

REJOINDER: HOLY WHALE!

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Recently, a stray fifteen-metre humpback whale was sighted for several days in succession in the waters adjacent to Texel, the Dutch island where I live. Scores of curious onlookers gazed in awe at the foraging behemoth. Humpbacks rarely visit these environs and other whale species seldom swim so close to the shore, which partly explains why the leviathan attracted the attention of a small crowd of whale watchers. The island's newspaper published a lengthy report and several photographs, and the national media also covered the event. Clearly, sighting the whale was believed to be an extraordinary, exciting and exhilarating experience. In this particular case, it was a chance meeting, but today many people across the world go on whale-watching tours, join swim-with-the-dolphin programmes or visit marine theme parks to catch more than just a glimpse of cetaceans and get the sensorial sensations they are after. They seek to be in touch with nature again. Whales apparently evoke profound sentiments in human beings and they have been imbued with special rights and moral values. People in the West currently perceive whales as potent symbols of nature and the poster child for conservation. They are believed to be inherently special and therefore inappropriate for consumptive use by humans (Bridgewater 2003:556). Many would find the mere idea of having whale meat for dinner inconceivable and utterly despicable. It therefore need not surprise us that whaling among the Faroese and the Makah has kindled vehement opposition from Western anti-whalers, environmentalists and the general public.

As Karen Oslund rightly points out, the current debates and actions accompanying the whaling controversy 'are informed by the legal language of the International Whaling Commission (IWC)'. The IWC's whaling moratorium and its inconsistencies concerning the exemptions for aboriginal subsistence whaling and indigenous peoples dependent on whales have indeed given rise to several contradictions. She 'would like to turn to the language of documents in order to explain the whaling debates.' Oslund certainly has a point and I also agree with her observation that 'the problems will multiply because other groups [...] will also try to assert their claim to indigenous whaling'. The objective of my

R. van Ginkel: Rejoinder. *MAST* 2007, 6(1) 52-56.

article, however, is not to seek solutions for the deadlock problems that the IWC moratorium has brought about. First and foremost, I want to show how proponents as well as opponents of whaling essentialise the cultures and identities of whale hunters and misconceive tradition. In regard to whale hunting peoples' self-definition, this is – as Oslund argues – indeed partly due to bureaucratic requirements, as for example the Makah 'needs statement' to the IWC evidences. It is, however, also a strategic choice of pro-whalers to achieve results in their attempts to maintain or gain the right to go whaling. Heini Olsen, a Faroese man interviewed for the video documentary *To Kill a Whale* (Leith 1991), says philosophically that pilot whaling is 'not a matter of to be or not to be, but *how* to be'. Facing the scorn of the outside world only reinforces the whalers' belief that they are different; it is their claim to authenticity.

In addition, I want to point out in my article how mutual perceptions have created a war of words; a specific discourse that leads way beyond the simple question of whether hunting whales is right or wrong. The anti-whaling discourse initially focused on the dangers of overexploitation and extinction, but following the discovery that not all whale species were threatened by depletion, the emphasis shifted from ecological concerns to the ethical aspect of cetaceans being distinctly and unequivocally valuable in their own right. Whalers wantonly and brutally slay the ocean's gentle giants for human consumption, which, we are told by whaling opponents, is completely unnecessary as well as morally and ethically wrong. In arguing so, they often de-legitimize the right to exploit whales, and, moreover, make deriding comments pertaining to the whalers' cultural practices and intentions. Power issues are obviously involved in such a stance. With the widespread public support environmentalists have gained and with whales symbolically representing the 'goodness' of nature, any criticism concerning the anti-whaling position is usually muzzled rather quickly as quibbles of infidels who favour commercial exploitation of the oceans' gentle giants. The activities of the ignoble whalers are believed to be 'inhumane' and incompatible with any 'civilized' society.

In this regard, I entirely agree with Katja Neves-Graça's statement that the environmentalists' – and their constituencies' – critique of (non-commercial) whaling is reminiscent of neo-colonialism. Underlying their conceptualization is a might-is-right attitude that foregrounds their ideology as the unchallengeable 'truth'. Any counterclaim that subsistence hunting of certain whale species is not endangering the species as such usually meets with vitriolic philippics about the pro-whalers' savage ignorance. The latter's activities are perceived as 'ill-adapted forms of socio-cultural atavism', to use Neves-Graça's terminology, that have no place in the modern world. Whether this

position promotes neo-liberal interests under the guise of environmentalism is an interesting question, but not one that I can easily answer here. It would seem to me, however, that it is first and foremost a matter of creed and dogma. Currently, whales would seem to be holy in the West. Karen Oslund commences her comments with the fascinating observation that in their campaigns, environmental organizations (or at least the IFAW) have reframed whales from 'super humans' into 'average humans' facing 'problems with which the target audience could identify'. Whales are thus seen as 'one of us'. In scientific as well as popular reports, their social behaviour is often described as being 'similar' to that of humans: they have social bonds, adults look after calves and protect them, they communicate, coordinate and cooperate, they are compassionate and intelligent and defend each other, and some species live in families or even matrilineal groups. Whales also transmit learned behaviours, they possess language – even dialects – and some species sing and have personalities and individual identities. In short, whales exhibit culture (see, for example, Brakes *et al.* 2004).

In thus portraying cetaceans, 'whalekind' comes to closely resemble mankind and consequently, feasting on whales is believed to be an act of barbarism that borders on cannibalism. However, although some cetacean species have a big brain, this in itself is no proof of intelligence. Based on recent detailed anatomical research, Paul Manger concludes that 'the evidence in favour of significant intellectual capacities of dolphins is tenuous, and based upon untested, unproven, unquestioned, and anthropomorphic assumptions' (2006:298). It would seem, then, that cetaceans are animals, not *humanoid* animals, after all. Perceptions of whales are based upon imagery and cosmology rather than evidential fact. Nevertheless, several environmental organizations have offered whales for adoption which is, again, indicative of the human image of cetaceans. If they are not real kin, at least they are fictive kin. The recent anthropomorphic, socio-centric and subjective representation and interpretation of cetaceans has obviously had profound consequences for the manner in which whalers are usually depicted and engaged. Whaling kindles fierce aggression on the part of its opponents. This is inextricably linked to the ideological framing of both whales and whalers. Whales are indubitably portrayed in favourable terms (they are 'friendly,' 'gentle,' 'peaceful,' 'benign,' 'graceful,' 'magnificent' and so on). By totemic association, whale defenders and their supporters are equally 'good.' The environmentalists and animal rights campaigners are the self-constituted and self-appointed vigilantes of the innocent gentle giants. In contradistinction, whalers are depicted negatively: they are 'evil'. Whereas whale hunters are demonized as savage beasts, whales are humanized.

I do not think, however, that whales are seen as ‘average humans’ with which human beings can identify as submerged likes. Rather, whales are the West’s ‘holy cows’, innately good and liminal beasts shrouded in beliefs and taboos. For some, meeting whales in the wild is nothing short of a spiritual or religious experience; a pilgrimage to the sacred sites of saintly cetaceans: ‘Whale watching at sea perhaps exploits semi-religious feelings of awe and the sublime that are lacking in the modern secular world’ (Pritchard 2004:172). The pilgrims are in search of ‘relics’ – that is, whales – to heal their concerns about the predicament of nature and the ritualized procedures provide the fantasy of becoming part of the ‘purity’ and ‘truer real’ of nature (Ris 1993:161; Desmond 1999:190). New Age adepts, in particular, imbue whales and dolphins with special significance and powers. They cast dolphins and whales as gentle, spiritual, wise and superior creatures; they idealize them to godlike status and often recount ‘miracles’ and tales of wonder. There is a widespread belief that cetaceans possess therapeutic and healing capabilities, that they want to talk to humans and that one day unlimited interspecies interaction, sociability and communication will be feasible (Neves-Graça 2002:257ff.; Pritchard 2004:391ff.; Servais 2005). For those who refuse to believe that God is dead, whales appear to possess attributes that make them the vehicle for such spirituality.

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