BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

Indigenous space for agency in international nature conservation discourse

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The paper to be presented analyzes indigenous people’s role in nature conservation, focusing on the discursive construction of indigenous subject positions in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and using postcolonial theory to situate the discussion in its historical and political context. The paper discusses what subject positions are made available to indigenous people, and what political agency they can be assumed to entail. The analysis shows a narrow recognition of indigenous peoples’ role in the context of the CBD, an influence of colonial discourse still present in the understanding of indigenous peoples in relation to nature and natural resources, and a heavy focus on indigenous subjects as holders of traditional knowledge.

The concentration of traditional nature conservation on preserving and maintaining “wilderness” in its pristine condition has often led to conflicts between national interests of protection and conservation and local or indigenous utilization of nature and natural resources. The goals of nature conservation have changed over the last decades, but setting aside areas for nature protection is still a major part of environmental efforts globally. Protected areas often include traditional lands of indigenous peoples, and although indigenous rights have been strengthened through international treaties, conflicts over land entitlement are still common. Nature conservation can be seen as helpful in safeguarding indigenous traditional lands from other encroachment, and there is increasing recognition that the environmental knowledge and land management practices of indigenous peoples can benefit conservation outcomes. However, nature conservation can also be conceived as a threat to indigenous rights, if it restricts indigenous use and management of land and natural resources. The increased recognition of indigenous traditional practices might make it easier for indigenous peoples to protect their knowledge and practices, but representing “indigenous” or “traditional” in particular ways also means potentially privileging these representations over others, as well as maintaining stereotyping and homogenizing notions of “indigenousness” or “tradition”.

Ideas about the relationship between humans and nature (and between groups of humans) affect how natural resource management is designed and implemented, and how conflicts over natural resource use are handled and resolved. The practice of conserving nature by setting aside areas for protection (and thereby limiting human access to those areas and their natural resources) is grounded in ideas about wilderness with root in colonial notions of humans, nature, and the relationship between them. Indigenous peoples are, by definition, linked to territories and a history of colonialism. A postcolonial perspective is necessary to understand and analyze discourses and power relations within nature
conservation, especially in relation to indigenous peoples’ claims to rights or influence over and use and management on their traditional territories. Core features of the colonial discourse still shaping contemporary discourses on both NC and indigenous rights include:

- The concept of nature as separated from culture – or, in other words, the “othering” of nature. Nature, and natural resources, have certain values to humans and can be used to serve human needs. These values can be expressed in terms of economics or conservation, but still hinge on the nature-culture dichotomy.
- The “othering” and subjugation of non-white, non-Western subjects – e.g. indigenous people. Indigenous people are stereotyped and homogenized, be it as backwards and inferior or as “ecologically noble savages”.
- The failure to recognize indigenous land use and land rights and the view of indigenous lands is as untouched and wild.
- The reluctance to recognize indigenous people as peoples, with rights to self-determination and collective rights to land, water, and natural resources.

The CBD is one of the main international frameworks for NC legislation and policy, and has also become a major focus for advancing indigenous peoples’ environmental claims. After initially recognizing the dependency of many indigenous and local communities on biological resources, the convention mainly refers to these subjects as holders of traditional knowledge that is assumed to contribute to the convention’s objectives. The connection between indigenous peoples and nature conservation in the discourse of the CBD, and the role of indigenous peoples in nature conservation as constructed by the CBD discourse, can be understood through a chain equating indigenous – traditional lifestyles – traditional knowledge – relevant for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Following this logic, indigenous peoples not embodying traditional lifestyles, or not holding relevant traditional knowledge, are not relevant (in the role of “indigenous”) for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity under the CBD. At least three of the features of the colonial discourse described above are visible in the analyzed texts (the nature-culture dichotomy being less apparent), and consequently inform the discursive construction of indigenous subject positions within the context of the CBD.

The paper concludes that the CBD presents a recognition of indigenous peoples’ role in nature conservation that could be considered rather narrow. The discursive construction of indigenous subject positions within the CBD can be considered to include colonial notions and power relations, and such constructions may affect the space for agency of indigenous peoples within the context of the CBD. The discursive construction of “indigenous” excludes any indigenous subjects not living up to the notions of “indigenousness” presented in the texts, and there is considerable space for arbitrary interpretations of central concepts in the provisions relevant to indigenous peoples. Experiences of colonialism and postcolonial power relations can be assumed to influence these interpretations, leaving less powerful groups or subjects with a limited space for agency, unable to present their “truth” as legitimate or valid.