The Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth Go Whaling

Whaling is a cultural tradition shared between the Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth, two closely related peoples, and is a practice that lies at the core of their societies. When whaling was widely practiced before contact with settler colonialists, it had great economic importance for both the Makah and the Nuu-chah-nulth. Killing a whale was considered the highest glory, and brought an enormous amount of food, prestige, and respect to the hunter and his community (Coté, 2010). Whaling was also central to the spiritual life of the Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth people. The whale hunt shaped people’s actions – a hunt was preceded by weeks to months of spiritual preparation and readiness. Stories contained within the Nuu-chah-nulth and Makah oral tradition reinforce their central identity as whalers, and the tradition remains strongly present in indigenous place names as well as in family and personal names.

Commercial overharvesting of whales by settler colonialists in the 1920’s meant that Nuu-chah-nulth and Makah people could not continue to sustain their cultural tradition. Governments favored settler-colonial whaling, did not equip Makah with means to keep up. US and Canadian policies actively tried to undermine social and cultural systems – from boarding schools to outlawing personal names. Present in indigenous place names as well as in family and personal names.

The environmental discourse has lead to overruling in U.S courts that already plague indigenous people. And falls within harmful stereotypes of reading of their traditional practice, as cruel and savage. This is a fundamentally false animal rights activists as cruel and animal rights activism. The rise of the “Save the Whale” movement reframed the issue of whaling in terms of morality and violence against helpless animals. Whales are considered to be a type of “charismatic mega-fauna”, an animal species with widespread popular appeal, which makes them easy targets for conservation efforts. However, the appeal of whales also makes it easy for Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth people to be portrayed by the environmental movement and animal rights activists as cruel and savage. This is a fundamentally false reading of their traditional practice, and falls within harmful stereotypes that already plague indigenous people. The environmental discourse has lead people to question the authenticity of Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth whaling culture. Makah efforts to resume whaling has faced vocal opposition from a coalition of domestic and global anti-whaling activists. The dominance of this environmental discourse and the way that it shapes how people view the Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth is neo-colonial and eco-colonial in essence.

Despite this, Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth people still fight for their right to whale. In his book Peace, Power, Righteousness, Taliaakte Alfred asserts that native communities must commit themselves to self-conscious traditionalism in order to decolonize and achieve sovereignty. Thus, whaling, and Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth attempts to practice it can be interpreted as a means of cultural self-determination and thus decolonizing practice in the way that it re-incribes Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth meanings on colonized landscapes.

The 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling was implemented to manage whale stocks and slow the commercial hunt of whales. During the 1970’s, the conversation surrounding whale conservation shifted from one of resource management to one of animal rights activism. The rise of the “Save the Whale” movement reframed the issue of whaling in terms of morality and violence against helpless animals. Whales are considered to be a type of “charismatic mega-fauna”, an animal species with widespread popular appeal, which makes them easy targets for conservation efforts. However, the appeal of whales also makes it easy for Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth people to be portrayed by the environmental movement and animal rights activists as cruel and savage. This is a fundamentally false reading of their traditional practice, and falls within harmful stereotypes that already plague indigenous people. The environmental discourse has lead people to question the authenticity of Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth whaling culture. Makah efforts to resume whaling has faced vocal opposition from a coalition of domestic and global anti-whaling activists. The dominance of this environmental discourse and the way that it shapes how people view the Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth is neo-colonial and eco-colonial in essence.

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*The illustrations above are based on the work of Thomas Eyekemans, and other elements of traditional Makah artwork. If there is any overlap or plagiarism, please contact the Indigenous Borderlands Project (www.border-rites.org) and it can most certainly be changed.

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- Signs 1946 ICRW, joins the International Whaling Commission (IWC)
- Canada outlaws commercial whaling in 1972
- Canada withdraws from IWC 1981
- Maa-Nulth Final Agreement ratified in 2006 recognizes right to hunt whales
- Moratorium placed on Maa-Nulth whale hunts for 25 years
- Maa-Nulth must conduct research on whales before hunting can be considered
- 1855 Treaty of Neah Bay secures Makah right to whale by ceding Tribal lands
- 1946 signs International Convention for Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), joins IWC
- 1949 Whaling Convention Act enacted domestically
- 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act
- 1982 IWC moratorium on whaling
- 1994 Grey whale taken off the endangered species list
- Makah must notify US government of interest in resuming treaty right to hunt, pursue quota at IWC meetings
- NOAA must issue an environmental assessment and hunt quotas
- US must represent Makah at any IWC meeting
- Environmental Assessments are subject to overruling in U.S courts
- Makah must have Marine Mammal Protection Act waived