

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Biocultural diversity and indigenous ways of knowing: human ecology in the Arctic*, by Karim-Aly S. Kassam (2009). Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press and the Arctic Institute of North America. 270 pp., 1 pocket map. ISBN 978-1-55238-253-0.

The perspective put forth in *Human ecology in the Arctic* by K.-A. Kassam, although not one that is fundamentally foreign to Northern social scientists, is intended to challenge what I suspect the author considers more orthodox and less socially aware approaches to research. Focusing as it does on how Indigenous Northerners learn the environment (and how to learn what they learn), this book has its closest intellectual articulation in Ingold's approach to human–environment relations.

The first two chapters, "Relations between culture and nature: a critical consideration" and "Human ecology reconceptualized: a lens for relations between biological and cultural diversity", are the core of this work. In them, Kassam calls for a structurally non-dichotomous view of nature and culture, and, thus, of what constitutes human ecology as a field of study. To accomplish this his prescription requires reorienting research toward the process by which Indigenous Northerners acquire and contextualize environmental knowledge. Here, he also begins to detail how "best" to acquire such information methodologically, a process that is elaborated upon in chapters 4–6, based on his own research with the Kola Peninsula Sami, Ulukhaktok Inuit and Alaskan Inupiaq at Wainwright. His rendering of Inupiaq knowledge of currents and winds, and their effect on sea ice, and thus whaling, is especially illuminating regarding the complex of information Wainwright hunters must synthesize.

It is difficult, at least for me, to summarize Kassam's belief that a recast human ecology must focus on *phronesis* (practical wisdom), if only because he draws his support from sources as diverse as Aristotle, Dostoevsky and E.O. Wilson. What is clearer is his view that true human

ecology research can only be achieved through the full participation of communities in all phases of the research process. In this way, Indigenous ecological understanding can become the integrative bridge that moves research from a privileged to an affective activity.

Although I am generally sympathetic to Kassam's endeavour, I would be considerably more sympathetic if his two core conceptual chapters did not leave me feeling as if I had just sat through an overly long lecture. In point of fact, the call here for a biocultural synthesis through the concepts and methodology he presents strikes me as not all that different from the ideas and practices already being applied by cultural ecologists in and beyond the North.

It is hard to argue against Kassam's ultimate objective: to see Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge fruitfully integrated, and it is not my intention to make such an argument. In point of fact, I suspect that very few Northern researchers, regardless of discipline, reject the goal of better science that benefits Northerners, and is benefited by them. At the same time, speaking for myself, Kassam's methodological and conceptual vision strikes me as no less rigid, at least as presented here, than Northern science and scientists are (too) frequently accused of being. In no small sense, characterizing Ulukhaktokmiut knowledge of animals and plants as *phronesis*, and scientists' knowledge about caribou or land-locked Arctic char as only *episteme*, seems to be not much more than a novel way of restating the (again the too oft repeated) argument that Inuit traditional knowledge is holistic, and that the knowledge of visiting scientists is "merely" reductionist. (The overall presentation, in my view, also slights just how valuable long-term participant observation is in terms of moderating scientific rigidity.)

In the end, although I am sympathetic to Kassam's overall aim—to strive for a more integrated science of the North—I remain firmly in the view that a diversity of theoretical orientations and methodologies does no harm to this aim. Moreover, bringing other views about nature and culture to the North is much more in keeping with the most important reason to do science: that is, to achieve an exchange of ideas to the social benefit of all.

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