

What do Conklin and Graham mean by the 'middle ground of Amazonian eco-politics'?

Are Amazonian Indians acting authentically? Relate your answer to at least one other example of indigenous people's capacity to resist domination.

The 'middle ground of Amazonian eco-politics' is concerned with the interaction between native Amazonians, the domestic politicians, and Western environmentalists. The Kayapó, for example, have learned how to strategically adapt the way they act to attract media attention, Western environmentalists, and gain political stance, which then gives them the chance to achieve their own objectives. One way in which they have done this is through the presentation of themselves as in agreement with environmentalist views, a second approach is through acting in what is typically seen as an 'authentic' way, mainly with the use of visual symbolism. In this essay I am going to discuss the ways in which Amazonian Indians have been successful, and sometimes unsuccessful, in their strategies. I will then go on to compare their political efforts of resistance to the efforts of the Powhatans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who resorted to war to protect their land, and the resistance of Bedouin people, particularly women, in Egypt.

Beth Conklin and Laura Graham (1995) state in an article that the "middle ground of Amazonian eco-politics was founded on the assertion that native peoples' views of nature and ways of using natural resources are consistent with Western conservationist principles." This is an interesting statement as it highlights the way that Amazonian Indians have found a shared interest with environmentalists who can then help them to protect their land, even though the 'shared interest' they claim to have may be insincere. The importance of the rainforest is greater than Amazonian Indians or other indigenous groups (Brysk 1994:36) for most people who have power to actively help either cause, and politically successful Indigenous groups use this knowledge to their advantage. By putting their aspiration to own the land they live on in terms of benefits to the environment, they expand the amount of support they have as many more organisations can aid them and their cause.

However, there are issues raised the portrayal of Indians as environmentally concerned; it impedes their aim of self-determination as they have to act to please environmentalists rather than themselves directly in order to reach their own goals. This need to fit in with environmentalists ideas of what an authentic native Amazonian is has given rise to a resurgence of body decorations (Conklin, 1997) which are seen as the mark of a truly authentic native Amazonian. This is one example of where native Amazonian behaviour

is not authentic; without intervention from outsiders, the communities would not have reverted back to wearing the traditional dress of their ancestors.

Conklin highlights a study on the National Geography Magazine by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993:247) in which it was found that 'readers perceived clothing to be the single most important marker of cultural identity'. This is a very important finding as it indicated that groups such as the Kayapo are right in their strategy to emphasise traditional dress in order to be globally perceived as authentic. On the other hand, to be seen as authentic on a local scale brings negativity from non-Indians (Conklin, 1997), and so 'authentic' clothing being an important part of cultural identity is then a disadvantage. To be respected and taken seriously by non-Indians, some native Amazonians adopt western attire. If a community would normally dress traditionally, then the wearing of western clothes to suit non-Indians is as inauthentic as another community dressing authentically to please the typical western view of Amazonian Indians. These two examples show how authenticity is relative: any two native Amazonian communities cannot necessarily be judged in the same way, so they should always be considered in terms of their situation.

Although it is difficult to take in to account the particular circumstances of different groups without first hand experience, it has become far more easily possible through developments in technology and communications. There has been a sudden increase in the awareness of native Amazonians in the last 20 years through developments in technology. As communication systems have advanced and become widely used, a false sense of closeness with other cultures has emerged which wouldn't exist if there were no means to capture and transmit images of indigenous people through the use of video, tape recorders, telephones and the internet. The development of communication has been especially important to Amazonian Indians in their mission to have their own voice heard in the political world, rather than relying on anthropologists and other non-Indians to represent them and protect the environment they live in.

With the introduction of technology such as the tape recorder, the Xavante leader, Mario Jaruna, was able to record government officials' promises and later prove to the press the officials had not fulfilled them. The Xavante's protests with traditional weapons and dress while also using western technology (Conklin and Graham, 1995) served as a symbolic show of the culture of indigenous people, but also a way to get media attention, and ultimately support from benefactors. In the same way that the Kayapó found

a middle ground with environmentalists, the Xavante were successful in finding a middle ground of authenticity – using western technology to their advantage but preserving the difference between themselves and non-Indians through their physical appearance. The Kayapó appealed to a larger audience not because of the way they used the media and press, but due to the public's concern for the environment, hence their reaction to Amazonian Indians was more sympathetic (Conklin and Graham, 1995).

The assumption that Amazonian Indians are friends of the environment and that this comes naturally to them is problematic. Appealing to environmentalism is one of the few options the Indigenous groups have to get their voice heard and their views taken into consideration; this can lead to a situation where Indians allowing and making money from their land being used 'non-green' purposes is seen as hypocritical and gives the impression that Amazonian Indians are deceptive, when they actually had little choice unless they choose not to pressure politicians to give them their own land at all. Conklin (1997) used the example of a Kayapó group who make money by allowing gold mining and timber harvesting on their land (Turner, 1993:535-536). Both mining and logging harm the environment considerably and certainly don't fit into the values of the environmentalists who have worked with Amazonian Indians to protect land from these damaging actions.

Despite a number of reports of Kayapó communities' keenness to produce income from their land by giving contracts to gold miners and logging companies, they are still used as a symbol of authentic rainforest people, an image that is very important in advertising and generating funds for NGOs. Turner (1995) argues The Body Shop gains its most important product from the Kayapó, 'not the oil and bead bracelets they produce, but their photographic images, and reportage about the projects in the media, which serve as free advertising for the company and for which it pays not a penny to the Kayapó'. If the Kayapó are aware of their use in this way, it is likely their apparent authenticity is put on in order to keep the Body Shop trading with them, even though they are not being paid for the product than benefits The Body Shop most.

Jeffrey Ehrenreich (in press) describes how the Awa from East Ecuador 'preserve important traditions, including their language and shamanic practices' by blending in with outsiders and avoiding attention. This requires them to appear to have lost their cultural integrity when their behaviour is in fact a conscious decision to promote the contrary. Contrastingly, leaders of some Indian groups in Brazil have started wearing the traditional native dress when interacting with different communities (Conklin, 1997). Although these behaviours appear opposites if viewed in an entirely superficial way, they

both aim to maintain the cultural traditions of the groups they concern. In the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, authenticity is defined as the 'condition of significant, emotionally appropriate living' and is opposite to inauthenticity, which is 'a state in which life, stripped of purpose and responsibility, is depersonalized and dehumanized'. Although the two ways indigenous groups mentioned preserve culture don't fit perfectly with the definition of authenticity, they are not entirely inauthentic – there is a purpose to their actions.

Ultimately, the middle ground of Amazonian eco-politics refers to the compromise made between indigenous Indians, the domestic politicians (mainly of Brazil), and Western environmentalist values. The connections between the desires of each group is very important in creating the balance that is vital if the goals of all groups are to be achieved.

Whether or not Amazonian Indians are really acting in an authentic way cannot ever be truly known, to say all native Amazonians are either acting authentically or not would be an underestimation of the vast variation between different communities. It is evident, however, that some native Amazonian groups have reverted to a more authentic image as a result of outside influence.

In contrast to the Amazonian Indians' political approach to resisting domination, the Powhatans retaliated violently to the English invasion of their land when, in 1609, Englishmen began to rob and kill Indians (Fausz, 1981). Resisting the English through war was successful in showing the Englishmen that the Powhatans were not prepared to capitulate under their authority. Fausz describes another significant way of resisting that the Powhatans used: their refusal to meet the requirements of the English when allowing the English to live with them and providing children for Christianisation unless they were allowed muskets. Although this refusal was not directly violent, the outcome once the English leaders allowed some Powhatans to possess muskets was. In later years, Opechancanough, the leader of the largest tribe of Powhatans, made plans to deceive the English into trusting them before the 'famous uprising' in 1622 where his warriors 'infiltrated white homesteads without arousing suspicion and managed to kill some 330 people' (Fausz, 1981). There are very few similarities between the resistance of the Powhatans and the native Amazonians, but one is that both are as a result of a threat to their land, which emphasises the importance of this resource to indigenous people and their commitment to defending their territory.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) studied Bedouin women and their resistance to the

men who imposed rules on the women in the community. The women defied the instructions of the men by working together to keep secrets and covering for each other so the men didn't become suspicious. In a way the rebellion of Bedouin women is like the resistance of the native Amazonians as it was covert and operated under the guise of innocence. In the case of the Bedouin women, they hide their disobedience of the men's rules, whereas the native Amazonians are assumed to have concerns for the environment rather than self-centred motives.

Another way of resisting described by Abu-Lughog (1990) is the female Bedouins resistance to getting married. Unlike their secret defiance of men's rules, the men in the community are fully aware of the women's resistance to marriage, and although the men are officially in charge, women's opinions on marriage are not ignored, and they are sometimes able to stop a marriage. The women in the Bedouin community compromise by allowing the men to be involved in the arrangement of their marriages, and only resisting if they disapprove of a particular choice of the men in charge.

This negotiations between the male and female members of the Bedouin community and the Powhatans struggle to fight for their land can be likened to the 'middle ground of Amazonian eco-politics' as all three cases are examples of a compromise between the interests of people involved. Compromise is vital practice; unless it is utilised each group would have little chance of success in achieving their goals.

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