

# Future Pasts

FUTURE PASTS WORKING PAPERS NO. 2

## Relationality, reciprocity and flourishing in an African landscape:

Perspectives on agency amongst ||Khao-a Dama, !Narenin and ||Ubun elders in west Namibia

Sian Sullivan and Mike Hannis

March 2016

<http://www.futurepasts.net> @Future\_Pasts

Bath Spa University, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of Edinburgh

with Namibian partners:

The National Museum of Namibia, Gobabeb Research and Training Centre,  
Save the Rhino Trust, and Mamokobo Film and Research



THE UNIVERSITY  
of EDINBURGH



Copyright © 2016, Sian Sullivan, Mike Hannis

Published by **Future Pasts**

Working Paper Series  
Bath Spa University  
Newton Park, Newton St. Loe  
Bath BA2 9BN  
United Kingdom

[www.futurepasts.net](http://www.futurepasts.net)

[futurepastscontact@gmail.com](mailto:futurepastscontact@gmail.com)

ISBN: 978-1-911126-01-0

**Future Pasts** draws on Arts and Humanities research methodologies to document and analyse culturally-inflected perceptions and practices of sustainability. It has a particular geographical focus on west Namibia, where three of our core research team have long-term field research experience.

The project seeks to:

- enhance understanding of sociocultural, economic and environmental changes in historical and post-independence contexts;
- document and support cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge regarding present and historical cultural landscapes of west Namibia;
- extend analysis and understanding of the historical ecologies of the Namib;
- interrogate interpretations of ‘sustainability’, particularly those contributing to the promotion of a linearly growth-oriented ‘green economy’;
- foster cross-cultural public discussion of concerns relating to environmental change and sustainability;
- critically engage with the power dimensions shaping whose pasts become transferred forwards to the future in contemporary approaches to environmental conservation and sustainability.

**Future Pasts** is funded primarily through a Major Research Grant from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC award no. AH/K005871/2), under the Care for the Future Theme’s highlight notice on ‘environmental change and sustainability’ (see <http://careforthefuture.exeter.ac.uk/>). Starting in October 2013, **Future Pasts** involves UK academics Sian Sullivan (Principal Investigator and Professor of Environment and Culture, Bath Spa University), Angela Impey (Co-Investigator and Senior Lecturer in Ethnomusicology, School of Oriental and African Studies, London), Rick Rohde (Co-Investigator and Research Fellow, Centre for African Studies, University of Edinburgh), Mike Hannis (Research Fellow, Environmental Ethics, Bath Spa University) and Chris Low (Research Fellow, Anthropology, Bath Spa University). Namibian partner organisations include the National Museum of Namibia, Gobabeb Research and Training Centre, Save the Rhino Trust and Mamokobo Film and Research.

## **Future Pasts** *Working Paper Series*

The **Future Pasts** *Working Paper Series* aims to facilitate rapid distribution of research findings and work in progress by researchers associated with the **Future Pasts** programme. We also welcome relevant contributions by post-graduate students and other associates of **Future Pasts**. The series aims to open up discussion among the global community of scholars, policymakers and practitioners on pressing issues concerning conservation, sustainability, heritage, knowledge and value that are exemplified in west Namibian social and environmental contexts. All **Future Pasts** working papers are available to download free of charge in PDF format via the **Future Pasts** website (<http://www.futurepasts.net/future-pasts-working-papers>).

All **Future Pasts** *Working Papers* undergo a light touch peer review. Copyright is retained by the author(s), and authors are welcome to publish further iterations of papers in journals and other formats (as such, references and notes may be formatted as appropriate for such future publications). **Future Pasts** working papers in joint authorship include a contribution statement as an early footnote or endnote. Acronyms present in each working paper are also listed in an early note.

The opinions expressed in the papers are solely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the project funders, Bath Spa University, or partner universities and organisations. We welcome comments on individual working papers, which should be directed to the author(s), or through [futurepastscontact@gmail.com](mailto:futurepastscontact@gmail.com).

More information about **Future Pasts** and our working paper series and other activities can be found on our website, [www.futurepasts.net](http://www.futurepasts.net).

# Relationality, reciprocity and flourishing in an African landscape: Perspectives on agency amongst ||Khao-a Dama, !Narenin and ||Ubun elders in west Namibia

Sian Sullivan<sup>1</sup> and Mike Hannis<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** This paper is a collaboration between an environmental philosopher and an environmental anthropologist seeking to illuminate theoretical reflections on relationships between human and non-human flourishing through exploring ethnographic material regarding agencies-beyond-the-human. Drawing on field research with ‘KhoeSan’ peoples in west Namibia, we document practices and perceptions regarding the agencies of a suite of action-bearing entities, namely: known and unknown ancestors, including an ancestor-hero called Haiseb; different kinds of animals; a particular class of plants imbued with the power to act to intervene in human fortune and misfortune; and rain, which under certain circumstances is personified as what might be thought of as a supernatural or spirit-being called |*nanus*. We suggest that these practices, perceptions and their associated ontologies are indicative of an ethos of reciprocity and respect that transcends species boundaries, yet remains grounded and pragmatic. We bring our material into dialogue with (in particular) contemporary Anglo-American environmental virtue ethics and the roles of narrative in encouraging ‘environmental virtue’. We argue that our ethnographic data supports and illustrates the attractions of a grounded ecological virtue ethics that recognises a close relationship between human flourishing and the flourishing of other-than-human entities. We affirm that perspectives, practices and associated narratives such as those documented here can have considerable heuristic value for understanding possible relationships beyond-the-human in ways that may transcend their particular cultural settings.

**Keywords.** relationality; reciprocity; flourishing; virtue ethics; eudaimonism; agency; ontology; west Namibia; KhoeSan; (ecocultural) ethics; ethnography

## 1. Introduction

Human flourishing does not happen in isolation. It is dependent on, and in large part constituted by, relationships – with specific others, with multiple communities, and with the world(s) in which one lives. At the interhuman level this theme of relationality has been

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author, [s.sullivan@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:s.sullivan@bathspa.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Contribution statement. This paper was first co-presented as ‘Reciprocity and flourishing in an African landscape’ at the 12th Conference of the International Society for Environmental Ethics (ISEE) on *Environmental Ethics Between Action and Reflection*, 22-25 July 2015, Kiel, Germany. A shorter version is forthcoming as a book chapter (Hannis, M. and Sullivan, S. Forthcoming, Relationality, reciprocity and flourishing in an African landscape, in Hartman, L.M. (ed.) *Flourishing: Comparative Religious Environmental Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press), accompanied by a dialogue with comparative religious ethicist Cheryl Cottine. The paper has been co-written, with Mike Hannis contributing most of the environmental philosophy and ethics content, and Sian Sullivan contributing the ethnographic material and associated reflections.

explored under many labels, including capabilities approaches and relational autonomy.<sup>3</sup> More recently the same insight has informed environmental virtue ethics, which extends the idea of identity-constituting community beyond the human, asking what it is to flourish as part of such a community.<sup>4</sup> What is the relationship between the flourishing of human beings (individually and/or collectively) and the flourishing of the nonhuman world? What kinds of relationships with ‘others-beyond-the-human’ characterise a flourishing human life – and what are the virtues of character that build and nurture such relationships? These questions break down the false dichotomy between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, freeing environmental ethics to make meaningful contributions to broader debates regarding environmental issues, rather than remaining hijacked by meta-ethical speculation.<sup>5</sup>

A fully flourishing human life requires connection and relationship not only with humans but also with nonhuman entities inhabiting and making up the world in which we live. This kind of relationship cannot be built with homogenised categories such as ‘nature’ or ‘biodiversity’.<sup>6</sup> It requires approaching and understanding animals, plants, forests, rivers and mountains *as themselves*<sup>7</sup>, rather than *as classes of things* defined only by their shared ‘nonhuman-ness’. Recognising ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ is important in this process, as is recognising commonality.<sup>8</sup> But both are beginnings, preliminaries to the development of a considered reflective relationship with the ‘nonhuman’ in its manifest variety. Connection and relationship are even less likely to emerge from thinking about ‘natural capital’ or ‘ecosystem services’, as forms the basis of ‘green economy’ market-based approaches towards valuing environmental parameters.<sup>9</sup> In the latter approaches the enforcement of commensurability works to *remove* distinctiveness, difference and an associated recognition of ‘nature’ as

---

<sup>3</sup> Sen, A. 1999 *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Mackenzie, C. and Stoljar, N. (eds.) 2000 *Relational Autonomy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Nussbaum, M. 2011 *Creating Capabilities*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

<sup>4</sup> Sandler, R. and Cafaro, P. (eds) 2005 *Environmental Virtue Ethics*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield; Sandler, R. 2007 *Character and Environment*. Columbia University Press; Hursthouse, R. 2007 Environmental virtue ethics, pp. 155–172 in Walker, R. and Ivanhoe, P. (eds) *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Treanor, B. 2014 *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics*. New York: SUNY Press.

<sup>5</sup> Dryzek, J. 1998 Political and ecological communication, pp. 622–646 in Dryzek and Schlosberg (eds.) *Debating the Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Whiteside, K. 2002 *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology*. Cambridge: MIT Press; Hannis, M. 2015a *Freedom and Environment: Autonomy, Human Flourishing, and the Political Philosophy of Sustainability*. London: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Soper, K. 1995 *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human*. Oxford: Blackwell; Maier, D. 2012 *What's So Good About Biodiversity? A Call for Better Reasoning About Nature's Value*. New York: Springer.

<sup>7</sup> Different ontological discourses on the intrinsic nature(s) of entities, combined with a Foucaultian acknowledgement that perceiving subjects are constituted through practices amidst conditions, including cultural conditions, of their possibility add further complexity here (discussed further in Sullivan, S. 2016 (Re-)embodying which body? Philosophical, cross-cultural and personal reflections on corporeality, pp. 119–138 in Thomas-Pellicer, R., de Lucia, V. and Sullivan, S. (eds.) *Law, Philosophy and Ecology: Exploring Re-Embodiments*. London: GlassHouse Books, Routledge Law, Justice and Ecology Series).

<sup>8</sup> Goodin, R. 1992 *Green Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity; Hailwood, S. 2004 *How to be a Green Liberal*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press; Martin, A., McGuire, S. and Sullivan, S. 2013 Global environmental justice and biodiversity conservation. *The Geographical Journal* 179(2): 122–131.

<sup>9</sup> Discussed further in Sullivan, S. 2016 What's ontology got to do with it? Nature, knowledge and the ‘green economy’. *Future Pasts Working Papers* 3 <http://www.futurepasts.net/fpwp3-sullivan-2016>.

comprised of a field of agencies<sup>10</sup>, as more and more domains of the world become abstracted into numbers, absorbed into spreadsheets and offset in frequently marketised exchanges. Trees become carbon, carbon becomes dollars, and ‘the world’ becomes subsumed into ‘the economy’, rather than the other way round.<sup>11</sup>

One way to resist a culturally hegemonic urge to abstraction<sup>12</sup> is to reflect on direct experience. It seems impossible to directly *experience* ‘biodiversity’ or ‘natural capital’.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, both first-hand and scholarly evidence confirm the transformative potential of real experiences of entities beyond-the-human and, indeed, of the damage caused by the lack of such experience.<sup>14</sup> Another route towards *refracting* the abstractions of calculative, economic approaches towards environmental management is to learn from the experience of others, for example through close attention to the perspectives and practices of different cultures.<sup>15</sup> Anthropologists have described many understandings of relationships between human and other-than-human<sup>16</sup> worlds. These frequently include ideas about nonhuman agency, personhood and moral status that can seem challenging to a ‘Western’ mindset<sup>17</sup>, particularly due to their foregrounding of ‘multiple agencies in the more-than-human world’<sup>18</sup>.

Here we seek to bring together perspectives from environmental ethics, and particularly environmental virtue ethics, with some ethnographic particularities from field research in west Namibia. Through illustrating differences in potential ‘ecocultural’ values that pertain

---

<sup>10</sup> Plumwood, V. 2006 The concept of a cultural landscape: nature, culture and agency of the land. *Ethics and the Environment* 11(2): 115–150.

<sup>11</sup> Polanyi, K. 1957 *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press; O’Neill, J. 1993 *Ecology, Policy and Politics*. London: Routledge; Sullivan, S. and Hannis, M. 2015 Nets and frames, losses and gains: value struggles in engagements with biodiversity offsetting policy in England. *Ecosystem Services* 15: 162–173.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Feyerabend, P. 1999 *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction Versus the Richness of Being*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Also see Maier, N. 2013 *What’s So Good About Biodiversity? A Call for Better Reasoning About Nature’s Value*. London: Springer, pp. 269–270.

<sup>14</sup> Abram, D. 1996 *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Random House; Albrecht, G. 2005 “Solastalgia”: a new concept in health and identity. *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3: 41–55; Louv, R. 2005 *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books.

<sup>15</sup> Possibilities for ‘refraction’ are discussed further in Sullivan, S. 2013 Nature on the move III: (re)countenancing an animate nature. *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Enquiry* 6(1-2): 50–71.

<sup>16</sup> We steer away from using the term ‘nonhuman’ in acknowledgement (after especially Abram, 1996. *op. cit.*) that this category defines entities and agencies beyond-the-human in a negative sense, i.e. as not human. At the same time we note that signifiers for natural agencies such as ‘more-than-human’ (*ibid.*), ‘other-than-human’ and ‘beyond-the-human’ (see Kohn, E. 2013 *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology of Nature Beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press) are also limited. These terms do little to invoke a fully ecosystemic view of the human organism that not only embraces relationships with nonhuman entities outside the skin of the human body, but that also invokes the extraordinary ‘biodiversity’ of species and entities dwelling within and symbiotically engendering the sustenance of the human body (as highlighted, for example, in Margulis, L. 1998 *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*. New York: Basic Books). ‘Nature’, human and/or otherwise, is thoroughly imbricated with a multiscale and dynamic diversity of agency-asserting entities that seems poorly reflected in the atomising categories associated with modern and scientific thinking.

<sup>17</sup> See, in particular, Descola, P. and Pálsson, G. (eds.) *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Routledge; Viveiros de Castro, E. 2004 Exchanging perspectives: the transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies. *Common Knowledge* 10(3): 463–484; Descola, P. 2013 *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Dransart, P. (ed.) 2013 *Living Beings: Perspectives on Interspecies Engagement*. London: Bloomsbury; Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.*; and Green, L. (ed.) *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*. Cape Town: HSRC (HumanSciences Research Council) Press.

<sup>18</sup> Plumwood, 2006, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

amongst at least some people in this particular context, we aim to indicate ways in which ethnographic detail may inform theoretical ethical reflection. In doing so we seek to foreground cultural variability in ethical assumptions regarding human relationships with other-than-human entities, materialities and contexts. In proposing an *ecocultural* perspective on ecological ethics<sup>19</sup>, then, we are reaching for a cross-disciplinary approach that pursues sustainability imaginaries as normatively entwined with the cultural production of particular pasts, presents and futures in specific contexts. We see such an approach as critical for responding in nuanced and sensitive ways both to understanding perspectives on environmental change, and to proposing ‘sustainability solutions’ to perceived problems in ways that simultaneously recognise difference<sup>20</sup>. This takes us into wider debates regarding considerations of social and ecological justice, and assumptions regarding appropriate social and environmental care practices; so as to move beyond distributional and procedural mechanisms which tend to be normatively framed in terms of the particular historico-cultural assumptions permeating neoclassical and market economics.<sup>21</sup>

We proceed by introducing some perspectives on ontology, particularity and ethnography, as these bear on our case material and interpretations. We outline in particular the hierarchies of value associated with a two thousand year trajectory of western thought, that have tended to restrict the attribution of agency to human actors alone (and historically often to only some humans). We note that this historically and culturally specific trajectory has effected a distancing from entities beyond-the-human that is universalising in its assumptions, and that has been extremely useful in terms of permitting evermore comprehensive strategies of objectification and instrumentalism. The following section focuses on attributions of agency beyond-the-human amongst elders of ≠Nūkhoen<sup>22</sup> / Damara (especially ||Kha-a Dama and !Narenin) as well as ||Ukun lineages (*!haoti*) in west Namibia (these identifying terms are explained in more detail below), based on field research conducted by one of us (Sullivan). We focus on perspectives and practices relating to ancestors, to different kinds of animals, to a particular class of plants imbued with the power to act to intervene in human fortune and misfortune, and to rain, which under certain contexts is personified as what might be thought

---

<sup>19</sup> On ‘ecological ethics’, see especially Curry, P. *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press.

<sup>20</sup> Also see, especially, Plumwood, 2006, *op. cit.*, Plumwood, V. 2002 *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge.

<sup>21</sup> On justice considerations in ‘biodiversity conservation’ see Martin et al., 2013, *op. cit.* On recognition justice debates, see Fraser, N. and Honneth, A. 2003 *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso, and McNay, L. 2007 *Against Recognition*. Oxford: Polity Press. For a good summary of the triad of approaches in moral philosophy (consequentialist, deontological, virtue ethics), their invocations in relation to ‘biodiversity’, and the preponderance in contemporary biodiversity management of market-framed, preference-based consequentialism (i.e. that emphasise utilitarianism and advocates market economic approaches to ‘value’ and allocation), see Maier, 2013, *op. cit.* especially pp. 22–40.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding orthography: for consistency we tend to rely on the ways that terms have been notated and transcribed with the assistance of our lead local translator and field companion, Welhemina Suro Ganuses, with whom Sullivan has worked since 1994. We also draw on the detailed Khoekhoegowab-English dictionaries by Haacke, W.H.G. and Eiseb, E. 1999 *Khoekhoegowab-English English-Khoekhoegowab Glossary/midi Saogub*. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan; Haacke, W.H.G. and Eiseb, E.A. 2002 *Khoekhoegowab Dictionary With An English-Khoekhoegowab Index*. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan. Khoekhoegowab is notable for its click consonants, the currently standard orthographic notation for which is: | = dental click; || = lateral click; ! = palatal click; and ≠ = alveolar click.



of as a supernatural or spirit agency called *nanus*.<sup>23</sup> Our final section draws this ethnographic material into reflections inspired by environmental virtue ethics. We suggest that specific ‘non-western’ cultural practices, perceptions and ontologies such as those documented here, whilst at first blush possibly troubling to western moral philosophy, may in fact have much to offer ethical understanding of ‘right relationship’ between human flourishing and the flourishing of other-than-human-natures.

## 2. Ontology, particularity and ethnography

From an anthropological as well as postcolonial perspective, ‘western’ hierarchies of value associated with other-than-human natures, whilst universalising, are understood to in fact be highly *particular*, embedded in, and made possible by, particular cultural and historical contexts.<sup>24</sup> Importantly for human relationships with natures beyond-the-human, they restrict the attribution of agency, intentionality and communication to human actors (and often only some human actors), whilst backgrounding the possibility that other entities might also enjoy such capacities. This restriction, so characteristic of ‘the West’, is strongly associated with the Enlightenment period and the ushering in of modernity, but is also rooted in hierarchies of value asserted in classical antiquity.<sup>25</sup> This universalising framework involves foundational assumptions about the ‘known’ nature of reality.<sup>26</sup> It prescribes what entities exist, how they are characterised, into what categories they can be sorted, and by what practices they can be known.

From a cross-cultural perspective, cultural and historical differences generate *plural ontologies*: or, at least, a plurality of discourses regarding what entities are considered to exist and how they are knowable, as well as the attribution of moral considerability and status to these entities. This plurality, combined with power/knowledge relations infusing historically and culturally situated ‘regimes of truth’<sup>27</sup> has significant implications for who and what might be meant when the term ‘we’ is invoked, as well as for what entities might socially be

---

<sup>23</sup> Also see Sullivan, S. 2016 What’s ontology got to do with it? On the knowledge of nature and the nature of knowledge in environmental anthropology, pp. 155–169 in Kopnina, H. and Shoreman-Ouimet, E. (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Environmental Anthropology*. London: Routledge.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Feyerabend, 1996, *op. cit.*; Chakrabarty, D. 2000 *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Viveiros de Castro, 2004, *op. cit.*; Descola, 2013, *op. cit.*; Dransart, 2013, *op. cit.*; Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.*; Sullivan, 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Hall, M. 2011 *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. New York: SUNY Press, pp. 19–26, after Plumwood, V. 2006 *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge; see also Marder, M. 2013 *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia University Press, and further discussion in Sullivan, S. 2016 (Re-)embodying which body? *Op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Discussed further in Sullivan, 2016, What’s ontology got to do with it? Nature, knowledge and the ‘green economy’, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, M. 1991(1975) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. A. Sheridan London: Penguin; Butler, J. 1988 Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal* 40(4): 519–531.

brought within the realm of moral considerability by this ‘we’<sup>28</sup>, and thus for what constitutes appropriate ethical practice in relation to these entities<sup>29</sup>. In particular, whilst the modern ontology of ‘the West’ may be *universalising*, it frequently does not translate well across different cultural contexts. It is itself particular, rather than universal.<sup>30</sup>

Ethnography – the attempt to understand in detail the makings of social reality in different cultural contexts, without necessary recourse to ‘the West’ as the measure of all things – can add detail, complexity and nuance to the understanding of different ontological and ethical ideas regarding relationships between humans and other-than-human entities. It seems, however, to have been relatively under-utilised in environmental philosophy, apart from quite broad brush-strokes such as Baird Callicott’s *Earth Insights*.<sup>31</sup> From a Foucauldian perspective, ethnography can also enhance possibilities for the destabilisation of knowledge categories and practices that may seem problematic for the flourishing of both specific entities and of a diversity of these entities. Cross-cultural ethnographic material can thus assist with diagnosis of assumed objects of knowledge. This may illuminate the subjugation of knowledges by which normalised understandings can or have become hegemonic, as well as generating fine-tuned perspectives on ways in which powerful regimes of truth naturalise certain ontologies and associated ethical possibilities over others.<sup>32</sup>

In particular, many indigenous communities globally – by which we mean cultures who have retained some degree of long-term, continuous connection with land areas – seem to conceive of an expanded zone of moral considerability, reciprocity and collaboration that includes entities beyond-the-human<sup>33</sup>, as these are embedded and constituted in specific and shifting relational settings<sup>34</sup>. These cultural contexts are frequently also associated with localities now valued as ‘biodiversity hotspots’<sup>35</sup>, where ecosystems characterised by high diversity and the incidence of endemism and rarity remain within the broader context of a global anthropogenic species extinction event. Human cultural arrangements in these contexts have clearly been associated with the maintenance of relationships with diverse natures-beyond-the-human, despite immense modern pressures to bend such arrangements and associated landscapes towards market values and economic growth. As Gorenflo et al. state, ‘the tendency for both [biological and linguistic diversity] to be high in particular regions suggests that certain

<sup>28</sup> cf. Behrens, K.G. 2014 An African relational environmentalism and moral considerability. *Environmental Ethics* 36: 63–82.

<sup>29</sup> As noted in Kelbessa, W. 2014 Can an African environmental ethics contribute to environmental policy in Africa? *Environmental Ethics* 36: 31–61, p. 46.

<sup>30</sup> Chakrabarty, 2000, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Callicott, J. B. 1994 *Earth Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Foucault, M. 1982 The subject and power. *Critical Enquiry* 8(4): 777–795. On ‘hegemonic concepts of agency in the land and natural systems’, see Plumwood, 2006, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–119.

<sup>33</sup> Sullivan, S. 1999 Folk and formal, local and national: Damara cultural knowledge and community-based conservation in southern Kunene, Namibia. *Cimbebasia* 15: 1–28; Kohn 2013; Behrens 2014; Kelbessa 2014.

<sup>34</sup> cf. Whatmore, S. 2002 *Hybrid Geographies: Natures Cultures Spaces*. London: Sage; Castree, N. 2003 A post-environmental ethics? *Ethics, Place and Environment* 6(1): 3–12.

<sup>35</sup> As reviewed in Gorenflo, L.J., Romaine, S., Mittermeier, R.A. and Walker-Painemilla, K. 2012 Co-occurrence of linguistic and biological diversity in biodiversity hotspots and high biodiversity wilderness areas. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109(21): 8032–8037.

cultural systems and practices, represented by speakers of particular indigenous and nonmigrant languages, tend to be compatible with high biodiversity'.<sup>36</sup> Understanding the ontologies that have made it possible for human cultures in these contexts to maintain particular relational sustainabilities thus seems relevant for learning how to live in more accommodating ethical relationships with many kinds of selves, only some of whom are human.<sup>37</sup> Of particular relevance, as emphasised by Eduardo Kohn, are the ethical perspectives and practices that may arise when people live as if other kinds of being can see 'us', and who thereby act as if the way(s) that 'they' see 'us' matters. As Kohn writes:

[h]ow other kinds of beings see us matters. That other kinds of beings see us changes things. If jaguars also represent us – in ways that can matter vitally to us – then anthropology cannot limit itself just to exploring how people from different societies might happen to represent them as doing so. Such encounters with other kinds of being force us to recognize the fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs.<sup>38</sup>

We seek to engage with such reflections through drawing on detail from a specific ethnographic context, where one of us (Sullivan) has worked intermittently since 1992. This is a land area (*!hūs*) in west Namibia known locally as Hurubes<sup>39</sup>, visited during a number of lengthy journeys with KhoeSan<sup>40</sup> elders of ||Khao-a Dama, !Narenin and ||Ubun lineages (*!haoti*) in 2014 and 2015 to Hurubes and adjoining areas (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). Hurubes stretches from south of the Hoanib River towards the settlement of Bergsig and the farm of Wereldsend, south of the !Uniab River. Specifically, ≠Khari ('small') Hurubes, is concentrated in the basalt mountains west of the Aub (≠Gâob) River towards the Hoanib River and the Sesfontein Basin, and borders onto the *!hūs* Aogubus to the east, and onto the Namib and then Hurib ('ocean') land areas in the west. ≠Khari Hurubes is distinguished from !Nau ('fat') Hurubes which stretches southwards from the !Uniab river catchment and was associated particularly with a different *!haoti*, the Dâure Dama.<sup>41</sup> During the relocations of people associated with the Odendaal Commission of 1964<sup>42</sup> and the establishment of Bantustans ('Homelands') in Namibia from 1970 on, following which the Palmwag hunting and then tourism concession was created in 1978<sup>43</sup>, the people inhabiting Hurubes were split.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8037.

<sup>37</sup> Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.*; Sullivan, 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.* p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Also '||Hurubes', see Dâure Daman Traditional Authority, 2013 *The Dâure Daman Traditional Authority / Dâure Daman di !Hoa!nasi ≠Gae≠guis*, pp. 184–215 in Hinz, M.O. and Gairiseb, A. (eds.) *Customary Law Ascertained Volume 2: The Customary Law of the Bakgalagari, Batswana and Damara Communities of Namibia*. Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, p. 186.

<sup>40</sup> 'KhoeSan' is a contested term but nonetheless we use it here to simply denote that our informants are part of the spectrum of Khoe- and San-speaking peoples spread throughout southern Africa who speak languages characterised by click consonants. See, for example, Haacke, W.H.G. 2008 Linguistic hypotheses on the origin of Namibian Khoekhoe speakers. *Southern African Humanities* 20: 163–177.

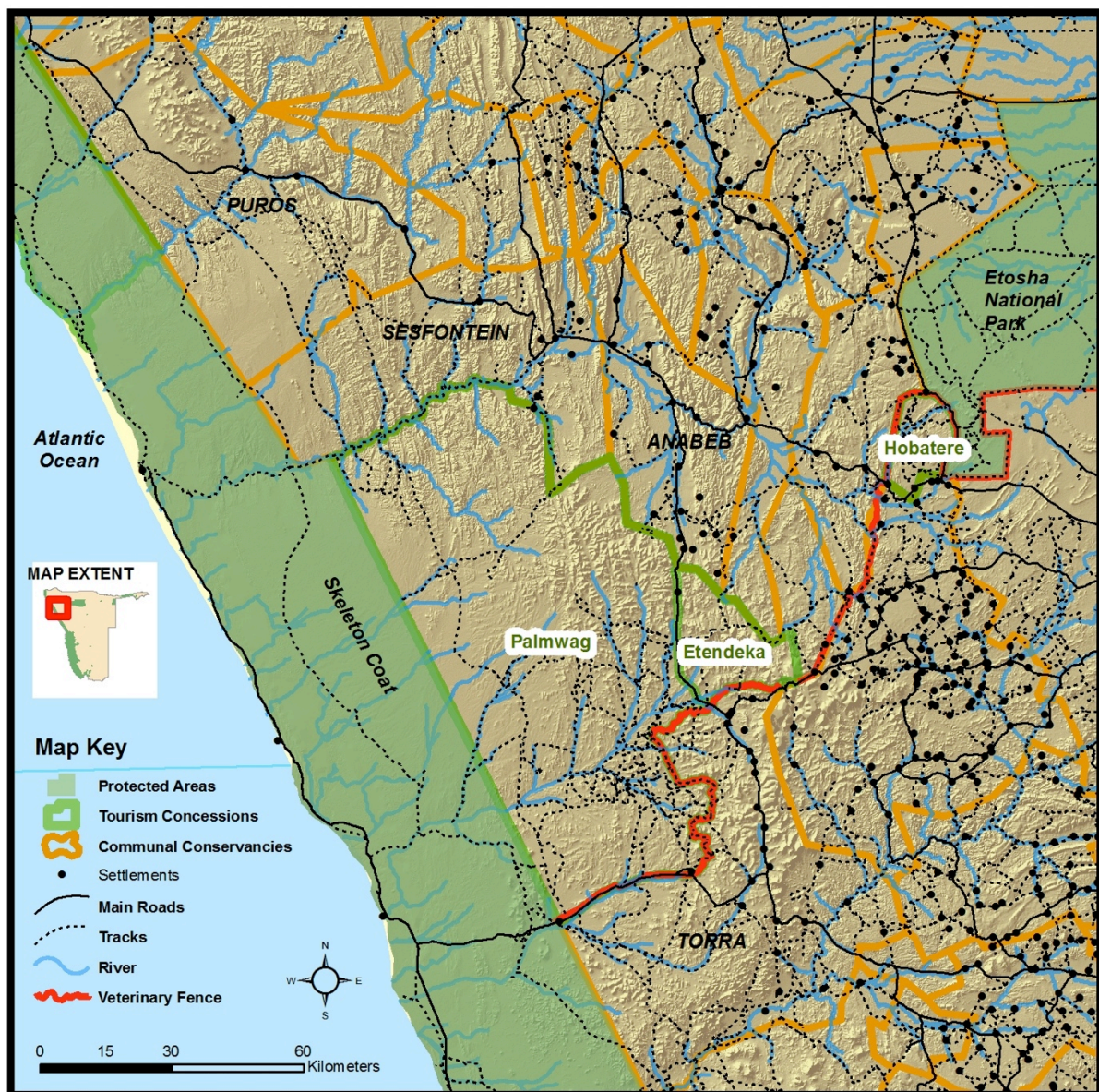
<sup>41</sup> Thus, '[t]he Dâure Daman lived around ||Hurubes and !Nau ||Hurubes (Ward 11 and the Palmwag Concession), up to |Aban !Khus (currently Ward 7) and across to |Huis (currently Ward 5) around the Dâures Mountain and along the shores of the Skeleton Coast Park', Dâure Daman Traditional Authority, 2013, *op. cit.* p. 186.

<sup>42</sup> Odendaal Report 1964 *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into South West African Affairs 1962-1963*. Pretoria: The Government Printer.

<sup>43</sup> Owen-Smith, G. 2002 *A Brief History of the Conservation and Origin of the Concession Areas in the Former Damaraland*. Online. <http://namibweb.com/conservation-areas-damaraland.pdf> (last accessed 3 February 2016).

Those in the southern !Nau Hurubes area tended to move southwards towards the Ugab (!U#gab River) and surrounding areas, although some Dâure Dama also relocated towards the Hoanib settlements of Sesfontein, Anabeb, Warmquelle and Kowareb<sup>44</sup>. #Nūkhoen and ||Ubun lineages associated with #Khari Hurubes and Aogubus (amongst other areas) (were) moved northwards to the Hoanib settlements.

**Figure 1.** Map of geographical study area showing current tourism concessions, communal area conservancy boundaries, state protected areas and current sites of settlement. Note that the Palmwag Concession area is now clear of human settlement although, as Figures 2 and 3 indicate, was dwelled in and known by a range of people up until the recent past.



Source: Jeff Muntifering, 5 March 2016.

<sup>44</sup> E.g. A!Kh, Kow, 130599 (see below, and Appendix 1 for information regarding interviews and oral histories drawn on in this paper).

**Figure 2.** Map showing locations of land areas (*!hūs*) as named and known by elders of ||Khao-a Dama, !Narenin and ||Ubn lineages (*!haoti*).



**Figure 3.** Indicative map showing the spread of former dwelling sites (small circles), springs (in blue) and other named features (in yellow, e.g. mountains, passes, etc.) known and inhabited in the recent past by Khoe-speaking peoples in west Namibia. Different sites and areas will be worked with in more detail in forthcoming *Future Pasts* publications.



Source for Figures 2 and 3: Sullivan working with Google Earth Pro and GPS coordinates logged during on-site oral histories recorded in 2014 and 2015 (plus building on information from oral histories recorded during the 1990s) with Ruben Saunaeib Sanib, Sophia Obi |Awises, Ezekiel |Awarab, Franz ||Hoëb, Noag Ganaseb, Christophine Daumû Tauros and Michael Ganaseb, with translation and logistical assistance from Welhemina Suro Ganuses and Filemon |Nuab.

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, three additional interventions also impinged on people inhabiting the area of Hurubes. These were: 1. repeated attempts to establish a livestock free zone around a veterinary cordon fence (a boundary which itself was also moved historically) that dissects the Hurubes landscape in a line from east to west<sup>45</sup>; 2. a short-lived extension of ‘Game Reserve No. 2’ (better known now as Etosha National Park) from 1958 to 1970, when its western boundary was moved to the coast<sup>46</sup>, following the Hoanib River in the north and a line going towards the coast south of and parallel to the !Uniab River<sup>47</sup>; and 3. the surveying and allocation of farms to Afrikaans farmers in the southern part of the broader Hurubes and Aogubus area<sup>48</sup>, as well as the opening up of grazing areas further west (see, for example, the locations of Afrikaner farm dams in the south of Figure 3). All these interventions meant that people have been progressively removed from the land areas to which they considered themselves to belong (‘||*khore*’)<sup>49</sup>.

In this context so-called Damara Khoe-speaking people tend to refer to themselves as ≠Nūkhoen, meaning literally ‘black’ or ‘real’ people and thus distinguished from *Nau khoen* or ‘other people’. ||Khao-a Dama and !Narenin are two land-associated lineage groupings of people who are also ≠Nūkhoen. The former are associated especially with ≠Khari Hurubes and the bordering Namib, Aogubus and Sesfontain/Hoanib areas and are considered to have come from ||Khao-as mountain, close to the !Uniab River (marked on Figure 3). !Narenin are ≠Nūkhoen people who lived at least partly from *!nara* fruits (*Acanthosicyos horridus* Welw. ex Hook.f.) harvested in the Hoanib River mouth and northwards towards the Hoarusib River and Ganias springs. ||Khao-a Dama and !Narenin would encounter each other whilst in the ‘field’ or *!garob* and especially at particular times of aggregation (after the rains), and intermarrying was an outcome of these encounters. ||Ubun also speak the same Khoe language (Khoekhoegowab or Nama-Damara) but distinguish themselves from ≠Nūkhoen. According to oral history they diverged from ≠Aonin (Topnaar) Nama of the !Kuseb River (particularly a settlement called Utuseb), moving northwards through the Namib and harvesting especially *!nara* from different localities along the Skeleton Coast, as well as moving inland where they utilised a different suite of plants and animals and also interacted with other ≠Nūkhoen *!haoti* encountered there. Often ||Ubun are referred to as Nama (as opposed to Damara), although some ||Ubun oral histories also maintain that their ancestry was distinct from that of ≠Aonin, with ||Ubun individuals referring to themselves instead as ‘Bushmen’<sup>50</sup>. A consideration of former *!nara* harvesting practices in the northern Namib will be the focus of a future working paper.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See Miescher, G. 2012 *Namibia’s Red Line: The History of a Veterinary and Settlement Border*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>46</sup> Prior to the establishment of the Skeleton Coast National Park in 1971.

<sup>47</sup> Tinley, K.L. 1971 The case for saving Etosha. *African Wild Life* (supplement) 25: 3–14, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> For example, the farms Palmwag, Juriesdraai, Rooiplat and Palm, see Kambatuku, J. 1996 Historical profile of farms in former Damaraland: notes from the archival files. *DRFN Occasional Paper* 4.

<sup>49</sup> RSS, SO|A, !Garoa, 231114.

<sup>50</sup> F||H, NG, Hoanib & Möwe Bay, 21-261115.

<sup>51</sup> Sullivan, S., Ganuses, W.S., ||Hoëb, F., Ganaseb, N., Tauros, C.D., Ganaseb, M., |Nuas, H. and |Nuab, F. in prep. *!Nara* harvesters of the northern Namib. *Future Pasts Working Papers*.

As noted above, current dwelling and ‘resource use’ practices in the west Namibian landscape have been significantly constrained by the land clearances associated with various historical interventions. Nonetheless, a number of elderly individuals who grew up in these areas retain keen memories of the perspectives and practices that enabled them to dwell in what often is framed by non-indigenous commentators as a hostile, inhospitable and wild landscape. The material that follows derives from oral histories recorded mostly whilst journeying with elderly Khoe-speaking people to and through these former dwelling places and remembered landscapes. As such it relies on an ethnographic and oral history methodology in which places themselves and their re-encounters act as mnemonics for practices and knowledges through which people made a more-or-less autonomous living, the values with which people were brought into the world, and memories of other and older family members with whom they lived. This is a form of what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls ‘historical retracing’: ‘walking the tracks of the past even in the present’ to draw out ‘the erasure of earlier histories in assessments of the present [thus] infilling the present with the traces of earlier interactions and events’.<sup>52</sup>

In what follows we offer brief descriptions of several knowledge and value practices through which ||Khao-a Dama, !Narenin and ||Ubun have conceived of agency and intentionality as enacted by entities beyond-the-human. Through these narratives we seek to contribute to broader explorations of moral obligations and nonhuman agency in a relational environmental ethics that refracts the anthropocentric/non-anthropocentric dichotomy.<sup>53</sup> Key recorded interviews and discussions are referenced here using a coding system that includes the initials of the interviewee(s) and the place and date of the discussion. The inclusion of full names is preferred by interviewees (see Appendix 1), and respects the value placed on ‘being known to know’ given multiple layers of knowledge suppression and displacement – by colonialism, apartheid and recent market-oriented restructurings – that have shaped peoples’ experience in west Namibia.

### 3. Relating with...

#### ... the agency of ancestors

For elderly ≠Nūkhoen and ||Ubun people with associations with Hurubes, moving through the landscape involves greeting and offering practices that connect people alive today with people now physically dead, who were previously associated in some way with these landscapes.

---

<sup>52</sup> Tsing, A. 2014 ‘Wreckage and recovery: four papers exploring the nature of nature’, pp. 2–15 *AURA Working Papers*, vol. 2, p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> See also Cloke, P. and Jones, O. 2003 Grounding ethical mindfulness for/in nature: trees in their places. *Ethics, Place and Environment* 6: 195-214; Figueroa, R.M. and Waitt, G. 2008 Cracks in the mirror: (un)covering the moral terrains of environmental justice at Uluru-Kata Njuta National Park. *Ethics, Place and Environment* 11(3): 327–349; Haraway, H. 2008 *When Species Meet*. London: University of Minnesota Press; Hall, 2011, *op. cit.*; Marder, 2013, *op. cit.*.

While often attenuated through displacement, acculturation and the variously disruptive effects of modernity, such practices remain current and significant.

Ancestors are communicated with through a practice called *tse-khom*,<sup>54</sup> understood as speaking with the ancestors in the day-time<sup>55</sup>). *Tse-khom* usually involves the offering and smoking of tobacco, through which ancestors or *kai khoen* – i.e. big or old people – in the realm of the spirits of the dead are also able to enjoy this smoking (see Figure 4).<sup>56</sup> Through *tse-khom*, ancestral agencies are requested to act in the present to open the road so that travellers can see the best way to go. They are asked for guidance regarding the most appropriate ways to do things, and their support is evidenced through the intuitions people receive in response to queries that may arise as they are travelling: thus, ‘even if you get lost then if you talk well to the *kai khoen* they will show you the way ... they are not telling you as such, but it’s they who help you to remember the way if you become lost’<sup>57</sup>. The *kai khoen* are also asked to mediate the activities of potentially dangerous animals such as lions, who are understood very much as other *ensouled* beings who assert their own agencies and intentionality (see below).

Ancestors thus greeted include recent family members whose graves are located in places travelled to and through (see Figure 5); unidentified dead (or what Schmidt refers to as ‘the invisible representations of anonymous dead’<sup>58</sup>); and sometimes a more broadly referenced ancestor-hero known as Haiseb. The latter is considered to have been a real person who was associated with the doing of wonderful and clever things<sup>59</sup>, who lived in the distant past and with whom large cairns found throughout the dryland environment from the Cape to the Kunene River are associated (see Figures 5 and 6).<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Translated literally as literal translation as *tsē* = ‘to separate’ and *khom* = ‘to keep holy’ in Schmidt, S. 2014a Spirits: some thoughts on ancient Damara folk belief. *Journal of the Namibian Scientific Society* 62: 133–160, p144 (after Krönlein, J.G. 1889 *Wortschatz der Khoi-khoen (Namaqua-Hottentotten)* Berlin: Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft, p. 325).

<sup>55</sup> N≠UT, CDT, M|AG, |Giribes, May95; WSG, Mai, 030314, CDT, M|AG, Hoanib, 070414; RSS, Hurubes/Palmwag, multiple dates 2014-2015 incl. RSS, Kow, 171114, RSS, Top Barab, 201114, RSS, Top Barab, 211114, RSS, SO|A, Kai-as, 221114, RSS, SO|A, Uru, 231114; MH, Khamdesca-Hobatere, 031114; WSG, !N-D, 121114. *Tse-khom* is distinguished from the different practice of *se-|kha*, when a family member communicates with their ancestors during night-time healing events in order to address sicknesses and disturbances caused by the unsettled spirit of a specific deceased family member (CDT, M|AG, WSG, |Giribes, 070414).

<sup>56</sup> RSS, Kai-as, 170215, and multiple participations in *tse-khom*.

<sup>57</sup> WSG, Mai, 010314.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p.135.

<sup>59</sup> RSS, Top Barab, 211114; RSS, SO|A, Kai-as, 221114; RSS, SO|A, Uru, 231114; EG, WSG, !N-D, 191014; WSG multiple conversations.

<sup>60</sup> See also Schmidt, S. (ed.) 2011 *Hai||om and !Xú Stories from North Namibia: Collected and Translated by Terttu Heikkinen (1934-1988)*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, especially pp. 24-30; Schmidt 2014a; Schmidt, S. 2014b Some notes on the so-called Heitsi-Eibeb graves in Namibia: ancient heaps of stones at the roadside. *BAB Working Paper* 3. Online. [baslerafrika.ch/wp-content/uploads/WP-2014-3-Schmidt.pdf](http://baslerafrika.ch/wp-content/uploads/WP-2014-3-Schmidt.pdf).



**Figure 4.** Enacting *tse-khom*. Top left, led by Nathan #Ûina Taurob, with Christophine Daumû Tauros and Michael |Amigu Ganaseb (|Giribes plains, May 1995), top right, led by Ruben Saunaeib Sanib (towards top Barab, 201114), bottom, led by Franz ||Hoëb (Hoanib River near Gudira-a, 211115).



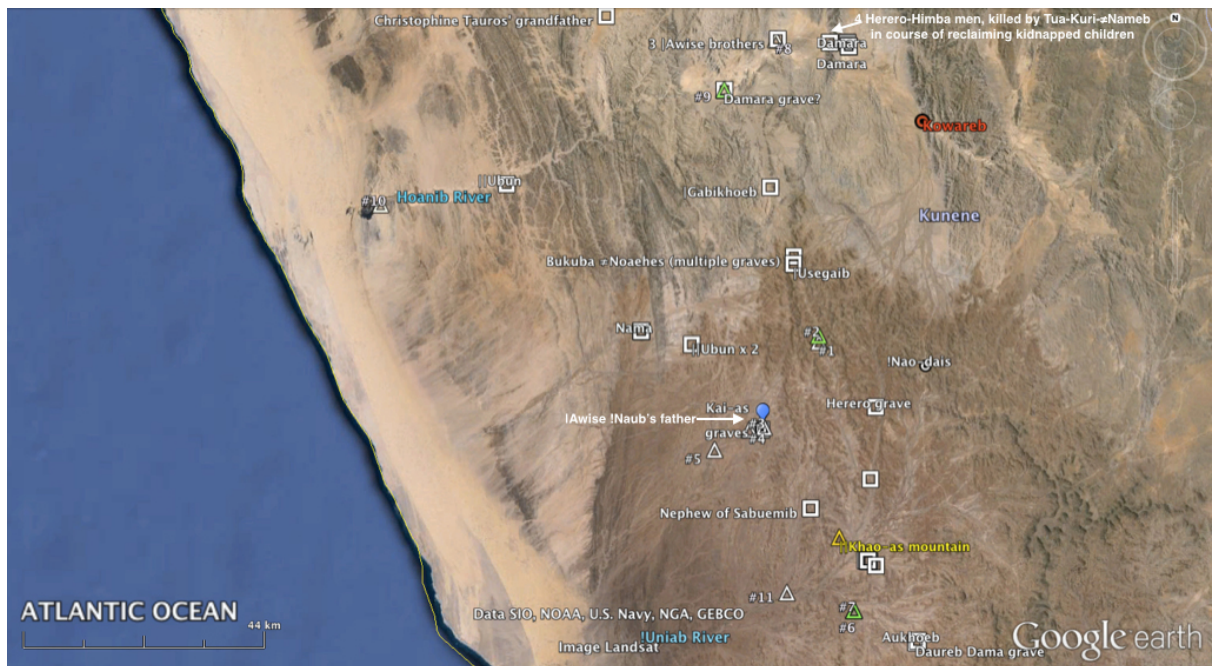
Source: Sian Sullivan, personal archive – images used with permission.

Ontologically, the ancestors are spirits or souls (*gagas*) that have left humans whose bodies have died.<sup>61</sup> As these spirit beings they have ontological reality in the present: they are not simply people who lived in the past, nor are they entities that require worship or regular social and ceremonial commemorations (as described for Himba in the north of Kunene by Bollig<sup>62</sup>). They are understood more as specific types of entities that, through pragmatic relationship practices, are greeted and called upon to intervene – to assert agency – in the present, so as to influence outcomes. Sometimes this includes intervention in the agency of other ‘nonhumans’ such as lions, a species with which humans here continue to live in close contact, as they have done throughout the remembered past.

<sup>61</sup> RSS, SO|A, Top Barab, 211114, cf. Inskeep, A. 2003 *Heinrich Vedder’s ‘The Bergdama’: An Annotated Translation of the German Original with Additional Ethnographic Material*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, p. 329.

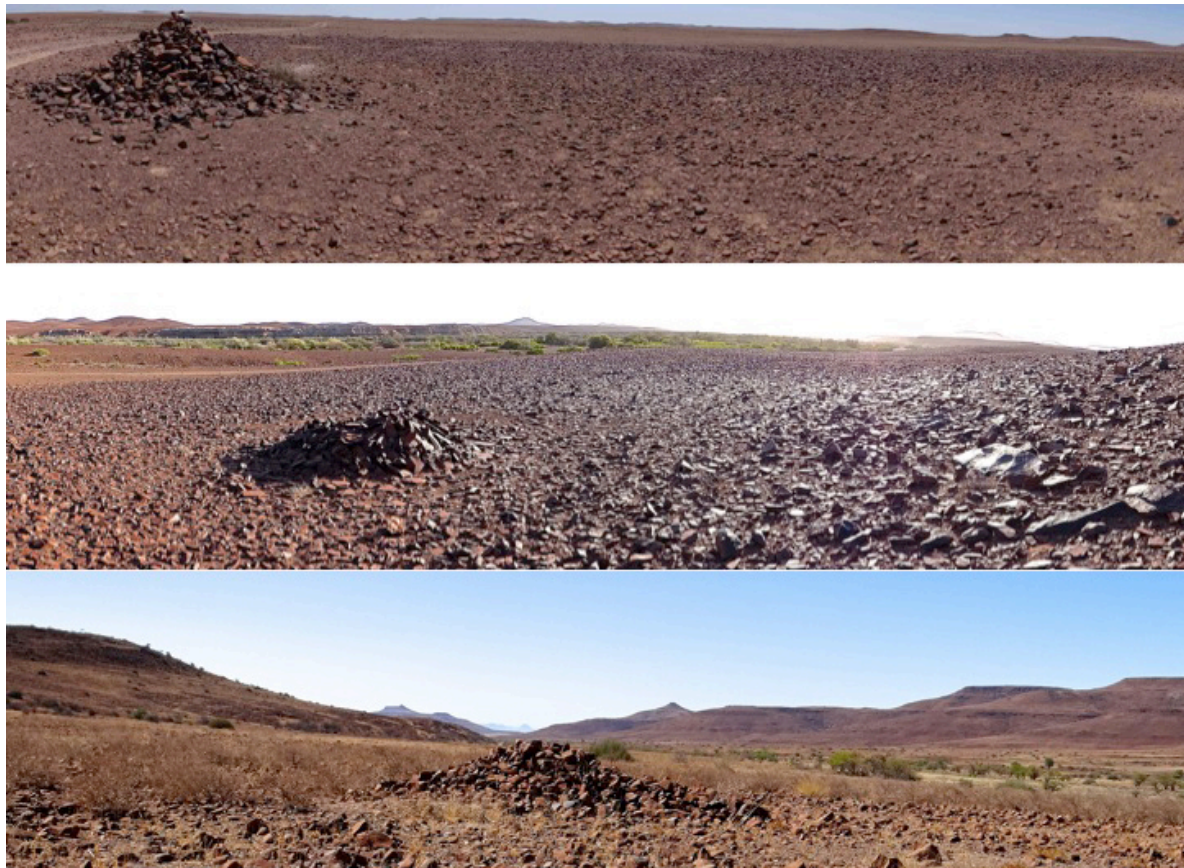
<sup>62</sup> Bollig, M. 2009 Kinship, ritual, and landscape amongst the Himba of northwest Namibia, pp. 327–315 in Bollig, M. and Bubenzer, O. (eds.) *African Landscapes: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. New York: Springer.

**Figure 5.** Graves (squares) and Haiseb cairns / ||ho||hobabs (triangles) encountered in west Namibia during 2014 and 2015. Cairn numbers indicate the date order in which they were encountered, green triangles indicate cairns where there is some uncertainty as to whether these are Haiseb cairns or graves. The names and/or indicative genealogy of those buried are indicated where known.



Source: Sullivan working with Google Earth Pro and GPS coordinates logged during on-site oral histories recorded during 2014 and 2015, as per Figures 2 and 3 (see above).

**Figure 6.** Haiseb cairns / ||ho||hobabs located in the Palmwag tourism concession.



Source: Sian Sullivan archive, 170215 (#5); 241115 (#11); 211114 (#1).

### ... animal agencies

Lions (*xamti*) (Figure 7) are a key and formidable predator, encounters with whom may result in the loss of human life, or the life of herded livestock. Nonetheless, people in the past sought them out, in order to scavenge meat from their kills: thus, ‘now in the past when we heard the lions crying in the night like last night, now we said, it’s a big dog [*kai arib*] making that sound, let’s go that side and find the meat there’.<sup>63</sup> Or, ‘when the lions come and drink water, we talk to them to ask them to start growling because tomorrow we are going to collect honey (*danib*) and we want to know where you are’.<sup>64</sup>

Lions figure in peoples’ realities as animals imbued with agency and intentionality. Just as Kohn describes for Runa interactions with jaguars<sup>65</sup>, and Brightman et al. review for cultural interactions with bears and jaguars in Siberian and Amazonian contexts respectively<sup>66</sup>, lions are conceived as being able to see, recognise and represent the people they encounter and interact with. The proximity of lions to humans is indicated by calling to lions as ‘big brother’, ‘big head’, or as a ‘big dog’<sup>67</sup> – names that denote respect and proximity. In non-ordinary states of consciousness associated with healing, KhoeSan reality also embraces the perceptual possibility of mutability between lions and humans.<sup>68</sup> This is potentially evidenced by rock art inscriptions of therianthropes – chimerical figures that are part human and part animal – including a famous rock engraving of a lion with a human hand emerging from its tail, found at the World Heritage Site of Twyfelfontein in west Namibia (as shown in Figure 8).

It is salutary to remember that living amongst a high diversity of large mammal kinds, including predators that may treat humans as prey, has been the norm until recently for KhoeSan peoples, an experience constrained within living memory through restrictions on

---

<sup>63</sup> RSS, SO|A, ≠Habaka, 201114.

<sup>64</sup> F||H, NG, Kai-as, 251115.

<sup>65</sup> Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>66</sup> Brightman, M., Grotti, V. E. and Ulturgasheva, O. 2013. Animism and invisible worlds: The place of non-humans in indigenous ontologies, pp1–27 in M. Brightman, V. E. Grotti and O. Ulturgasheva (eds.) *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Lions are considered to ‘look like a dog – it’s only the hair and mane that are different’ (RSS, SO|A, WSG, ≠Habaka, 201114), as well as being close social proximity to humans (also Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.* especially Ch. 4). In the past, dogs played extremely important roles, both as aids in hunting and in finding places where there is water as people historically moved into unfamiliar areas. I have lost track of the times that people related a story about a known ancestor in the past moving into an unfamiliar area, to be drawn to a water source by their dog. This is a key component of oral history regarding how the northwards Swartbooi Nama migration found water at Fransfontein in the late 1800s (named after Franz Swartbooi, whose dog sniffed out the spring there), as well as for how an earlier movement of |||Ukun people found water as they moved northwards into the Namib from the !Kuiseb River.

<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the possibility of mutability as a means of cleverly responding to and manipulating encounters could be said to be a highly valued skill in KhoeSan contexts, as expressed, for example, in numerous ≠Nū Khoen stories associated with the ancestor-trickster-hero Haiseb (especially RSS, SO|A Top Barab 211114; RSS, SO|A, WSG, Kai-as, 221114; F||H, NG, Kai-as, 261115). For discussion of conceptual and material mutability in KhoeSan thought see Guenther, M. 1999 *Tricksters and Trancers: Bushman Religion and Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Power, C. 1994 *The Woman With the Zebra’s Penis: Evidence for the Mutability of Gender Among African Hunter-Gatherers*. Masters Thesis, University College London, London; Schmidt, 2011, *op. cit.*; Sullivan, S. and Low, C. 2014 *Shades of the rainbow serpent? A KhoeSān animal between myth and landscape in southern Africa – ethnographic contextualisations of rock art representations*. *The Arts* 3(2): 215–244; special issue on World Rock Art.

settlement and mobility effected through conservation measures combined with other historical pressures and shifts in administrative boundaries (as noted above).<sup>69</sup> Although much conservation literature emphasises problems for people generated by ‘wild animals’, especially under the rubric of human-wildlife conflicts<sup>70</sup>, another perspective is also salient. This is that when people have lived and acted with relative autonomy, i.e. prior to the constraints effected by various recent colonising forces<sup>71</sup>, they have also tended to appreciate – to *like* – living with a diversity of nonhumans. Thus,

we stayed together with *all* the animals. Even the lions and leopard, elephants, rhino.. A lot of animals were here and we stayed together with the animals. ... sometimes the lions bite the goats, but sometimes he just come and drink at the spring and then go again. And sometimes he killed the zebra and the oryx here and when he eat and then he leaves to fetch the water then the people also go and take the meat from his kill [much laughter].<sup>72</sup>

Part of what engenders this appreciation is a sense that humans and other animals share kinship: not so much because of their biological and morphological similarities, as in natural history and evolutionary perspectives (although these are important), but because, like humans animals are animated by a soul that passes from them when they die, and that confers to individuals a sense of self. It is this soul – or *gagas* (as above) – that gives humans and animals their unique smell or ‘breath’, confers their abilities to move as well as to assert agency and intentionality, and informs the qualities of action and behaviour from which humans also learn how to act appropriately<sup>73</sup>. This shared soul is bound with a sense of both the primal time closeness between humans and other animals,<sup>74</sup> as well as a residual experience of communicative closeness shared between humans and ‘nonhuman’ animals. This closeness makes it ontologically commonplace to assert, for example, that the ostrich in a well-known true story of the primal time became the *xoma-aob* – the healer – who taught the people how how to suck (*xoma*) sicknesses from the people (‘he wasn’t *like* a healer, he *was* a healer’).<sup>75</sup> Or to relate that in the past, the people did not experience problems with ‘wild animals’: when encountered, people simply spoke to them asking them nicely to move so that the people could be on their way.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, many ≠Nūkhoen and ||Ukun people of the

---

<sup>69</sup> On the particular impacts of conservation policy on mobile indigenous peoples see the collection edited by Chatty, D. and Colchester, M. (eds.) 2002 *Conservation and Mobile Indigenous people: Displacement, Forced Settlement and Sustainable Development*. Oxford: Berghahn Press.

<sup>70</sup> For the Namibian context, see, for example, Jones, B.T.B. and Barnes, J. 2006 *Human Wildlife Conflict Study: Namibian Case Study*. online. [assets.panda.org/downloads/hwc\\_namlastfinal.pdf](https://assets.panda.org/downloads/hwc_namlastfinal.pdf) (last accessed 5 February 2016).

<sup>71</sup> In this context, effected by Oorlam Nama dominance following northwards movements in the mid-late 1800s (Rizzo, L. 2012 *Gender and Colonialism: A History of North-western Namibia*. Basle: BAB, plus oral histories including H|N, Ses, 060414; CDT, M|AG, Hoanib, 070414), German colonial rule, South African administration and the associated and ongoing emergence of various forms of expert conservation management).

<sup>72</sup> CDT, M|AG, |Giribes, 070414; RSS, SO|A, WSG, ≠Habaka, 201114. Also F||H, NG, Hoanib & Kai-as, many discussions, 20-261115.

<sup>73</sup> RSS, Top Barab, 211114. For more detail on KhoeSan understandings and workings with this ‘wind’, see Low, C. 2007 Khoisan wind: hunting and healing. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Special Issue on Wind, Life, Health: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives, ed. by Low, C. and Hsu, E.) 13: S71–S90.

<sup>74</sup> Solomon, A. 1997 The myth of ritual origins? Ethnography, mythology and interpretation of San rock art. *South African Archaeological* 52: 3–13; also see Viveiros de Castro, 2004, *op. cit.*

<sup>75</sup> CDT, M|AG, |Giribes, 070414; WSG, |Giribes, 070414.

<sup>76</sup> F||H, NG, Hoanib, 221115.

**Figure 7.** Lions encountered in the ephemeral Hoanib River, close to the former dwelling site of ||Oeb (see Figure 3) and the present Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp run by the international eco-tourism company Wilderness Safaris<sup>77</sup>. This pride is the group known in Namibia’s Desert Lion Conservation project<sup>78</sup> as ‘the musketeers’<sup>79</sup>.



Source: Sian Sullivan, personal archive, 211115.

**Figure 8.** Petroglyph therianthrope consisting of a lion with a human hand emerging from its tail, at the Twyfelfontein UNESCO World Heritage Site, southern Kunene, west Namibia.



Source: Sian Sullivan, personal archive, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2014.

<sup>77</sup> See <http://www.wilderness-safaris.com/camps/hoanib-skeleton-coast>

<sup>78</sup> See <http://www.desertlion.info/>

<sup>79</sup> In the time since this paper was written four of the pride known as ‘The Musketeers’ were killed by Herero pastoralists in the Purros Conservancy north of Sesfontein, following lion attacks on livestock. For an overview of the situation see Sullivan, S. 2016 Three of Namibia’s most famous lion family were poisoned – why? *The Conversation* 23 August 2016 <https://theconversation.com/three-of-namibias-most-famous-lion-family-were-poisoned-why-64322>

west Namibian landscape consider that it is a result of motorised vehicles and cameras that animals like elephants have become ‘naughty’.<sup>80</sup> In ‘the West’, by contrast, the conceptual removal of ‘soul’ from animals was notoriously achieved by Descartes’ affirmation that animals were merely ‘soulless automata’, an ontological strategy that has arguably sanctioned ruthless instrumentalisation of animals by justifying extreme moral indifference.<sup>81</sup> For the ≠Nūkhoen and ||Ubusun people engaged with here, asking whether or not animals have a soul is responded to as a derisory question.

For ≠Nūkhoen and ||Ubusun elders soul animates animals at the top of the food chain, such as lions, but it also confers vitality and agency to much smaller creatures such as insects. Social insects such as harvester ants who harvest seeds subsequently gathered by people, and bees from whom people harvest honey, are valued extremely highly. These creatures are so valued not only for how hard they work to gather important foods that are then shared with humans, but also for the *egalitarianism* with which they share both this work and the resulting foods. Great care has been taken by people when gathering seeds or honey from harvester ants nests and beehives respectively, so as to ensure productivity in future years: neither seeds from harvester ants’ nests (seen as the ‘home’ – *oms* – of the ants in a manner that is parallel to the homes or ‘*omti*’ of humans), nor honey harvested from beehives, should be gathered in such a way as to leave nothing for the future sustenance of the ants or bees.<sup>82</sup> Human action is thus considered to *support* or to *serve* the present and future existence of these other creatures.<sup>83</sup>

These practices might be interpreted as simply examples of ‘resource taboos’ that in a utilitarian manner act to safeguard human sustenance from one year to the next.<sup>84</sup> But this interpretation does not mesh well with the ontological reality that seems to inform such practices in this context. This is because although humans are seeking to eat from the multiple kinds of selves with which they live, the simultaneous consideration of these selves as variously able to see, represent and act arguably confers an expanded sense of reciprocity and relationality to the multiple interactions arising between these human and nonhuman others.<sup>85</sup> As Viveiros de Castro writes for Amerindian contexts, the assumed shared hypostasis of soul as animating embodied existence can thus act to attenuate the emergence of objectification

---

<sup>80</sup> CDT, M|AG, |Giribes, 070414;

<sup>81</sup> Descartes, R. 1968(1637) *Discourse on Method*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 75–76. See discussion in Hornborg, A. 2006 Animism, fetishism, and objectivism as strategies for knowing (or not knowing) the world. *Ethnos* 71(1): 21–32, p. 24 (after Evernden, N. 1985 *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 16–17); Harrison, P. 1992 Descartes on animals. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42(169): 219–227; Baird Callicott, J. 2013 Ecology and moral ontology, pp. 101–116 in Gergandi, D. (ed.) *The Structural Links Between Ecology, Evolution and Ethics: The Virtuous Epistemic Circle*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 296, p. 112; Sullivan, 2016, What’s ontology got to do with it? *op. cit.*

<sup>82</sup> Sullivan, 1999, *op. cit.*

<sup>83</sup> On *servicing* ‘nature’ see Sullivan, S. 2009 Green capitalism, and the cultural poverty of constructing nature as service-provider. *Radical Anthropology* 3: 18–27; Combetti, C., Thornton, T.F., Wylliede Echeverria, Patterson, T. 2015 Ecosystem services or services to ecosystems? Valuing cultivation and reciprocal relationships between humans and ecosystems. *Global Environmental Change* 34: 247–262.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Forbes, W., Antwi-Boasiako, K.B., and Dixon, B. 2014 Some fundamentals of conservation in South and West Africa. *Environmental Ethics* 36: 5–30, pp. 10–14.

<sup>85</sup> cf. Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.*

and instrumentalisation practices.<sup>86</sup> To connect with a different approach in ecological ethics, then, associated human behaviours, which (may) consciously realise and sustain the flourishing and abundance of socio-ecological assemblages rather than of individuals only, arguably recall Arne Naess' concept of 'Self-realisation': as realisation of the ecologically-connected relational Self, in contradistinction to a narrower, ego-centred conception of 'self-realisation'.<sup>87</sup>

### ... plants as agents

Plants, by contrast, are not in this context considered to be animated by soul in the same way as humans and other animals, mostly because they do not move as animals do. Nonetheless, they are definitely considered to be alive, and to die, just as humans do<sup>88</sup>. Some plants, however, are conferred with special properties of agency. These are a suite of plants considered to be 'soxa', i.e. as particularly potent. A cluster of these plants are considered to act in a protective manner, especially against 'bad thoughts' or envy ('surib'<sup>89</sup>) seen as a cause of sickness when directed towards someone, especially a person who is vulnerable such as a child, or someone who is already ill or elderly. Importantly, a key aspect of such plants is that they will not work – indeed they will not stay with the human person seeking their protection – unless something small such as a 5 cent piece, a piece of a person's clothing, etc. – is given to them in exchange.<sup>90</sup> This direct material exchange between human person and potent/soxa plant binds the matter and healing action of the plant to a person, for example through the wearing of a |ores – a small pouch around the neck – containing a small piece of the plant (illustrated in Figure 7).<sup>91</sup> Through this material exchange, the agency of particular plants matters in their ability to act in relation to a human self.

**Figure 9.** Hane Ganuses wears around her neck a |ores containing the protective soxa plant #âis, for which a material exchange is required to ensure both its efficacy and that it remains with the recipient.



Source: Sian Sullivan, personal archive, !Nao-dâis, 261114.

<sup>86</sup> Viveiros de Castro, 2004, *op. cit.*

<sup>87</sup> Naess, A. 1987 Self-realization: an ecological approach to being in the world. *The Trumpeter, Journal of Ecosophy* 4(3): 35–42

<sup>88</sup> MH, Kham, 021114; RSS, Top Barab, 211114.

<sup>89</sup> Schmidt, 2014a, *op. cit.* p. 142.

<sup>90</sup> Also Schmidt, 2014a, *op. cit.* p. 149 and references therein.

<sup>91</sup> WSG, Mai, 030314.

### ... the personified agency of rain

Our last example extends agency and intentionality further still, to include the actions of biophysical forces. In this west Namibia and KhoeSan context, it is the personified, supernatural force – |*nanus* – behind the phenomena of rain that asserts agency in selecting those humans who become healers<sup>92</sup>. Healers are thus known as |*nanu-aob* or |*nanu-aos* – meaning literally man or woman of the rain. When someone is called by |*nanus* they experience a psychological transformation precipitated by a loss of a sense of self. They go into the field (!*garob*) and wander around, lost to the normal world of everyday waking ego consciousness. During this time they receive the rain spirit in the form of ‘energetic sensitivities’ or ||*gaban* that become lodged in the body of the nascent healer/seer.<sup>93</sup> On realising that someone has been called in this way, people of their community go looking for them singing the songs of healing dances called *arus*. It is when the nascent |*nanu-aob/s* hears the threads of the familiar songs of the *arus* that they are able to re-enter the social world, having been ‘opened’ by |*nanus* so that they can see sicknesses of the people. Through virtue of their selection by |*nanus*, combined with ritualised practices of consumption of particular rain- and healing-associated substances – such as the *soxa* plant *tuhorabeb* (‘*tu*’ = rain<sup>94</sup>) which assists with being able to see<sup>95</sup> – healers are conferred certain powers of perception that permit them to see and cure sickness. These powers are independent of other forms of leadership, so are not necessarily consistent with any sort of political authority.<sup>96</sup> They are activated through collective healing events (*arus*) involving songs, dance movement and percussion. An *arus* involves the singing of *arus* songs, led by women (on the left in Figure 10) with each woman accompanied by the driving rhythmic hitting of two hard sticks together. This singing is coupled with an *arus* drum played by men (on the right in Figure 10), which rhythmically ‘sings’ an accompaniment to the *arus* and ‘gives the people the power to dance’.<sup>97</sup> This drum also acts so as to ‘wake up’ the ||*gaban* sensitivities lodged in the body of the |*nanu-ao.b/s*, thus enabling their capacities to see and heal.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> M!UO, Outjo, 061114; CDT, !Nosa, Ses, 251114. Another version of this confluence of agencies for Damara people (detailed by Schmidt, 2014a, *op. cit.* pp. 135–140) is as follows. The ancient supreme being ||*Gameb* (from water, i.e. ||*gam-e*) guides productivity, hunting success, and the dynamics of fortune and misfortune – the latter including sickness which is associated with arrows and other objects (||*gamagu*) that enter a recipient’s being to cause dis-ease and the symptoms of illness. ||*Gameb* ‘calls’ those who become healers (||*gama-ao.b/s*) who, whilst powerless against ||*Gameb*, are skilled in seeing and being able to remove ||*gamagu*, with the assistance of the supportive spirit presences of *kai khoen* (known and unknown ancestors) called to assist with healing, as well as of potent objects or ‘equipment’ (sticks, beads, the walking stick of the healer..) considered to be the ‘children’ of the healer.

<sup>93</sup> Multiple conversations and especially CDT, !Nosa, Ses, 251114; J||H, Ses, 271115.

<sup>94</sup> cf. Sullivan, S. 1998 *People, Plants and Practice in Drylands: Sociopolitical and Ecological Dynamics of Resource Use by Damara Farmers in Arid North-west Namibia*. Ph.D. Anthropology, University College London. Online. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1317514/>, p. Annexe-28; Low, C. 2008 *Khoisan Medicine in History and Practice*. Rüdiger Köppe Verlag: Köln. Schmidt, 2014a, *op. cit.* p. 233.

<sup>95</sup> N≠UT 1995-96; !Nosa, Ses 251114. The identity of this plant is known but withheld for intellectual property reasons.

<sup>96</sup> cf. Clastres, P. 1988 *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

<sup>97</sup> J||H, Ses, 271115.

<sup>98</sup> For more on KhoeSan medicine, see Wagner-Robertz, D. 2000 *Ein Heilungsritual der Dama Südwestafrika / Namibia*. Rüdiger Köppe Verlag: Köln; Low, 2008, *op. cit.*



**Figure 10.** An *arus* or healing song-dance in Sesfontein<sup>99</sup>. !Nosa, the lead |*nanu-aos* here, is shown having just entered a trance-state from which she emerges to begin drawing sources of sickness from peoples' bodies.



Source: Sian Sullivan, personal archive, 140315.

This final example takes us towards what might be conceived as the ‘ontological edges’ of modernity, to extend a currently lively seam of work in the humanities that explores and opens up some of these ontological edges. This includes work encouraging recognition of the biologically-grounded ontologies of being of nonhuman species towards more sensitive attunements with other-than-human presence<sup>100</sup>, as well as work that takes seriously the socio-ecological and ethical demands of materiality<sup>101</sup>. But for anthropologists working in diverse cultural contexts there may be a whole *other* ontological edge that demands to be taken seriously. This is the diverse world of both ancestors and spirits, which in many cultural contexts are known and encountered as agency-enacting entities with ontological reality.<sup>102</sup> As Kohn writes, ‘spirits are their own kind of real’ emerging ‘from a specifically human way of engaging with and relating to a living world that lies in part beyond the human’.<sup>103</sup> Since

<sup>99</sup> Also known by the ≠Nūkhoen names of !Nani|aus (lit. ‘six springs’, after the German colonial name of Zessfontein) and the older name of ≠Gabia-≠gao (lit. ‘confused heart’ and referring to the disbelief that one feels on encountering the many strong, permanent freshwater springs in the area).

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Haraway, 2008, *op. cit.*; Flusser, V. 2011(1987) *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. New York: Atropos Press; Marder, 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Latour, B. 2004 *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Bennett, J. 2010 *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press; Hecht, G. 2012 *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press; Jackson, M. 2013 Plastic islands and processual grounds: ethics, ontology, and the matter of decay. *Cultural Geographies* 20(2): 205–224.

<sup>102</sup> cf. Chakrabarty, 2000, *op. cit.*; Kohn, 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* Kohn 2013, pp. 217, 216.

the spirit realm has its own future-making logics and habits, Kohn remarks additionally that how this reality is treated ‘is as important as recognizing it as such’.<sup>104</sup> In other words, there may be further vistas to explore in an expanded relational and reciprocal ontology, with implications for future flourishings.

## 4. Flourishings

We have only been able here to skate over the surface of the above ethnographic examples. In doing so, however, our suggestion is that the knowledge practices we describe illustrate an expanded sphere of moral agency and considerability, associated with relations of reciprocity with other-than-human entities that may be fruitful for engendering multi-species abundance. We are not making a comment specific here to what is becoming known as ‘African relational environmental ethics’ more broadly<sup>105</sup>, although the knowledge and value practices we describe might indeed intersect with this approach. What we suggest is that a *milieu* of relationality and reciprocity, such as that described above, accompanied by an ontological assumption of distributed agency and a keen awareness that ‘difference makes a difference’<sup>106</sup>, might act to discourage excessive interference with, and instrumentalisation of, other-than-human natures, and conversely to support the flourishing of both human and other-than-human diversities.

What ethnography and environmental anthropology might offer to a relational environmental ethics, then, is a deeper understanding of how people might live in specific relational contexts with different kinds of agency-asserting entities, only some of whom are human.<sup>107</sup> Through such cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural engagements, a hope is that pluralistic perspective and dialogue might inform a shift in *transcultural* solidarities and shared values that responds to the contemporary global ‘wicked problems’ associated with multiple environmental crises and accompanying cultural displacements.<sup>108</sup>

### **Knowledge, value and symbiosis**

In particular, the kinds of practices and associated narratives we gesture towards above indicate that something has been lost in a modern reality considered by many commentators to be ‘disenchanted’.<sup>109</sup> This loss makes it harder to work out what it is to really act on the basis of relationship with the nonhuman. Of course there have been ‘gains’ too: modern

---

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208, 216.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Behrens 2014 and Kelbessa 2014.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* Kohn 2013, after Bateson, G. 2000(1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>107</sup> cf. Figueroa and Waitt, 2008, *op. cit.*; Baird Callicott, 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>108</sup> cf. Mazzarella, P. 1992 Introduction, pp. 1–12 and Pellegrino, E.D. 1992 Prologue: intersections of western biomedical ethics and world culture, pp. 13–19, both in Pellegrino, E., Mazzarella, P. and Corsi, P. (eds.) *Transcultural Dimensions in Medical Ethics* Frederick Maryland: University Publishing Group; Brown, V.A., Harris, J. and Russell, J.Y. (eds.) 2010 *Tackling Wicked Problems: Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination*. London: Earthscan.

<sup>109</sup> Weber, M. 1993(1963) *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press; Curry, P. 2016 From enlightenment to enchantment: changing the question in Thomas-Pellicer, R., de Lucia, V. and Sullivan, S. (eds.) *Law, Philosophy and Ecology: Exploring Re-Embodiments*. London: GlassHouse Books (Routledge Law, Justice and Ecology Series).

humans know a great deal about things like evolution, genetics, mathematical ecology and molecular biology. But this knowledge arguably brings ‘us’ no closer to understanding our own relationships to the rest of the world. It has in fact become commonplace to remark on the danger that scientific prowess can *increase* human separation from the world.

This line of thought can easily run into the quicksand of an old debate between ‘reductionism and holism’.<sup>110</sup> Some varieties of environmentalism have been keen to pin the blame for present ecological problems on modern Cartesian reductionism, in the process downplaying the importance of detailed empirical and experimental methods of environmental observation in nonmodern contexts.<sup>111</sup> But this is not the whole story, as evidenced by nuanced debates in environmental aesthetics concerning the potential role of ecological knowledge in properly appreciating and valuing ‘nature’.<sup>112</sup> Does a scientific understanding of exactly what is going on in a forest, for example, just distract attention onto mechanistic details, or does it in fact facilitate a deeper appreciation of the complex interconnected whole? There is no right answer here – both may potentially be true. In any case, perceiving and appreciating *relationship* requires apprehending both details *and* the whole that they comprise. It might be argued that such apprehension cannot be done with the ‘rational’ mind alone. Alternatively it might be observed that, as has often been noted, there can be many rationalities.<sup>113</sup> After all, as an anthropology of nature suggests, scientific ecology derives from one of a number of possible ontologies.<sup>114</sup> From this latter perspective, perhaps scientific ecological knowledge is just one of the rationalities that can potentially help develop the skill – the virtue – of perceiving and experiencing both interconnectedness and coherence. Of seeing both the wood and the trees.

This is not, however, to say that environmentalists are necessarily wrong to mistrust ‘reductionist’ scientific paradigms. The existence of multiple anthropogenic ecological crises does strongly suggest a significantly reduced capacity for *symbiosis* between modern humans and our nonhuman companions. (Re)building a capacity for symbiosis and mutualism is perhaps the most urgent challenge facing humanity. John Barry describes ecological virtue as ‘a mean between a timid ecocentrism and an arrogant anthropocentrism’, centred on ‘modes of character and acting in the world which encourage social-environmental relations which are symbiotic rather than parasitic’.<sup>115</sup> The *absence* of such virtue leads to the destructive modes of social organisation we see today, which arguably position humanity as a parasite rather than a symbiont. As Barry’s more recent work argues, change requires excavation of the political, ethical and ontological underpinnings of this destructive modern story of the

---

<sup>110</sup> As discussed in e.g. Bergandi, D. and Blandin, P. 1998 Holism vs. reductionism: do ecosystem ecology and landscape ecology clarify the debate? *Acta Biotheoretica* 46(3): 185–206.

<sup>111</sup> Richards, P. 1985 *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*. London: HarperCollins.

<sup>112</sup> See e.g. Rolston, III, H. 1995 Does aesthetic appreciation of landscapes need to be science-based? *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35: 374–386, and discussion in Brady, E. 2003 *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

<sup>113</sup> Dryzek, J. 1987 *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell; MacIntyre, A. 1988 *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth.

<sup>114</sup> cf. Descola, 2013, *op. cit.*

<sup>115</sup> Barry, J. 1999 *Rethinking Green Politics*. London: SAGE, pp. 33–35.

human / non-human relationship.<sup>116</sup> Having other narratives to compare this with,<sup>117</sup> particularly ones in which symbiosis is more clearly valued (as, perhaps, in those recounted above), can help with this endeavour<sup>118</sup>.

### **Egalitarianism and reciprocity**

Valuing symbiosis entails a very different understanding of how egalitarianism, obligation and reciprocity may work to sustain community. Maintaining a calculative balance sheet of entitlements and obligations between individual ‘economic actors’ usually does not nurture community. Anthropologist David Graeber maintains that such practices are instead a modern innovation to interpret mutual obligations in terms of an ethical imperative to ‘pay one’s debts’.<sup>119</sup> Non-capitalist cultures, Graeber suggests, would see a person who attempted never to be ‘in debt’ as effectively placing themselves outside community by rejecting the social fabric of reciprocally obligated relationships, choosing instead to define their identity atomistically, and to deal with others as strangers.

To reject such atomism, and to instead celebrate the webs of mutual obligation as importantly constitutive of community, is to embrace a more complex, multidimensional understanding of reciprocity. Possession and exercise of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls *virtues of acknowledged dependence* can allow a person to understand and discharge their own responsibilities as a member of a community, a ‘network of giving and receiving’.<sup>120</sup> These networks form a kind of organic scaffolding supporting community: the exercise and amplification of relevant virtues thus maintains the coherence and integrity of the networks, of the social arrangements within which individual flourishing lives can unfold. Such networks are also essential for an individual’s understanding of their own autonomy – as MacIntyre argues, ‘acknowledgement of dependence is the key to independence’.<sup>121</sup>

Expanding this idea to consider virtues of acknowledged *ecological* dependence leads to an ‘ecological eudaimonism’ that recognises character dispositions which maintain the integrity of the nonhuman world as beneficial for humans as well. This is not only because such integrity is itself important for human flourishing, but also because recognition and acknowledgement of our dependence upon nonhuman worlds contribute to our understanding of ourselves.<sup>122</sup> Ecological virtues include traits and dispositions related to aesthetic, emotional and spiritual perceptions of the natural world, as well as those related to the ‘rational’ perspectives of environmental science. Moreover, what Rosalind Hursthouse calls ‘right orientation to nature’ includes respect not only for living things, but also for inanimate

---

<sup>116</sup> Barry, J. 2012 *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>117</sup> Herman, D. 2014 Narratology beyond the human. *Diagesis* 3(2): 131–143.

<sup>118</sup> On the potential for productive interplay between different environmentally-oriented narratives, also see, Rigby, K. 2013 *Dancing With Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times*. London: University of Virginia Press.

<sup>119</sup> Graeber, D. 2011 *Debt: the First 5000 Years*. New York: Melville House.

<sup>120</sup> MacIntyre, A. 1999 *Dependent Rational Animals*. London: Duckworth, pp. 9, 99.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p. 85.

<sup>122</sup> Hannis, M. 2015 The virtues of acknowledged ecological dependence. *Environmental Values* 24: 145–164.

natural features and phenomena, and for the integrity of whole natural systems themselves.<sup>123</sup> This is justified not on the basis of respect for the *telos* of living things (although from other perspectives this will be important), but on the eudaimonist basis that a human life characterised by a right orientation to nature will be a more flourishing one.<sup>124</sup> Such an orientation would not see *all* human impact as ethically problematic, but would at least encourage a reflective and respectful approach to the human use and consumption of ‘nature’.

So what is it to flourish as part of a broader community conceived in this way? How is individual flourishing related to the flourishing of the broader community of humans, nonhumans, and ‘land’ (as Aldo Leopold would have it)?<sup>125</sup> How might seven billion or more human beings live in this kind of dynamic reciprocity with the nonhuman world? However this last question is to be answered, it will surely require a very different trajectory from that suggested by recent calls for humanity to embrace its role as ‘the God species’.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, acknowledging and assuming more-than-human agency may be a key part of telling a new story that avoids such hubris. For these purposes nonhuman agency need not necessarily be taken as literally or objectively ‘true as scientific fact’. An heuristic interpretation may still do the job of opening up the required extra reciprocal dimensions, of stretching the imaginative muscles required to really perceive the complex webs of interconnections between living (and non-living) things.

This is not, however, to suggest that in describing the realities of people mentioned in this text we are merely sharing metaphors or analogies. Theirs are sophisticated practices and narratives that embody accumulated cultural knowledge of ‘how to live a good life’: and as Brian Treanor notes, ecological virtue is in large part developed by and through narratives.<sup>127</sup> Here, and in ideal terms, a life characterised by appropriate relationships with animals, plants, ancestors, and spirits is understood as a better life – a more flourishing life – than one characterised by inappropriate relationships with these agencies. It is also a life perhaps more likely to bring about the flourishing of others, human and other-than-human alike. A eudaimonist ecological virtue ethics may be well equipped to understand the ethical implications of the deep relationality that seems to be involved in worldviews such as these. Cultivating ecological virtue, on a eudaimonist model, can therefore help bring about a good life for oneself, but without emphasising individualism or indeed anthropocentrism. As suggested in the ethnographic examples outlined above, the focus of an ecological eudaimonism might instead be on relationality and reciprocity through amplifying interconnection and symbiosis across acknowledged and appreciated differences.

---

<sup>123</sup> Hursthouse, 2007, *op. cit.*

<sup>124</sup> Hannis, 2015a, *op. cit.*; Hursthouse, 2007, *op. cit.*; Thompson, A. 2008 Natural goodness and abandoning the economy of value: Ron Sandler’s character and environment. *Ethics, Place and Environment* 11(2): 218–226.

<sup>125</sup> Leopold, A. 1968 (1949) *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>126</sup> Lynas, M. 2012 *The God Species: How Humans Really Can Save The Planet*. London: Fourth Estate; discussed in Hannis, M. 2012 Another God Delusion? *The Land* 11 [www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/another-god-delusion](http://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/another-god-delusion).

<sup>127</sup> Treanor, 2014, *op. cit.*

## Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (ref. AH/K005871/2), the National Museum of Namibia, Save the Rhino Trust Namibia, Gobabeb Research and Training Centre, and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism for a research permit (no. 2023/2015) for Sullivan to conduct fieldwork in the Skeleton Coast National Park. We are indebted to the following individuals in particular for material used from key recorded and transcribed interviews: Welhemina Suro Ganuses (WSG), Ruben Saunaeib Sanib (RSS), Sophia Obi |Awises (SO|A), Nathan ≠Ūina Taurob (N≠ŪT), Christophine Daumŭ Tauros (CDT), Michael |Amigu Ganaseb (M|AG), Emma Ganuses (EG), Max Haraseb (MH), !Nosa, Martin !U-e So-Oabeb (M!UO), Hildegard |Nuas (H|N), Franz ||Hoëb (F||H), Noag Ganaseb (NG), Jacobus ||Hoëb (J||H) and Andreas !Kharuxab (A!Kh). Invaluable translation and logistical support was provided in Namibia by Simson !Uri-||khob, Welhemina Suro Ganuses, Filemon |Nuab, Ezegiel |Awarab, Elfriede Gaeses, Andrew Botelle, Eugène Marais, Jeff Muntifering, Wilderness Safaris (especially Louis Noortjie) and the Hoanib Research Centre at Hoanib Camp (especially Emsie), for which, many thanks. We also thank Chris Low and Rick Rohde for comments on an earlier draft.

**Appendix 1.** Table of interviewees, with places and dates of interaction, for material drawn on here.

Interviewee name	Abbrev.	Main <i>!haoti</i> (where known)	Places - of interaction	Dates -
Sophia Obi  Awises	SO A	Ubun	≠Habaka Top Barab Kai-as Uruhunes (Uru) !Garoa	201114 211114 221114 231114 231114
Michael  Amigu Ganaseb	M AG	Ubun	Giribes  Hoanib	May 1995 070414 070414
Noag Ganaseb	NG	Ubun	Hoanib and Möwe Bay Kai-as	21- 261115  251115 261115
Emma Ganuses	EG	Khao-a	!Nao-dâis (!N-d)	191014
Welhemina Suro Ganuses	WSG	Khao-a	Mai Go ha (Mai)   Giribes !Nao-dâis (!N-d)  ≠Habaka Kai-as	010314 030314 070414 191014 121114 201114 221114
Andreas !Kharuxab	A!Kh	Dâureb	Kowareb (Kow)	130599
Ruben Saunaeib Sanib	RSS	Khao-a	Kowareb (Kow) ≠Habaka Top Barab  Kai-as  Uruhunes (Uru) !Garoa	171114 201114 201114 211114 221114 170215 231114 231114
Max Haraseb	MH	Gaio	Khamdesca-Hobatere	031114
Franz   Hoëb	F  H	Ubun	Hoanib and Möwe Bay Kai-as	21- 261115  251115 261115
Jacobus   Hoëb	J  H	Khao-a	Sesfontein (Ses)	271115
!Nosa			Sesfontein (Ses)	251114
Hildegard  Nuas	H N	Hoanidaman	Sesfontein (Ses)	060414
Martin !U-e So-Oabeb	M!UO	Hai  om	Outjo	061114
Nathan ≠Ūina Taurob	N≠ŪT	!Narenin (ancestors = !Oe-≠gā)	Giribes	May 1995
Christophine Daumû Tauros	CDT	!Narenin	Giribes  Hoanib Sesfontein (Ses)	May 1995 070414 070414 251114