

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Conservation Policy and the Commons, by Moira Moeliono

Our Views and Their Views of Conservation

Dario Novellino

Department of Anthropology, University of Kent, UK

Whether we like it or not, debate on environmental protection is still trapped in western categories with detrimental implications for the lives and well being of indigenous communities. 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. This is something that every citizen of the world should strive for! What I am questioning here are notions such as 'respect' and 'responsibility for' the environment regarded by conservationists as universal, and thus applicable crossculturally. My two decades experience with the Batak of Palawan (the Philippines) tells me a different story.

The Batak are a vanishing group of horticulturalists and hunters-gatherers, and they have always been thinking 'globally', in the sense that they normally draw a causal connection between certain actions (over-hunting, overharvesting, sexual improper behaviour, etc) and the impact that these may have on the world. So in this respect, attributing responsibility for the fate of the world to humans seems to be endorsed by both conservationists and Batak (as well as other indigenous people). 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 understood.

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'. Customarily, the maintenance of good relationships with the other entities are all associated by Batak with what is perceived as a 'sustainable' use of the common environment shared with animals, plants and non-human agents.

Overall, Batak seem to be 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. In short, Batak too, like conservationists, have a 'global' perception, but one where social relations, not nature or biodiversity are its fundamental constitutive elements. How to incorporate these views into laws and conservation policies is, however, another matter.

Just think about the legislation on ancestral land in the Philippines (Republic Act 8371). No doubt it represents a fundamental step in favour of indigenous peoples. However, most of its definitions dealing with land and the environment imply utilitarian criteria of human action and thus do not represent epistemologically valid concepts for the indigenous societies to whom these notions are applied to. I ask: does the western notion of 'land tenure' have any relevance at all when compared to the holistic approach of many indigenous people towards land and resources. Surely, the term tenure does not seem to have any equivalent word in Batak language. When indigenous communities are confronted with this alien terminology they are also forced to express their claims using a foreign vocabulary. As a result, they have

to adjust their views in the attempt to make them intelligible to outsiders. Indeed, to ground environmental laws on people's own ways of perceiving and engaging with the environment is easier said than done.

Batak resting after the planting of upland rice in the remote interior of Tanabag April 2004 any relevance at all when compared to the holistic approach of many indigenous people towards land and resources. Surely, the term tenure does not seem to have any equivalent word in Batak language. When indigenous communities are confronted with this alien terminology they are also forced to express their claims using a foreign vocabulary. As a result, they have to adjust their views in the attempt to make them intelligible to outsiders.

Indeed, to ground environmental laws on people's own ways of perceiving and engaging with the environment is easier said than done.

Let me tell you a little story. Between May and July 2001, I assisted my Batak friends in the preparation of a Community Resource Management Framework (CRMF), which is part of their legal requirements as holders of a Community-Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA). Preparation of this documents required close coordination between community members and myself in order to discuss controversial topics, such as the inclusion of swidden practices (which is forbidden by the law) in their CRMF. Batak were concerned that such inclusion might have led the Department of Environment and Natural resources to take legal actions against them, thus jeopardising the community's future chances for obtaining the necessary permits to gather and sell non-timber forest products (NTFPs). A unanimous decision was eventually reached: Batak agreed that swidden cultivation had to be listed amongst the activities of their CRMF, and that this decision had to be forwarded to the concerned government agencies.

To challenge DENR regulations was, in my opinion, a remarkable move. However I thought that, in order to strengthen community's claims to swidden cultivation, it was necessary to support and validate them, using powerful pieces of legislation. Interestingly enough, Presidential Decree No. 705 prohibits shifting cultivation nationwide, while Republic Act 8371 ensures protection for indigenous rights to perform traditional religion. Significantly, swidden cultivation (*uma*) is not only a foodproducing activity but also a fundamental part of Batak ritual practices and "religious beliefs."

As specified in Rule VI, Section 3 of the 'Rules and Regulations Implementing Republic Act No. 8371,' the right to cultural integrity shall include: "recognition of cultural diversity", "protection of religious, cultural sites and ceremonies" (no doubt, this also applies to Batak swidden fields and related rice ceremonies); Clearly, all such rights were being hampered through the implementation of CBFMA regulations. The more I studied the law, the more I became convinced that this could have been used to support Batak claims to swidden farming. After a careful assessment of the existing legislation, I held discussions with Batak about the fundamental connection between the sustainability of traditional swiddening, local beliefs and ritual/religious practices, and on how the existing legislation might have been used to validate such a connection.

A Batak legend attributes the origin of rice to a human sacrifice and rice is generally regarded as *taw* (person/ human). Particularly promising, I thought, was to use Batak beliefs and rice related practices as evidence to support people's rights to 'protect indigenous knowledge systems' (and thus swidden cultivation). In other words, during our meeting with the government, we would have demonstrated that - according to Republic Act NO. 8371 - the State was obliged to protect, rather than prohibit, indigenous agricultural practices because they are also an integral part of Batak 'spiritual beliefs'.

Finally, the meeting with the local DENR officials was arranged. Two Batak representatives, members of a local non-government organization (NGO) and myself visited the DENR Office in Puerto to discuss and

defend the argument that swidden cultivation had to be allowed inside the CBFMA area, and be regarded as one of the activities of the Community Resources Management Framework. Contrary to what we agreed, during the meeting, Batak did not discuss with government officials the connection between rice cultivation and religious beliefs, neither did they mention the myth concerning the origin of rice, and why this crop is often referred to as *taw* (human). It was only in the following days that I became more and more aware as to why Batak are unwilling to disclose certain aspects of their culture to outsiders. In short, I had failed to see that Batak are all too aware that state bureaucracy cannot be challenged through 'direct', and straightforward descriptions of people's worldviews. In relation to this, Pekto, one of the Batak joining the meeting, told me:

"How can we explain to the government that rice is human? I am sure that they cannot understand this, they would laugh at us. Exposing these issues, would make things even more complicated. Because the government would ask us: do you have the proofs of what you say? Do you have a document to support what you say? The government is different from us, they always have a piece of paper for everything they say, but our culture is only 'on the tongue', we have no written papers, so we cannot challenge the government."

Here, I can only footnote a couple of messages that this story has taught me. First, indigenous people, nowadays, are inescapably trapped in a State discourse on property rights and environmental conservation, which they have great difficulties coping with. Secondly, people like the Batak are aware of the difficulties of using traditional beliefs as a means to legally support their own land management practices. This is because indigenous knowledge and beliefs can hardly be translated into the language of bureaucracy, as well as into protected areas laws. This also brings us to the problem of how certain cultural values no longer shared by communities as a whole, may be used by indigenous advocates (like myself) as means to support customary rights (e.g. to rice cultivation), and to infer that local beliefs (e.g. the attribution of 'personhood' to rice) play an essential role in the maintenance of both genetic diversity of rice and sustainability of traditional swiddens. Then, paraphrasing Weiner (1999): if the knowledge that underwrites a belief system is no longer a basis for ritual action, can this still serve a political function for indigenous people like the Batak? Again, this question guides us back to one of the key points of Moira's article, that "conservation is far more a social challenge than a biological one."

darionovellino@libero.it