



Rivers Like Tears

A book review
by Sylvie Shaw

Fikret Berkes - Sacred Ecology

I picked up **Fikret Berkes Sacred Ecology** first because of its title. I was in the midst of writing a proposal for a course in sacred ecology and the book's title seemed intriguing. It was not the only coincidence. I discovered the author, who is Professor of Natural Resources at the University of Manitoba, had done his field work in Northern Quebec, with the **James Bay Cree**

A few years ago, I had travelled to the area and stayed with the Cree in the place Berkes mentions, Chisasibi, when I went dog sledding. It was a journey I had wanted to do since I was 10 years old - following the caribou on their annual migrations. But there was a big difference in dreaming about this trip for so long and the reality. By the time I got there, the ecology of the region had been terribly affected by the building of gigantic hydro-dams. This impacted on the quality of the lives of the people and of the land.

Before I left I had read how the flooding of vast tracts of the land has caused wide-spread mercury poisoning. Quantities of natural mercury from the soil has contaminated the rivers and the fish and poisoned the people who rely largely on fish for food. Margaret Sam-Cromarty (1992), a Cree poet whose house we stayed in at Chisasibi, laments these changes in her moving poem "Rivers"

Tears are like rivers;
they never stop flowing.
Rivers are like tears
they become dry.

In the mid-1970's, when the Cree and the Inuit were told of the government's plans for damming what they refer to as their garden, many questioned what would become of the animals, and of their way of life: "How will the caribou know which way to go?", they asked. "How will the fish get up the river?" And they protested: "Only the beaver has the right to build dams in our territory". But the government did not listen.

Like Fikret Berkes, I also had some of the same conversations with our guide Bobby Snowboy

that I read about in his book - the relationship with the caribou, the connection with the land, and I heard about and witnessed the enormous impact of the hydro-electric dams. At the end of our journey we could not take the dogs into the township as the river no longer iced up. We had to load the dogs at one side of the river's edge, then take the truck across the bridge, underneath the towering concrete wall and gigantic pylons. A stark contrast from the last two weeks in the mighty wilderness.

Differing Perspectives of Ecology

Berkes makes a strong case for broadening the Western scientific base of ecology into one which more holistic and encompasses ethical, social, political and spiritual perspectives. Into issues that we are concerned about in ecopsychology although that is not a term he uses. He comes to the same conclusion that what we need is an understanding of the integral relationship between humans and nature but his foundation is one of scientific resource management rather than one of psychology.

His focus is the scientific ecology of indigenous cultures, their knowledge of local ecosystems, their relationship with the land, and the manner in which they have been managing their land for millennia. He describes the different approaches used by Western ecology and indigenous ecologies and points out that although they may reach the same conclusion about resource management, they do this from entirely different vantage points, practices and knowledge. He terms these indigenous knowledges, beliefs and practices "traditional ecological knowledge" and spends some time explaining why he uses the term "traditional" although it is seen as problematic in much post-colonialist discourse.

Although deciding to adopt the term "traditional ecological knowledge", he goes on to point out the problems associated with the narrow colonial perspectives of terms like "wilderness" (an uninhabited pristine place) and the romanticism that perceives indigenous cultures as spiritual and ecological "noble savages" who, since time immemorial, have lived in harmony with their pristine environment.

In contrast, Berkes sets up a number of fascinating case studies which outline the way indigenous cultures manage and care for their land sustainably. The examples from tropical rainforest regions, semi-arid areas, the Pacific islands, the Caribbean and from the James Bay region make interesting reading. They show how indigenous cultures have evolved an intimate understanding of their local ecosystems and how they have devised adaptive strategies to

ensure the maintenance of a healthy, productive and sustainable ecosystem.

One of the important aspects of traditional ecology is the emphasis on the sacred - through the use of ceremonies and rituals to enhance connection with the land, to ensure a good harvest or hunt, and to renew the spirits of place. He makes the point that what is different about the way indigenous people relate to the land is the notion of reciprocity ñ an attitude of giving thanks back to the land. This attitude is missing from the Western worldview and ecological resource management practices.

As an example of the two way relationship between humans, the land and the animals, Berkes describes in detail the rituals and obligations associated with hunting among the Cree. What I find fascinating is the contrast between the way Western science views hunting and the way the Cree do. He says that in the West it is assumed that humans can take control of animal populations. But the Cree believe that animals themselves control the success of the hunt. They believe that animals are aware of everything humans do, including the hunter's intentions. If the hunt is successful, it is because the animal decides it will be so. Success depends on the attitude of the hunter who needs to show respect and humility throughout the hunting, killing and butchering process.

When I was in Cree country, I asked our guide Bobby Snowboy about what the caribou meant to him. He told me they are his whole life. Berkes describes this relationship in much more detail, in particular, he talks about how the understanding of the relationship can affect the migratory patterns of the caribou herds. He mentions specifically a serious problem that emerged in the early 1980s.

The season 1982-83 was an excellent year for caribou. So good in fact that people overdosed on caribou. The hunting was prolific but the hunters forgot their mutual obligation to the animals. They ignored the need for respect and humility. As a result, by 1984-85, there was almost no caribou. A community meeting was called where the elders reminded the younger people of the old stories of Cree-Caribou connection. The following year the hunt was done with the obligations restored. And the caribou returned. Berkes uses this example to debunk the ecological noble savage myth, to reflect on the importance of the role of the elders in telling the stories of land connection, and to restore notions of ritual, reciprocity and sacred ecological management practices.

Learning to understand indigenous knowledge systems has been undertaken by a range of

Western scientists, anthropologists etc. but, in the past Berkes outlines, they may have misinterpreted the information they were told or may not have approached the indigenous communities with an ethical or respectful attitude. Working with indigenous communities needs to be one of collaboration and ethics, he says. Incorporatingí both waysí ñ Western empiricism and indigenous knowledge can enhance sustainable management practices.

I found the book fascinating reading. Informative. Excellent case studies. Food for thought. Directly relevant for ecopsychology although not written with that perspective in mind. It seems to me that underpinning any discussion of the human-nature relationship, in Berkes case about resource management skills, is the analysis and approach of ecopsychology. Berkes ends his informative book by recommending that narrow ecological views which fail to recognize indigenous perspectives are ñhuman-centricí. He calls for a new ecological ethics which recognizes the links between cultural diversity and biodiversity.

Berkes' book is an excellent adjunct to works by one of my favourite authors, Richard Nelson, eg, *Make Prayers to the Raven* and *The Island Within*, and to the most delightful anthropology of indigenous people Robin Riddingtonís *Little Bit Know Something*.

REFERENCES

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<http://www.ecopsychology.org/journal/gatherings5/sacred.html>