Chasing Whales with Bateson and Daniel

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1 Capturing Whales and Whalers

It is early morning in the small village of Lajes do Pico (Azores, Portugal) and one can still feel the cooling effects of the ocean breeze. The sun will soon scald the black lava-shelf that forms the village’s southwestern shore. In the torpor of the summer’s blazing humidity, the people of Lajes will head out to their daily jobs. For now, all is quiet. One can hear the sound of small waves crushing in the distance and birds chirping as they leave their nests. In the air there is a wonderfully pleasant smell of ocean mist and incense trees.

All of a sudden, a rocket goes off echoing through the mountain cliff that frames the northeastern side of Lajes. It is a sign that a whaler (the vigia) has spotted whales from a lookout up in the hill. Many more rockets follow. After a few minutes, the first three men come running down the village. They are barefoot, and hastily pulling on their sweaters. Stern faces glow with excitement. Baleia! Baleia! they shout. Many other men show up also running in the direction of the pier, followed by women who carry baskets with provisions and extra clothing for the men. They arrive at the pier warehouses and pull out beautiful sailing canoes; each designed to fit a crew of seven. They launch them into the water, tie them to the motorboat that will tow them out to sea and jump in. They are off to hunt and kill the Baleia.

From the hill, the vigia uses a radio to direct the skippers of the engine boat towards the whale that he can see through his binoculars. After forty minutes of navigating, the whale hunters are within a short distance of their prey. The canoes are released; the whalers pull the sails up. When they can hear the whales breathe, they pull down the sail and get ready to make a final approach. The captain of the canoe yells out instructions to the remaining six men. Row strong! Harpooner, get ready, she is going to be ours! There is frenzy aboard the small canoe, though every man knows exactly what to do, and when.

They are now parallel with the whale. She breathes fast as she senses the approaching canoe, wondering if it is friend or foe. The harpooner stands at the prow, harpoon in hand. He throws his weapon so that it will pierce the lungs of the colossal shimmering animal. A perfect blow. The entire body of the surprised whale shakes in woe. Her head lifts up slightly as she cuts the waves. Her body arches. It arches again. With a final noble bow her royal figure sinks into the great deep blue.

The harpooner jumps back into the bottom of the canoe, and feeds out the harpoon rope from its circular layers in a bucket through the prow. It’s traveling so fast that he must pour water constantly on the rope so that it does not catch on fire. Some twenty minutes later pulling on the rope abates. It is loose and floating on the water. Then the whale emerges from the depths of the ocean to lie tired and wounded on the surface, not far from the canoe, floating in a puddle of blood. The whalers move in slowly until they are once more right beside her and pierce her several times with a lance, hoping to reach the heart. They move away until she is motionless.

Now dying, the whale’s body enters a state of convulsion. She bends and stretches, her tail alternates between moving gently in the air, almost stopping in that position, splashing heavily into the water, and back into the air to start drawing another circle of throes. Gradually, all movement subsides, except for some tenuous breathing. The whalers move back for a final blow with the lance, and wait.

In her last moments of agony, the whale turns sideways and stretches her flipper towards the sky as her head turns in the direction of the sun. Softly, the flipper comes to rest on the whale’s body. Her jaw drops open. There isn’t a sound to be heard or a motion to be seen. The whale is dead. The men are still shaking in a mixture of fear and excitement. In the canoe a young boy’s eyes outshine those of his shipmates. Daniel, a 14 year old who finally saw his life long dream come true (Wolf 1972).

When I met Daniel, he was forty-three years old. He had not hunted a whale since he was fifteen years old, and he now worked as skipper for a whale watching firm. Every time he talked about whales, his eyes still shone as much as on the day of that first whale-hunting trip. Like many other Lajence men, Daniel had killed whales as a necessity for the survival of his family. Though he could not exactly put it into words for outsiders, Daniel was cognizant that there was much more to the hunting of whales than the satisfaction of his family’s needs. As a whale hunter, Daniel knew of a connection between the whalers, the ocean, the whales, all the living animals, and all the people he had ever encountered. Being out in the ocean with whales is all he wished to do.

2 Chasing Whales

Awareness and responsiveness to the pattern which connects is, I believe, at the core of Bateson’s understanding and use of the term aesthetics. A similar conceptualization of aesthetics can be found amongst former whale hunters in the Azores. Indeed, whalers often express the aesthetics of whale hunting in ways so compelling, that even the coldest listener would not be able to avoid recognizing affinity between what they hear and their own experiences of similar moments of responsiveness to heartbeats that are not their own. People don’t hunt whales anymore in Pico. Now they do whale watching instead. This is supposed to be informed by deeper ecological knowledge. Some of my whale hunter friends would question that, as indeed they have. They tell me, no one loves a whale as much as a whale hunter, and add that the people in the new whale watching business haven’t yet gotten the point of what being out there with a whale is all about. Daniel wanted the whole world to know what it means to be a whaler. Instead, he was accused of being a murderer of cetaceans.

The harpooner stands at the prow of the canoe, left foot on a bench-board, left knee partly bent, the opposite leg solidly supported by the right foot which is secured at the bottom of the canoe. His right palm holds the lower end of the harpoon for thrust while his left hand supports the inner-middle part of the weapon for direction. This posture perfectly adapted to his impending purpose. Unless something were to go terribly wrong, a good harpooner would never strike until his body is one with the bouncing canoe, and both the canoe and the whale move side by side, riding the waves in symmetrical harmony. A whale can only be killed by another whale. In any other circumstance it is butchery.

The harpoon flies through the air following a perfect parabola as planned by the whale hunter, passing from the canoe’s prow, to the whale’s body. As the harpoon cuts the air it produces a sharp sound of wind. It pierces the whale with the sound of thickness giving into sharpness. There is always a moment of eternity right after, where the shadows of what just happened carry on.

Now with both hands on his knees, breathing with some difficulty, the harpooner is invaded by an overwhelmingly intense range of emotions – happiness, fear, pain, exhilaration. The whale’s throe is the whaler’s agony. Each painful movement of the giant’s body is felt by the whaler’s aching bones. Every time the whale’s tail crushes into the water the whaler’s heart shatters and sinks. When finally the whale’s small flipper comes to rest, the whaler chinchis his jaw and looks fixedly at the star of the whale’s last wish. The whale is dead, the whaler is mortified.
And yet, it is at this very moment where life and death meet, that the whaler glimpses the sublime and senses it with all his being. He becomes aware that he feels the living unity of self-whale-surrounding, and suddenly, if for a fleeting instant, he realizes that all the pain and suffering he has ever endured in his life, all the good and happy moments he has lived, without his entire existence, is justified in the beauty of a mortal whale. Whalers are not addicted to slaughtering whales. They long for the transformed understanding they get from responding to the pattern that connects them to the whale, to each other, to the Ocean, to the people of Lajes, and to the island of Pico. For a whaler of Lajes, it is a fundamental truth that ‘nobody loved a whale more than a whale hunter’. For them, this truth is sacred.

The first sperm whale I saw was a disappointment. I had for long heard about the special connection that is said to exist naturally between humans and cetaceans. I had even secretly hoped that an encounter with the big headed physiologist might afford me a peek into the sublime as the great stories of whalers seemed to indicate was possible. I would have been content with receiving a fraction of the divine wisdom that these animals are supposed to embody. Instead, I could hardly recognize a whale in the greyish-brown mass that was breathing not far from the zodiac that zipped me over to it in less than 30 minutes: not without causing some bruising to my legs as I held on for dear life while seated in this thing correctly called zodiac, as it is certainly neither boat, ship, nor canoe.

More and more similar looking whales, many more minutes over choppy waters, and my desire for the sublime had been substituted by an overwhelming urge to feed all the fish in the ocean. I thus found myself occupied on the wrong side of the zodiac, when the whale fluked. As it turned out, the most sublime moment of that day took place after I finally set foot on shore once again, and dragged myself to the Moby Dick coffee-bar right in the center of Lajes, so that I could have a sip of bottled water. I was resting at the Moby Dick when Daniel, the whale hunter, arrived to ask me about my impressions of my first whale watching trip. I knew Daniel well enough to owe him the truth. I told him about my limitation. He offered to take me out and teach me about whales, with the condition that I followed this rule: stop trying to locate the beauty of the whale and instead just enjoy the whole of the experience.

Just like his ancestors, he became a whale hunter. He was a very skilled whaler in spite of his small, frail stature, simultaneously fearless and gentle in his approach to whales. He was recognized by all as master at being in-tune with whales and their behavior. Later, as a whale watching skipper, Daniel had a unique ability to touch people, especially the many recurring clients, with his deep aesthetic appreciation of whales. Those traveling with Daniel could simply not escape acquiring some practical knowledge of whales, and ultimately, like him, end up loving these great mammals. Daniel had hunted whales until this activity became illegal. He had seen the end of whale hunting with great sadness and a sense of personal loss. He identified deeply with whales, and without the possibility of going out to ocean to be with them, he had felt параметры.

The day Daniel was asked to become a skipper for a whale-watching firm he felt some of the joy that he had felt when he went on his first whale-hunting trip. When I first met Daniel I immediately noticed a spark in his eyes while he talked about whales. I had never seen such light in the eyes of whale watching skippers who had not been whale hunters.

Daniel saw his role of whale watching skipper as entailing the responsibility to provide people with a whale watching experience whereby they might begin to understand whale hunters and appreciate whales. On the days he was scheduled to go out on a trip, he would get up even earlier than usual, to make sure he cleaned the already spotless boat one more time, and that all was in order for navigation. He bought refreshments for clients, prepared for fighting dehydration for cases of seasickness. Unlike many other commercially oriented skippers of whale watching businesses, his main goal during a trip was not to assure good ‘photographic’ moments, but to make sure people were comfortable on the boat, so that they might concentrate on observing whales.

For him this meant something much different from the usual rapid gaze followed by a brief explanation of the biology of whales. Instead, Daniel took his time, directing people’s attention towards ‘details’ that might otherwise go unnoticed by clients. With the engines barely audible, if at all, Daniel would almost whisper ‘listen to her breath… puff… puff… puff… feel the rhythm of this sound’. He would then make people aware of distinct patterns of breathing and explain which ones meant the whale was relaxed, nervous, tired, or simply resting. Daniel was most upset, angry even, when he encountered whales that had been frightened by other whale watching skippers and for this reason were taking short, rapid breaths or otherwise behaving erratically. Though he was generally a very quiet and gentle man, the few times I saw him verbally and loudly express any feelings were either on occasions or when he was excitedly talking about whale watching and the beauty of whales at the local cafes after returning to shore.

On other occasions, Daniel would draw the attention of clients to the whale’s eyes: “Look at those eyes, she is looking right back at us, trying to figure out what we are about, if we are friendly or not. We must not disturb her, she is in her home and it is an honor for us to be here, not a right”. Other times the focus was on the whale’s body, its size, how it moves after the hump, how whales moved their heads up and down, slowly, rhythmically, as they pushed forward creating little waves at regular intervals which produced a hypnotic lapping sound because of the way they were paced.

Eventually there came a moment when Daniel would yell ‘attention now, she is going to show us her fluke… look… head in water once… she is getting ready… head in water twice, deeper this time… and now, now she will go”. On the boat people observed, motionless and holding their breaths, as the whale arched, showing her body from the hump to the beginning of the tail. The louder sound of water moving against its body and, finally, the fluke starting to emerge, slowly again, stretching from a perfect arch to a vertical line where it seemed to stay for a few seconds soon after to disappear under the water. This was followed by total silence as Daniel often stood there, with tears in his eyes, happy for having shown what he knew to be the most beautiful thing that existed. I began to learn.

3 Aesthetics, Epistemology, and Anthropological Representation

The whalers of the Azores knew sperm whales by engaging in a multilevel process of communication with these mammals (i.e. part-whole relationships). For the duration of the hunting trip, whalers in the canoe aimed to act in unison among themselves as well as with the whale. In the Azores a successful whale hunt depended on effective communication between hunters and their prey. The whalers had to be aware of feedback loops between hunters themselves and their prey as these unfolded recursively through time. The canoes were fragile and difficult to maneuver, easily overturned at the slightest communicational failure with deadly consequences for the whalers. From the moment the whaling canoe and its crew met the whale, until they tugged it back to shore, the whalers were constantly adjusting their behavior to responses from the whale, which in turn caused the whale to respond either in ways that encouraged the whalers to carry on (e.g. the whale sensing the canoe thrusts its body forward, while remaining parallel to the canoe) or in ways that discouraged them to proceed (e.g. the whale changing its course). The successful whale hunt, therefore, acquired through awareness and responsiveness, a certain aesthetic quality, which is developed through aesthetics. As Bateson so poignantly tells us, human capacity for successful communication with non-human species cannot be achieved by means of dualistic Cartesian premises. A human appreciation of its place within the “natural order” requires an aesthetic understanding of relation, which is premised on an epistemology of holism.

The price for failing to recognize the multilevel-ness of phenomena, as for example by conflating the whale and the human, is the creation of all sorts of deterministic ‘reductionism’. This is the case of Melville’s Moby Dick, where the whale is treated as having simply human attributes. In this context, it is assumed that the whale, or ‘nature’, ‘behaves’ in accordance to human logic and motivations, while at the same time failing to realize that human logic and motivations are always historically situated within socio-cultural formations. Thus ‘nature’ is seen as possessing all kinds of human intentionality such as the desire for vengeance, the competition for resources, the desire for dominance over, the desire for prey. This way, the whale hunter, at least anything that is not a project of Ahab’s self. Ahab commits the epistemological sin that leads to his downfall and ultimately to the destruction of the Pequod and its crew.

Amongst other problems, conflation of the kind ‘humans are whales’, renders communication impossible because in the absence of perceptions of difference one has no means of knowing about this relation. Consequently, without the capacity for knowing about this relation, it becomes very difficult to consider the extent to which the interaction is either beneficial or detrimental. There is also a risk that intra-human relations come to be modeled from a crude understanding of what is natural. One way to prevent this is by mistaking ‘whale for human’, where the whale (or at a more general level ‘nature’) is turned into the transcendental projection of the worst qualities of humanity which are then projected back onto the whale to respond either in ways that encouraged the whalers to carry on (e.g. the whale sensing the canoe thrusts its body forward, while remaining parallel to the canoe).
The pattern that connects the whales of Pico to the sperm whales of Lajes, and with the oceanic environment surrounding the island, is premised on its close relation to an epistemology of holism, and emerges at the perceptual level through the bodily-sensory exchange of information between humans and whales. It also emerges at the level of gestalt such that through the interaction of hunting the whales can recognize themselves in the whole, including bodily processes, structures, and sensations (e.g. pain) and emotions (e.g. fear). This constitutes a process of intra-species and cross-species communication whereby whales engage in the discovery of differences and similarities between whale and whalers and discover relationally what it is to be a whaler (elsewhere I explain how it also includes whalers’ participation within the socio-cultural world of the village of Lajes; see Neves-Graca 2002). For the whalers of Lajes this pattern is sacred (Neves-Graca 2005). Rather than being construed as a transcendental order, this sacredness resides in the awareness that the pattern is immanent in whaler engagement within the world of which they are part. Hence sacredness is the acknowledgement of unity in the form of ‘spreading around knowledge’ of difference rather than the alternative – putting fragments of their knowledge into some form of scientific or political unity, a tactic employed by the elites in the Azores. (see Neves-Graca 2002 for an ethnographic discussion of these processes). By this I mean that from the whales’ perspective it is reductionist to express their aesthetic world of unity through an analysis of dissection of whaling practices, so cutting their understanding into fragments and abstracting these fragments to pronounce (in a supposedly objective fashion) upon the whales’ world. As the whalers told me, “it turns the word whale into less than what it is, it turns our relations with whales into a mystery, and our religious practices into superstition”. This is the case when the ‘killer’ dimension of the word whale (which for a whale is but a small part of the story) is taken to represent the whole of whaling: whales are then reduced to inhuman murderers of cetacea. Another form of reductionism took place in Lajes do Pico when the local intellectual and political elites attempted to ‘objectify’ the identity of the people of the entire village as having whaling as fixed ontology. When Daniel insisted in his need for ‘the whole world to know what it means to be a whaler’, he meant to evoke the whole continuum between whale and whale in Lajes do Pico.

Inspired by Bateson, I have approached aesthetics as responsiveness to the pattern that connects. Aesthetics is always about relationships. Whether the case in point be whale aesthetics or whether it be anthropological representation: even denial of connection is done in relational contexts. Ecological aesthetics in particular can never be about the detached appreciation of arbitrarily dissected and located aspects of part-whole relations (as in whale watching and its effort to ‘see’ how beautiful whales are). As the Azorean material shows, it is through interaction-comparison that a whaler recognizes himself in that with which he interacts, while at the same time he recognizes the differences that make him a part of a whole. It is by means of this process that the whaler becomes aware of pattern that links him to other whales and humans, to sperm whales, to the environments of Lajes. Whale aesthetics entail an holistic epistemology which focuses on part-whole. It is by means of this process that the whaler becomes aware of the pattern that links him to other whales and humans, to sperm whales and to the environment of Lajes.

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**WORKS CITED**


**FOOTNOTES**

a. Baleia is the Portuguese word for whale.

b. It is important to note, that I use the word similarity to refer to “a Gestalt principle of organization holding that (other things being equal) parts of a stimulus field that are similar to each other tend to be perceived as belonging together as a unit”. See WordNet ® 2.0, © 2003 Princeton University.

**NOTES**

1. Later in this paper it will become evident, that this is very much in tune with how the whalers talked about themselves in relation to sperm whales and the oceanic environment in which the two met, as well as about their knowledge of whales and their environment. Translating into academic parlance, the whaler’s theory of ecological knowledge (epistemology) was posited on the premise that ecological knowledge can only be acquired through practical engagement with the whales and the oceanic environment of Lajes, and that this practical engagement entails cross-species communication which requires awareness and responsiveness of the pattern which connects (aesthetics). After all, even the Azorean whalers which I represent in this article had to face the issue of relating aesthetic responsiveness to representation when their environment of Lajes, and that this practical engagement entails cross-species communication which requires awareness and responsiveness of the pattern which connects (aesthetics). More to the point though, these stories were woven together in reference to a large range of elements from hunting whales to the narration of emotions and feelings the non-whaling population knew from other contexts. The whalers were very aware of the pattern that connected them to their relatives, friends, and humans in general – not only of their relation to whales.

2. On another level of communication, the whale hunters of Lajes interacted with the oceanic environment of Lajes to determine when and where the whales were more likely to be spotted, and yet at another level, the whalers made sure that their hunting activities would not affect the thresholds within which a whale population can survive. Another level, with a distinct temporal scope, occurred as the ecological knowledge of the whalers was passed on, and transmitted, from one generation to another out in the ocean hunting whales, within whalers’ homes, through story telling, within the village and its annual whalers ritual, and within the context of shifting regional, national, and international markets for the allocation of whale-related products (see Neves-Graca 2002; 2004) for a more detailed discussion of these distinct levels of communication at their temporalities.

3. Additional amplification of this kind of constellation may thus lead to other forms of ‘upward reductionism’ whereby parts of the whole of the interaction and communication are removed from context such that the part ends up standing for the whole. A classical example is the transformation of Darwin’s notion of competition and the survival of the fittest. It can be argued that it entails a projection of liberal principles into creatura within the context of the paradigm shift in which Darwinism emerges. Darwin’s notion of the survival of the fittest was understood as a ‘force’ behind evolution (which in itself has been critiqued as reductionist), and later again abstracted and projected back to economics as an invisible hand akin to God (and hence, not to be tampered with), ultimately accepted by most of us as an inescapable reality on which we ‘have’ to build our lives.


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