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Book Review

Charlotte Coté, *Spirits of our Whaling Ancestors: Revitalizing Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth Traditions* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), xx + 273 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0-29599-046-0.

During the last few decades we have witnessed two partly interrelated global trends. One is a remarkable revitalization of indigenous cultures; the other is an increasing recognition that local participation is vital in natural resource management in order to secure sustainability. Moreover, international reports such as *Our Common Future* (1987), *Caring for the Earth* (1991), and *Agenda 21* (1992) stress the principle of self-determination: people should be allowed to exploit the resources on their own premises as long as this does not put the resources in jeopardy. Nonetheless, the rights of indigenous peoples have repeatedly been sacrificed in order to protect resources that do not need such protection from an ecological point of view. Some resources are apparently different from others. One such resource is whales. And two peoples who have been denied their rights to whale are the closely related Makah (in the State of Washington) and the Nuu-chah-nulth (previously called Nootka) on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

The book under review addresses both these trends, although the former more explicitly than the latter. Charlotte Coté—associate professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Washington—invites the readers into her home. Born and raised as a member of the Tseshaht First Nation, one of 15 Nuu-chah-nulth groups, she aims to explain 'how reviving our whaling tradition has cultural, social, and spiritual significance and will affirm our identities as whaling people, enriching and strengthening our communities by reinforcing a sense of cultural pride' (p. 6).

This ancient whaling culture (summarized in Chapter 1) came under pressure with the arrival of commercial whalers who almost wiped out the stocks of grey and humpback whales along the coast, putting an end to indigenous whaling in the 1920s (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3 she argues that despite the interruption of whaling, both the Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth maintained strong cultural links with their whaling past. Therefore, when the grey whale in 1994 was taken off the endangered list (as the stock had recovered completely) the Makah applied for a whale quota (although this was strictly speaking not necessary as their right to hunt whales is enshrined in their treaty from 1855) and caught a whale in 1999 (Chapter 4). This was achieved despite strong opposition mostly from animal rights groups (Chapter 5), who subsequently allied themselves with right-wing politicians to combat the resumption of whaling in courts. Provoked by this foot-dragging tactic five Makah men 'illegally' caught another whale in 2007, for which they were sentenced in court (Chapter 6).

Chapters 1 through 6 chronicle both the whaling experience and the injustices inflicted on the Makah and the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples by the hands of the whites. Although much of this was known before, Coté does us a great favor by bringing the

story together under one cover. Her personal and engaging writing style serves her purpose well, which is to explain and defend her people's rights to whale to an often hostile social environment. In this endeavor Chapter 3 stands out from the rest.

Anti-whalers argue that the Northwest Coast whaling culture died with whaling in the 1920s and that people have survived without whale meat since then. In their view there is thus no need to resume whaling. Coté stresses in Chapter 3, on the other hand, that their whaling does more than bring nutritious food on the table. Whaling holds an important role in their creation myths and provides the people with a rich repertoire of material for naming both places and people, for mythmaking and story-telling, for songs and rituals, as well as for creating art. There are thus important cultural and psychological needs connected to whaling activities. She argues convincingly that their whaling culture never ended with the whaling operations in the 1920s. On the contrary, many aspects of their whaling tradition have been maintained and continue to inform their cultural identity.

It may be naïve to ask why they need to resume whaling now when their whaling culture has survived for 70 years without such activities. This is the subject of the final chapter. The simple answer is food and health. Indigenous peoples, and the Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth are no exceptions, suffer from comparatively poor health and low life expectancy rate attributed to changing eating patterns. A return to traditional food, i.e. healthy whale meat, will alleviate this problem. Her more complex answer is to restore society. As Coté writes, 'traditional food is sacred and has a spiritual connection to the world we live in' (p. 198). Food is at the core of their culture. Producing and consuming their own food and not being told by outsiders what to eat is not only a human right, but bears on their identity, self-respect, and life purpose. To resume whaling thus has important cultural, social, and spiritual implications.

This is a very personal account, at times almost an autobiography. This is both a strength and a weakness. Its strength is that we get to know these people and their innermost feelings and aspirations. One of its weaknesses is the lack of theoretical and methodological rigor. Coté's study invites a comparative approach but she seems to have no ambitions to address more general theoretical issues. But her book provides other researchers with an excellent source for comparative research, and for this service she is to be applauded.

Another minor weakness is that she glosses over internal conflicts. We are presented with a conflict between First Nations and encroaching whites. This is in a way understandable, but in an academic publication it is less than satisfying. We are told that a few Makah opposed the resumption of whaling, and we are likewise told that the Nuu-chah-nulth groups chose different strategies during their negotiation with Canadian authorities, but we are not told how and why. The result is a somewhat romantic view of society.

These minor shortcomings aside, this is a book that deserves to be read by many, particularly students of indigenous peoples, students of environmental issues, and not least a general audience who may wish to make up their own minds on this hotly contested issue.

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