

General introduction: The critique of culture and the plurality of nature

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Nature is no longer what it used to be. But neither is culture. The former is being deconstructed, the latter is being naturalised, and yet the two antagonists in themselves appear as important and foundational as ever. It may be that the bearings of this dichotomy are simply in the midst of a reconfiguration. Coming to grips with this complex condition, however, calls for novel analytical approaches. We believe that this collection of essays breaks new ground by arguing that recent reconceptualisations of the processes of practice and imagining can act as a useful starting point from which to understand the complex ways in which nature emerges as a human reality.

The emphasis on the dual perspective of practices and processes of imagining arises from a concern to capture how nature is simultaneously real and really imagined. From different theoretical points of departure, the contributors to this volume all seek to describe the multifarious forms which the dialectic between nature as ‘fact’ and nature as ‘imagined’ may take and to show how this seeming dichotomy is a constantly shifting whole. Thus we maintain that the arguments of ‘constructivists’ and ‘primordialists’ need to be refashioned and reconciled rather than accepted as each other’s opposites. Nature is neither ‘just’ made up nor ‘just’ there to begin with as an innate fact; rather its ‘constructedness’ has real effects that need to be taken seriously, while its ‘facticity’ has a history that needs to be traced. We suggest that both of these perspectives may be appreciated by paying attention to the ways ‘nature’ is engaged through human varieties of practice and imagination.

While all human forms of practices and imaginings are constantly changing, they do so in tangible, traceable ways because they arise and are reproduced within specific social and institutional settings. By emphasising the way ‘practices and imag-

inings of nature' are part of particular historical and institutional circumstances we hope to avoid the latent mentalism of much recent academic thinking, in which 'nature' appears primarily as a matter of 'classification', 'perception' or 'invention'.

After briefly tracing how this 'shift towards classification' has come about, the introduction lays out in detail the arguments and implications of the anthology. It is argued that detailed attention to human practices highlights how 'nature' is at the same time real and constructed, simultaneously independent and full of human agency.

Understanding Nature 'in the active'

Within the past ten years of anthropological, sociological and philosophical writings, 'nature' has emerged as a firmly established *problematique*. The backdrop of this emergence of 'nature' as a conceptual and scientific problem is the increased political focus on environmental issues that has placed 'nature' centre stage far beyond the academic theatre (Sachs 1993; United Nations 1993; Kalland this volume). In response to the sharp social and political focus on matters of nature, the overall trend within the social sciences has been to 'denaturalise' nature as an academic concept and to relativise or historicise it as a cultural category (Milton 1996). The emphasis has thus been on showing that nature is not an eternal constant but inherently an unstable concept, prone to change dependent on the cultural and historical context. 'Nature', it is argued, is a historical, cultural and social construct with powerful emotional, moral and political associations.

A brief glance at the recent academic bibliography on 'nature' suggests the outlines of this – dare one term it 'constructivist'? – trend. There have been calls for a 'redefinition' (Ellen & Fukui 1996) and a 'reconstruction' of nature (Dickens 1996). Others have set out to demonstrate that nature is a cultural construction (Eder 1996; Simmons 1993), an invention (Bargatzky & Kuschel 1994; Cronon 1995), a social or historical creation (Evernden 1992; Teich et al. 1997); while still others have stressed how differently other cultural perceptions of and attitudes towards nature are constructed (Bruun & Kalland 1995; Croll et al. 1992; Holm & Bowker 1994). What nature is, has in other words been thrown fundamentally into question. The following essays set out to explore some of the implications of and lacunae in this recent push to 'denaturalise nature'. If we accept that 'nature' is constructed, perceived, and classified according to social, historical and cultural context, this

means rethinking the processes through which this construction, perception or classification is established. Rather than following the recent trend and asking ‘what is nature?’ (Soper 1995), the contributors to this volume provide specific answers to the question of ‘how nature is established’ as an entity. While the constructed nature of ‘nature’ may now have become accepted dogma, the volume attempts to go one step further and inquire into the processuality of this construction. This is done through a range of analyses which focuses on ‘the practices of nature’, that is, human practices that depend upon or are involved in generating particular perceptions and categories of nature. These practices of nature are in a ‘feedback’ or ‘looping’ relationship with their environment making them both producers of ‘nature’ and products of nature. Paradoxical as it may initially seem, detailed attention to these ‘practices of nature’ in fact problematises the whole issue of the constructedness of ‘nature’.

Anthropologists have now for some time criticised the ‘constructivist’ stance for not allowing ‘the environment’ to play an active role (Descola & Pálsson 1996a: 11; Ingold 1992a; Milton 1996: 214), but constructivism has, we will argue, a way of reproducing itself in new and unexpected ways, as evidenced in the many recent attempts to ‘reconstruct’ our understanding of ‘nature’. We believe the solution is not to discard the issue of construction, but rather to take it much more seriously. Thus pointing to the cultural constructed-ness of nature should not blind us analytically to its imposing productive reality. It is as an inescapable reality that ‘nature’ is constantly engaged, practised, semiotised, and reproduced – hence, constructed as a category (at least within a Western tradition, see Ingold 1992b). In turn, it is as a practised and semiotised reality that nature constrains, affects, and shapes human ‘being and doing’. As Michael Taussig suggests, we need to come to grips analytically with the dialectic between the real and the really made-up. Only then can we ‘gain some release from the hold of “constructivism” no less than the dreadfully passive view of nature it upholds’ (Taussig 1993: xix). We believe that the best way to engage this epistemological paradox of the constructed, yet real – which may be a problem unique to the modern Western tradition but with which we are nevertheless forced to contend – is through a practice-oriented approach which seeks to understand the processes that gird the variety of human relations with ‘nature’.

The following chapters all present case studies that depart from the passive view of nature shared by many culturalist and ‘constructivist’ approaches to ‘nature’ without succumbing to the naive realism evinced by some sections within sociobiology

(Escobar 1999; Ingold, this volume). Without wanting to exaggerate the homogeneity of the varied selection of approaches and research focus of the contributions to this volume, we wish to highlight some of the commonalities in the contributions by suggesting a number of concepts that might help reconfigure our understanding of nature ‘into the active mode’. We will do this by first outlining what we take to be the underlying logic behind the recent ‘constructivist turn’, namely a parallel shift in the anthropological understanding of ‘nature’ and of ‘culture’. We will then clarify in a piecemeal fashion the concepts that go into the title of this volume: *practice, imagining, nature, cosmology, and identity*.

The critique of culture – and the consequences for nature

The trend in the theoretical understanding of nature outlined above appears to parallel and to some extent incorporate the shift that has happened to the concept of ‘culture’. Within anthropology and associated disciplines, the validity of ‘culture’ as an analytical concept thus came under increasing attack during the 1980s and 1990s (Clifford 1988; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Dirks 1994; Gupta 1992; Herbert 1991). The critique of the concept of culture meant that many – especially in the British and French tradition, both with a long history of suspicion against the concept (Barth 1992; Kuper 1996; Kuper 1999) – argued for the abandonment of ‘culture’ as a valid analytical concept. Others suggested being attentive to the processual character of cultural processes and using the concept cautiously and only in its adjectival form (Keesing 1994). Despite various suggestions for a cure, the overall effect of the critical diagnoses was that the concept of ‘culture’ was displaced from its formerly paradigmatic position as a master trope.

It is the same theoretical trend emphasising an epistemological reconsideration and deconstruction of central concepts of the social sciences that has allowed for an increasing pluralism in the academic understanding of nature. A consequence of the criticism of the concept of culture was that the opposition between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, which had acted as a baseline for much anthropological research, became increasingly untenable. As noted by Descola and Pálsson (1996a: 2–3), the nature-culture dualism used to be the structural backbone for several widely differing schools of thought, although it performed this function in remarkably different ways. On the one hand, materialist interpretations such as Marxism, cultural ecology

and sociobiology all regarded 'culture' as an epiphenomenon for underlying environmental or genetic realities. On the other hand, symbolic and structuralist anthropology used a nature-culture dichotomy as a basic classificatory device enabling the interpretation and understanding of various types of cultural phenomena. While the former strove to establish 'the naturalistic ordering of culture', the latter advocated an understanding of 'the cultural order of nature' (see Sahlin 1976: 100). Although the 1980s and 1990s experienced a paradigmatic break with both of these theoretical approaches within anthropology and frequent calls to avoid such contrastive thinking by not positing 'culture' and 'nature' as opposing monolithic entities, the contrast held its ground. Moreover, as structuralism turned into post-structuralism and symbolism into postmodernism, 'culture' became fragmented and with this fragmentation the other term in the equation, the concept of nature, also exploded into heterogeneity. From this process of reconsideration, 'nature' – very much like 'culture' – emerged as historical, contextual and specific. The attempt to highlight the contextuality and specificity of 'nature' mirrored, in other words, the theoretical critique of the homogeneous and static character of the concept of 'culture'.

As a reaction to the increased impossibility of maintaining the nature-culture dichotomy, some within the Continental and British tradition suggested seeing the opposition between 'culture' and 'nature' in terms of a dichotomy between 'nature' and 'society' instead (Descola & Pálsson 1996b; Teich et al. 1997). But the very notion of there being an opposition at all was by now questioned and the new terms of the dichotomy, 'nature' and 'society', were even at times set up only to ostensibly be torn down in an act of 'healthy self-criticism' (Descola & Pálsson 1996a: 12). Thus Descola showed the 'dualist paradigm' to be inadequate to describe the Jivaro world view, since the modes of social engagement with animals followed much the same rules as those organising social conduct among humans (Descola 1994).

Whether one prefers to see the 'dualist paradigm' in terms of a nature-culture or a nature-society dichotomy is probably a matter of individual idiosyncrasy as much as theoretical affiliation. Whatever the terms of the opposition, however, most anthropologists have displayed an unwavering distrust towards it, preferring to see it dissolve into a monism (Descola & Pálsson 1996a: 7), even as the difficulty of escaping the opposition, once it was posited, was acknowledged (Pálsson 1996). Descola and Pálsson suggest that a demolition by decree of the nature-culture dichotomy is necessary for further insight:

Going beyond dualism opens up an entirely different intellectual landscape, one in which states and substances are replaced by processes and relations; the main question is not anymore how to objectify closed systems, but how to account for the very diversity of the processes of objectification. (Descola & Pálsson 1996a: 12)

As tempting as this suggestion may appear at first blush, we are not convinced that the dualism – whether understood as ‘nature’ opposed to ‘society’ or ‘culture’ – is easily demolished and replaced by a monist explanation. While we acknowledge the problems involved in allowing the dichotomy to be an unreflected backdrop to one’s argument, as structural, symbolical, materialist and socio-biological studies in each their way have done, we doubt it is possible to simply discard the opposition. The fact that this opposition has persevered despite the long history of critique suggests that the critique itself may be as much part of its mode of reproduction as its destruction. We agree, however, with Descola and Pálsson’s point that it is necessary to ‘account for the very diversity of the processes of objectification’, especially if this also includes the processes by which ‘nature’, ‘society’ and ‘culture’ are objectified both in the Western discourse and increasingly also in global political discourse (see Kalland, this volume Milton 1996; Pedersen 1995). Examining the creation and critical reproduction of this distinction as well as the ways in which it appears both to give meaning and to be meaningful in itself is only possible, we argue, by attending to the level of practice.

The framework: practice

A central part of the critique of culture has been what Sherry Ortner already in 1984 termed a ‘practice turn’ (Ortner 1984). An attention to the unfolding of actual practice over time, which highlighted the plurality and historicity of human agency involved in making communities, has thus increasingly replaced the static, systemic understanding of culture as a community bound by rules and norms. We are not using culture as an analytical concept in this introduction, and we do not have an overarching notion that will replace it one to one. We prefer instead to discuss human practices as a complex multitude of activities out of which certain emerging features arise that one might attempt to study, understand and classify.

As a pragmatic header, ‘practice’ is attractive for two reasons. Firstly, it is an open term that allows for the focus on a number of interrelated phenomena, from knowl-

edge, perception and meaning to power, identity and money. Secondly, the heading allows for and indeed encourages close empirical study that is open to the phenomenological processes of doing and being, while also maintaining an analytical understanding of structure, power, and meaning.

It is this attention to the level of practices and processes of establishment that we find missing from the recent critique of the concept of 'nature'. Although the critique of culture has been acknowledged, the consequences have not been thoroughly incorporated into the understanding of how 'nature' emerges out of a dialectic between human perception and human practice at the same time as human practice and perception are shaped by their history of engagement with 'nature'.

If 'nature', then, is shown to be like 'culture', at the same time as 'culture' is no longer taken to be a homogenous and static entity but a heterogeneous and dynamic set of practices, what does this do to our understanding of 'nature'? This volume suggests that paying attention to the practical as well as the discursive engagement with 'nature' – what we call 'practices of nature' – is necessary to get at the processuality, heterogeneity, and contextuality of imaginings of 'nature'.

The metaphor: imagining

The human activity of *imagining* acts as the overarching metaphor for the practices of nature analysed in this volume. But the process of imagining is more than a metaphor; it is a particular form of practice. Imagining is not just the grasping or the conceptualisation of that which is 'out there', it also implies an attempt to render an idea real by making it the model for future action. In other words, imagining entails a model *of* as well as a model *for* reality, to paraphrase Geertz' famous dictum (1966: 93–94). As the contributions to this volume show, imaginings of nature are established through the bodily internalisation of habitual practice (Ingold, Bjerkli and Pedersen). Inversely, once established, particular imaginings of nature become moral realities that affect local practices of identity as well as scientific knowledge-practices (Kalland, Witoszek, Roepstorff, and Hornborg).

The dialectical relationship between practice and imagining has been explored in detail by Benedict Anderson who, in his highly acclaimed book *Imagined Communities* (1991), set a new agenda for the study of nations. Anderson demonstrated that the idea of the nation was historical, and that it coincided with the development of specific institutional practices and technologies, which made it pos-

sible and feasible for very large groups of people to conceive of themselves in a new way. They became part of a national collective: an imagined community of anonymous individuals whose relative homogeneity was guaranteed by their sharing of a common past, present and future within a common territory defined by fixed boundaries. This new symbolic universe was made possible by new reproductive technologies and media as well as by new institutional forms of communication that Anderson labels 'print-capitalism'.

The fact that the nation is a historical construction and the outcome of certain practices and imaginings does not, however, detract from its contemporary reality. Once established, nations are real and they further come to produce reality in several ways: the nation-system is a universal classificatory system for dividing up the world; the nation has become a spatial, political and historically given entity; and it is now an important field of action for human practice for its citizens. As such, it is part of the 'nature of nations' that they exist in an interplay between the historically given and the constant practice of imagining (Billig 1995, Roepstorff and Simoniukstyte, in press). Anderson's notion of the imagined community allowed for a careful and subtle understanding of how nations could be at the same time real and constructed. He showed how imagining oneself as part of a national community arose as a possibility with the transformation of a whole series of institutional, technological and scientific practices. Once established as an entity, the imagined community changed the parameters for action by instituting a new sense of self, space, and time. In a similar if more humble vein, the contributions to this volume suggest an approach to the entity of 'nature' that captures the dialectics of practice and imagining, and that explains how 'nature' acts simultaneously as the product and source of practice.

The title of this volume, *Imagining Nature*, implies an extension, in two directions, of Anderson's original concept of 'imagined communities'. First, it entails a shift from the passive *imagined* to the active procedural *imagining*, and this shift is central for the practice perspective advocated. Second, the inclusion of the term 'nature' means an expansion of the entirely social entity 'the community' to a more inclusive term that encompasses all relations in which humans are implicated. Such relations exist not only between social human actors, but also as relations to non-human actors such as spirits, landscapes, resources, machines, or animals. The French philosopher and anthropologist of science Bruno Latour has proposed the term 'collective' to encompass this interrelated amalgam of humans and non-humans

(Latour 1999a). At the level of ideology, then, 'imagining nature' describes the way 'nature' is established in institutional, scientific, and political discourse as an entity 'out there'. Rather than describing 'imagined communities' the contributions to this volume therefore analyse 'the imagining of collectives'.

The case studies in the section entitled 'Cosmology' contribute to an understanding of these processes of imagining. The segregation of things 'natural' from things 'social' or 'cultural' is one of the characteristics of the modern constitution, as several contributors point out. Entailed by this argument is, however, a simultaneous attention to the level of practice: it is after all only through scientific, institutional or other discursive practices that the dichotomy is maintained. This attention to the complex ways in which practice engages nature is shared by the contributors to the section called 'Identity'. Thus, while the dichotomy might be maintained at the level of ideology and ideal conceptions of 'practice', the dichotomy between things social and things natural collapses 'in actual practice' as actors and entities assume a hybrid form as at once social and natural, moral and factual. This goes for the modern context of science and politics in the West, as Hornborg, Ingold and Kalland show, as much as it applies to the coevalness of the human and the non-human spheres in Mongolia or in Greenland as demonstrated by Pedersen and Roepstorff in their contributions. Thus, instead of positing an imagined community faced with a real nature, the contributions to *Imagining Nature* describe the way collectives, understood as an amalgam of people and non-humans, are organised, practised and imagined in a variety of settings. In this sense, 'nature' becomes an aspect of and agent in the constitution of 'imagined collectives'.

Nature – and nations

Our extension of Benedict Anderson's metaphor is furthermore supported by the fact that the terms 'nation' and 'nature' share more than a few similarities. Etymologically both are derived from the latin *nasci* (to be born) (Bargatzky 1994: 16) or *natio* (something born) (Greenfeld 1992: 4), indicating that they share a common semantic history of being associated with origin and emergence. The two notions also appear to assume their contemporary semantic form in Western Europe sometime around the turn of the eighteenth century (Bargatzky 1994: 9-10; Greenfeld 1992: 24), although the exact where and when is as contentious and disputed as all other issues related to the origin of modernity. It is, however, not only at an ety-

mological and semantic level that ‘nation’ and ‘nature’ are connected. Ties are also clearly discernible in the historical emergence of nationalist ideology. As shown by Witoszek in her analysis of German and Scandinavian nationalism (Witoszek, this volume), notions of ‘nature’ are frequently tailored to fit the constitution of specific national ideologies, while emotive themes related to conceptions of nature come to have a bearing on the shaping of the nation and ideas about the nation. Nations seem, in other words, to demand specific natures.

Finally and most importantly for our purposes, ‘nation’ and ‘nature’ appear to share some of the same properties from a general, analytical perspective. Anderson’s analysis of nationalism introduced an important mediation between two positions on the origin of the nation. The so-called ‘primordialist’ interpretation, defended by most nationalists, claimed that the nation was a manifestation of eternal commonalities founded upon a primordial attachment to the soil, the mother-tongue, blood or ethnic origin (Smith 1986). Conversely, the critical stance, found for example in orthodox Marxist-Leninist thought (Connor 1984), saw nations as inventions of the eighteenth century. As an invention, the nation was created and, thus, was but an ideational fetish that would in due course be superseded by history. Rather than being mutually exclusive truths about the origin of the nation, the two positions combined in Anderson’s approach into a synthetic explanation. Nations were indeed constructed, historical entities, as the constructivists claimed, but nations were also factually existing agents in the modern world order whose significance could hardly be underestimated. The constructedness of the nation had, in other words, to be taken seriously by understanding how nationalism was a real institutional and political agent. As the contributions to this volume argue, ‘nature’ occupies the same interstice between the real and the really made-up and defies any unilateral relegation to the domain of the ‘purely constructed’ or the ‘really real’.

Nature as *factish*

Anthropological phenomena are arguably always located epistemologically between the real and the really made-up, but by what concepts might the interstitial character of these phenomena be highlighted? In his call for a non-modern conceptual order, Bruno Latour (1999a) has proposed a new name for such hybrids; namely *factish*, a word that in itself is a hybrid between fact and fetish. ‘Nature’ and ‘nation’ both appear to belong to this awkward class of phenomena that one for lack of a

better word may call factishes: phenomena that are at once constructed and real, processual and independent entities. The most comprehensive understanding of the conditions of production and being of 'factishes' is achieved, we argue, by the application of a dynamic practice perspective.

Bruno Latour was led to the notion of factish through his anthropological and philosophical studies of scientific practice. A central issue in the philosophy and anthropology of science in the last decade has been the 'social constructionism' debate (Hacking 1999). In its strong version, this discussion asks whether results in the natural sciences are 'real'; that is, unaffected by human agency and intentionality, or whether they were 'socially constructed'; that is, mere reflections of ideology and interests among the scientists producing them. This discussion reflects a central difference between the sciences devoted to nature and culture respectively, Latour claims. Particularly, it reflects different ways of handling human agency analytically. Setting up a no doubt simplified dichotomy that nevertheless captures a significant difference, Latour argues that the natural sciences strive to eliminate the intervention of human agency into scientific inquiry in order to ensure the 'truth' of its facts. The social sciences, on the other hand, far from trying to eliminate it, tend to take human action as their object of study. In its critical form, social science thus seeks to unmask what appears to be solid entities (such as facts, nature or nation) as instances of human agency. As a rule, the social sciences do so by demonstrating that the presumed fact is 'really' a fetish: an ideological effect of a strategic endeavour by some segment of society or an unintentional outcome of 'epistemic' preferences. This epistemological conflict between two scientific cultures that has dogged the sciences for at least a century is, according to Latour, an instance of the so-called 'modern constitution' – a certain conceptual division of the world that relegates phenomena into distinct categories: nature on one side, society on the other. The ideational construct wherein 'facts' belong to nature while 'fetishes' belong to society thus organises the scientific division of labour but is also related to the nature-culture dichotomy, the dialectical relationship of which has been the bone of academic contention for decades. Latour even suggests that the epistemological conflict between nature and culture is an organising principle in the modern constitution (Latour 1993).

While the epistemological opposition between nature and culture may seemingly achieve its congruent social form in the scientific division of labour, the opposition between the social and natural sciences appears less clear when one studies

carefully the actual scientific practices, as Latour and his colleagues did. The entities popping up as a result of the practice of the natural sciences are thus undoubtedly real but also human-made and full of agency. In fact, it is precisely because they are made that they may get an independent existence. This finding has a very different message than the much criticised bogus of universal constructionism (see Hacking, 1999: 24) which states that scientific knowledge is only human agency, therefore it is constructed and by implication it is relative, fetishistic and false ideology. In Latour's analysis, then, the epistemological opposition between the real and the made up, which both types of science have agreed to uphold, also dissolves. This opposition as well as the dichotomy between the natural and the social sciences are only valid as long as human agency is not factored into the equation. We wish to apply the same logic to the dichotomy within anthropology between culture and nature. Instead of advocating for the abolition of the dichotomy, we suggest looking at its mode of reproduction by beginning, simply, where anthropologists have always begun: with human practice.

It was the study of actual scientific practice that allowed Latour and his colleagues to show that scientific facts were simultaneously full of human agency and yet reliable, independent entities. In a similar vein it was through the careful and detailed analysis of how nations came into being not as abstract ideas, but as concrete, imagined communities, that Anderson and others (e.g. Cubitt 1998) could demonstrate how nations came to be at the same time real and constructed. Their seemingly different projects of analysing the 'natural fact' as a real but constructed scientific entity and the nation as a constructed but real institutional entity overlapped, in that their objects of study, the nation and the scientific fact, were central to the constitution of modernity. Latour's research in the science lab thus led him to identify the blind opposition between nature and culture as the basic opposition organising modernity (Latour 1993), a modernity, which as Anderson highlighted, has nations as the most general principle of social organisation. We think that the overall take-home message from this volume can be formulated along the same lines: that it is through the careful study of human practices that it becomes clear how 'nature' is at the same time real and constructed, simultaneously independent and full of human agency. Additionally, if the contributions succeed in pointing to some of the ways that 'nature', real yet mediated and constructed by human practice, is related to 'the period formerly known as modernity', we feel the volume has achieved its aim. Certainly, Witoszek's analysis of the entanglement of nature and

nation in Scandinavia suggest such a link, as does Hornborg's examination of the modern, rationalist economy of the environment. In both cases, we see how 'nature' is a symbolic, if real, effect of 'modern' human practice. Once institutions are set up within nations to alter 'their' nature to fit a specific ideal, the relationship between human practice and natural change within modernity becomes even more apparent. We have by now become accustomed to the 'tristes tropes' of this relationship: environmental degradation, pollution, deforestation. But human practice shapes nature in other ways, too, often creating the supposedly 'pristine nature', nations and environmentalists seek to preserve. This is for instance suggested in the analysis by Kull et al. (this volume) of the Estonian wooded meadows: a unique type of nature with an extraordinarily high species diversity that exists only through and by a practical engagement between humans and their environment pursued over centuries. The relationship between 'nature' and human practice is, in other words, more complex than might be assumed at first blush. It needs therefore to be analysed in detail with an observant eye and keen ear for the local meanings and narratives attached to the relationship, since it is at once symbolic, moral, political, imagined and real.

Cosmology

The dialectical relationship between imaginings and practices of nature unfolds within at least two different domains, which structure this volume. One domain is related to the production of knowledge; the other is related to the production of identity. Within the first domain, 'nature' is an object of scientific and popular knowledge but, as the contributions reveal, the particular status that 'nature' has as a discursive object is intimately related to a much wider reality which includes practical ways of engagement, moral issues, institutional knowledge regimes and political dynamics; in short, an encompassing conception of the world that anthropologists have traditionally called 'cosmological'. We have therefore opted for the term 'cosmology' to denote this domain in which 'nature' is produced by and produces certain moral knowledge-practices. Cosmology is an old anthropological fad, something that anthropologists can construct as a synthesis of 'the native's' thought, an overarching narrative about sky and earth, gods and people, the right, the good and the beautiful (Barth 1987). In modern societies, the conceptual cake seems to be cut somewhat differently. In the jargon of the natural sciences, cosmology is mainly understood as an objective sub-discipline of astrophysics that deals with the origin

and fate of the universe (see, however, Toulmin 1982). In the popular conception, as well as in the humanities, cosmology is the domain of the supernatural, the spiritual, the unreal, but also the unseen realm of systematicity, which governs life. As such, cosmology is distinct from the pedestrian normalcy of society, and here cosmology comes to assume the same position as society's 'other' that nature otherwise occupies. It is, to cite Coppet and Iteanu, as if

European societies have opposed two qualitatively distinct domains. One attributed lesser values, is governed by relative human laws, we call it society. It is dominated by a wider realm, understood as an intrinsic universal order and represented at different times and places by the figures of God, Nature and the Individual.... This larger domain fits perfectly into the dictionary's definition of the term cosmos, as "an orderly harmonious systematic universe, a complex orderly self-inclusive system". Since the primary characteristic of a cosmos is its claim to wholeness, no higher value than those which characterise it may exist (Coppet & Iteanu 1995: 1).

One of the dichotomies underlying this idea of cosmology as an encompassing order is thus the opposition of nature and culture. In this relationship nature is frequently made to function as the ordering principle of culture. Coppet and Iteanu forcefully argue that in Oceanian societies, the cosmological distinctions are drawn differently from this Western stereotype. While the insights from Oceanic and other societies may undoubtedly be useful in questioning our own doxic ideas, we need to be sure that the ideas are really as doxic and unquestioned as is claimed. The contributors to this volume thus share a suspicion against erecting such an opposition between the West and the Rest to question the nature-culture or cosmos-society dichotomy. Even in the West, alternative orders are always possible. For instance, while 'nature' may in one view – namely that of the hard sciences, of sociobiology or cultural ecology – function as the 'cosmogenic' principle behind things 'cultural', the trend within 'constructivist' anthropology has recently been to make social classification or cultural perception the ordering principle of 'nature'. Symbolic reversal of the levels of encompassing orders is thus always possible – also in the West. Even Western scientific practice may be shown to appeal to the level of cosmology, seemingly as part of its effort to establish scientific credibility. As Hornborg's study of monetary rhetorics and Roepstorff's study of knowledge forms in contemporary Greenland demonstrate, 'hard' sciences such as economics and biology employ a

particular cosmology in their approach to nature. The seemingly objective and value-neutral activities of counting fish in modern Greenland or calculating the money value of biodiversity are part of a moral universe that interrelates humans and non-humans into larger frameworks and hence have the effect of mobilising cosmologies in the classical anthropological sense.

These and other suggestions in this volume seem to lend credence to Latour's polemic statement, that 'we have never been modern' (Latour 1993). Although 'we adherents' of the modern constitution on many political, institutional and ideational levels act as if reality is rigidly divided into a 'natural' and a 'cultural' domain, numerous practically mediated connections linking the two poles appear upon closer inspection and reveal 'modernity' as more of a formal statement or creed than an accurate label for contemporary society. If that is correct, this destabilises many of the common myths about the West. The institutional rationalisation of society, characterising modernity in the Weberian optic, may fade once we attend to the specifics of institutional knowledge-practices, as Hornborg, Ingold, and Kaarhus show. The opposition between the West and the Rest, already heavily chastised, also proves tenuous from this perspective. One specific instance of this is Kalland's critique in this volume of the political opposition made between the nature-exploiting West and the 'noble savage' society living in harmony with both cosmos and nature.

Identity

The second domain in which 'practices of nature' are evident is in the production of localised identity. It is thus a well-established fact of social theory that identity is an inherent outcome of the emergence of social relationships (Barth 1969; Mead 1967). These relationships are continuously made and remade as certain connections stabilise, condense and contract, while other connections are never made or simply cut (Strathern 1996). In classical symbolic anthropology, the universe of relations – out of which identities are condensed – was conceptualised as a web of significance (Geertz 1966) and were seen to be established only between groups of real social actors. However, as the contributions to this section show, the web that establishes identity is not just a web of significance, it is also real and very material. Secondly, and following from this, the communities that form out of these condensed relations, at once mental and material, contain semantic, social connections between people as well as things, objects, technologies and non-humans (Latour 1993). The

types of identity established thus cut across the ideal dichotomy between the social and the natural. They are collectives in Latour's terms, being about specific groups of humans that ascertain a specific identity, but also an involvement with highlighted sections of 'the natural world', be it trees used for firewood among the Saami (Bjerkli, this volume); mountains and rivers among the Tsatang in Mongolia (Pedersen, this volume); or soil types in the African Sahel (Paarup-Laursen and Krogh, this volume). At the same time, however, it is crucial to maintain clear sight of the fact that although humans and the non-human are immensely connected, distinctions and the cutting of networks are continuously made as part of social practice – establishing different kinds of people and different kinds of things. These 'kinds' are continuously realigned and reconnected in particular historical matrixes of social power (Bourdieu 1984; Hacking 1992; Strathern 1996). While the resulting identities can be deconstructed, be taken apart and disconnected analytically, identity carries a real existence as focal points for actions and interpretations.

The papers in the identity section are case studies from classical ethnographic settings like Africa (Paarup Laursen and Krogh), Mongolia (Pedersen), and Sami communities in northern Norway (Bjerkli) as well as modern, complex nation states like the Scandinavian (Witoszek) and the classics of modern architecture (Brauckmann). They do, however, tell a remarkably similar story of how practically mediated relations to the environment on the one hand stabilise social identities and on the other hand turn the purely physical space into a valorised place of belonging and believing (Appadurai 1995).

Concluding perspectives

Recently, a focus on the 'politics of nature' has been advanced as an important aspect of our reconceptualisation of 'nature' (Escobar 1999; Latour 1999b). This push seeks, like the contributions to this volume, to deal with the 'factish-ness' of 'nature' as being at one and the same time a cultural construct and a reality of increasing political concern (see Anderson 2000). As already indicated by Benedict Anderson (1991), imaginings always entail a particular politics. They also entail a particular ontology, epistemology, ethics, and sense of belonging. We have therefore in this volume opted to focus on the almost old-fashioned notions of identity and cosmology. This allows for a focus on those practices of nature that engage a particular view of the world, on the one hand, and those practices of nature that deal with

the place of particular groups of humans in the world, on the other. The papers in the section titled 'Cosmology' demonstrate how the engagement with nature – which is discursive as well as practical – is part of the construction of an encompassing cosmology: a moral regime of knowledge and a practical getting to know the world. The papers grouped under the heading 'Identity' tell a similar story. They examine how human identity and identities arise out of interactions not just with other humans, but also with the non-human realm. In the imagining and making of 'society', 'nature' is established simultaneously as a classificatory system for dividing up this world, as a spatial, political and historical given, and as multiple fields of action for human practice. The papers also reveal how 'practices of nature' engender a particular kind of community or 'collective'. Using either phenomenological or Batesonian concepts, several papers thus show how the corporeal engagement with the natural environment sets the standards or 'ethos' for engagements within 'the social world' (Ingold, this volume; Bjerkli, this volume; see also Ingold 1998). These studies thus suggest that 'practices of nature' are involved not only in constructing specific 'perceptions of nature' but also in establishing particular human ontologies.

As argued by Ingold (this volume) humans are living organisms who both purposely and habitually act in the world. At the same time as this activity takes shape from the contours of the life-world, the life-world is also being bent and transformed by human praxis. One of the first consequent attempts to formulate a coherent framework for biology that took as its starting point an organism's life-world was that of the German-Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Uexküll proposed a subject-based biology that examined how each organism was surrounded by and built around itself a subjective sphere of meaning, called *Umwelt* (Ingold 1995; Uexküll 1921; Uexküll 1980). This approach did mark an interesting shift of analytical stance that is receiving renewed attention today (Kull 2001; Brauckmann this volume). Although the distinctions introduced by Uexküll may still be useful, the essentially solipsistic *Umwelts* do not appear to be able to describe the particular human condition (Roepstorff, 2001). People do not live enclosed in mental soap bubbles, neither individually nor socially. On the contrary, as factishes such as nature and nation demonstrate, the human *Umwelt* is neither confined to the single subject nor is it satisfactorily described as a subjectively perceived 'outer world'. Rather it appears that humans establish among themselves entities that cannot be understood exclusively as states of the mind, or as entirely physical things in the world around them. An analysis

along this line led the late Estonia-based Russian semiotician Jurij Lotman to propose that humans create around themselves a peculiar form of environment: a meaningful, sign-based semiosphere that adds an extra layer to the organic biosphere and the inorganic lithosphere (Lotman 1990). This wide-ranging outline for a semiotic anthropology has not received much attention outside specialists in semiotics or slavonic studies (see, however, Witoszek and Randviir, this volume; Eco 1997; Hornborg 1996), but whereas much insight into the constituency of the semiotics of culture can be gained from the semiosphere perspective, it appears to show a disinterest in the non-semantic aspects of human life (see Randviir, this volume).

Our contention is that nature is simultaneously semiotised and real. As such 'nature' is both the product of human practice and its condition of possibility. In this understanding, the notion of nature is maintained only in the context of specific and dynamic practices. Aspects of the natural world obviously fall beyond the domain of the human, but humans make it their interest through action, classification and semiotisation and they thereby draw it into the field of practice and discourse. This is not a Berkeleyan argument stating that there is nothing out there if no one pays attention to it (Berkeley 1710: §45). Many natural processes occur whether humans observe them or not and may have a determining and limiting effect on humans whether we are aware of them or not. Nature may in this sense act as the background and limitation for human practice. As a background and limit, however, 'nature' is continuously being semiotised, valorised and made to be meaningful through reflection and practice. Imagining is thus a 'semiotising practice' – a practice shaped by the very world it constantly semiotises. It is this double process of shaping and being shaped, of being real and being really made-up that characterises 'nature'. Each in their own way, the contributions seek to get at this 'factish-ness' of nature by describing the specific processes of semiotisation and imagining at stake in the 'practices of nature'.