir K. Chopra, even go as far as to suggest that "[t]he mind set that exults in the killing of whales and the 'sports' hunting of endangered wildlife species overlaps with the mind set that accepts genocide of 'inferior' human beings", but, of course, without giving any evidence to support this

subsistence
nature
good

commercialism
cities
bad

This scheme might partly explain why *commercial* whaling is regarded as unethical, while several animal welfare groups are ready to accept aboriginal *subsistence* whaling *as long as they do not sell anything and use primitive methods* (i.e. are close to nature). "Commercial" whalers, of course, refuse to accept money as their totem and refute the validity of the oppositions.

assumption (1991:27).¹²

Whalers are often portrayed as less civilized than the "like-minded group", as can be seen in terms like "species chauvinism" and "fascism" which have been used to characterise whalers and their supporters. The more sober British newspaper, *The Times*, writes in an editorial—after first pointing out that minke whales are plentiful, a fact which has forced the agriculture minister to change his argument from one of ecology to another of humane killing—that a "return to the cruelty of existing methods of whaling by Norway, Japan and Iceland will damage their reputation as civilised societies" (29 May, 1991). In a letter to the Washington-based ambassadors of the whaling nations (dated May 25, 1991) the president of WWF, Kathryn S. Fuller, urges the termination of whaling because "not killing whales is evolving as the norm among the nations of the world" and thereby to "join the world community". Some people sees a process of evolution from the primitive and barbaric to civilization, and attitudes to whales and whaling are used to measure this progress. Protectionists try to make the whaling nations into the pariahs of the world.¹³

If whaling is barbaric, eating whale meat is not less barbaric. The boulevard paper *Daily Star's* frontpage headline announced: "Sickest dinner ever served: Japs feast on whale", and over two inside pages the readers were told that "Greedy Japs gorge on a mountain of whale meat at sick feast" in a "banquet of blood" (11 May, 1991).¹⁴ A few days later, another boulevard paper, *Today* (28 May 1991), wrote that

¹² Rhetorically one may ask whether some of the US allies in the whaling issue—Belize, Egypt, Kenya, and Mexico, for example—have better records on human right issues than whaling nations like Iceland, Japan and Norway. We may also wonder why the most whale-loving nation, the USA, also has one of the highest crime rates in the world and still practice capital punishment. Is this an example of humane killing? Or why the US leads the field in the invention of new and crueller weapons? Are sophisticated weapons, as used by the USA forces recently in a distant country to cheers at home, also a way of killing humans humanely?

¹³ That there are few whaling nations makes these nations ideal scapegoats for the animal welfare groups. It would be more difficult, and far less effective, to focus on pigs and chickens because then we would all be scapegoats and pariahs.

¹⁴ Among the pictures accompanying this orgie of accusations bordering on pure Fascism, is one with the caption "Out of the deep: a whale is winched aboard a Japanese ship". As anyone with the slightest knowledge of Japan and Japanese whaling can see, this is not a Japanese boat, nor is the whale being winched onboard. A small Scandinavian fishing boat is winching the whale—which most likely had been trapped in a net—ashore in a Scandinavian fishing port. The text is, like the caption, free imagination.

"[u]nashamed Icelanders see whale steaks as a traditional dish", which "place on the menu will sicken ... conservationists". Hopefully people do not pay much attention to this kind of newspaper (although I am afraid that they do influence people's attitudes), but for those who have a tradition of eating whale meat, these accusations are both humiliating and seen as cultural imperialism.

Conclusion

During the last few years a new line of argument against whaling has become more pronounced. We are told that "*the* whale" is so unique that it is morally and ethically wrong to kill the animal. Usually people talk about the whale in the singular, and only rarely do the anti-whalers bring in nuances by talking about specific species. By combining traits from various species of whales, they have begun to create an image of a "super-whale". The whale is perceived as intelligent and strong and cute and large and friendly and caring and so on *ad infinitum*. This "super-whale" has got an enormous symbolic power, which, of course, makes it especially well suited in fundraising campaigns. Whales have become metonyms for the animal rights groups in that they stand for the whole of nature. As one of the most unyielding anti-whalers wrote (Sidney Holt 1985:192): "Saving the whales is for million of people the crucial test of their political ability to halt environmental destruction".

But this "super-whale" is something more than the sum of the traits of individual species of whale. It is claimed that it is almost a human being. In many ways this "super-whale" even outdoes human beings. It is as intelligent as us, it thinks and dreams like us, and it lives in strong family groups. It is given human-like characteristics and becomes our counterpart in the sea. It takes on an aura of a totem and in the process whalers and their supporters are portrayed as morally deficient and greedy money maximizers. By analysing this process of totemization we may gain added insight into the working of totems in ancient societies. The only novelty about turning whales into totems is that their creators, e.g. some environmentalists, try to impose this totem on all people and not keep it as a totem for their own "like-minded group".

The strategy of totemizing the whales has proved effective in protecting whale stocks from exploitation. And costs have been minimal to the animal rights groups in that the anti-whaling campaign attacks people residing in marginal areas, and largely unable to fight back. The fact that only a few countries are put into a corner, makes the whale, and seal, even more attractive as a symbol. The question remains, however,

whether totemization is an optimal way of managing resources. Protecting certain species in the food chain may cause ecological imbalances and the campaign against whaling has turned eating of whale meat into a symbol of resistance. Whales have, like seals (**Einarsson** 1990:40), become metaphors *of* animal welfare groups, and not only *for* these groups. If whalers cannot defeat these groups, they can at least eat their totem. Therefore the ritualized eating of whale meat can in some circumstances, but not always, be viewed as a symbolic attack on the protectionists. And all possibilities of dialogue have been lost.

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