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B. Indigenous Communities and Classifications

Ursula Münster

Contentious Diversities and Dangerous Species: Biocultural Diversity in the Context of Human-Animal Conflicts

Ethnobiologists introduced the concept of biocultural diversity to focus attention on the interrelationship between biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Biocultural diversity links the extinction of biotic species with the disappearance of languages and indigenous livelihoods (Maffi 2001, 2005). The concept was originally formulated to dismantle the prevalent nature-culture dichotomy in conservation discourse and practice. But whose diversity should be valued in a situation where the coexistence of certain species is disharmonious and conflict-ridden? Who decides on the "hierarchy of values" (Sodikoff 2012, 9) ascribed to different species? Should cultural or biological endurance be secured in conservation contexts, where managing interspecies relationships depends on the policing of strict boundaries between humans and "wilderness"? Whom should we privilege when the survival of highly endangered (and dangerous) species seemingly depends on the creation of human-free spaces?

Scholars have criticized the biocultural model for laying exclusionary emphasis on the role of traditional ecological knowledge and practices for conserving biodiversity (Brosius and Hitchner 2010). In fact, in the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary of Kerala in southern India, biocultural diversity is interpreted by conservationists to have applicability only within highly circumscribed contexts, pertaining solely to "authentic" indigenous Adivasis[1]—those people whose cultural forms might be meaningfully integrated into wildlife and nature protection. Attempts to allocate a place for Adivasis inside the wildlife space reinforce the prevalent castist/racist attitudes of the "mainstream" to dehumanize them and set them on the "wild" side of the forest frontier. Confining the idea of biocultural diversity to the "savage slot" runs the risk of essentializing, homogenizing, and traditionalizing local communities, leading to their "eco-incarceration" (Shah 2010). They are confined to a sustainable "eco-lifestyle" in the forest, whereas the rest of the society can consume and "develop."

1 Adivasi is the Hindi word for "original inhabitants."

Wildlife biologists praise the forests of Wayanad, located in the biodiversity hotspot of the Western Ghats, as one of the best habitats for some of the world's remaining charismatic megafauna. The Kerala forest department prioritizes saving large mammals from extinction, especially the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus)*, the tiger (*Panthera tigris*), the leopard (*Panthera pardus*), and the Indian gaur (*Bos gaurus*). However, the forests of the region are fragmented and enclosed by a highly populated area used intensively for chemical-laden cash-crop agriculture. To salvage the forest's iconic animals, Wayanad's conservationists regard the establishment of a firmly monitored area devoid of human influence as an ecological necessity. Local environmental activists and the forest department dismiss the local people's culturally diverse, forest-related livelihoods—in continuity with colonial rhetoric and practice—to justify authoritarian and coercive wildlife protection measures.

"There are no 'real' Adivasis left," I was continuously told by wildlife conservationists and forest officials during my fieldwork in the region. Many of the communities living on forest land, like Paniya and Adiya, are not considered "genuine" by nature lovers—traditionally, they never depended on the forest for their livelihood. Rather, they worked as agricultural laborers and slaves on landowners' fields. Even the Kattunaika, who until recently lived mainly as hunters and gatherers on forest land, are perceived by Wayanad's environmentalists as "degenerated" by contact with the consumerism of modern mainstream society, and by the state's developmental programs. In consequence, environmental activists and forest officials argue that they should not be granted the entitlement to inhabit forest land, either. As a result of the activists' (and some farmers') continuous pressure, a relocation program was launched in March 2012, evicting hundreds of people from the wildlife sanctuary.

Simultaneously, however, the forest department has been obliged to implement a landmark piece of legislation in the history of forest laws in India, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA, Government of India 2006). The central Indian government passed the act to restore the rights of "scheduled tribes"[2] and other so-called "forest-dwelling communities" to land and other resources that had been denied to them for decades as a result of the continuance of colonial forest laws in India. The aim was to finally introduce more inclusive

2 Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC) are communities notified in India's constitution for purposes of positive discrimination, see http://ncst.nic.in.

and democratic forms of environmental governance in postcolonial India. Initially, all over the country, Adivasi and Human Rights' activists celebrated the FRA as a turn towards "biocultural diversity" in policy-making, recognizing the role of communities in conservation—as "custodians" of the land they have inhabited for generations. In Wayanad, paradoxically, this process has happened while approaches to conservation continue to forcibly separate "nature" and "culture," and thus to perpetuate the binary logic of "wildlife" versus "people" (see Adams 2004; Brockington et al. 2008; Duffy 2010). Hence, the forest department has prevented the full implementation of the FRA; in particular, community rights to resources and local participation in forest and wildlife protection have remained unrecognized until now in Wayanad.

At the edge of Wayanad's forest, there is no smooth ecological/human continuum that allows for an easy application of biocultural diversity discourses. So-called "human-animal conflicts"—manifested in invasions of fields and plantations, as well as in deadly attacks on humans, mainly by elephants—are part of daily life on the fringes of the forest. Likewise, diseases transgress the forest frontier. Cattle grazing in the forests transmit parasites, viruses, and bacteria, such as Anthrax to wildlife, and elephants have perished from tubercular infections spread by humans—further proof of their problematic, close vicinity. The contact zones between humans and non-humans in Wayanad are increasingly characterized by conflict and disruption rather than by harmonious "convivial modes of human-elephant companionships" (Laurimer 2010, 492) or, as recent explorations in multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) have described it, by flourishing forms of new "interspecies collaborations" (Tsing, this volume; Tsing 2009) and "interspecies intimacies" (Haraway 2010).

In consequence, a fortified border, quite literally an "iron curtain," has been established by the forest department that divides wildlife and agricultural land. Fortification of the forest happens not only to keep humans out of "biodiversity," but equally to keep the "forest" out of the agricultural landscape. Currently, significant efforts are underway to dig deeper trenches and to build electric fences along the whole forest border to prevent invasions by "wild" animals on contiguous fields. Until now, these protection measures have been unsatisfactory. In recent years, rising elephant attacks have been reported; 36 people have been killed in encounters in Wayanad since 2004 (Wayanad Wildlife Warden 2011). The gravest "cultural" injustice for many Adivasis is thus the prohibition against owning weapons for self-defense and hunting inside the reserved forests.

Biocultural diversity in Wayanad represents a confluence of conflicts at the essentialized border between "nature" and "culture." Even policy decisions are locally framed as "wildlife" versus "humans." The communist-led government's decision in 2011 to distribute one acre of forest land to landless Adivasis under the Forest Rights Act, for example, enraged local environmentalists and drove them to take legal action at the High Court to save Wayanad's "pristine nature." Likewise, the unpopular night traffic ban on the National Highway, which prohibits nocturnal flows of commodities and tourists through the forest sanctuary, has been described as "anti-human" in a popular discourse that rhetorically divides local society into forward-looking "pro-developmentalists" against "human-hostile" wildlife activists.

This paper argues that policymakers and national institutions remain reluctant to integrate or attend to participatory and inclusionary "biocultural" models (Sundar et al. 2001), especially in contexts where legacies of "colonial style legal and organizational structures" (Peluso 1992, 7) continue to characterize conservation projects. Reconceptualizing both "culture" and "nature" will be necessary in order to prevent the concept of biocultural diversity from appearing, as postcolonial critics have argued regarding various forms of transnational conservation, as just another form of "green neocolonization" or "eco-imperialism."

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