

Negotiating concepts of nature and future in Africa

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1 Challenges and Ideas

History of Project

Recommendation of Science Advisory Board: investigate/intensify relationships between 'area studies' and 'systematic disciplines'. ...lead to

Call by German Ministry of Research and Education (BMBF)

A group of Bayreuth colleagues submitted a proposal based on: ...

area studies Africa and its diasporas

systematic literature, sociology, modelling, ...

methodological time in focus: 'Future Africa – Visions in Time'

After approval of the proposal and start in November 2012 organisation of the project has been based on:

Two Pillars

- academy program: working groups (current: 'Nature and Future')
- subprojects: SP-II (host) 'Visions of Nature'
- joint: workshops (like this one)

Project Overview

Subprojects

1. Narratives of Future in History (History)
2. *Visions of Nature* (Anthropology, Geography, Religious Studies, Ecological Modelling)
3. Middle Classes on the Rise (Sociology, Anthropology)
4. Concepts of Future in MediaSpaces (English & German Literature)
5. Revolution 3.0 (Visual Studies, Artists)

Working Groups

- Conceptualizing Future in Current Debates (all SPs)
- Multiple Futures (SP-1, History)
- *Concepts of Nature and Future* (SP-2, see above)
- Midterm Revision (all SPs)

2 Workshop Topics

“Negotiating Concepts of Nature and Future in Africa”

The many disciplines involved required clarification of terminology on ‘nature’ and ‘future’

Key Terms

Moderns defined with respect to time, . . .

Negotiating disciplines across the nature-culture divide use incompatible terminology

Concept models in mathematical language (run on a computer)

Nature autonomous, system? (can mean many things)

Culture expression of human will

Future characteristic time concept of ‘Moderns’

Africa includes diasporas

3 Public Perception

‘*Climate Change*’ and ‘*National Parks*’ are two widely known environmental topics. We start from the respective international conventions.

Public Perception

International Legal Framework

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) commits signatories to a long-term goal of stabilizing atmospheric greenhouse gases “at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) “comprehensive, binding agreement covering the use and conservation of biodiversity. It requires countries to develop and implement strategies for sustainable use and protection of biodiversity.”

Ideas behind

extracted

- *stabilize* greenhouse gases such that no human interference with *climate* occurs
- *use* and *protect* (as human activities/interventions) such that biodiversity is *conserved*

Principles

- two natures:
 - one with passive relation: non-living nature (climate system)
 - one with active interference (living nature)
- synchronized history: modern agents
- global tasks

- nation states as agents

For the climate the goal represent an autonomous dynamic system, outside the reach of human disturbances. This implies self-restraining humans rather than geo-engineering of the climate.

For biodiversity humans depend on utilizing living systems. The goal is hence formulated in the manner of use (sustainable, protective). This implies an interactive relationship between humans and ecosystems. What kind of human use is a 'National park'? It is sometimes represented, like the climate, as an autonomous system which will revert to (stabil, stationary) states once humans are excluded (though the empirical evidence for this is much poorer). In other instances 'National parks' are described as challenging management tasks, how the goal of preservation can be achieved.

4 Scientific Perception

Implications

A Genuine 'Modern Situation'

- one global history
- at a critical (decisive) moment?
- controlled by 'free' agents (set apart from nature)
- seeking to preserve their global heritage
- future a fact (accessible by prediction)
- scientists as mediators

Methodological Implications

Modern attitudes towards nature imply a *spatial* delineation of the ambience: Firstly, an outer realm which is beyond human (and divine) control and which changes autonomously under 'Laws of Nature', the paradigmatic example being the planetary system. Secondly, an inner, *social* realm in which human interaction is played out and which is subject to social (moral) norms, with family and local communities as paradigmatic examples. The social realm is under human control and humans are held responsible for their (intentional) actions. The inner (biological) nature of humans is usually kept distinct from the former two instances.

Dynamic System, spatially delineated (early moderns)

- outer spatial realm, outside the reach of humans (astronomy: 'science of seeing'), became *autonomous nature*, permanent by itself: *future as fact* (after Barbara Adam)
- nearby spatial realm, within human reach (realm of culture: 'arts of doing'), became *human culture*, creative, always changing, heritage actively conserved: *future as fiction* (after Barbara Adam)

Environment of late or post-moderns

- on a *finite* earth with a *global* culture, these realms merge
- enter: *reflexive* modernity
- instead of nature versus culture, *hybrids* everywhere

5 Questions

Questions

to Scientists, Regardless of Discipline

- How to deal with hybrids systematically?
 - Here, inspecting perceptions (visions) at different scales and perspectives: examples national parks (preserving living nature) and climate (adapting to changes and new stationary climate states)
 - reflecting on proper abstractions, concepts, models, ...
- how to replace nature and culture dichotomy?
- reflexive worlds may contain (macro)-inconsistencies. How to identify and represent?
- How can 'free subjects' decide on a shared future if their world views do not contain a consistent past? (does it?)

Scientific disciplines are usually organised around empirical accessible phenomena which allow for a consistent theoretical characterization. The few exceptions occur so far in physics, mathematics, anthropology(?). In a reflexive modernity, a reflexive world, such inconsistencies many proliferate to many more disciplines. How to respond conceptually?

Personal Remark, as Modeller

Mainstream Responses Sufficient?

- most of us have one disciplinary home
- few sciences teach switching, tolerating different, incompatible cosmologies
- what meta-language and meta-praxis?
- is this 'an-elephant-in-the-room-problem'?

how does mainstreams feel?

- cultural sciences approach: subsume notions of nature as another humanly construct
- natural science approach: extend language of dynamic systems metaphorically (to allegedly complex systems)

If the world is not just finite, but inconsistent: contains incommensurable aspects? This might be interesting for artists, managers, pragmatics people, but what is an appropriate *scientific* response? What are your experiences with this, especially in an interdisciplinary context?

Questions, we are struggling with ...

Related to National Parks

- not one (universally best), not arbitrary many, but few (four) world views (cosmologies)?
- translations to other classifications (from Descola 2004)
- characterize few 'pure' cases of land management
 - timing is the key, opportunistic on space
 - spatial zoning, configuration is the key, temporal change autonomously
- local comparisons, case studies on national parks helpful?

Questions, we are struggling with ...

Related to Religion

- Influence of religious beliefs and practices on communities' interaction with their environment
- Impact of (physical, behavioural) features of the environment on religious beliefs and practices
- Deviations and orthodoxy
- Utilization (appropriation, syncretisms) of collective cosmologies by various actors

Questions, we are struggling with ...

Adaptation as a travelling idea

- How does the global „idea“ of adaptation to climate change „travel“ to projects and people in Africa? And back? → discourses, translations
- in which way are anticipation, risk-taking and future-making embedded in societal relations with nature? → society
- to what extent do negotiations about adaptation to climate change affect possible futures in other regions? → space

Elephant in the Room?

Kants third antinomy dealt with the compatibility of human free will with a world ruled by Laws of Nature. Throughout Western history this problem has repeatedly been addressed (for example see Wolfgang Welsch, 2008: Mensch und Welt), but not solved. If humans investigate the ambience through their senses, they find themselves in a unique situation, distanced through sense perception from the world. If humans reconstruct and interpret their evolutionary history they find a continuity, such that any of their cognitive abilities has a pre-runner in another mammal.

Nature seen outside

- (unique?) exo-observer
- perception filtered through senses
- finds deterministic laws of nature
- spatial, discontinuous, complex, ...

Culture memorized inside

- endo-observer
- embedded in shared history
- free to assign meaning and options
- temporal, continuous, interactive, ...

How can an exo-observer, who has only indirect access to the world, be at the same time endowed with free will which evolved in a shared history?

In any interdisciplinary cooperation within a reflexive world the pragmatic neglect of incompatible terms and concepts may no longer be an option. Computer models are the likely places where the implications will show up first.

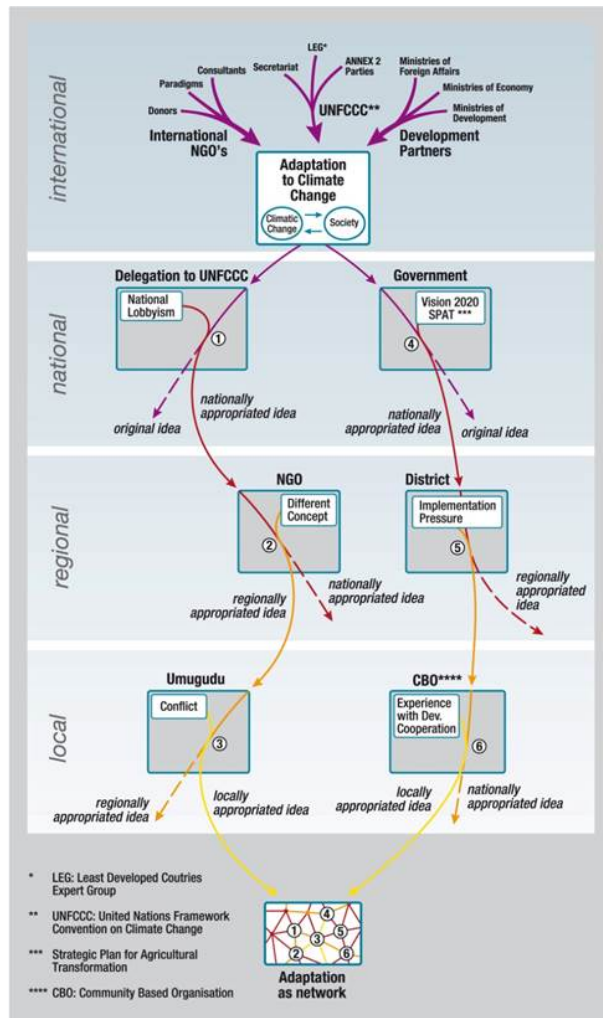


Figure 1: Makuva2012

6 Structure of Workshop

Workshop Sessions on

- nature (National Parks: preserving wildlife, contested areas)
- philosophy (inconsistencies in reflexive modernity?)
- climate (adaptation, coping, future as social fact, ...)
- religion (legitimation of actions, values, theological legacies)
- synthesis