



Healing and the Land: Cultural Perspectives on Health and Environment. The Case of Aboriginal Australia

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ABSTRACT

In this article, it is questioned whether and how cultural values and ideas play a role in influencing the ways in which we, as humans, behave towards nature, and how then we end up shaping it differently; this is done by bringing at first the instance of “Western” conceptions on the environment from the 17th century onwards. The centre of this issue is mainly developed around how different ways of treating the environment affect people’s wellbeing, and specifically it is brought the example of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, with regard to their experiences during and after colonization. Colonizers, in fact, imposed on Aboriginal communities different ways of living within the environment and also of dealing with health and sickness, causing disrupting consequences for the native peoples’ wellbeing and also for the environment’s one, that ended up being differently managed. Specifically, it is presented the example of the customary use of fire among Aboriginal communities, utilized as a way to take care of the land, a behaviour that positively affects peoples’ lives and wellbeing too. In this way, it is emphasized the positive role that humans can play in shaping a healthy environment when they assume particular behaviours related to specific values and ideas (the example of totemism within First Australians is also reported), while at the same time they can be a negative and dangerous influence, in case they value nature as a mere resource, or as a domain to be kept apart from humans.

Introduction

The influence that the environment has on our health, represents new hints from which it is possible to approach both fields, the environmental and the medical one. There are various disciplines that are addressing these issues from new perspectives, like that of environmental health, which promotes human wellbeing, by focusing also on ecological balance and healthy environments. Especially since the First Industrial Revolution, the acknowledgement of the impacts of human activities on the environment and their consequences on human health, had represented a slow start into a change of perspective around these topics. A series of posterior events - included the Second Industrial Revolution, the Second World War, the increased use in chemicals and pesticides, the rise of environmental movements, and of new disciplines that started to put at their centre the environment, such as environmental economics – contributed to the reinforcement of these ideas. There is also a new paradigm that generated around these issues: “One Health”, an approach jointly developed by FAO, OIE, and WHO, that has the main aim of advancing practices for better public health able to consider everything present in the environment, including the environment itself, and in this way getting out of the individual body perspective. Its representative symbol is a circle that depicts “Healthy People” – “Healthy Environments” – “Healthy

Animals” (Fig. 1).

Much of the material that can be found about the One Health paradigm presents a deep focus on the infectious diseases’ control and prevention, and on the zoonoses (animal borne infectious diseases) that, due to the increasing human population that leads to the consequent inhabitation of a large amount of natural spaces, poses more frequent risks to the elevated contact between humans and animals. Nonetheless, this approach is developing also in other branches, like food safety, diseases related to climate change and rising temperatures, pollution, but also to the health issues that might derive from socio – economic disparities, that is from the social environment (which can include the availability and possibility of access to health and public services); in this regard, it relates also to the numerous hazards that impact differently people in poorer countries compared to those living in richer ones, as well as individuals in the same society, that can have diverse possibilities and life’s standards. The main goal of this paradigm, then, aims not only to an improvement in humans’ wellbeing, but also to an implementation of strategies in order to have mutual benefits both for humans and for non – humans and their environments, that is to research on a balance between ecosystems and human lives.

The field of environmental health has developed new perspectives also on the positive role that the environment can play in influencing human wellbeing, for which living in healthy environments, with an exposure to clean air, clean water, access to food, and availability of natural spaces, all represent an asset to human physical and mental wellbeing: “[...] we need a research agenda directed not only at exposures we suspect to be unhealthy, but also at those we suspect to be healthy, and at outcomes that reflect not only impaired health, but also enhanced health [...]” (Frumkin 2001: 238). Generally then, when talking about environmental health, we need to consider not only the negative and dangerous effects of the health hazards¹, that can affect people exposed to a badly damaged environment, but also the positive outcomes of living in healthy environments, and not just that: at the same time, in fact, it’s also important to consider that humans themselves, when in contact with nature, can bring positive changes to it, by monitoring, curing, saving and implementing strategies to preserve and enrich the environment they live in. In fact, by quoting Seddon: “[...] we are not always despoilers. We can also be creative” (Seddon, G. 1997: 112). Do cultural values and ideas influence whether we tend to be despoilers or creative?

The core of this article regards health and environment approached from the perspective of culture, and it will focus on the relations that humans can entertain with those two variables: specifically, it will refer to the analysis of the encounter between different cultural concepts of land and of the environment that happened in Australia during and after colonization, from the late 18th century to the present day. Indeed, the colonizers imposed a different land’s perception compared to that of the various Aboriginal communities², and this had effects not only on the environment itself, that

1 Yassi et al. (2001) talk about «health hazards» that can be divided between hazards caused by natural factors, which have always existed, and those caused by human actions – by technological and industrial development, that by modifying the natural environment play an important role into human lives too: these last hazards can also include factors such as light, noise and safety of the surrounding social environment.

2 I acknowledge that talking about “Western” on one side, and “Aboriginal” on the other, it’s a generalization: “Generalizations about Aboriginality can obscure the fact that there are many Aboriginalities. [...] Generalizations about non-Aboriginality can conceal the great differences between first- and sixth-generation Australians, and between immigrants from England, southern Europe and South-East Asia” (Cameron, J. 2003: 187 – 188). For this reason, I find important to justify the use I made of some words: throughout this article, when I mention a general “we”, “us” or when I talk about “Western”, I do it in order to refer to the main philosophical, historical and scientific trends risen in Europe especially from the 16th – 17th centuries onwards – and that quickly expanded elsewhere through colonization for instance – that have characterized centuries crucial to the development of key ideas that are at the base of the thought formation and of the institutional approaches which influenced our education under many aspects. However, I would like

ended up being differently managed, but also on the wellbeing of most of the Aboriginal peoples, that, besides, had been subjected to different ways of dealing with health and sickness.

As a practical and contemporary example of how different cultural values affect land management, and how this comes to condition peoples' wellbeing, it will be introduced the practice of traditional customary use of fire among Aboriginal communities in Australia. This will also result to be explicative of how during colonization, different ways of managing the environment had been naturally and culturally imposed on Aboriginal peoples, with consequences that have been affecting also the nowadays clashes when it comes to land rights, co – management of protected areas and natural reserves, and, more generally, environment and health related issues. Protection and enhancement of land can in fact be intended in different ways according to different cultural and social settings, and they end up shaping the environment differently, causing also wanted or unwanted effects on people's health.

Well, we had six hundred dialects in Australia. [...] And that means [that] there were six hundred communities. And those six hundred communities had a responsibility in their area, to manage the land. And, what we call cool burning, cool burning is done in the winter time mainly, and that burns enough not killing the animals, it's taken into consideration that, with the cool burn, when the migrating creatures went migrating, then the[y] cool burn, so that only the underneath, the canopy of the trees would burn out. It didn't burn above the tree [...], no fire would have reached that high... it was done by what we call cool burning. And, it was done in a way, that you knew where the fire was gonna go. [...] what we call a section, like a section that we would burn, like, it would be like... in sections, but wasn't general. Fire didn't go and take everything. [...] So that's how we managed the earth. It was burnt for the rejuvenation, that would rejuvenate the forest, in fact it was healthy, it was a healthy forest to be burnt, and burnt in a proper manner. So that, so the trees and leaves and then, plants would need a fire to propagate. By that sort of heat and fire, proper management, for burning sections. So, just a way it was the whole... you can imagine six hundred communities throughout Australia, doing the same thing as I said in the appropriate times. And that kept people and land healthy, and kept getting rid of toxic weeds, and those things that came to this country brought by European[s] (Uncle Ossie³, 28th July 2020).

In this excerpt of interview, the issue of the recent bushfires that hit Australia between 2019 and 2020 is presented, especially in the optic of the cool burning practices, that are part of the traditional ways of dealing with the land of most of the Aboriginal communities living in Australia. The actions that people, individually and as a group, undertake with regards to the environment, mirror the ideas and the values that they have about it. According to different societies and cultures, in fact, and more specifically regarding peoples' and groups' social, economic and religious conditions, the ways in which people live the environment, and how they define sustainability are multiple: in this way, we

to restate that I acknowledge that, if not properly explained, it is just a dangerous generalization that risks to include in one word different economic, cultural, social and religious conditions that keep changing and that keep contributing to the creation of new "Wests". The same discourse can be done also for the word "Aboriginal", since Aboriginal communities, tribes and groups in Australia differentiate in social, geographical, cultural and linguistical terms. I will use it by making reference to the areas where I mostly conducted my research, which are in New South Wales and Victoria, and I will utilize it in a way that implies the diversity and the plurality of the communities (by using, for instance, "Aboriginal peoples", "First Australians", and "Aboriginal communities" or "clans", this last one to refer to the smaller unit within a community). These generalizations then, they are done in a way to refer to general concepts that are usually broadly accepted from the "two" sides, and that treat about themes and world views that can be more relatable to one or the other.

3 Uncle Ossie is part of the Yuin – Monaro Nation, and he is a long – term advocate of Indigenous Rights in local, national and international spheres. The terms "Uncle" and "Auntie" are used among Aboriginal peoples, as a way to show respect, then referring to the Elders, those people considered to have a wide knowledge of traditional values and an active engagement into their group. I asked and I was given permission by my interlocutors to address them in this way.

could talk about “many natures” that are formed by multiple cultures and by multiple cultural ways of shaping nature – against the typical perspective “one nature – multiple cultures”. So, how is the case that the environment can be shaped differently according to peoples’ ideas? There are some values, ideas and beliefs, that trigger in humans different responses to the environment, different behaviours and also different ways in which to see themselves in their role of “humans” within that environment.

In the first part of this article, there will be a brief analysis of some of the main concepts that had been formed around nature from the XVII century onwards, in a “Western” perspective; then, it will be represented how these concepts got exported in different natural, cultural and social settings through colonization, and the encounter with different local ideas around them; lastly, the practical example regarding the recent bushfires, with reference to the Aboriginal traditional burning practices and to the values and ideas that hide behind these behaviours (like totemism), will be the centre of the last part, that will also reconnect to the influences that the environment can have on health (and that our ideas about health can have on the environment).

An anthropocentric vision of the environment

Let us first start with the word “environment” itself: it comes from the French *environ*, “surrounding”, implying the idea of something that is external, around us. Mühlhäusler and Peace (2006: 458) have defined it as «an anthropocentric notion» in itself, since it came to identify that nature mainly important to human beings, and for this reason it is contrasted with the word “nature” itself.

It seems that the word “environment” was used for the first time around the 17th century, right before the period that we refer to as Enlightenment. The 17th and 18th centuries saw the decisive passage from theocentrism to anthropocentrism, and the concepts of progress and development started to be part of the current mode of thinking human life on Earth. This was also thanks to the progress made by science (e.g. Newton and Copernic) that contributed to the establishment of a new relationship between humans and nature – this last one being perceived as an objective order structured by universal laws. Science then became the subject whose means was the objective knowledge of the world and its laws, and whose goal was the dominion by men on it (Andreozzi 2011: 101).

The 17th century is also the period when nature became an important part central to various disciplines, but being mainly seen still in the perspective of “natural resource”, as something that could serve humans and had to be exploited for humans’ purposes. In this regard, Latour said that already in the 17th century, economists considered nature in their studies, but taking it “as a mere ‘factor in production’, a resource that was precisely *external, indifferent to our actions*, grasped from *afar*, as if by *foreigners* pursuing goals that were *indifferent* to the Earth” [emphasis in original] (Latour 2018: 74). As expressed by Viveiros de Castro, humans (in some specific contexts like in this one analysed here) have followed a path in which they emerged from their animal status and from the biological world, in order to return into it as masters. After the Industrial transitions (both the one that happened in the second half of the 18th century, and that one that reached its peak at the end of the 19th century), the main ideas associated with it in the countries majorly exposed to this change, were related to an extreme confidence “in human ability to solve all problems and exploit natural resources for own benefits, regardless of the consequences” (Bennett 2002: 14). Even in the artistic field, with the development of the three dimensions perspective, typical of the Renaissance art, “nature becomes a quantifiable, three – dimensional universe appropriated by humans. [...] Nature becomes then objective, so that ‘she’ becomes ‘it’, and ‘it’ can be understood and controlled” (Pálsson 1996: 66). The prevailing ideas then regarded those of simplification and control that could be held over the land, in order to maintain a

powerful position towards nature and towards the people living in a specific territory.

Between the end of the 18th and the start of the 19th centuries, the environment started to be approached in a different way, at least in the literate and the artistic field – that are the domains from which culture and ideas are generated. In fact, it was characterized mostly by a disenchantment towards the human power to reign over the environment, and there was a rising feeling of fear towards a nature that had become “wilderness”. If nature before was mainly seen as a place from which to take the maximum in terms of resources, in that moment it became mostly understood as a domain opposite to that of humans, an empty space where no human action should be involved. We can say then that wilderness was considered the real nature, while natural resources were still regarded as part of the civilized world, in their role of serving humans’ needs.

In this period, Romanticism, the natural world became something to be admired and respected, but at the same time it was still regarded as a separate sphere, distant from the world where humans live. That incomprehensible wilderness, so vast, dangerous and beautiful at the same time, those immense landscapes that evoked the idea of the “sublime”, in front of which humans felt powerless and like a grain of sand, represented a break that people could take from their urban daily lives, from the “civilized” world. Romanticism can also be considered as a reaction to the increased industrialization and urbanization, against which philosophers, writers and painters praised nature in its shapes and perfection, in an attempt to distance themselves from their urban lives.

It’s clear that in both these examples, we have a concept of the environment that either has to be exploited for its resources, or that has to be exclusively admired and protected. And, in both cases, it’s regarded as something external, incapable of any reciprocal (and two – ways) interaction with humans.

Pálsson (1996) gave a name to these two different behaviours. One is “orientalism”, which implies the pure exploitation of nature, while the second is “paternalism”, whose main characteristic is the protection of it. What is important to notice here, as Pálsson (1996: 66) underlines, is that in both cases, despite having two totally different goals, humans are depicted as the “masters of nature.” The main vocabulary that refers to the former includes words such as “domestication, frontiers and expansion” (Pálsson 1996: 68). In the second definition, we can talk about the rights of the environment, but this is meant in the way that “humans act on behalf of nature” (Pálsson 1996: 70), so still having a different kind of power over it. “Humans exploit and degrade, but they also conserve and protect” (Bennett 2002: 13), and both actions can empower them in different ways. Pálsson adds then a third variable totally different from the previous ones, which is “communalism”, that does not have implicit in it the separation between nature and culture because it implies reciprocity and a dialogic relationship – and he also relates this kind of relationship to that between anthropologists and the peoples they study (Pálsson 1996: 72 – 73).

Ironically, what capitalism destroys, Western culture personifies as precious: ‘romantic constructions of nature accompany its systematic plunder, exoticism serves exploitation; romance and rapacity are familiar partners’ (Adams 2003: 29).

The encounter with “other” cultures

The historical events that saw some of the European countries spreading their empires all over the world, especially from the 16th century onwards, represent the seeds of a colonization of lands and spaces, but also of minds. The concepts of globalized and global culture are fairly recent, but the whole

process probably had started with the colonization that, with its centre in Europe, spread all over while assuming different shapes and going across many local changes.

First of all, before seeing how Europeans reacted to different environments and different conceptions of nature, that is before approaching the non – human sphere, let's see how they interacted with the communities and the individual members of the other cultures they met. This is because the ways in which we relate to the “other” from the same species, can be a mirror to the ways in which we behave to the non – human world, perceived as the ultimate expression of difference: “humans approach Nature as they approach Society: they do unto the natural world what they do unto themselves” (Bennett 2002: 10).

During most of the colonization experiences, when difference was recognized, it was followed usually by domination – you are different, then inferior. “Differences are judged as grounds of inferiority, not as welcome and intriguing signs of diversity” (Plumwood 2003: 58). If instead equality was recognized, in the name of a common human nature, assimilation was usually the outcome, so the assimilated had to assume the customs, beliefs and behaviours of the dominating society. Both these responses characterized the approach taken towards Aboriginal people in Australia for instance, by first implying the segregation policies, with the creation of reserves, then by (forced) assimilation – with the result of the Stolen Generations⁴.

Especially from the 18th century onwards, another way of perceiving the “Other” consisted in their idealization, introducing the Roussonian idea of the “noble savage” in perfect harmony with nature, totally apart from the urbanized and civilized world.

These ways of perceiving the “Other” with a sense of superiority towards them on one side (even when considered equal and then assimilated), and in a romantic way on the other – and considering that one vision is not exclusive of the other – have an equal outcome, which is a sense of deafness – deafness that can be translated in the relationships both with the “other” as human, and as pertaining to the non – human world:

[...] our perceptions are screened through a colonizing conceptual sieve that eliminates certain communicative possibilities and dialogical encounters with the more – than – human world. Such an analysis suggests that our main problem lies not in silence, but in a certain kind of (constructed) deafness (Plumwood 2003: 67).

To find a difference – in – equality is important, in order to give credit to other cultures, beliefs, economies and political structures, that should have the right to express their voice too.

Even those cultural constructs that we generally consider the crown jewel of Western culture, like those of equality between humans, as just mentioned, and individual freedom, despite being fundamental and still sadly not always respected in “Western” countries nowadays, they can have two side effects – both on the environment and on the local communities – in case they are utilized in the wrong manner: firstly, in fact, they can contribute to further outdistance humans from the world

⁴ The Stolen Generations are formed by those Aboriginal people that, as children, were forcibly removed from their families in order to be settled in missions, in “boarding houses” or in white families, where they could be Christianised and educated to a “white lifestyle”. The main goal was then to absorb them in the dominating society. In this way, the descendants of the colonizers thought that they could wipe out all the physical and social “black” characteristics in order to have a fully “white” society. This happened between the 1910 and 1970s, however these assimilation policies informally started much before, already in the 19th century.

surrounding them, making promises over the benefits available to everybody from an exploitation of natural resources with no consequences: “[...] *greed is accentuated in human behavior by civilizations that permit large numbers of people to exist in apparent “freedom” from environmental constraints*” [emphasis in original] (Bennett 2002: 9).

The latest demonstration of this is in the post – Second World War, when through the promises made by governments, with regard to development and to the infinite resources available at accessible prices, “[...] almost everywhere expectations have exceeded the possibilities of realization, or at least have failed to conform to practical limits” (Bennett 2002: 9 – 10), pushing to a further exploitation to meet the increasing demand. Secondly, as previously stated, equality can have its downside by stating that all humans are equal – with implicated the risk of (forced) assimilation. Furthermore, these liberal concepts such as those of freedom, individual human rights and private property, might devalue the needs and beliefs of more holistic kinds of societies: “Individual based regimes tend to exclude or at least subordinate all other conceptions of society, property, and the person, such as relational and holistic conceptions, in which the person is seen not as a self-bounded, autonomous entity but in terms of relations to others and to larger social wholes” (Escobar 2008: 50).

The encounter with “other” nature(s)

As well as these two main concepts – exploitation and admiration – were applied to people, they were also referred to the land. These two major approaches sustained the colonization of lands and they took place, sometimes overlapping each other, across the centuries central to colonization. Between the 16th and the 17th centuries, the exploitation of natural resources was the main perspective, sometimes accompanied by the idealistic visions of new Eden(s) inspired by the new landscapes. From the mid – 18th century, an increasing acknowledgment of the environmental impacts of capitalism helped to stimulate conservation ideas. Naturally, the time frame changes specifically according to the places, for instance in Australia it started much later, since the Australian landscape was considered too wild to inspire any idealistic image, so it could only be exploited.

The idea of humans as masters of nature (using the “orientalism” perspective previously explained), then, got imported also in the colonies, where the environment was perceived differently by native people and it was given different cultural meanings, therefore it was also built differently.

Nature exists in a dense universe of collective representations that at once grounds different ways of doing things with/around nature. Succinctly put, many communities in the world signify their natural environment, and then use it, in ways that markedly contrast with the more commonly accepted way of seeing nature as a resource external to humans and which humans can appropriate in any way they see fit (Descola and Pálsson 1996; Restrepo and del Valle 1996) (Escobar 2006: 124).

Furthermore, colonizers arriving in Australia considered the land, especially between the 18th and the 19th centuries, as an empty space, *terra nullius*, underdeveloped and unmanaged, with the people living there not considered able to properly take the best out of it, reason why the colonizers regarded themselves as those with the right and almost with the duty to exploit it: “Not seeing the signs of ownership and property to which they were accustomed, many settlers assumed that there was no ownership and property, and that the landscapes were natural” (Rose 1996: 17).

If on one side, the lack of consideration of different ways of managing the land lead to the

appropriation of it and to the imposition of European ways of exploitation to get the most out of it, then on the other, also conservation ideas were portrayed according to European conceptualizations of nature, following this time the “paternalism” perspective, by using the Pálsson’s concept.

Around the 19th century, in fact, colonizers, even in Australia, considered important also the preservation of the land; still, conservation implied a total separation of the natural environment from the human sphere. In fact, these conservation ideas were still part of a Western conceptualization of it, implying the separation nature – culture: it had been rarely sensitive to other world views and to the local communities’ needs. In this view then, nature had to be preserved “maintaining representative sections of it free of human interference [...]” (Adams and Mulligan 2003: 10).

The view that an unspoiled environment is one untouched by humans can hardly be pushed to its logical conclusion, and in case it is misleading, first because it sets Man against Nature, where it is more illuminating to see Man as a part of Nature; and secondly, because we are not always despoilers. We can also be creative (Seddon 1997: 112).

Even nowadays there are two dangerous rhetoric employed by many environmental movements: one considers Indigenous peoples as an integral part of their environment – perpetuating then a separation between “us”, civilized and urbanized, and “them”, in total harmony with nature (reason why those Indigenous people who are more assimilated in the dominant society and who employ ways of living closer to it, are not considered really Indigenous, therefore not worth of the support of NGOs). On the other hand, there are still conservation movements that consider any human activity harmful for the specific protected area, and who then plan to move the communities living there to other places – ignoring the fact that many communities could actually contribute to the management of those areas.

Indeed the fact that “we can also be creative”, to report what Seddon wrote, can be exemplified by the different traditional activities carried out by Aboriginal people that contributed not only to an effective preservation, but also to an enhanced sustainable productivity of the land.

At the same time, a logic that pursues simply the preservation of natural parks and specially designated areas, cannot go too far, with the continuous separation humans – nature, since it leaves aside all the important changes that should be done outside those protected areas: “[...] measures to conserve integrity cannot stop with protected areas, but must address the exploited landscape matrix between them” (Miller and Rees 2000: 13).

Within this brief analysis of the views that influenced the colonizers’ activities in other countries, it’s possible to see two main branches that, even today, play a big part in our ways of looking at the world: anthropocentrism, for the land was regarded as an instrument to be exploited in order to reach the goal of human wellbeing – even if just in the short – term; Eurocentrism (today it could be called Euro – North American centrism), for which (the not yet) Europeans considered themselves on a higher level not only over non – humans, but also compared to the people from cultures that drastically differed from what they were used to, that were also regarded as primitive and inferior for not sharing what for the colonizers was considered as natural and universal, like their economic interests over the land (Plumwood 2003: 53).

[...] So manipulation and to modify, and for buy and trade and sell, so to buy and invest, and make more money. And buy more land, and sell more land and make more money. Aboriginal people didn’t look at our land like that. We looked at the land as our mother, our land is our mother, and we must look after our mother, and our mother will look after us. You see? We

believe we come from the earth, and then when our people die, they go back to the earth. Until the creator comes and takes them to a better place (Uncle BJ⁵, 13th August 2020).

Techno – scientific progress should not be directly related to the certainty of a general improvement of life and, as well as the economic demands, it's part of assumptions that only depend from the value system of a specific cultural context, and it is not universal; ecologic demands instead come from fundamental physical and biological laws (Andreozzi 2011: 109).

Concepts such as those of “progress”, “development” or “developed” are culturally constructed, and throughout history they have been often imposed on other cultures, that could have different ideas over these concepts, for instance in the ways in which human progress is considered:

Non è, infatti, il concetto di ‘progresso’ a costituire, in sé, un errore. Lo è piuttosto utilizzare questa nozione, come fa l’Occidente, nella convinzione che l’essere umano sia una forma di vita superiore intrinsecamente orientata verso lo sviluppo economico, scientifico, tecnologico e industriale (Andreozzi 2011: 100)⁶.

What are the needs behind the decisions that are taken for the actions implemented towards the land? And how much our cultural values, transmitted through history, play a role into determining the different importance we place to the various elements able to influence our health, variably according to different social and cultural contexts?

In the next section, a more specific look will be given to the cultural context of Aboriginal Australia, where the relations entailed with the environment are totally different.

Bushfires and cultural burns in Australia

Australia has been at the centre of scientists’, governments’, and members of the civil society’s attention for the raging bushfires that hit the country between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. These fires have particularly raised the world’s attention because of their direct relation with changing climates around the world, and they are correlated to many other similar events that hit other countries, like Siberia, California and Brazil. By looking specifically at Australia, these fires are surely the result of climate change and rising temperatures, adding the fact that this country has always been affected by these events, due also to the hot and dry temperatures that can be reached during summer, accompanied by strong winds that facilitate the spread of the flames.

However, there is also something else that should be considered in the analysis of this event, and in order to understand why, in these last decades, the fires have been so raging. Climate change in this, as previously stated, obviously played its role, but another reason can be found in the mismanagement of the land.

There are various local councils and environmental movements, in fact, that often impede Aboriginal people to carry out their traditional burning practices (Fig. 2) because they consider them as being dangerous, and as a major threat to native species of plants and animals. In this way, multiple natural reserves and conservation dedicated areas are left partially unmanaged, especially with regard

5 Uncle BJ has been the Chairman of Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council since its inception. He is a descendant of the Yuin – Monaro Nations.

6 “It is not, indeed, the concept of ‘progress’ that is, by itself, a mistake. The mistake consists in making use of this notion, as it is done by the West, in the certainty that human beings are superior forms of life, intrinsically oriented towards economic, scientific, technological and industrial development” (My translation).

to these traditional activities. By not taking care of the land in this way, then leaf and litter accumulate on the ground, with the high risk of getting dry and catching fire more easily during the dry season.

They put laws that you couldn't burn at all without a permit. And they stopped the cool burning several years ago, and that's why this country became an infernal, because they wouldn't allow that takes place in the proper portions, and you couldn't get all these people [to] agree, you couldn't get local government to agree with national park, and then the national park with forestry, and forestry with the agencies that are responsible for land. And those [the fires] got out of hand, no one who is really doing the proper cool burning [...] (Uncle Ossie, 28th July 2020).

In order to gain a clearer perspective on these concepts regarding the land, let us approach the practical use of fire that had been (and partly still is) employed by Aboriginal communities.

Cool (or cultural) burning practices are (and especially were) activities utilized as a way to manage and to take care of the land: they have to be done during the winter time, otherwise it would be too hot and dangerous, and these fires have to be carefully managed and controlled in shape, size and duration, in order to avoid that they spread too widely: in fact, they have to remain low and small, and they need to be done in patches. Indeed, it is not possible to burn everything at once, but only patches of land could catch fire in an alternate way: this results to be useful not just for the animals, that can take refuge in the unmanaged parts, but also so that in this way, if during summer a fire naturally starts in those unburnt parts of land, it cannot spread too much because it would be surrounded by patches of land already burnt.

The two main functions of these fires were: burning the weeds and the litter accumulated on the ground, in this way avoiding the insurgence of bigger fires during the dry season; the enhancement of land's production, since there are plants that need heat and smoke to germinate. These customary practices then were not just a way to ensure productivity and wellbeing solely for human beings, but they were carried out with the certainty of their benefits to other animal species and to the whole ecosystem. These practices can be partly considered as the mirror of the values that Aboriginal people formed with their stories, their songs, and their cultures in general, about nature and about the role of humans within it. In this, it is conceived a much more holistic perception of the world, for which the health of humans entirely depends on the health of the environment.

I'm gonna use in Aboriginal language, saying /mei miethal/, our mother, our mother earth, yeah. She is the one that looks after us, if we look after it. And that's mentally, spiritually, and bodily (Uncle Graham⁷, 1st July 2020).

Ideally, totemism – in Australia – can be a good example, in this case study, of how ideas and value systems play a role into affecting people's behaviours towards the land. There can be individual totems and social totems (generally represented by an animal, a plant or a natural element in general), which respectively imply a responsibility by the individual and by the group, which has to guard on them: totems also mediate between peoples and their respective places and natural elements, with which they hold special relationships. Through a series of ceremonies then, the survival of certain types of plants and animals is ensured; in this sense then, culture, society and land are inextricable, and the wellbeing of each single sector of the social and natural systems, is interconnected to the others.

It does not matter whether what is implied by totemism is true or not, or whether any belief in any cultural system is real or not, but what matters are the actions and the behaviours that they create, that

7 Uncle Graham is an Elder part of the Yuin Nation, Director of the Aboriginal Medical Health Service.

end up having an impact on the land and on society.

Where Christianity makes humans superior to the other creatures to the eyes of God, where Science places them at the same biological level of the other beings, but at the same time provides them with the instruments and tools to rule on them, Totemism sets humans on the same level of the other beings, because of a reciprocal need, in order to maintain an ecological and social balance within the community and the ecosystem. The only thing that might be asked further to humans, is a major responsibility because of their larger impact on the environment, reason why they must ensure the balance, the continuity and the prosperity of the land they live on.

In this case, in most of the Aboriginal cultures, the role of the totem and the relationships it entails with human beings, help to reduce the line that in our society we usually draw between the animal/natural world and that of humans. Indeed, it is a line that does not exist in Aboriginal peoples' ways of perceiving the world.

[The totem] *It is a sign of unity between things or persons unified by something else. The 'something else' is one or more of a possibly vast set of significations of that totem. There are many possible symbolisations of the ground and cause of unity. One of the most common is the symbolic complex 'one flesh—one spirit—one country—one Dreaming'* (Stanner, W. E. H. 1979: 129).

“Dreaming”, it is referred to a mythical period that tells about the beginning of times. In the previous quote, Stanner talks about “one Dreaming”, a common Dreaming, a common spirit: there are then many Dreamings, all of them related to the histories of specific families, clans, communities, totem groups, and animal and plant species.

Because of these multiple Dreamings, Stanner then states that they are common elements in Australian culture, but they are not universal, they can't be universalized because each group is characterized by their own Dream Time.

You know, the life cycle of a kangaroo? Or the life cycle of a whale? That life cycle is called Dreaming. Kangaroo Dreaming is kangaroo life cycle. Whale Dreaming – whale life cycle. You see what I'm saying? [...] So, my Dreaming is the black duck Dreaming. And that talks all, all the life and the ceremonies, and the technology, and the language of the Yuin people, is Yuin Dreaming (Uncle BJ, 13th August 2020).

As there are many “Dreamings” then, there are also many totems, since each individual has one, as well as each group. Indeed, these beliefs' systems are to be considered mainly local, there is not that sense of self – imposing one's own beliefs and habits to other people. The implicit sense into this, is that knowledge about the land and about its elements implies the fact of being capable of dealing with it, knowing how to treat it in order to get the most out of it, but without compromising its wellbeing.

The most important thing to be acknowledged, as part of these totemist structures, systems and beliefs, is that they trigger some forms of behaviour, like that one that produces fire management practices. Being these values never considered universal, there is not then the concept of imposing them on someone else, especially when it comes to activities to be done in someone else's country: since knowledge is localized and specific, when visiting or travelling somewhere else, it is considered a duty to “always ask” (Rose 1996: 45), because of a lack of knowledge that relates to a different locality.

There is a practical example reported in the book written by Rose I just mentioned, that tells about a

mistake related to the treatment of the land by an Aboriginal group visiting another part of the country, where they acted without asking to the locals first, provoking in this way a big damage to the land:

The burning of the cane grass caused the water temperature to become too hot. The fire was lit by Aboriginal people who did not know the country. They did not have any consultation with our people for the country. We call this 'indiscriminate burning', regardless of what persons they are (Rose 1996: 46).

From this quote, we can relate these totemist systems and the beliefs that lay under them, in relation to the use of fire, which was done only locally: every single individual, used to take care of their local land, but by doing this, also the wellbeing of other communities and environments, even on the other side of the country, was automatically ensured, since everybody was doing their job on the country. Uncle Graham used the image of a puzzle, saying that in their cultures, we have to imagine it working like a puzzle, for which each piece is fundamental for the formation of the whole picture, but each individual knows only about their piece: "Cause you can't know everything, you're part of the puzzle. You're one piece in a puzzle" (Uncle Graham, 1st July 2020).

'Burn grass' takes place after the wet season when the grass starts drying off. This takes place every year. The country tells you when and where to burn. To carry out this task you must know your country. You wouldn't, you just would not attempt to burn someone else's country. One of the reasons for burning is saving country. If we don't burn our country every year, we are not looking after our country (Rose, D. B. 1996: 63).

Totemist relations then, bring humans closer to animals and to other beings, and in this relation, their wellbeing is related to that of the ecosystem itself: humans are responsible for taking care of the land and of its elements, also so that they can ensure its productivity, and to get benefits that will influence their family's and community's wellbeing too.

This explanation revealed to be fundamental for a better understanding of the customary use of fire among Aboriginal communities: it can be viewed, in fact, as an example of responsibility and as a way of taking care of the land, as it has been briefly explained in the very beginning of this article.

Fire, then, is not considered useful just for humans, like when it was discovered as a tool for scaring animals, for cooking and heating purposes, and for creating tools and weapons: in these instances, it was mostly used for human needs, and not as something that could actually connect them to the environment and that could be employed for enhancing land's productivity. In Greek culture, which laid the basis for the Latin and the European cultural contexts, fire was exactly the instrument that differed humans from other animal species, bringing them to a superior level, and that released them from the chains that tied them to nature. In the myth of Prometheus, in fact, where fire was donated to people by the semi – deity that, with this action, condemned himself, fire is seen as the key to civilization and the end of the mere animal status for humans. In the Aboriginal understanding of the world, instead, fire is considered as something used to work in, with and for the environment: and in this case, by working for the environment we mean also working for humans themselves, since they are considered part of the natural sphere, for which, on the other side, something done against the land, will have its reverse effects on humans themselves.

These different ways of relating to nature, then, had their effects on the land itself. On one side, with protection it is meant the total exclusion of human activities on the land; on the other, humans are seen as integrated and fundamental part in natural management, and a non – relation can be

considered as bad as exploitative actions actively taken against it.

A more integrated management of country, that could include both the government, environmental movements and local councils, and also Aboriginal communities themselves, should be considered in its positive and relational activities, where each part can bring the most positive experiences coming from their specific knowledge.

In this, the recent catastrophic events seem to have turned both national and international interest to Aboriginal ways of managing the land, and hopefully it will give all the credit deserved to these practices, also for the future.

So our fires here, we have cool burns, and after fifteen years of pushing all this stuff, they're starting finally to listen, just a little bit: because of the fires, because of the fires, people, the community, the broader community, they started to think, well... because we had, we had a trial burn, a cultural burn on our lands, that saved a town from being wiped out, that's the only thing that saved the town. But, because of the catastrophe that took place and because we proved that our cultural burns are significantly safe and it's good for the environment, the soils, and everything that's connected, now, because of that they're starting to listen (Uncle Graham, 1st July 2020).

Conclusions: healing with the land

By bringing new ethical perspectives and by challenging those that we have, it can set a new direction to how we consider actions taken in favour or against the environment: in fact, we generally consider environmental consciousness as something ethical rather than seeing it as something necessary, that we do not just for the environment itself, but for our own wellbeing. In this sense then, being anthropocentric (that, as shown in the first section of this article, brought people to consider themselves superior to nature), could be useful in order to reverse people's attention to the ways in which we behave towards the environment: by harming it, we'll just end up harming ourselves. During the conference *The Post – Coronavirus Ecological Front. New strategies for change in the prism of the pandemic crisis*, 30/04/2020, one of the guests, Mathis Wackernagel (founder and president of Global Footprint Network) proposed the concept of "skin in the game", implying the fact that talking about the environment's health is talking about our own: "[...] we feel we are in the game, it's not just about 'Oh that's nice, let's save the Ethiopians!' We are in the game, it's our game!" (Fondation Braillard Architects⁸). In all this, we can see how much not just the environment, but the ways we perceive it, and therefore the ways in which we behave towards it, end up influencing our own health and wellbeing.

The ways in which Aboriginal communities behaved towards their environment, was extremely explicative of the ways in which they perceived their health, and how their health could be influenced and how it should be treated.

[...] being wholly focused on global values can lead to the devaluation of local needs [...]. So projection of the local onto the global has its problems, but so does the obverse (Napier Et al. 2015: 8).

This statement can be extremely explicative of the core of this conclusion: in fact, by taking Australia as an example, the forced imposition of "global" accepted concepts such as those of equality

8 <https://braillard.ch/activites/pcefl/> - Last consulted: 28/07/2020

(according to which Aboriginal people had to be assimilated) and private property (that lead to the fencing of the land and to the inability for Aboriginal people to freely access to its resources), had damaging consequences on Aboriginal peoples' lifestyles. At the same time, we can see that these believed globalized concepts, are instead still local, pertaining to a specific cultural context, in this case that of European colonizers. In this way, we can approach it from a different perspective, by seeing the European values as a projection of local values on a global scale – when they should be considered only local. On the other hand, if we take medicine, and Western medicine specifically as an example, we can also consider that as a projection of global values (in the sense that they are accepted and considered useful on a global level in multiple contexts) on a local scale, by obscuring in this way local perspectives and ways of dealing with health and sickness, and by also not considering what actually could enhance wellbeing in a different local perspective (Napier Et al. 2015: 9).

In this sense, we can also understand how land, by being differently conceived, it is also differently managed: in most of the Aboriginal communities' perspective, in fact, the environment plays a major role in affecting humans' wellbeing, the two aspects are entirely correlated, and for this reason, land has to managed and has to be taken care of, for instance by using traditional burning practices, and in this way it will also take care of us.

Furthermore, Aboriginal concepts of medicine and healing were directly challenged and strongly destabilized by the Western conceptions of health and medicine, for which they were imposed on the Aboriginal health systems: also this ended up to have disruptive consequences on Aboriginal peoples' social structures, beliefs and healing practices – and health itself as well. Here the issue lays in an ethnocentric approach to the Aboriginal health problem, for which it is implicated that “Aborigines have – or should have – the same ‘health values’ as white Australians” (Moodie 1973: viii). As recorded by the first settlers that reached Australia, in fact, Aboriginal peoples used to be in very good health, since their wellbeing depended on a healthy diet and on an active lifestyle.

[...] we're better off than a lot of other people in a lot of other countries, 'cause a lot of people are starving, and a lot of people are suffering for wars going on in their countries. So, in today's standards we're better off than a lot of other people in a lot of other countries. But we're not better off than what our people used to be before colonization (Uncle BJ, 13th August 2020).

There are many things that badly affected Aboriginal peoples' physical, mental and social health during and after colonization, but in this context, there has been neither the space nor the possibility to go through all of them.

What is important to understand here is whether and how the forced changed relationship with land played a role in the lowering of Aboriginal peoples' health, and how, more generally, a distanced relationship with the environment can affect also our wellbeing. For this reason, I found appropriate, in the context of these arguments and questions, to mention the case of fire as an example of Indigenous management of land.

Considering in our perspectives on health the “more – than – human” world, can be enriching with regard to positive outcomes to happen both for us and for the environment, and it can enlarge our comprehension of how, in other cultural contexts, these different perspectives have brought to a better understanding of land and of the ways in which we can contribute to its productivity, while still maintaining its ecological sustainability.

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Sitography

- Fondation Braillard Architectes: Mathis Wackernagel's and Thomas Vellacott's interventions During the webinar *The Post – Coronavirus Ecological Front. New Strategies for Change in The Prism of the Pandemic Crisis*, 30/04/2020 <<https://braillard.ch/video/post-coronavirus-ecological-front-new-strategies-for-change-in-the-prism-of-the-pandemic-crisis/?Lang=en>> (Last consulted: 28/07/2020).
- WHO <<https://www.who.int/>> (Last consulted: 13/10/2020).

Immagini



Fig. 1 - The "triad" of the One Health paradigm. Source: Semantic Scholar.



Fig. 2 - Example of cool burning. Source: ABC News.