



Exorcizing Misleading Terms from Ethnobotany

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Editorial

Not too many years ago, a scientific paper could use terms such as “witch doctor,” or “primitive people” without drawing fire for being vague, insensitive, prejudice, or misleading. In their day, these terms were socially correct in academic circles so few gave them much thought. Such terms were accepted until their flaws were pointed out and they were replaced by more accurate statements. As “witch doctor” was exorcized as being a negative stereotype and ill-defined word, so too should a range of other terms that persist within the conversations and writings of ethnobotany.

A review of the ethnobotanical and related literatures will rapidly uncover a number of misleading terms used today by well-meaning authors. I call the terms misleading because they are vague, politically correct statements, that carry emotion but little if any factual reality. These terms can be easily divided into two camps, those with negative and those with positive connotations. A temptation is to identify the negative and excise them from usage, however, both sets should probably be considered and dealt with appropriately.

Both the negative and positive terms are generally composed of “straw-man” arguments intended to avoid specificity. There are good reasons for avoiding specificity. People who are specific can be proven incorrect. Science is all about examining the specific and extrapolating to the general or non-specific. However, the notion becomes non-scientific when generalizations are used as the basis for analysis of the specific. My statements thus far should be suitably vague to encourage the reader to continue to read, hoping that details will emerge.

Western

One of the most common misleading terms is “western”. In an historical sense, there may be a point in time when

“western” is a meaningful descriptor, but I doubt it. Western was coined in reference to the civilization(s?) of the Western Roman Empire. The initial implication is that the Roman Catholic part of the empire was a relatively homogeneous unit distinct from the eastern empire with its capital at Constantinople (Istanbul) and its faith in the Eastern Orthodox Church. A different interpretation of the term is that it refers to all the civilizations of Europe since the time of the Greek city states as well as all derivative civilizations with the lot being distinguished from Eastern traditions of Asia and the Middle East. Both of these definitions have a number of problems.

The first problem is one of homogeneity. Can anyone who has visited Germany, Italy, and England seriously consider these to be the same cultures? Yes, there are some overlapping traditions, but lumping these distinct peoples together is disrespectful of their individual accomplishments, languages, and histories. Each region was formerly part of the Roman Empire, yet each retains strong elements of its pre-Roman peoples and customs. Let us consider a similar kind of lumping that would be less palatable. The British Empire once included India, Egypt,

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New Zealand, Fiji, and Belize. Would it be reasonable to lump the hundreds of cultures of the Indian sub-continent with Coptic, Māori, Fijian and Mosquito cultures just because they had a common colonizer? Of course not. Likewise it is foolish to lump the formerly colonized cultures of the Roman Empire under one flag: Western.

An additional homogeneity argument that is raised is based on the ignorant perspective that “western” civilization shares a common religious heritage based in Europe. It is true that many countries labeled as western include many Christian believers. However, it is important to realize that the world of Christianity did not begin in Europe, was not the basis for the development of the Roman Empire (in fact it may have been key to the demise of the empire), and was developed along multiple lines in Asia and Africa, as well as Europe. Were it not for the rise of Islam, we might consider Christianity to be an Asian or African religion instead of European. Not all Europeans have been, or are currently Christians, so it is unfair to them to label them as being part of this tradition.

A second problem with the term western is that it is inclusive of vast intellectual territory that was not developed within the geographic domain that is normally labeled as western. In addition to Christianity, scholars of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa have contributed mathematics, literature, architecture, and an array of other accomplishments that are now lumped as western. So-called western science currently is being advanced by many individuals from Asian and African communities whose home languages/cultures are not of Europe and whose accomplishments are not intended to advance “western” society. Conversely, many communities found within “western” societies are not happy that they are lumped under this umbrella. These include peoples reviving languages that have approached extinction and who are seeking to regain political and social recognition and/or autonomy. The labels applied to these communities to distinguish them from “western” society leads us to the second set of terms.

Traditional

Several terms are used with generally positive connotations: “traditional,” “indigenous,” “original,” “aboriginal,” “native,” etc. These terms are not only vague but in many instances misleading. Most of these terms imply that something or someone is conservative, ancient, authentic, or otherwise unchanging. Yet, there is ample evidence that ALL human cultures are constantly evolving, adapting to changing environments. The terms also imply “original”, yet it is increasingly clear that in most parts of the earth, the people encountered at a specific location at the time of European exploration, were not the original people, but prior waves of colonists, sometimes with many waves of colonists, and colonization is part of the history of a par-

ticular place. (Archaeology and local traditions are sometimes in conflict, but this is a discussion for another time.)

Although ethnobiologists have used these terms with positive intentions, they often have the negative effect of lumping distinct people’s, technologies, histories, languages, etc. Labeling practices of Sami, Lakota, Tongan, Maasai, and Sherpa as “traditional,” belittles the unique contributions each makes to the world today. When people are assigned labels such as these, expectations are generated about expected behaviors and values. For instance, someone labeled as “indigenous” is expected to practice a pre-colonial religion, use pre-colonial technologies, and speak a non-globalized language. Individuals and communities who are Christians or Muslims, rely upon modern technologies, and speak global languages such as English, French, etc. are for some reason considered to be less “original,” less “authentic,” less “indigenous.” Although I have periodically encountered individuals who were not very self-confident and measured themselves in these ways, I have been left with the impression that this is derived from external pressures rather than internal cultural assumptions. An outcome of this line of thinking is that people who practice more ancient ways of doing things are more “authentic” and by implication more traditional or indigenous. It is not clear that this is a meaningful conclusion and it is likely that this conclusion is very dangerous for both scientists and people with whom we work.

Nested within the ideas of being authentic, are notions of being different. Differences may be translated into positive terms that are uplifting for people, however, more often than not, differences are the basis of irrational prejudices and assumptions. One of the most powerful tools for either removing or reinforcing prejudices is the law. Global cultures, including researchers, have recently been practicing a form of neocolonialism involving enforcement of the laws developed for protection of inventions and inventors universally upon all people’s ideas or intellectual property regardless of their cultural conceptions of property, rights, or specific world views about intellectual domains.

Intellectual Property Rights

There are many legal terms that have found their way into science and public discussions. Although these terms have definitions that are set on paper, this does not mean that the terms translate well into other cultural view/languages, nor that their meaning is significant across cultures. Although there are many vague legal terms, I will only pick on one that is commonly found in ethnobiological literature: “intellectual property rights”. This is a term with perfectly good definitions, legal constructs, and precedents. However, the notion is not one that emerges equally from all cultures. In my own work in Pacific island cultures, I have seen that people in some communities are

genuinely afraid of the idea of “owning” knowledge while others are strong advocates of ownership of knowledge. The ethnobotanical literature is sprinkled with this variation, with some people indicating that certain kinds of information is secret, while others indicate that similar kinds of knowledge must be part of the common domain. Who is right and wrong? Should we pit one culture against another? Well, we do. The very process of getting worked up about intellectual property rights is the process of casting one world view as the matrix for evaluating all others. Although this is often done with the best of paternalistic intentions, it is a form of colonial activity that has been blessed as acceptable. Baloney! We need to be more honest with ourselves. Intellectual property rights are matters of global society economics and are rarely seen in the same way in local communities.

I think that in many cases, researchers have become worked up about an issue such as intellectual property rights (social equality, political correctness, democracy, etc.) in their own culture and have taken this issue to their study community. Margaret Mead has been accused of just this, taking her early feminist movement perspectives to Samoa where she reported finding a society that was more to her liking. Although we will never know if this is what actually happened, we each need to be wary of our own intentions or cultural baggage, ensuring that the research questions we raise are valid for science and not simply for justification for social change in our own or another culture.

So, what can we do? How can we write about what we see without using the terms I have berated? The point should be to increase accuracy and not simply to sanitize our vocabularies. The following are some recommendations:

Recommendations

Be Specific

Each time we are tempted to use one of the terms that are hammered above, it should be replaced with a more specific term. For instance, when tempted to use “Western” to describe 18th and 19th century colonial influences on Hawaiian culture, I can replace this with more accurate terms such as: British, American, Chinese, or even simply “foreign”. Even better would be to use names of specific individuals who carried out specific acts since it is also not fair to generalize about the actions and motivations of all 18th century British, Americans, Chinese, or foreigners. The point is, be as specific as possible.

Remember Evolution

Living cultures are dynamic mosaics of individuals bound by common values, overlapping beliefs, and common histories (and often genealogies). Cultures change. When

reporting on practices, be sure to report on them as they occur, not as they occurred at some prior point in time. If reporting on practices that have changed, simply report them as changing. There is no reason to lament that cultures evolve. People make choices. Get over it.

Use Local Languages

We need to represent people as they see themselves and not hide them and their world views behind legal terms such as intellectual property rights. The most clear way to do this is to report information FIRST in the language and descriptive terminology of a community rather than first in a language of science that is external to the culture.

Although ethnobiologists are eager to accurately report what we have learned, we do people a bit of a disservice when we write in English or any other language that is not that in which knowledge of a community is stored and passed on. (This is true, even in many cases where the local language is English. Not all English words carry the same meaning for all speakers nor do all English speakers use the same vocabulary.) When reporting research results, it is critical to use terms that are meaningful within a community, even if they are cryptic to other scientists. It is much better to be accurate, than to be misleading.

Don't Use People in Battles

It is very tempting to carry battles being waged in our own communities into others. The battle over intellectual property rights is one example of many. Be sure to report information as it is meaningful within another culture. Don't insist on legal restrictions that fit the world view of the researcher and not the world view that is being reported. I am not however proposing that we ignore the self-expressed needs of people with whom we work, but rather that we work within their causes and not drag them into ours.

Conclusion

I have probably managed to step on most readers toes, fingers, or other protuberances. Can I step on my own just to make it fair? In several instances I have used the term “global”. Is this referring to a mysterious and sinister international economic, political, and even religious movement bent on homogenization of the earth? Probably. Is this a generalization that is fair? Probably not. Perhaps one or more of the readers will respond with her or his own editorial whacking me for generalizations I have used and encourage me to be more specific. The gauntlet has been cast. Who will pick it up?

