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Summary of the discussion on

Negotiating concepts of nature and future in Africa

June 19-21, 2014

Conference of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies

University of Bayreuth

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Introduction by Michael Hauhs

Michael presented the history and the project structure of the research network Future Africa at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies. The main objective of this network is to elaborate the conceptionalization of area studies with a focus on temporality by integrating perspectives of area studies and systemic disciplines. The conference is hosted by the subproject "Visions of Nature" which focus on the perception of nature in the context of climate change and national parks in Africa. The subproject examines how different actors in national parks as well as participants in the climate change debate conceptualize their respective notions of "nature" and their roles in using, protecting and preserving nature for the future. Michael discussed the implications of a "modern situation" and its specific understanding of nature and culture. He suggested two methodological perspectives on future and nature, referring to Barbara Adams: future as fact with the idea of nature being autonomous and future as fiction with a more reflexive, fluid idea of nature. He also discussed the postmodern idea of hybridity versus the modern idea of a nature/culture dichotomy.

The conference organizers' initial questions in relation to their research topics were:

➢ Does the classification of Descolas's four world views on nature (cosmologies) offer an empirically useful categorisation?

➢ How helpful are comparative area studies of different national parks?

➢ What is the influence of religious beliefs and practices on communities' interventions in the environment?

➢ What is the impact of (physical, behavioural) features of the environment on religious beliefs and practices?

➢ How does the global idea of adaptation to climate change „travel" to projects and people in Africa? And back?

➢ In which way are anticipation, risk-taking and future-making embedded in societal relations with nature?

Additional questions by all participants after discussing the introduction

➢ How can the nature/culture divide be overcome (postcolonial perspective, knowledge as cultural practice)?

➢ What is scientists' role?

➢ Why is the figure of dichotomy so attractive (despite there being no empirical evidence)?

➢ Relevance of situated knowledge (reflection of positionality)?

- ➢ Travelling ideas in historical and present?
- ➢ Heritage of narratives of nature?
- ➢ Role of communities in environmental protection?
- ➢ Conceptional relations between space, time, materiality?
- ➢ Whose future/development are we talking about?
- ➢ How is the domestication/colonization of nature related to gaining control over the future?
- ➢ In which way is power relevant for the capacity to negotiate one's future?
- ➢ How is the capacity to negotiate future linked to/embedded in locality/space/land ownership?

Panel: Nature in the context of African national parks

Globalizing environments in the lowlands of Southern Ethiopia
by *Echi Christina Gabbert*

Two case studies of contested land use for sugar cane plantation and oil exploitation in nature protection areas. Intervention by communication and the global neighbourhood approach to "give development a human face".

Geographical imaginations of Africa. The (re-)production of African landscapes
by *Jan Erik Steinkrüger*
Examples of civilized nature/wilderness in African national parks and German zoos. Deconstruction of national parks as a protected idea/picture of landscape and the commodification of selected nature. National parks are a colonial project, transforming Africa into gardens and cash crop land. Nowadays national park wilderness is presented for a tourist gaze.

Negotiating nature - culture relationships in social change partnerships: observations from the Kalahari
by *Lauren Dyll-Mykklebust*
Case study on the conflict between tourism and nature protection in the Kgalagdi Transfrontier Park at the border of South Africa and Namibia. Presentation of communicational tools (participatory tourism development for solving land use conflicts with, includes identification of private, public and community partners, their visions of future and socio-economic empowerment).

Panel: Cross cutting themes of concepts of nature and future
First input by Michael Hauhs and Georg Klute

The dualistic divide of nature and culture is a Christian invention and most non-Christians do not use this concept. Furthermore various non-dualistic concepts of nature and culture exist in European philosophy, such as the world views of Platon, Aristoteles or Kant. Their worldview of the connectedness of everything is much more related to African consciousness. But the old European philosophers wanted to order the world by discrete categories within a triangle systematisation. We should overcome dual or triangle systems to understand crisis phenomena as hybrid phenomena.

Second input by Sybille Bauriedl

Until now we have discussed "nature" as a natural resource, commodity, common good, environment, ecosystem service, social construction, narrative, artificial, romantic idea, civilized wilderness. To understand what nature means for the possible future, we should focus on societal-nature relations. The rationalities of society and nature relations analysed at our conference so far were: firstly ownership (property of land, land use rights, control of access to land), secondly knowledge production (narratives of nature and natural heritage within colonial power geometries and scientific categorisation), and thirdly appropriation (exploitation and extraction of natural resources, monetarization and commodification of nature). And to understand what the constraints of possible futures are, we have to ask what the hegemonial goals of regulating global societal-nature relations are: sustainability? Resilience? Ecological stability? Just society?

Statement by Nikolaus Schareika

We should focus on practices of doing science with nature/culture frameworks and ask what the rationalities, social constraints and personal interests of benefit are. Approaches dealing with dichotomies are political ecology, landscape studies and science technology studies. Pragmatic approaches in anthropology ask: What people are doing? What are their practices? How do people think dichotomies and to what sense? Common approaches in anthropology are: evolutionism (explaining culture through nature as a law), adaptation (systems theory, cultural ecology), cultural diversity and meaning (humans as parts of systems and meaning). More reflection is needed about what we (each of us) are doing in our research and we need to be more precise about our objects of research and terminology. These practices are socially, culturally and historically embedded.

Discussion after inputs on cross cutting themes of concepts of nature and future

- Do we simply have a problem with terminology? Should we talk about "environment" instead of "nature" or about "societal relations of nature"?

- The two entities of human and non-human world are images of a continuum

- Keep the distinctions of human/nature in order to address relationships, constructedness and non-identity of nature

- In which way does nature unfold in history?

- Images of future as a return to the past: getting beyond the linearity of evolutionary concepts of future

- Landscape are a hybrid of culture and nature

- Alternative concepts of future: development and planning (controllable future) and prophecy (future as fate)

- Distinction of modernity: rationality (knowledge) and reasonability (practice)

- Agency of non-human: can nature have agency outside of a societal context?

- Terminologies and concepts are still unclear/ambivalent: "culture" as a system of meaning?

- Getting beyond the nature/culture separation or searching for alternative views with anthropological approaches (local knowledge, outside/inside view)

- Science and technology studies (STS): examines practices of knowledge production and drivers of science, rationality of systems, how societies inscribe themselves into production of landscape, "nature" and technology

- Is the nature/culture dichotomy a temporal problem or something inherent in every society? Is it a problem of modernity or a universal characteristic of human civilisation?

- Future: emergence, contingency, (un-)predictability, practices of scholars using the nature/culture dichotomy -> focus on the consequences of these practices

- ➢ Grounding research problems: not out of the blue, making the effects of dichotomies concrete (commodification etc.)
- ➢ Same future for everyone? us/others?

Panel: Religious dimensions of human-nature relations

Indigenous environmental management practices embedded in local narratives of climate change

by *Liz Watson*

Case study of Northern Kenya as a new territory of contestation, with green grabbing as a way of commodifying nature and its appropriation by a wide group of players in the name of sustainability, conservation and green development. This region is transformed into "waste land" by narratives of nature as out there, wild, unused, underdeveloped and tamed. The discourse of climate catastrophism and apocalyptic imaginary supports this practice of green grabbing. The political and social impact is the dislocation of pastorals as former land users and a fast transformation of land use. In national climate discourse social crisis (poverty) is translated into an ecological crisis (impacts of climate change).

Environmentalism and African traditional religion

by *Nisbert Taisekwa Taringa*

Case study of animal spirituality in Zimbabwe which shows different representations and interpretations of nature using Western concepts as well as concepts of the Shona people, who associate animals with certain cosmologies.

Stakeholder cosmologies at Matobo National Park, Zimbabwe

by *Kupakwashe Mtata, University of Bayreuth*

Two case studies of the different sacralisations of nature in the Matobo World Heritage Site with a diachronic outlook from prehistoric times up to the present and a synchronic outlook on competing and cooperating sacralisations in contemporary times. While one community may perceived a piece of land as valuable for subsistence, another community without previous experience of the place as home may admire it aesthetically as a possible tourist destination. This extensiveness is divisible according to different scales and according to the intensities and types of values. Valuations of landscape may compete or collaborate or do both at the same time.

Panel: Climate adaptation as travelling idea

Geographies of the future: navigating through risky territories

by *Detlef Müller-Mahn*

Arjun Appadurai differentiates three cultural practices of future-making: imagination (production of locality), aspiration (capacity for having a good life) and anticipation (capacity for risk-taking). Ulrich Beck describes risk as the anticipation of future catastrophes in the present and world risks as

delocalized (e.g. climate change, terrorism, financial crisis). Risk-taking is embedded in a global securitization discourse and local discourses of adaptation. The case of the Afar, pastoral nomads in Eastern Ethopia, shows various adaptation strategies such as irrigation, agriculture, armament and migration. Climate adaptation is a widely-disseminated idea of the Western desire for the control of nature.

Climate adaptation discourses and rescaling practices
by *Sybille Bauriedl*
Mark Pelling differentiates visions of adaptation as resilience, as transition and as transformation with very different impacts on societal-nature relations and regulation. Scientific climate change knowledge of resilience is translated via national adaptation programs into transition and clashes with local knowledge of transformation. Local adaptation strategies are highly politically contested. Case studies in Kenya shows that the interpretation of climate change as an ecological crisis can deflect attention away from underlying drivers of vulnerability and poverty, as well as obscuring the interests of governments that are intent on reordering poor and vulnerable populations.

Localizing climate change
by *Shuaib Lwasa*
Case study of the communication of vulnerability in Uganda. Resettled residents have increased difficulties with malaria due to climate change in their new residency. Impacts of climate change are too abstract to realize as health risks. There exists a lack of equivalent in the local language. Identification of risks and necessary strategies to adapt are needed, not catch-all approaches. Different ideas of adaptation and development are contested.

Closing discussion on (re-)conceptionalizing African nature and future

1) *What is nature?*
- Negotiating nature gives rise to general questions.

- How do ideas of nature travel and how they are translated?

- We discussed the ontologies of nature (reading and norming nature/landscape) and the meaning of nature (re-reading nature/landscape) within different scientific frames

2) *Perspectives on human nature relations*
- Dualistic, dialectical, hybrid and holistic perspectives are simultaneously relevant.

- Historically the nature-culture dichotomy is the most powerful ordering in the modern world related to Africa.

- An aim exists of finding universal definitions for nature (scientists want to be modern) with a permanent practice of purification of the nature-culture divide.

- There is no universal definition of nature and future, it depends on situated knowledge.

3) *How to speak about future?*
- In some societies future is not a question

- History is the starting point for future making

- Future-thinking is not always related to change

- Where and by whom is nature and future negotiated?

- What is relevant for people related to future? The embodiment of fears, hopes and memories. Various future-cultures: calculation, predictions, etc.

- Relativity of time: climate change is a problem of present and future

- Time systems and the relation of the present to the future are culturally produced

- Individual and collective/global ideas of futures are very different (effects on behaviour are related to individual perceptions)

- Perception of future is a problem in western, capitalist societies (with its ideas of success and growth) and Christian culture (with its ideal of nature in the future, e.g. paradise and the garden of Eden).

- Denying of bad predictions (story of Cassandra)

4) Is situated knowledge relevant?

- We did not focus on African nature in our conceptional discussions.

- More scienctific study than African study. Reflexion on personal perspective than reflexion on scientific practices!

- Reflexions of own and other cosmologies needed as self-referential reflexion on conceptualising nature.

- What are the debates in other cultural / regional contexts?

- Looking to cultural history to understand where certain representations and ideas of nature come from (idea of paradise etc.)

- Cross-cultural perspectives of knowledge production is needed.

- For whom scientists are speaking, when the subaltern cannot speak?