THE ENVIRONMENT OF PERCEPTION AND PERCEPTIONS OF ENVIRONMENT: A COMMENTARY

by

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Abstract: A brief analysis of Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment* shows a comprehensive review and innovative treatment of hunter-gatherer issues, albeit at times naturalizing indigenous groups and shortchanging the impact of ethnohistory on the politics of genealogy and tribal land ownership.

Keywords: Native Americans; hunter-gatherers; landscape.

Resumo: Uma análise breve do livro de Ingold *The Perception of the Environment* demonstra uma revisão completa dos problemas relacionados com o estudo dos caçadores-colectores e um tratamento inovativo dos mesmos problemas. Contudo, neste tratamento Ingold por vezes naturaliza os grupos indígenas, e parece minimizar o impacto político da história dos grupos étnicos em termos de geneologia e de territórios tribais.

Palavras-chave: Nativos-Americanos; caçadores-colectores; paisagem.

In December 2004 I was fortunate to be invited to attend a symposium organized by Vítor Jorge on Tim Ingold's work, and more specifically on his book *The Perception of the Environment* (2000). The symposium, one of many Vítor Oliveira Jorge has organized around specific works or thematic issues, took place at the Fundação Engenheiro Antonio de Almeida, Porto, and included commentators from various academic disciplines. The two-day multidisciplinary discussion was articulated through commentaries made by scholars who, having read specific chapters of *The Perception of the Environment*, fostered and guided thematic discussions. Given my work on Native American hunter-gatherers as well as on issues of representation and United States Federal Acknowledgement of Native American Tribes I was asked to comment on chapters 1 through 3 as well as on chapter 8. This short summary, which per force obviates thematic continuities within Ingold's twenty-three chapters, will address only some of the issues related to those chapters and raised during the extensive and animated discussion.

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Ingold's successful compilation of cogent articles into a book is likely to be the first truly comprehensive treatment of hunter-gatherers that fully recognizes the cultural (and by inference archaeological) 'complexity' inherent to the multifaceted hunter-gatherer world. More importantly, few works have included, analyzed, and given equal billing to hunter-gatherer aboriginal perspectives (for recent and notable exceptions see, for example, Brody 2001). The history of anthropological engagement with hunter-gatherer populations has traveled a tortuous path, and is littered with ideological and theoretical signposts that relegated hunter-gatherer populations to the position of simpletons, or as members of a pseudo leisure-class often seemingly to be going through life on automatic pilot. It should, however, be remembered that the histories and development of anthropology and archaeology in Europe and in North America followed different paths. That singular fact has influenced greatly the paradigmatic and methodological approaches taken by scholars operating in the two continents. These historical differences, which we often forget or overlook, together with a North American tradition of critical thinking and assessment can produce curious lopsided discussions and discontinuities. Continued cultural interventions such as those organized by Vítor Oliveira Jorge provide a forum for interchange and rapprochement not just between disciplines, but between schools of thought and traditions of scholarship.

In *The Perception of the Environment* Ingold proposes a radical review of the way anthropologists conceive and represent modern hunter-gatherer populations. Ingold initiates the reader by positing a perception, and ultimately a heuristic dilemma: is the deer-in-the-headlights a dazed or self-offering prey? How the reader perceives and translates the metaphor and the actual act of exposure of the deer determines the reader's positioning in the age-old mind/body/culture/nature dichotomy and the chained-link dichotomies that these polarities underwrite. Ingold is not the first to propose moves out of Descartean constraints that have formed and inhibited western understandings of non-western cultures (Bender 1993). Indeed decades after the 'linguistic turn' some subfields of anthropology more than others are still mired by ways of thinking and ways of telling. Yet, a short perusal at the anthropological literature of the 1980s (see for instance, Kurland and Beckermam 1985, Hawkes, Hill and O'Connell 1984, Martin 1983, Rodgers 1988) will quickly show that the first three chapters of *The Perception of the Environment* constitute mostly a dated response to emphatic efforts to understand (and perhaps summarize) hunter-gatherer ways of making a living by comparing and appraising modern hunter-gatherer behavior against economic and optimal foraging models. These elaborate and effective western heuristic models rationalize hunter-gatherer behavior by re-stating or subtracting from the model that information which ultimately gives the model its 'reality': the ethnographic data provided by modern day hunter-gatherers. Further, these data are culled efficiently, and often selectively, to bolster archaeological modeling of the past. But perception is 9/10ths of reality, and it is quite possible that as we build models of the past by using the present, we reshape the very present we use as a baseline. While physical and biological anthropologists were engaged in delineating the subsistence portray of a foraging *homo economicus* in the 1980s, archaeologists both in Europe and in North America were busy refitting material culture to hunter-gatherer subsistence patterns or replying to Lewis Binford and his models (see, for instance, the articles published by *American Antiquity* in 1983 and by *Antiquity* in 1987).

Like many others, I subscribe fully to Ingold's perspective that indigenous hunter-gatherer populations all over the world did not, and some still do not, perceive the world through prisms of mind/body/culture/nature. For modern Native Americans of the High Plains regions in the

United States and Canada who continue to hunt and gather as part of their sustenance (physical/spiritual), or for those who dwell in the landscape, or who seek it as a replenishing life-source the polarities that exist, if they exist, do not cleave mind from body or culture from nature. Today, as in the past, stones speak and have specific powers (Cabeza de Vaca 1993 [1542]: 62) but access is not a given. There are often membranes to peer or break through by ritual means, and almost always those means are in, and of, the landscape. For instance, the vision quest is indeed a quest; the guardian spirit has to be sought and it may, or may not, reveal itself.

It is certainly important to identify and make manifest the moments, practices and strategies that show precisely how modern hunter-gatherers are not just embedded in the landscape they inhabit but are constitutive and constitute that very landscape. Likewise, it is extremely important to demonstrate the historicity of hunter-gatherer practices and, if possible, the concept of history held by specific groups at specific times. In one case that I documented for Texas in 1673, the decision making process of the group was specifically tied to the future and genealogy (Wade 2003: 37-39). This kind of information retrieval is as crucial for groups that can still dwell in their significant landscape, as it is for those that no longer can do so. For several years I have been collecting archival evidence of this unison of mind/body made explicit through Native American speech acts and sometimes through their translated voices. Such work has political consequences to Native groups in many parts of the globe, and certainly in North America, where it can be translated in rights to land (dwelling). I will return to this issue later in the commentary.

On the other hand, Ingold's discussion on aboriginal views seems to undermine Ingold's declared agenda of bringing to the anthropological fold Native understandings because his discussion tends to naturalize (and obviate) the differences that make the Cree unlike the Ojibwa. Briefly, in relation to North America and Northern Mexico, one perceptual scheme does not fit all, and although mind/body (and similar) dichotomies do not appear to exist, there are subtle degrees of separation that mark bodies/minds in relation to Other, and in relation to animate and inanimate 'beings' in the landscape: these are real and important boundaries (Brody 2001: 119, 289). These inside/outside/us/other dichotomies implicate beings as they implicate bodies/minds and were sometimes expressed in ethnographies and archival documents as 'resource territories' and in role assignments and proscriptions. For instance, in south Texas women (or male Other) were able to cross landscape boundaries as traders and peace makers because they did not (could not?) hold the role of warriors. We cannot impose over the Native (aboriginal) world our grid of western dichotomies, but we should not be so ready to 'import' a paradigm of dwelling that may be constituted by layers of difference we are far from comprehending. More importantly, archaeologists have to be cautious in the ways they confront the past with models of the present, because the circumstances under which modern hunter-gatherers dwell in the world introduce problems unlike those of the past. What anthropologists and ethnohistorians have to do is engage in concerted research of colonial archives and re-visit 19th and early 20th century ethnographies. Having done so we need to consult and listen to Native peoples and incorporate their perspectives in our work. Most of all we must not dismiss or rationalize that which we do not understand. The importance of our (read scholarly and often western) 'perception' of aboriginal paradigms has academic repercussions, but has definite political consequences for aboriginal groups, a discussion that seems strangely curtailed in Ingold's otherwise thorough analysis. That question brings me to the last point I wish to make, and one I raised during the symposium.

In Chapter 8, Ingold proposes that we discard the dendritic genealogy tree or chart as insensitive and ineffectual, and adopt the conceptual and visual model of a rhizome. Ingold is not particularly pleased with the rhizome as a model (p.426), and that may be the reason why there is no diagram of the rhizome model. Although I have several problems with Ingold's argumentation, he raises very pertinent questions about ancestry and implicitly about the ownership of indigenous ancestral lands. Regardless of which graphic representation one chooses to adopt, the problems faced by indigenous groups result from historical and political structures, not genealogical models, the latter being a form of representation of the former. In fact, the genealogical model has a long pedigree as a power instrument in antiquity, in the Judeo-Christian traditions and in the natural and social sciences.

I am not sure the rhizome model will work but it is an attractive model, particularly when one considers issues of ethnogenesis of Native American groups that have lost their language, but not their oral traditions, their tribal lands, but not their land. The United States process of Federal Acknowledgement for Indian Tribes is far more complicated and messy than it might appear from Ingold's discussion of genealogy. Federal Acknowledgement is granted not on the basis of genealogy, but on the basis of a nexus of chronological proofs that have to do certainly with ancestry, but particularly with community, leadership, and recognition of the tribe by outsiders. Despite the fact that a tribe might know its history and acknowledge its kinfolk, it may soon find that neither qualifies as the required ancestry or history as both have to be validated by documentation. Thus, in the process of ferreting the proofs required by the Bureau of Indian Affairs the tribe refashions itself, learns to re-perceive itself, and constructs an image of itself that will become its public image, and will 'match' the tribe that results from the Federal Acknowledgement process. The documentary process, which was always public record but harder to obtain, today is readily available on the Internet. This public image often excludes internal tribal perceptions held by the group, highlights potential inter-tribal misunderstandings, and is often at odds with the historical and oral traditions of tribal members.

Despite the fact that I find several aspects of Ingold's model questionable, his discussion and model opens up a space to link life histories with lines of descent across space and time and helps to dissolve the western linearity of thought and time. These life histories, which unfold as they are lived in fields of relationships, do not congeal the community in a fixed space, nor do they have to be recounted according to strict chronological models. Also, the model does not exclude from tribal history any members, or their deeds, whose genealogical ties to the group cannot be substantiated. The present model followed by the Bureau for Indian Affairs (hereafter called BIA) does have the potential for inclusion of oral histories and cross-cutting fields of relationships, but it cancels out tribal history branches that cannot be documented and reduces the history of the group to its evidentiary sum.

Whether intentionally or not the process of Federal Acknowledgement re-writes history. Yet, the process of recognition, as an exercise of power by nation states, produces results, some of which can be viewed as the structuration of ethnogenesis, generally described as "the historical emergence of a people who define themselves in relation to a sociocultural and linguistic heritage" (Hill 1996: 1). Drawing on Anna Tsing's work, Jonathan Hill states that ethnogenesis is a useful concept to explore the complex relationships between global and local histories by focusing on "the dialogues and struggles that form the situated particulars of cultural production" (Tsing 1994:283). The requirements established by the BIA draw tribes, undergoing the process of recognition, into the meanders of global history. BIA requirements force tribes to uncover a history that is neither the history as told to them, nor the history as narrated by anthropologists, archaeologists and historians. The result of this process of cultural production is a history that questions life long perceptions of tribal selves anchored on oral versions, inaccurate anthropological ethnographies, incipient archaeological research, and seamless historical narratives. Through the process of cultural production some tribal members discover their history and publicly assume an identity, while others find themselves trying to adjust the official version of their history to what was told to them and what they have told to themselves. Located at the margins "where contradictory discourses overlap" (Tsing 1994: 279) they reconfigure their history to go by the book and fill in the blanks of the records. The adjustment between what the historical records say and what American Indians (or anyone else) learn through the process of living is difficult and fraught with conflict.

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