

## **Muted mutji. On secularized self-censorship, virtual environmentalism and spiritual ecologies in Kavango, Namibia**

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### *Abstract*

*Namibia has an environmental and economic problem with anthropogenic overuse of natural resources. The paradigms of development and conservation, exemplified through the catch-term CBNRM, dominate public discourses on how to influence individual and collective behavior towards sustainability. However, cosmological drivers of action, e.g. witchcraft, are widely missing from these discourses. Based on empirical evidence of the prevalence of cosmologically influenced action in Kavango, as well as of potentially detrimental outcomes for natural resources and social capital I discuss in this paper the possibility that a crucial link between spirituality and environmentality is being muted. Models of environmental protection and development are based on prevalent eurocentric ontologies and differing presumptions about the factuality of cosmological convictions. Paradigms of secularity and modernity support self-censorship on epistemological aspects of environmental relations in public debate. As long as this self-censorship continues a mutual understanding between the different stakeholders and successful sustainable resource management will be restricted.*

### **Introduction: Resource problems and conservation efforts**

In late 2010 I attended a series of conferences in the process of constituting Regional Science Service Centres for southern Africa.<sup>1</sup> Numerous scientists and environmental practitioners from Africa and Europe gathered to discuss potential research for sustainable land management under conditions of climate change and land degradation in the arid, semi-arid and sub-humid parts of Southern Africa. During a conference in Zambia European scientists were invited to attend panel sessions where African partners were collecting ideas on potential research topics for their country. Being confined to the role of a consulting observer I was in two minds whether to suggest adding research on spiritual ecologies, specifically on the impact of witchcraft on environmental issues or not. At some point I left the room for a phone-call. During my absence a colleague of mine, who had become interested in my studies on witchcraft, reported briefly on my involvement with the subject and suggested it be discussed. When I re-entered the room all eyes turned to me with amazement. Being asked to give a statement I emphasized

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rssc-southernafrica.net/>

my perception that the subject of witchcraft impacting not only economic but also ecological behaviour is neglected in ecological discourse.<sup>2</sup> Embarrassment and laughter were the main reactions among most of the African scholars. It was vicarious embarrassment of the type that makes people uncomfortable when they see someone making themselves look ridiculous. There was also embarrassment and slight indignation at a European evoking a subject associated with exoticism and bygone colonial prejudices of 'African irrationality'. My scholarly interest was met with head-shaking and cautious laughter as if it were an odd and rather unscientific subject adding something unpleasant and incongruous to an otherwise perfectly rational discussion. Obviously witchcraft seemed odd and out of place to the panel participants. However, the idea was reluctantly recorded. When read to the plenary the next day, the reader laughed uncomfortably and the idea solicited the same reactions as the previous day.

I consider this anecdote as symptomatic of a larger phenomenon which I would not confine to witchcraft and would term as the absence of 'spiritual ecologies'<sup>3</sup> from serious public environmental debate. Using fieldwork data from the Kavango in Namibia in this paper I will demonstrate how 'traditional' spiritual or cosmological convictions are being neglected or even muted in public discourses on development and conservation and so far have often been absent from the Namibian Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) discourses.<sup>4</sup> This fact contrasts with the strong salience and prevalence of individual and household decision-making on the basis of cosmological convictions. To outline the background of this approach I will start with a short introductory overview on Namibia's potential resource problems and conservation efforts.

Namibia, like the rest of Southern Africa is facing environmental problems.<sup>5</sup> It is projected that the region will experience increasing losses of natural resources during

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<sup>2</sup> The term will be used here in a broad sense for all forms of societal communication and debate embedded in social interactions and social practices.

<sup>3</sup> Penny Bernard and Sibongiseni Kumalo, "Community-based natural resource management, traditional governance and spiritual ecology in southern Africa: The case of chiefs, diviners and spirit mediums", in: C. Fabricius, E. Koch, H. Mangome, and S. Turner, (eds.), *Rights, Resources and Rural Development. Community-based Natural Resource Management in Southern Africa*, London, Earthscan, 2004: 115-126.

<sup>4</sup> Empirical anthropological work for this study has been executed in the inland of the central Kavango region southwest of Rundu, as well as in Rundu and its vicinity (figure 1). Data were collected within BIOTA, an interdisciplinary project on anthropogenic influences and cultural dimensions of biodiversity uses using a variety of qualitative and additional quantitative methods such as ethnographic census, household surveys, and systematic observations (cf. Michael Pröpper, *Culture and Biodiversity in Central Kavango, Namibia*, Berlin, Reimer, 2009). Data on witchcraft *beliefs* and *behaviour* were collected with a mix of interviews and observations. For the elicitation of personal witchcraft beliefs and experiences qualitative trust base methods of open interviews and comparative thematic apperception tests (TAT) proved to be most fruitful. Observations were used to balance the potential bias of talking and exoticizing this highly popular topic.

<sup>5</sup> Consisting of Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, see Reinette Biggs et al., "Scenarios of biodiversity loss in southern Africa in the 21st century", *Global Environmental Change*, 2008, 18 (2): 296-309.

the coming decades.<sup>6</sup> Changes in land use, most extensively in the form of agricultural expansion and livestock production, climate change, population growth, pressures to accelerate economic development, and ineffective regulation by government of the environmental impact of human settlement have been identified as key drivers.<sup>7</sup> It is stated that “the impact on land transformation in southern Africa is likely to have disproportionately high impacts on global biodiversity”.<sup>8</sup> Moreover it is widely undisputed that the problematic losses of global biodiversity, caused by complex combinations of international pressures and domestic factors,<sup>9</sup> affect ecosystem services and human livelihoods with disproportionate consequences for the poor.<sup>10</sup>

In the sub-humid woodland savannah Kavango of Northeast Namibia such an impact of human land use is clearly visible. The increasing expansion of agriculture, intensification of livestock production (especially along the river but increasingly in the hinterland), extraction of tradable resources like thatching grass, harvesting of timber, fishing, increases in waste and pollution often cause a degradation of habitats and the over-harvesting of species.<sup>11</sup> The region is also characterized by little awareness amongst the population of the detrimental effects of expanding cultivation, land clearing and targeted harvesting of resources.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Biggs et al., “Scenarios”.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; Helmut J. Geist and Eric F. Lambin, “Proximate causes and underlying driving forces of tropical deforestation”, *BioScience*, 2002, 52 (2): 143-150; Sala, Osvaldo E. Sala, et al., “Global biodiversity scenarios for the year 2100”, *Science*, 2000, 287 (5459): 1770-1774; Alexander Wood, P. Stedman-Edwards, and J. Mang, (eds.), *The Root Causes of Biodiversity Loss*, London, WWF and Earthscan, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Biggs, et al., “Scenarios”: 296f.

<sup>9</sup> These include macroeconomic policies and international trade factors as much as population growth, poverty, migration, weak environmental legislation, inequality, marginalization, lack of control over resources, and *cultural*/changes (cf. Wood, et al., *Root Causes*, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> William M. Adams, et al., “Biodiversity Conservation and the Eradication of Poverty”, *Science*, 2004, 306, (12 November): 1146-1149; Graciela Chichilnisky, “The economic value of the earth’s resources”, *TREE*, 1996, 11 (3): 135-140; Sandra Diaz, et al., “Biodiversity loss threatens human well being”, *PLOS Viology*, 2006, 4 (8): 1300-1305; Peter M. Vitousek, et al., “Human domination of earth’s ecosystems”, *Science*, 1997, 277 (5325): 494-499; Wood, et al., *Root Causes*.

<sup>11</sup> Biggs, et al., “Scenarios”; Tobias Fox, “Investigating the dynamics of subsistence cultivation in the tree savanna of North-East Namibia by means of remote sensing”, unpubl. Thesis for Master of Science in Geomatics, Faculty of Geomatics, in cooperation with the German Aerospace Center (DLR), Oberpfaffenhofen Remote Sensing Data Center (DFD), Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe University of Applied Sciences, 2008; Geist and Lambin, “Proximate causes; John Mendelsohn and Selma el Obeid, *Sand and Water. A Profile of the Kavango Region*, Cape Town, Struik, 2003; Pröpper, *Culture*; Michael Pröpper, “Sawing Kavango timber commons: Levels of action and agency upon local natural capital”, in: C. Greiner and W. Kokot, (eds.), *Networks, Resources and Economic Action. Ethnographic Case Studies in Honor of Hartmut Lang*, Berlin, Reimer, 2009: 171-188; Ben J. Strohbach and Andreas Petersen, “Vegetation of the central Kavango woodlands in Namibia: An example from the Mile 46 Livestock Development Centre”, *South African Journal of Botany*, 2007, 73 (2007): 391-401.

<sup>12</sup> Pröpper, *Culture*; Michael Pröpper, et al., “Causes and perspectives of land-cover change through expanding cultivation in Kavango”, in: T.H. Hoffman, U. Schmiedel, and N. Jürgens, (eds.), *Biodiversity in Southern Africa. Implications for Landuse and Management*, Göttingen/Windhoek, Hess, 2010: 1-31.

To counter these threats Namibian regional and national policy making and governance is focusing on two paradigms which are supported by the UN Millennium Goals<sup>13</sup>: economic development through growth and conservation of natural resources towards sustainability.<sup>14</sup> The Namibia Third National Development Plan (NDP3) formulates several Key Result Areas, among them a competitive economy and the sustainable utilization of natural resources. It envisions Namibia being transformed “into an industrialized country of equal opportunities, which is globally competitive, realising its maximum growth potential on a sustainable basis”.<sup>15</sup> The conservation and sustainable utilization of biotic resources for ecological well-being is one of the main goals of the Namibian Vision 2030.<sup>16</sup>

The Kavango region consists largely of state owned communal land – commonly used under the auspices of the traditional legal system. Such common property requires cooperative management by land-user communities, as common property theory has emphasized with considerable success.<sup>17</sup> On a worldwide scale<sup>18</sup>, but also in the Namibian context, one group of actors – *local communities* – have been identified as being crucial to a concept that is called community-based natural resource management (CBNRM).<sup>19</sup> The role of ‘communities’ as crucial champions for participation and

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Ashley, Caroline, “Incentives affecting biodiversity conservation and sustainable use: the case of land use options in Namibia”, Windhoek, unpubl. manuscript, 2000; Phoebe Barnard, S. Shikongo, and J. Zeidler, *Biodiversity and development in Namibia. Namibia's ten-year strategic plan of action for sustainable development through biodiversity conservation*, Windhoek, Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2001; Michael Bollig, “Beyond development – global visions and local adaptations of a contested concept”, in: C. Limpricht and M. Bieseke, (eds.), *Heritage and Cultures in Modern Namibia. In-depth Views of the Country*, Windhoek and Göttingen, Hess, 2008: 23-36; see as well Lisa M. Campbell and Arja Vainio-Mattila, “Participatory development and community-based conservation: Opportunities missed for lessons learned?”, *Human Ecology*, 2003, 31 (3): 417-437.

<sup>15</sup> Republic of Namibia, *Third National Development Plan (NDP3). 2007/2008-2011/12*, Volume I, Executive Summary, Windhoek, Namibia National Planning Commission, 2008: 5.

<sup>16</sup> Republic of Namibia, *Namibia Vision 2030*, Windhoek, Office of the President, 2004: 41.

<sup>17</sup> Lesley P. Boggs, *Community Power, Participation, Conflict and Development Choice: Community Wildlife Conservation in the Okavango Region of Northern Botswana*, Evaluating Eden Series Discussion Paper No.17, IIED, 2000; Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Researchers have invested considerable effort in understanding what promotes and what hampers local community actors' collaboration and their involvement in strengthening local level institutions for resource protection, cf. Elinor Ostrom, *Understanding Institutional Diversity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005. The governance of commonly used resources through such actors seems to depend strongly on their perception of a necessity, their willingness to cooperate and the existence of a functioning set of rules to organize such activities. See Thomas Dietz, Elinor Ostrom, and Paul C. Stern, “The struggle to govern the commons”, *Science*, 2003, 302 (special section): 1907-1912 (1907). At a local level in particular, conditions such as the absence of accepted boundaries and rights, control, monitoring and sanctions can hamper the evolution of institutions, see Ostrom, *Governing*: 90ff.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Corbett and Clement Daniels, *Legislation and Policy Affecting Community-Based Resource Management in Namibia*, SSD Research Report No 26, Windhoek, Multidisciplinary Research Centre – University of Namibia, 1996; Christo Fabricius, “The fundamentals of community-based natural resource management”, in: C. Fabricius, E. Koch, H. Mangome, and S. Turner, (eds.), *Rights, Resources and Rural*

conservation has been presumed and emphasized.<sup>20</sup> The idea or ideal of CBNRM has been described as integrating the role of local residents in decision-making in contrast to earlier approaches of reserving places for nature and separating humans and other species.<sup>21</sup> CBNRM activities centred around “promoting sustainable use of natural resources through providing appropriate economic incentives, by devolving authority from government to community institutions, and creating the conditions for strong community proprietorship and tenure over land and resources”.<sup>22</sup> CBNRM activities have grown considerably in recent years and are firmly established in national programmes.<sup>23</sup> Communities as agents of community based natural resource management have appeared in statutory resource legislation, in the case of Namibia, for example, in the form of community based resource management projects like community forests or conservancies.<sup>24</sup> At the centre of most CBNRM activities in Namibia is “an attempt to help communities to develop institutions, which can manage common property

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*Development. Community-based Natural Resource Management in Southern Africa*, London, Earthscan, 2004: 3-43; S. Gasteyer, et al., “Community participation for conservation and development of natural resources: A summary of literature and report of research findings”, *Delta Development Journal*, 2002, 1 (2): 57-84; Brian T.B. Jones, *Synthesis of the CBNRM Policy and Legislation in Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe*, WWF – SARPO Occasional Paper Number 16, Harare, WWF, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> M. Bertelsen, “Holistic management in West Africa: A new approach to community-based natural resource management decision making and institutional development at the decentralized commune level”, in: K. Cason, (ed.), *Cultivating Community Capital for Sustainable Natural Resource Management. Experiences from the SANREM CRSP*, Athens, GA, SANREM CRSP, 2000: 29-38; Corbett and Daniels, *Legislation*; Gasteyer, “Community”; Petra Palm and Oliver Pye, *The Potential of Community Based Tourism and the Role of Development Cooperation in Namibia*, Eschborn, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), 2001; Eva Schiffer, *How does community based natural resource management in Namibia change the distribution of power and influence? Preliminary findings*, Windhoek, Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Republic of Namibia, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Brian T.B. Jones and Marshall W. Murphree, “Community-based natural resource management as a conservation mechanism: Lessons and directions”, in: B. Child, (ed.), *Parks in Transition: Biodiversity, Rural Development and the Bottom Line*, London, Earthscan, 2004: 63-104.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, *Synthesis*: 79.

<sup>23</sup> Brian T.B. Jones, *Community-based Natural Resource Management in Botswana and Namibia: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis of Progress*, Evaluating Eden Series Discussion Paper No.6, London, IIED – International Institute for Environment and Development, 1999. “Perhaps the dominant characteristic of Namibia’s CBNRM program is the institutionalizing of facilitation and support for CBNRM by the national NGO community. Namibian NGOs have evolved as boundary organizations [...] mediating the contributions of international donors and legal requirements of central government with local conservancies, and facilitating capacity building at conservancy level to meet conservancy registration requirements and manage donor funds and revenues from wildlife conservation and related tourism enterprises. A strong and quite well coordinated network of CBNRM support organizations has developed that has facilitated capacity-building at the local level and partnerships with private enterprises. This density of supportive networks bodes well for the robustness of the conservancy model for wildlife conservation.” (Arthur Hoole, *Lessons from the Equator Initiative: Common Property Perspectives for Community-Based Conservation in Southern Africa and Namibia*, Winnipeg, Centre for Community-Based Resource Management – Natural Resources Institute – University of Manitoba, 2007: 22f.).

<sup>24</sup> Republic of Namibia, *Forest Act, 2001*, Windhoek, Government Gazette, 2001.

resources successfully. Wildlife, forest products, veld foods and indeed tourism, are good examples of common property resources".<sup>25</sup>

With the benefit of greater experience and a growing body of critical studies the enthusiasm for CBNRM has cooled.<sup>26</sup> Fabricius has identified several problems and flawed assumptions such as malfunctioning policies, institutions and devolution of authority; inept professionals and poor administration; overestimated financial benefits that relate to various projects in Southern Africa.<sup>27</sup>

Many CBNRM approaches are based on administrative discretion rather than legal rights that can be defended in court. Politicians and officials are reluctant to give up power in practice, despite policy provisions. The institutions expected to implement CBNRM policies and legislation are often still staffed with many personnel who are at worst opposed to and at best sceptical of CBNRM as an approach.<sup>28</sup>

In fact discussions of experiences of and potential for development, common property management and CBNRM in Namibia strongly centre on the subjects of incentives, economic benefits, and institutions for natural resource management.<sup>29</sup> These are important aspects, but from an anthropological perspective they do not cover the full range of challenges.

As briefly touched upon above, in this paper I target *cultural* challenges for individuals and communities in managing resource sustainably. Fabricius outlines three of them. First, by portraying communities as *elusive* he states that the "expectation that local people speak with one voice and have a single vision that encompasses all the aspirations of the group often does not hold".<sup>30</sup> Users and user networks do not automatically equate with villages and villages, as conglomerates of individual actors,

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<sup>25</sup> Jones, "Community-based": 1.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell and Vainio-Mattila, "Participatory".

<sup>27</sup> Fabricius, "Fundamentals": 20.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Synthesis*: 80.

<sup>29</sup> Ashley, "Incentives"; Sushenjit Bandyopadhyay, Juan Carlos Guzman, and Selma Lendelvo, *Communal conservancies and household welfare in Namibia*, DEA Research Discussion paper No. 84, Windhoek, Directorate of Environmental Affairs, Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2010; Michael Bollig, "Success and failure of CPR management in an arid environment: Access to pasture, environment and political economy in Northwestern Namibia", in: H. Leser, (ed.), *The Changing Culture and Nature of Namibia: Case Studies*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2006: 37-68; Manfred O. Hinz, *Without Chiefs there would be no Game: Customary Law and Nature Conservation*, Windhoek, Out of Africa, 2003; N. Indongo, et al., *Community-based natural resource management in Namibia: Results of a 2006 household survey*, DEA Discussion Papers No 81, Windhoek, Directorate of Environmental Affairs, Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2010; Jones, *Synthesis*; Schiffer, *Community based*; Karl Vorlauffer, "Kommunale Conservancies in Namibia: Ansätze der Biodiversitätssicherung und Armutsbekämpfung?", *Erdkunde*, 2007, 61: 26-53; Gil Yaron, Gertie Janssen, and Usutuaije Maaberua, *Rural Development in the Okavango Region of Namibia: An Assessment of Needs, Opportunities and Constraints*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Fabricius, "Fundamentals": 22.

cannot be equated with 'communities'.<sup>31</sup> In a second step communities are described as spaces of internal conflicts. These clusters of conflicts revolve around levels and forms of leadership (statutory, traditional, elite, NGO), land and resources.<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, and most crucially *differences in worldviews* between outsiders and local people are perceived as hampering CBNRM. It is the insufficient understanding of the cultural causes of domestic decisions on land use such as values, beliefs, and local legal traditions, which is perceived as problematic. In my perception these three aspects receive less attention in the discussion on development and natural resource management. Focusing mainly on the third aspect and showing how it is interlinked with the first two I aim to outline the importance of recognizing the impact of cosmological thinking on *environmental* behaviour.<sup>33</sup>

To demonstrate this I first look at the reality of land and resource usage in the Kavango region, presenting empirical data on the impact of cosmological thinking. I emphasize the role of witchcraft convictions. I also sketch some of the linkages to environmental behaviour, detrimental uses and destruction of natural and social capital. Then I show how such convictions which are perceived as wasteful and dangerous are being made taboo in several forms of public *discourse* causing a gap between aspirations and reality. I then use this short overview to reflect on this gap between the aspirations for development, nature conservation and community based resource management and the reality of much more complex influences on individual decision-making and social cohesion.

## Background: Livelihood *realities*

The rural farming population of the sub-humid Kavango is largely dependent on natural resources for subsistence based livelihoods. Three quarters of the 202,694<sup>34</sup> inhabitants<sup>35</sup> of different ethnic backgrounds depend on these natural resources as one

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<sup>31</sup> See as well Arun Agrawal and Clark C. Gibson, "Enchantment and disenchantment: The role of community on natural resource conservation", *World Development*, 1999, 27 (4): 629-649; Fabricius, "Fundamentals"; "The term community in community-based conservation is gloss for a complex phenomenon because social systems are multi-scale and the term community hides a great deal of complexity. [...] Communities are elusive and constantly changing. A community is not a static, isolated group of people. Rather it is more useful to think of communities as multidimensional, cross scale, social-political units or networks changing through time" (Fikret Berkes, "Rethinking community-based conservation", *Conservation Biology*, 2004, 18 (3): 621-630 [623]).

<sup>32</sup> Fabricius, "Fundamentals".

<sup>33</sup> 'Cosmological' is used in this article as a cover term interchangeably with 'religious', 'spiritual'. Cosmological thinking encompasses ideas of the world as a totality of entities and phenomena in space and time.

<sup>34</sup> National Planning Commission, *2001 Population and Housing Census. National Report. Basic Analysis with Highlights*, Windhoek, NPC – Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> The Kavango region has experienced strong population growth, caused predominantly by war-migration from neighbouring Angola. Thus the region is ethnically heterogeneous and many migrants from Angola are nowadays integrated into local rural structures all over Kavango, cf. Inge Brinkman, "Violence, exile and

of their main sources of income.<sup>36</sup> These people live in villages, towns and on the urban periphery in kinship-based households as farmers and cattle-holders. Diesel-engine water pumps are used to obtain water. Electricity and sanitation are largely lacking. Growing millet, maize and sorghum and gathering fruit, grass and wood products play an important role in most households' livelihoods and to a growing extent as commodities for trade.<sup>37</sup>

Poverty and social stratification are widespread in Kavango. Daily life is challenging and laborious. Poverty, which is indicated by low income due to unstable yields, limited access to safe water, sanitation and electricity and a poor health-, education- and labour infrastructure, is a problem affecting large sections of the population. In central Kavango an average household generates a mean yearly harvest of about 95kg/ha of mixed crops (mainly millet and maize) on an average field of about 10ha.<sup>38</sup> Taken together with other socio-demographic factors such as high mobility and fertility this situation leads farmers to expand their cropping activities continually into new areas.<sup>39</sup>

In Rundu rampant poverty and extremely high unemployment, segregation on the basis of wealth with a few very rich entrepreneurs, a small urban middle class and a vast majority of impoverished urbanites living in 'locations' are clearly visible.<sup>40</sup> In the face of high HIV/Aids mortality an ever increasing number of funerals require the organisation of firewood, crops, water and meat from the countryside.

Development in the region has been hampered by several institutional and infrastructural weaknesses. A statutory system of social security and insurance is largely absent and traditional social structures and norms shape interactions. Besides this, so far little public infrastructure has been developed to foster either such awareness or control of natural resources. The distribution of authority and power between regional and local level political and legal institutions such as statutory and traditional authorities needs to be more clearly defined.<sup>41</sup> An unequal and stratified political-economic system

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ethnicity: Nyemba refugees in Kaisosi and Kehemu (Rundu, Namibia)", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1999, 25 (3): 417-439.

<sup>36</sup> John Mendelsohn and Selma el Obeid, *Farming Systems of Namibia*, Cape Town, Struik, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Traditional cropping happens on communal state-owned land, with access to land being controlled through a three-level system of traditional authorities as well as understaffed state authorities such as the Directorate of Forestry (Pröpper, "Sawing"). Agriculture is dependent on inconsistent rains of about 600mm/year and is practised largely without the input of chemical fertilisers. Fields are ploughed with ox-drawn ploughs. Kavango soils are rather sandy with a low fertility and are exhausted by cropping after 3-5 years, see Ulrike Wisch, *Soil fertility of dryland farming systems in the Kavango region, Namibia*, unpubl. Diploma Thesis, Department Biologie – Institut für Bodenkunde, Universität Hamburg, 2008. Additionally traditional technology, lack of chemical improvements, and lack of external capital input for rural subsistence farmers influence the low agricultural productivity.

<sup>38</sup> Pröpper, *Culture*.

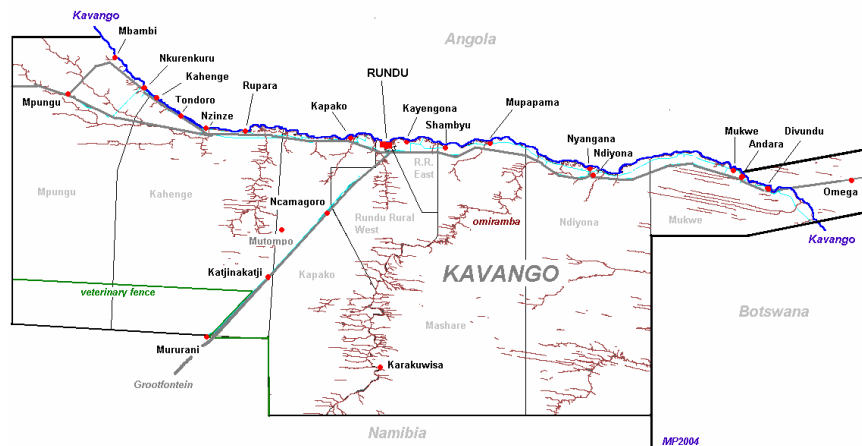
<sup>39</sup> Fox, "Investigating".

<sup>40</sup> National Planning Commission, *2001 Population*.

<sup>41</sup> Manfred O. Hinz and Oliver C. Ruppel, (eds.), *Biodiversity and the Ancestors: Challenges to Customary and Environmental Law. Case Studies from Namibia*, Windhoek, Namibia Scientific Society, 2008.

with low upward mobility and high transaction costs, keeps farmers on the verge of 'modern infrastructure' for information, labour, health, social security and education.<sup>42</sup>

Figure 1: Kavango research area



### Cosmological *realities*, spiritual ecologies

Cosmological convictions are not only highly salient in Kavango; they are an inextricable part of people's realities.<sup>43</sup> Historically Kavango has been strongly influenced by Christian missions.<sup>44</sup> In Kavango today the fields of Christian morality and 'traditional' beliefs do coexist as perceived dichotomies and at times complementary explanatory models.<sup>45</sup>

The vast majority of people in the sample area are Christians. People's faith and piety are very strong aspects of life. The Christian religion as a model for explaining causal relationships between different worlds has found a widespread following. The living

<sup>42</sup> Pröpper, *Culture*.

<sup>43</sup> I just present an overview on cosmological convictions as a social reality here. Elsewhere I have outlined the ontological, social and communicative role of beliefs such as witchcraft (ibid.). What I aim to emphasize here is the prevalence of beliefs like witchcraft as an influence on action.

<sup>44</sup> Adrianus Petrus J. Beris, *From Mission To Local Church. One hundred years of mission by the Catholic Church in Namibia*, Windhoek, R.C. Church, Meinert, 1996; Paul Isaak and Christo Lombard, "Religion and its impact on Namibian society", in: Volker Winterfeldt, Tom Fox, and Pempelani Mufune, (eds.), *Namibia. Society. Sociology*, Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2002: 87-123.

<sup>45</sup> Churches emerged from the colonial past and are still places of ambivalence and ignorance towards traditional beliefs, especially in the treatment of witchcraft.

nature (*nsitwe*) for the vast majority of Kavango Christians cannot be conceptualized without God and is perceived as a godly creation. However, entities such as ancestral spirits (*vadimu*) warily observing their descendants' conduct or a supernatural snake (*ekongoro*) connected to creation taboos<sup>46</sup>, are part of Kavango cosmology and are known and believed in by contemporary Kavango citizens.<sup>47</sup> Equally widespread is a belief in witchcraft (*urodi*) as a life-eating force, witches (*varodi*), witches' familiars and ghost-workers (*yiruru*, *yindumba ndumba*), the divination and healing methods and powers of healers and witchdoctors (*yimbanda*) practising traditional medicine (*mutji*). Within this pantheon these entities, like the Christian God, spirits, ancestors, and of course witches and their familiars, act in interlinked worlds of varying access and visibility and have powers over mental phenomena such as dreams as well as 'natural' resources, such as yields, rain, wind, herbs, pathogenic agents and the like.

During extensive research on the subject it was my experience that people do not really debate the factuality and causality of these entities and forces but rather treat certain phenomena, such as the existence of god, ancestors, ogres, undead or witches, as ontological facts that are ascertained by word-of-mouth causality.<sup>48</sup> The same applies to witchcraft. Witchcraft is a complex phenomenon which I have discussed in detail elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> For many people in Kavango it is an undisputed social and ontological reality that is tightly woven into the communicative interaction of people. It encompasses the interaction of people with witches (*varodi*). These are humans inhabited by a life-eating embodied force (*urodi*) manipulating natural and supernatural forces that inhabit different spheres of the world for multiple ambivalent motives. This interaction manifests itself in destructive and widely feared occult attacks on others motivated by envy and the wish to level social or economic disparities. Witches are believed to attack other people in different ways, among them through sickness, disasters, accidents, animal attacks, yield failures, marital and family problems, social conflicts, infertility and death. Hence witchcraft can be perceived as a cultural model for explaining mysterious causal relations and occurrences in the environment. It is largely aetiology about the causes of physical, social and economic constraints. Witchcraft is deeply interwoven with a complex of traditional healing that involves specialists like healers and witchdoctors (*vanganga/yimbanda*).<sup>50</sup>

As this short overview shows, typical aspects of Kavango ontological/cosmological realities are permeable for invisible phenomena that have been largely displaced from

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<sup>46</sup> Maria Fisch, "Die mythische Wasserschlange bei den Kavangostämmen, ihre Beziehung zu Geistern in Tiergestalt und zum Regenbogen", *Namibiana: Mitteilungen der ethnologisch-historischen Arbeitsgruppe*, 1979, 1 (3): 37-52.

<sup>47</sup> Pröpper, *Culture*.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: Notes from the South African postcolony", *American Ethnologist*, 1999, 26 (2): 279-283.

<sup>49</sup> Pröpper, *Culture*.

<sup>50</sup> See as well Samuel K. Mbambo, *Heal with God: indigenous healing and religion among the Vagciriku of Kavango Region, Namibia*, Proefschrift Universiteit Utrecht, Utrecht, Unitwin, 2002; Pröpper, *Culture*.

scientific and ocularcentristic models of reality. The latter characterize supernatural phenomena as inapproachable by scientific method while colonial Christian discourse has depicted them as 'not real' or 'superstition'. However, in Kavango-worldviews occurrences like sickness, disasters, accidents happening in the mundane, profane and social sphere *can* incorporate actions from invisible spheres, un-understandable mysteries beyond rational reasoning. Such spheres are not perceived as *separated* but as interlinked. The ecological world is inhabited by spirits and cosmological or ontological cultural models – often applied in diagnostic phases – explain the linkages. These diagnostic phases are applied to all sorts of catastrophes, yield failure, a series of family misfortunes, personal bad luck, impotence, infertility, miscarriage, accidents, diseases and the like. In an aetiological process first *natural causes* (e.g. god's will, modern scientific explanations) are assumed and only when remedies fail is a witchcraft model activated. This coexistence of the natural and the supernatural, the mundane and the mysterious have been found all over Africa to be a “patent feature” of the world and an “integral part of people's daily lives” that is less extraordinary than ordinary.<sup>51</sup>

## The prevalence of witchcraft

To document witchcraft's potency and pervasiveness in real-life as one of the most prominent cosmological models I will focus on three areas, the prevalence of witchcraft convictions among large parts of the population, the availability of healing services and the abundance of healers.<sup>52</sup> The latter two are difficult to assess. However, they can be considered as indicators of the prevalence of witchcraft.

Interviews and observation over an extended period support my estimate that about 98% of the people in the research area share *convictions* about the reality, factuality and potential threat of witchcraft. Many people reported having been accused of using witchcraft. Privately others voiced suspicions about family members, fellow villagers and neighbours using witchcraft. However, apart from this abundance of potential witches I did not encounter anybody who would confess to being a witch or was willing to talk about his or her occult activities. The whole subject and surrounding discourses happened in a social setting with a diversity of motives and intentions, and talk about it revives and reinforces fears and excitement at the same time. Clandestine debate about beliefs, fears and suspicions; gossip and constant speculation and interpretation causalities are part of daily life. However, public talk about witchcraft convictions is hampered by fears of becoming associated with accusations as well as severe traditional law sanctions for false or unfounded accusations.

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<sup>51</sup> Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, (eds.), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities*, London, Routledge, 2001: 4.

<sup>52</sup> Certainly not all traditional healers can be linked with witchcraft since many of them, e.g. herbalists, offer treatments in which they use their highly significant and vanishing knowledge of healing plants only (Pröpper, *Culture*). Likewise not only genuine *witch-doctors* are involved in diagnoses and therapies of witchcraft related symptoms. There is a lack of systematic research in this area.

Observations during public sessions and court trials and in multiple interviews and discussions over the years have led me to estimate, though, that at least 50% of the people in the research sample had *used and paid* for the services of a traditional healer and in many of these cases witchcraft was mentioned as an issue during the diagnosis.<sup>53</sup> Several studies in adjacent regions and countries additionally underline that in southern Africa witchcraft convictions, witch-finding activities and their effects on livelihoods have deep historical roots and a high actuality.<sup>54</sup>

Some studies indicate the abundance of traditional healers. For the Kavango in 1994 it was calculated that there was a ratio of 1 healer per 500 people, which would be far higher than the ratio of medical doctors.<sup>55</sup> In her eastern Kavango research village Koppe found 13 healers for 1200 inhabitants and Biesbrouck interviewed seven healers in the Nyangana district and assumed that there was one healer in each Gciriku village.<sup>56</sup> Looking at the social implications of witchcraft in the context of HIV/AIDS and effects on livelihoods in the adjacent Caprivi Thomas found that most of the healers she interviewed “claimed to be diviner herbalists [...]”. However, many who claimed to be ‘healers’ were also involved in witch-finding and in the protection and treatment of the ‘witched’ person”.<sup>57</sup> During research in the wider vicinity of my research focus area several herbalists, prophets and diviners were encountered and interviewed.

Besides these specialists Pentecostal and African Healing Churches<sup>58</sup> who offer an alternative and less costly way of healing have recently found a growing afflux and not only in Kavango.<sup>59</sup> In the Kavango case they can be classified by a few distinct

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<sup>53</sup> Compare also similar results arrived at by Debie LeBeau, “Is witchcraft real? The role of perceptions in health seeking behavior”, in: D. LeBeau and R. Gordon, (eds.), *Challenges for Anthropology in the ‘African Renaissance’*, Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2002: 92-103 (94).

<sup>54</sup> Inge Brinkman, “War, witches and traitors: Cases from the MPLA’S eastern front in Angola (1966–1975)”, *Journal of African History*, 2003, 44: 303-325; Charlanne Burke, “They cut Segametsi into parts: Ritual murder, youth, and the politics of knowledge in Botswana”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 2000, 73 (4): 204-214; Paolo Israel, “The war of lions: witch-hunts, occult idioms and post-socialism in northern Mozambique”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2009, 35 (1): 155-174; Isak Niehaus, “Perversion of power: witchcraft and the sexuality of evil in the South African Lowveld”, *Journal of religion in Africa*, 2002, 32 (3): 269-299; Felicity Thomas, “‘Our families are killing us’: HIV/AIDS, witchcraft and social tensions in the Caprivi Region, Namibia”, *Anthropology and Medicine*, 2007, 14 (3): 279-291.

<sup>55</sup> Tara Waters Lumpkin, *Traditional Healers and Community Use of Traditional Medicine in Namibia*, Windhoek, Ministry of Health and Social Services and UNICEF, 1994.

<sup>56</sup> Ineke Koppe, *Yitondo Ya Nyambi (The medicine of God). A research on Illness and Healing in a North-Namibian village*, Utrecht, Unitwin, 1995; Martine Biesbrouck, *Life for my child – Diarrhea and acute respiratory infections. A study into health behaviour of mothers in Nyangana district, Namibia*, Utrecht, Unitwin, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas, “‘Our families’”: 290.

<sup>58</sup> Healing churches are Christian churches with strong indigenous participation and a large degree of independence from larger currents.

<sup>59</sup> James Pfeiffer, Kenneth Gimbel-Sherr, and Joaquim Augusto Ovahlho, “The Holy Spirit in the household: Pentecostalism, gender, and neoliberalism in Mozambique”, *American Anthropologist*, 2007, 109 (4): 688-

characteristics a.) acceptance and integration of traditional aetiology and beliefs in witchcraft, spirits and supernatural forces and b.) involvement in healing people's problems through reconciliation and ritual. Counter-activities against witchcraft, spirits etc., e.g. through divination, are part of the churches' liturgy.<sup>60</sup> The prayer-based diagnosis and treatment of witchcraft afflictions is less costly than consulting a healer witchdoctor.<sup>61</sup> In the urban context the density of practitioners has not been measured but in all types of witchcraft treatments, it seems to be higher than in rural areas. Observations confirmed that several healers of different nationalities operate in this field. Another indicator of the salience of witchcraft in Kavango daily life is the fact that it is a central issue of legal culture. Several high ranking senior headwomen and -men of the rural and urban traditional authorities confirmed in interviews that they are concerned with an average of 2-3 larger witchcraft trials monthly. The institution of traditional courts recognises the factuality of witchcraft attacks as a crime all over Kavango and imposes traditional fines in the currency of heads of cattle on those found guilty. The figures here only include the larger cases that have been referred to the higher levels of the traditional authority system and do not include the many cases that are dealt with at village level. Altogether I consider the findings presented to be representative of the social reality of witchcraft.

## Decision guiding aspects of spiritual ecologies

Based on the observations outlined above I argue that for many Namibian land-users and urbanites it is a perfectly *rational* part of their daily life to integrate cultural models of the environment/spiritual ecologies when they make decisions about natural resources. Such cosmological models interfere and at times compete for interpretive dominance and can have both protective and destructive outcomes.

Christianity and churches provide places of regular gathering and belonging, talking, gossiping, and of social events. A Christian church morale of humility, obedience and transcendental promises certainly supports and sustains people through the hardships of their lives – the high mortality, poverty and austerity. But likewise it may amplify obedience to any sort of authority.<sup>62</sup> Christianity influences people's perceptions of nature as a godly creation calling for moderation in the treatment of the environment. Likewise this creation is perceived as inhabited by various non-human entities that can influence human action, e.g. by establishing taboos. With several examples from

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700; Madelon Zwart, *Indigenous Churches in the Kavango*, Utrecht, Unitwin Network for Southern Africa, 1999.

<sup>60</sup> See for example Zwart, *Churches*.

<sup>61</sup> The involvement of African Pentecostal churches in political and economic contexts has been subject of critical studies, cf. Birgit Meyer, "The power of money: Politics, occult forces, and pentecostalism in Ghana", *African Studies Review*, 1998, 41 (3): 15-37; Sasha Newell, "Pentecostal witchcraft: Neoliberal possession and demonic discourse in Ivorian pentecostal churches", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 2007, 37: 461-490.

<sup>62</sup> See the contribution of Ndeikwila to a discussion portrayed in Isaak and Lombard, "Religion": 106.

southern Africa Bernard and Kumalo demonstrate how spiritual ecologies can function to guard land and resources but can also obstruct management and development programmes initiated from without.<sup>63</sup> They explicitly mention CBNRM programs which “need to be particularly sensitive to the role of spiritual ecology to many rural people in southern Africa, especially regarding the ways in which it influences their perception and use of certain resources and features of the landscape”.<sup>64</sup>

Ambivalent behaviour is also salient in the domain of health and healing where different aetiological models of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ diseases as well as diagnoses, medicines and therapies exist.<sup>65</sup> This complex is closely linked to the phenomenon of witchcraft. In traditional healing, medicines from natural sources and beliefs in their powers play an important role. These perceptions may appear to the contemporary observer as volatile and archaic in a globalized and modernized world dominated by consumerism. However, almost nobody of the many interlocutors I have encountered was willing to openly deny the factuality and force of supernatural agents.

Lastly the cultural model of witchcraft has an impact on environmental decision-making and this impact belongs to those aspects of spiritual ecologies which are not entirely protective. A most immediate influence is the consensual belief that witches and their supernatural agents can directly affect all a household’s assets such as animals, crops, houses and the like, and can even kill. It is not only humans but also a household’s natural capital that can be bewitched. Repeated mysterious events which are interpreted as afflictions can require countermeasures, e.g. the consultation of a healer/witchdoctor which can result in high costs of diagnosis and healing for the household’s limited budget.<sup>66</sup> These payments are not made exclusively in cash but largely in kind, e.g. in livestock, crops, or fruit. Against a background of poverty and heavy dependence on natural resources the imminence and reality of these threats not only influence ecological perceptions but also economic decision-making.

Furthermore witchcraft as a social interaction between an alleged attacker and a victim lives from rumours, gossip and clandestine accusations which are strongly fuelled by envy, conflict, aggression and fears of social exclusion. As such witchcraft has been interpreted in the past in functional terms as an indicator of social fission<sup>67</sup> and “a pressure valve” to relieve social tensions or as “social diagnostics”.<sup>68</sup> In this line of thinking Jong has described Kavango drumming sessions as a psychotherapeutic

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<sup>63</sup> Bernard and Kumalo, “Community-based”. This potential of religion is being tapped by conservationists of late for ecological preservation. See Gary Gardner, “Engaging Religions to Shape Worldviews”, in: E. Assardourian, (ed.), *2010 State of the World. Transforming Cultures. From Consumerism to Sustainability. A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, New York, Norton, 2010: 23-29.

<sup>64</sup> Bernard and Kumalo, “Community-based”: 118.

<sup>65</sup> Debie LeBeau, *Dealing With Disorder. Traditional and Western Medicine in Katutura (Namibia)*, Köln, Köppe, 2003; Mbambo, *Heal with God*.

<sup>66</sup> Pröpper, *Culture*.

<sup>67</sup> Max Marwick, (ed.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery. Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970: 17.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Moore and Sanders, *Interpretations*: 8f.

drama.<sup>69</sup> However, in many studies the detrimental impact of the witchcraft phenomenon on social cohesion has been outlined.<sup>70</sup> My own findings confirm the argument that fear of witchcraft, suspicions, and (clandestine) accusations can create a climate of distrust and fear, can hamper community cooperation with costly consequences, e.g. for CBNRM.<sup>71</sup> The resulting trials in front of traditional courts or diagnoses through healers and witchdoctors often do not function as valves relieving pressure but further disconnect people, weaken social cohesion and increase individual isolation. In various cases I have seen witchcraft-related gossip, suspicion and accusations destroy families and split marriages, often along the most fragile line of matrilineal clan membership. These fissions in social capital are also costly for natural capital since they are clearly among the main causes of regional migration and the existing high household mobility.<sup>72</sup> Households and families that split up due to witchcraft problems will leave all their immobile assets like homesteads and fields behind and will start elsewhere clearing forests and building a new existence. These activities impose new burdens on natural capital. Concentrating on the linkages between witchcraft, social tensions and HIV/Aids in Caprivi Thomas emphasizes the disruptive effects that witchcraft beliefs can have on livelihood activities and resource assets. She demonstrates how witchcraft related mobility, the uprooting and resettling elsewhere, results in social capital costs and an extra burden on the natural environment due to the need to re-establish livelihoods following the abandonment of existing fields and homesteads.<sup>73</sup>

## Aspirations and realities: The gap in discourses

So far I have shown that cultural convictions about the functioning of the cosmos are highly salient. However these convictions seem widely absent from many discourses on *environmental issues*. I will exemplify my observations, which admittedly are not comprehensive, by having a look at various types/arenas of discourse.

*Scientific* publications on Namibia's and southern Africa's socio-cultural perspectives largely authored by Namibian writers with social science backgrounds devote relatively little attention to the linked subject of spiritual ecologies.<sup>74</sup> Isaak and Lombard discuss

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<sup>69</sup> Erik de Jong, *De Ngoma van Kavango: Een onderzoek naar de Drumceremonies van Genezing in het Noorden van Namibië*, Dissertation, Utrecht, Universiteit Utrecht, 2001.

<sup>70</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, "Economies"; Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, "Witchcraft, social cohesion and participation in a South-African village", *Development and Change*, 2005, 36 (5): 937-958.

<sup>71</sup> Pröpper, *Culture*.

<sup>72</sup> Mendelsohn and el Obeid, *Sand*.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas, "'Our families'".

<sup>74</sup> See for example Ingold Diener and Oliver Graefe, (eds.), *Contemporary Namibia. The First Landmarks of a Post-Apartheid Society*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2001; Hinz and Ruppel, *Biodiversity*; Hartmut Leser, (ed.), *The Changing Culture and Nature of Namibia: Case Studies*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2006; Cornelia Limpricht and Megan Bieseke, (eds.), *Heritage and Cultures in Modern Namibia. In-depth Views of the Country. A TUCSIN-Festschrift*, Windhoek and Göttingen, Hess, 2008; Volker Winterfeldt, Tom

the importance and impact of religion in Namibian society, with a focus on history, sexuality, reconciliation, patriarchy, and public discourse.<sup>75</sup> A body of work on religion and cosmologies, as well as on witchcraft and healing in Namibia and Kavango specifically also exists<sup>76</sup> but rarely with regard to the impact on environment or natural resources.<sup>77</sup> Work on religion, healing and witchcraft is often more directed towards the dichotomous relationship with modern medicine, behaviour in the face of illness and aetiology.<sup>78</sup> Literature on Kavango biodiversity, sustainability and/or economic and institutional development usually has a different focus and rarely follows up the linkages with the spiritual.<sup>79</sup> Exceptions are the works of Bernard and Kumalo who address the spiritual links between southern Africa's rural people and their natural resources and of Thomas who emphasizes the disruptive effects that witchcraft beliefs can have on livelihood activities.<sup>80</sup> It is in such rare works on the links between cosmologically induced behavior and what nature provides that the crucial link becomes apparent.

To illustrate this it is interesting to look at the background of anthropological and social-science discourse on witchcraft in Africa. Over the past twenty years high profile scholarly works have documented witchcraft in Africa as being timeless, reappearing and growing rather than going into decline.<sup>81</sup> Moreover it seems to fit well into the increasing globalisation of economies, communications, consumerism, spread of pandemics etc.<sup>82</sup>

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Fox, and Pempelani Mufune, (eds.), *Namibia. Society. Sociology*, Windhoek, Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2002.

<sup>75</sup> Isaak and Lombard, "Religion".

<sup>76</sup> Maria Fisch, "Hexenprozeß am Kavango", *Afrikanischer Heimatkalender*, 1981: 81-86; Koppe, *Yitondo*; LeBeau, *Dealing*; Lumpkin, *Healers*; Samuel K. Mbambo, "Magic — a stumbling block? An investigation into the question whether magic has any negative effect on the proclamation and implementation of the Gospel amongst the Vakavango", unpubl. Ms, Windhoek [?], UNAM [?], 1994; idem, "Witchcraft and healing in the Kavango", in: R.L. van Houten, (ed.), *Commission for Theological Education and Interchange of the Reformed Ecumenical Council*, Grand Rapids, Theological Forum, 1994, <http://www.recweb.org/TF-Nov94-mbambo.html> (accessed 12 February 2011); idem, *Heal with God*.

<sup>77</sup> But see Pröpper, *Culture*.

<sup>78</sup> Koppe, *Yitondo*; LeBeau, "Witchcraft"; idem, *Dealing*;

<sup>79</sup> Martti Eirola, Jan Bradley, and Arto Laitinen, *Kavango — The Sambiyu Tribe. The Way of Life of the Mupapama River Terrace Community, Rundu*, Finnbatt Untag, 1990; Thomas Falk, *Communal Farmers' Natural Resource Use and Biodiversity Preservation. A New Institutional Economic Analysis from Case Studies in Namibia and South Africa*, Göttingen, Cuvillier, 2008; Hinz, *Chiefs*; Yaron et al., *Development*.

<sup>80</sup> Bernard and Kumalo, "Community-based"; Thomas, "'Our families'".

<sup>81</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, "Economies"; Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft. Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1997; Khaukanani N. Mavhungu, "Anthropology and African witchcraft: Social 'strain gauge', modernity and witchcraft violence in South Africa's far-north", in: D. LeBeau and R. Gordon, (eds.), *Challenges for Anthropology in the 'African Renaissance'*, Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2002: 68-79; Todd Sanders, "Reconsidering witchcraft: Postcolonial Africa and analytic (un)certainties", *American Anthropologist*, 2003, 105 (2): 338-352; Thomas, "'Our families'".

<sup>82</sup> Adam Ashforth, "An epidemic of witchcraft? The implications of AIDS for the post apartheid state", *African Studies* 2002, 61 (1): 121-143; Comaroff and Comaroff, "Economies"; Geschiere, *Modernity*; Sanders, "Reconsidering".

Against a background of expanding economic and political interrelations the cultural practice of *witchcraft* in Africa is being continuously regenerated.<sup>83</sup>

A second type of discourse elements I refer to as *official* organisational publications, deal with development and conservation issues and in particular with the success/problems of CBNRM projects like conservancies and community forests. These include speeches by members of the government, legal texts, ministerial publications (e.g. NDP 3), NGO papers. I have already mentioned the section concerned with the complex reasons for the failure of development and CBNRM projects. Despite the fact that by reflecting communities as spaces of internal conflicts and differences in worldviews the picture is slowly being expanded, I am not aware of official debates that have integrated, for example, the role of religion in protecting natural resources or witchcraft in causing social fission, mobility and strain on natural resources. The occupation of political organs with the subject of witchcraft seems to be ambivalent as well. On the one hand government seems to be forced to defend its secular and modern image<sup>84</sup> while on the other a serious parliamentary debate seems to be hampered by the same embarrassed laughter about the ludicrous aspects that I mentioned in my introductory anecdote.<sup>85</sup>

*Public* discourse takes many forms, of which, traditional court sessions are one aspect. During these sessions mediated discussions in the local vernacular about problems, accusations and defences take place. These public events happen in the open sphere of traditional courts, special places at headmen's/women's or chiefs' houses and are public rituals. In rural areas these can be large trees offering enough shade. These open spaces are in principle accessible to all who are interested and who respect the court's rules of behaviour. They often attract large crowds of curious onlookers. As I have pointed out witchcraft accusations and witchcraft cases make up a considerable part of the courts' business and hence are clearly visible for all onlookers. In the recent past large court trials of traditional healers abusing patients or the discovery of allegedly human body parts have attracted large masses of visitors and extensive media coverage. Traditional law has been a part of oral culture for a long time and written legal texts are a relatively new development. During my research I collected the written laws of the Mbunza and the Shambyu.<sup>86</sup> Parallel to that the Human Rights and Documentation Centre in the Faculty of Law of the University of Namibia conducted a project to identify

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<sup>83</sup> Diane Ciekawy and Peter Geschiere, "Containing witchcraft: Conflicting scenarios in postcolonial Africa", *African Studies Review*, 1998, 41 (3): 1-14.

<sup>84</sup> See the online edition of *The Namibian Newspaper*: "Govt draws line on witchcraft", 16 September 2004; "Witchcraft warning sounded", 27 April 2005, <http://www.namibian.com.na/nc/archives/> (accessed 28 May 2009).

<sup>85</sup> See the online edition of *The Namibian Newspaper*: "Witchcraft, mafia style ... laugh at your peril", 22 October 2004; "MPs discuss witchdoctors and magic creams", 15 October 2008, <http://www.namibian.com.na/nc/archives/> (accessed 31 January 2011).

<sup>86</sup> Alfons M. Kaundu, *Republic of Namibia. Mbunza Traditional Authority. Decision of Customary Law Court Fines*, Kapako, Paper-Copy, 2002; Edward Sikerete, *The Laws of the Shambyu Community*, Rundu, Council of the Shambyu Traditional Authority, 2006.

the written customary laws of Namibian groups and provided traditional law texts for the Gciriku and Kwangali. None of these official traditional law *texts* mentions witchcraft though it is publicly known in all four areas what fines can be imposed for the use of witchcraft. It seems that witchcraft as a cosmological conviction is part of a localised oral discourse but not of a translocal written one.

Another arena of public discourse is the media – radio, television and newspapers. Print and radio media regularly report especially about the exotic and thrilling aspects of witchcraft often associated with violence and sexuality.<sup>87</sup> Very popular are radio phone-in shows where callers debate facts and interpretations of witchcraft events. These broadcasts reach the rural villages, where people listen and then debate the contents. Such public shows, and the debates that surround them demonstrate that the subject not only offers lurid stimulation for already existing cultural imaginations, but also sparks public discourse. Public rituals actually raise the visibility of witchcraft and by emphasizing and focusing on the odd and exotic parts of the phenomenon tend to reinforce deeply rooted fears and beliefs in its omnipresent reality. By depicting witchcraft as ‘traditional’ (as synonymous with old-fashioned), grubby, exciting, violently modern, but not a subject of modern discourses I would argue that a serious debate about the epistemological background is being hampered. As demonstrated by the introductory anecdote it remains a subject, which by its very mentioning in serious discussion, immediately smacks of irrationality. While people pray at the start of public meetings they speculate about the causes of mishaps behind closed doors, in the evenings sitting at a bar or around the campfire.

To sum up so far one can say that cosmological influences are prevalent in daily interactions but their treatment in various forms of public discourse is not objective. It seems that in a largely economic world a spiritual orientation in the economic processes of life is not being addressed or has not yet been fully recognised.

## Discussion: Causes of the gap?

In attempting to address the question why spiritual ecologies are absent from serious public discourse the issue of secularity is crucial. Secularity is broadly about a separation of the outer societal worldly sphere of politics and economics from the private sphere of religious and cultural cosmological convictions. Faced with the mysteries of life people privately choose or happen to be religious/spiritual believers, ‘in-betweeners’ or non-believers; churchgoers and non-churchgoers; belonging to those who fear witchcraft as an imminent reality or those who consider it an invention of the

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<sup>87</sup> The online edition of *The Namibian Newspaper* offers some examples: “Night marauders spread panic at Oshakati”, 04.01.2011; “Gruesome child murder: Community living in fear”, 13.12.2005; “Alleged ‘muti’ assassins terrorise villagers”, 27.07.2004; “Headless ‘muti’ murder in Kavango”, 05.01.2005; “‘Muti hunters’ go for the genitals”, 20.02.2004; “Witchcraft victim’s feet may be saved”, 02.12.2005; “Mob assaults woman accused of witchcraft”, 15.05.2006; “‘Ghost’ burns huts in Okongo district”, 21.09.2004, all at <http://www.namibian.com.na/nc/archives/> (accessed 31 January 2011).

human fantasy; globalized citizens or localized members of 'traditional' cultures. In private people make choices on epistemologically different positions, and strictly speaking position themselves on a side of what could metaphorically be called an epistemological abyss. The secular ideal then is that this epistemological position will remain an internal affair that will not interfere or influence people's actions in the public secular spheres of life.

Despite the fact that the Namibian Constitution establishes the country as a "sovereign, secular, democratic and unitary State" (Article 1(1)) Namibian scholars have agreed that the secularization process in the country has been elusive.<sup>88</sup> Instead of a decline of religious influences it is argued that traditional symbols and values are being "redefined, revitalised, re-contextualised".<sup>89</sup> Focusing on environmental debates I have argued in the same direction that there is a yawning gap between secularized public environmental discourses and the non-secular daily activities of land users. In fact it seems that secularity in the sense of a separation of the spheres of life is hard to achieve and causes more epistemological problems. Societal talk of secularity is something different than personal (non-)secular actions. The hidden split that this circumstance causes is as much within people as within society. I will address this issue further below.

Before that I want to ask if the secularized spheres and discourses of life are really so dominant? Fabricius has argued that the relationship between people and their environment in Southern Africa is "highly value laden and agenda driven".<sup>90</sup> He finds that on a societal scale there are larger separable societal agendas<sup>91</sup> – spheres and themes of life like 'capitalism', 'developmentalism', 'conservationism', and 'spiritualism' to which certain groups of people relate. In fact one could hold that the global capitalist, materialistic agenda forms a background that supports secularity. It comes with dominant norms and ideals of modernity, rationality, economic market integration, a hunger for natural resources, business competitiveness, and an ignorance of environmental externalities that leave little space for spiritual ecologies. It is certainly based on the idea that global goods will find new consumers in remote African markets and that former subsistence farmers will become workers, and local capitalists selling their natural resources on global markets.

Likewise the 'conservationist and somewhat social-democratic egalitarian agenda' seems to form a secular background – especially when it comes to debates around

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<sup>88</sup> Isaak and Lombard, "Religion".

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.: 100.

<sup>90</sup> Fabricius, "Fundamentals": 38.

<sup>91</sup> In a study on Southern Africa Fabricius uses the term 'agendas' to identify three distinct social-political-economic agendas. He describes a "conservationist and somewhat social-democratic egalitarian agenda, advocated by well-meaning donors and project managers; a spiritual and traditional agenda, driven by communities who live close to natural resources and who are dependent upon them for their survival; and a materialistic, capitalist agenda, driven by the private sector and individual members of the local community, who choose to have a more selective engagement with conservation, egalitarianism or tradition and who see wild plants and animals as the road to affluence." (ibid.)

CBNRM which are largely dominated by science and NGO's. It is a homogenizing global movement as well, following a moral and ecocentric worldview, rather than spiritual or religious values. For proponents it is largely undisputed that scarce natural resources need to be preserved and that doing so is a *moral obligation*<sup>92</sup> if not an imperative.<sup>93</sup> The recognition that the destruction of local ecosystems may have cascading effects for the globe has claimed a new *universalism*. From such a perspective sustainable behaviour is a must, implying that environmental necessities require an adaptation of harmful cultural practices – both in the Kavango and worldwide. In the face of global inequalities between the north and the south it is reasonable to view such hegemonic calls critically. The global conservationist movement has certainly shown sensitivity to spiritual ecologies and the potential of spiritualism and religion to function as a proxy for nature-protection.<sup>94</sup> But a focus on the protective potential of spiritual ecologies has so far neglected those cultural convictions that may be more obstructive to cooperation and conservation. In such cases the conservationist position will ultimately be secular.

It is clear that such thoughts on the secularized spheres of society represent an extremely simplified view which, in fact, is much more elusive when one focuses on individual actors. Many of the capitalists, conservationists, scientists etc. of 'the west' and even of a 'modern Africa' would possibly not even consider themselves non-spiritual or non-religious. Some of them will claim to have religious or spiritual motivations. Likewise, a certain faction of Kavango people will certainly resist being associated with 'traditional convictions'. However, the difference, it seems, is in the way secularity has been *internalized* in actions and again shapes peoples participation and self-censorship in public discourse. In this sense people whose actions are not influenced by spirituality or models of religious morality, though they consider themselves spiritual, may be considered 'secularized from within'.<sup>95</sup> They do not make their position on the epistemological abyss a public affair beyond that what is socially standardized and accepted. In this sense Christianity in Kavango is a sphere that is more secularized. It is part of Kavango daily life to pray before political meetings and court sessions and to attend mass on Sundays. In a society which is more than 90% Christian it is common sense to confess publicly to being a believer. Likewise in daily interactions it is not a serious problem for non-believers to show respect as long as secularity is respected as well. Christianity, being rooted in western European history and its missions, does not

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<sup>92</sup> Such universal criteria valuation can e.g. be the moral obligation of sustaining a livelihood basis for the well-being of future generations (cf. Markku Oksanen, "The moral value of biodiversity", *Ambio*, 1997, 26 (8): 541-545).

<sup>93</sup> See for example Adams et al., "Biodiversity"; Nicholas Agar, *Life's Intrinsic Value: Science, Ethics, and Nature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001; Diaz et al., "Biodiversity"; Oksanen, "Value"; Konrad Ott, "Zur ethischen Bewertung von Biodiversität", in: M. Hummel, (ed.), *Konfliktfeld Biodiversität*, Münster, Agenda, 2002: 11-41; Darrell Addison Posey, (ed.), *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, London, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999; Wood et al., *Root Causes*.

<sup>94</sup> Gardner, "Religions"; Posey, *Values*.

<sup>95</sup> See Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, New York, Macmillan, 1967: 36ff.

cause friction if it is treated as a private affair. If public discourses on the environment are largely shaped by privatized Christians the epistemological discord will be rather small.

The situation with the non-secular sphere of traditional African beliefs, which historically has been the target of missionary attempts at exorcism, is more difficult. This is the 'spiritual and traditional agenda' described by Fabricius, driven by communities who live close to natural resources. As I have shown a dichotomy of the natural world versus the supernatural is integral to western thinking while the convictions that the mundane and the supernatural are not separated but causally linked is part of the thinking in Kavango. Beliefs in ancestors, supernatural animals and witchcraft do not fit into the christianised eurocentric ontologies and mainstream conjectures about factualities. Here there are marked differences in worldviews between 'local people' – the ones that have been socialized in local cultures of cosmologies – and 'external actors' – who have a different secular socialization. Tacit but dominant among many developmentalists, conservationists and scientists is the western *conviction* that witchcraft (and other) forces do not *really* exist but are somewhere on a spectrum from fantasies to discursive social inventions and superstition.<sup>96</sup>

Against these 'occult' worldviews secularity has been silently but firmly enforced. It is a question of taking sides on the edges of an epistemological trench, either on the side of rationality and modernity or of the irrational shoals of magic killing and the like. But this time it is a deep gap between those who believe in supernatural snakes, ogres and life-consuming forces and those who consider that nonsense. We stand again at the crossroads that anthropology has been standing at for decades when it comes to witchcraft's *rationality problem*.<sup>97</sup> Against the background of the power and dominance of secularity taking sides with the witchcraft-believers certainly positions you on *the wrong side* in modern discourses.<sup>98</sup>

It is embarrassment over disaffiliation, I would argue, that causes people to engage in role-playing, doing the splits between secularized and non-secularized spheres of life, or to choose self-censorship. The result is a different way of looking at the phenomena that

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<sup>96</sup> My own encounters with representatives of these different bodies in the Kavango have shown that many of those who work with conservation and/or have the power to change rules are aware of the omnipresence of witchcraft as a tabooed traditional practice but *unaware* of its real life repercussions in the domain of the environment.

<sup>97</sup> Geschiere, *Modernity*; Bruce Kapferer, (ed.), *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery*, New York, Berghahn, 2002. It has been argued that to conceive of convictions as 'imaginings' will do the trick, see Kapferer, *Rationalism*; Johannes Merz, "From relativism to imagination. Towards a reconstructive approach to the study of african witchcraft", *Anthropos*, 2004, 99 (2): 572-580.

<sup>98</sup> The *motives* for applying witchcraft, envy and greed, are no less exotic or irrational on Wall Street than in the African bush. The fears or hopes of being attacked or assisted by a consuming force are no less real/imagined than the fears of any other supernatural forces worldwide. The freedom of belief in any imagination beyond scientific knowledge about the hidden nature of the cosmos is not up for debate, it is rather an individual privilege of choice between *models* and related actions which support cooperation and sustainability and ones that hamper it.

influence people's behavior in different spheres of discourse. The multiple impacts of *mutji* are a matter of heated vernacular debate in evening radio phone-in shows. But they are being muted in public debates about the causes of environmental problems. Here, I argue, lies a key to understanding the absence of certain spiritual ecologies from public environmental discourse.

The two sides of the epistemological trench it seems have drifted further apart. In search of a unifying universal paradigm to bridge the gap or, at least, with which to align actions, one might consider morality or humanity. Since these are culturally shaped concepts we face the question of whose morality/humanity. Despite the fact that witchcraft seems to grow in a climate of distrust, envy and fear the application of a dominant morality paradigm bears the risk of normatively devaluing certain cultural convictions in favour of others<sup>99</sup> while the morality of global forces is debatable as well.<sup>100</sup> The Comaroffs have argued with a focus on the economics of witchcraft that "everywhere the boundaries of post-enlightenment *humanity* are called more and more into question".<sup>101</sup> And Ciekawy and Geschiere have emphasized "the need to look for ways, old and new, to 'neutralize' and 'domesticate' these dangerous and ever-changing forces".<sup>102</sup> This is not a moralistic academic imposition as witchcraft is treated as a moral issue by most Kavango who call the attack on others *Udona* meaning evil. Many of these would like to see the impact of witchcraft reduced and §15 of the Shambyu laws even states that "Any tradition and culture that is beneficial to the community should be

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<sup>99</sup> The devaluation of e.g. the ambivalent witchcraft complex on moral, epistemological grounds might raise problems of agency and authority. For many *academics* widespread pragmatic western thinking in the guise of a global moral imperative of biodiversity conservation might raise the question whose morale and ontological models cause whom to act how. Interpreted in this way environmentalism revitalizes old dichotomies in the analysis of witchcraft. It nestles nicely in the juxtaposition of witchcraft as negative, backward, irrational vs. environmentalism as good, rational and free of abuse and agency. Likewise it comes dangerously close to old ghosts-projects of colonialism, modernity, capitalism and neo-liberalism that unsuccessfully tried to exoticise and exorcise an 'aggregated witchcraft' on shaky epistemological grounds of attacking its factuality and rationality. See as well Terence Ranger, "Scotland Yard in the bush: Medicine murders, child witches and the construction of the occult: A literature review", *Africa*, 2007, 77 (2): 272-283.

<sup>100</sup> Among anthropologists of late it has been a trend to comprise of witchcraft as a critical meta-commentary on 'modernity's latent and blatant immoralities' Cf. Todd Sanders, "Modernity, wealth and witchcraft in Tanzania", *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 1999, 20: 117-131; overview in Sanders, "Reconsidering": 339. In fact it is seductive to hit a straw man by grounding analyses on the "anthropologically appealing proposition, [...] that modernity, neoliberalism or globalization does bad things to good people", see Todd Sanders, "Buses in Bongoland: Seductive analytics and the occult", *Anthropological Theory*, 2008, 8 (2): 107-132. This critique on the immorality of global forces holds a lot of truth, but exposes only parts of the problem and evades discussing the epistemological/ontological destructiveness of witchcraft. Arguing that "in a seminar room, witchcraft stories may offer a fascinating criticism of arrogant and one sided conceptions of the modern" but that "In everyday life in Africa and elsewhere, it is a discourse about action and the urgent necessity to handle these dangerous but hidden forces" Ciekawy and Geschiere emphasize the tangible consequences of dealing with the undoubted factuality of a life-consuming force (Ciekawy and Geschiere, "Witchcraft": 3).

<sup>101</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, "Economies": 281 (*italics added*).

<sup>102</sup> Ciekawy and Geschiere, "Witchcraft": 4.

respected, honoured and maintained, while any aspect of tradition that is malevolent to the community shall be abolished and abandoned”.<sup>103</sup>

So far an epistemological debate has been avoided or muted but a potential public debate on local and global perceptions of spirituality – morality – humanity vs. the necessities of environmental conservation is shimmering through here. Does that bridge the epistemological gap? Can one speak about invisible, occult, supernatural forces without accepting/denying their factuality and existence? In informative group meetings with villagers and authorities I have dared to speak about my findings on witchcraft and they have always been met with approval. They have triggered a lively discussion about the loss of trust. I was also confronted with the question “What can we do to domesticate witchcraft?” This question cannot be seriously answered without accepting the local factuality of spiritual ecologies, something that often can neither be tested nor disproved with scientific methods.

More pragmatically un-muting or re-opening debates could help to find common human ground in the face of global environmental problems. Less ambitiously an understanding of the impact of different worldviews on environmental behaviour could realign discourses away from muting essential drivers. Such a procedure can save costs. “Donors, project managers and officials often do not understand the belief systems of people in rural areas and erroneously assume that profits alone will lead to development and resource conservation”.<sup>104</sup> The problems that several CBNRM projects have show that such a lack of understanding for the social and environmental impacts of spiritual ecologies can be costly and misleading.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have targeted *cultural* challenges for individuals and communities of managing resources in a sustainable way. I have presented empirical evidence that against a background of strong dependence on natural resources, poverty and social stratification, the ecological and economic activity of the majority of Kavango land-users is strongly influenced by spiritual ecologies. In Kavango worldviews occurrences like sickness, disasters, accidents happening in the mundane, profane and social sphere *can* incorporate actions from invisible spheres, un-understandable mysteries beyond rational reasoning. I have pointed out that several cosmological models trigger different behaviours and that some convictions like beliefs in an omnipresent, envy-based witchcraft-complex can be obstructive to conservation. Using the example of witchcraft which is especially salient in the Kavango I have outlined how beliefs in witchcraft-related attacks and respective countermeasures cause social and ecological costs, e.g. through fears, distrust, additional extraction, and migration.

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<sup>103</sup> Sikerete, *Laws*. The Shambyu are one of the central Kavango groups.

<sup>104</sup> Fabricius, “Fundamentals”: 21.

I have then pointed to the highly virtual nature of environmental discourses, dominated by a paradigm on CBNRM, which so far has failed to include such spiritual ecologies into a holistic search for causes of environmental behaviour and strategies for conservation.<sup>105</sup> I have argued that various stakeholders' cultural cosmological models of the world have not been integrated sufficiently into public discourses on development and conservation. I have outlined that secularism as a dominant societal approach towards 'western' modernity, rationality etc. supports self-censorship in the spheres of *serious* public debates. Emic cultural worldviews integrating perceptions of spiritual causes of well-being/ill-being, success/failure, conservation/devastation and cooperation/conflict have not been debated publicly but remain private and muted. This circumstance is backed up by global economic confluence and a new universalist conservationism which supports secularism and a mechanistic focus on economic incentives and institutions. As such both leave little space for local spiritual ecologies a gap between private action and public talk ensues. This gap is especially problematic when it comes to the management of natural resources in CBNRM which relies heavily on cooperation and public participation. If these activities are debated without addressing the behavioural impacts of witchcraft, e.g. the causes for a community's non-cooperation or even sabotage these will remain unclear.<sup>106</sup> As a consequence models of conservation, CBNRM and development will remain problematic, fragmentary and virtual if major drivers of individual and collective action upon nature remain untouched in public discourse.

These public discourses should by no means be restricted to conservationists from the west but *must* involve and oblige the landusers and resource owners as well as different actors such as multi-level authorities, NGO's and scientists. However, finally and ideally, it will be the landusers and their representatives and authorities who will have to reconcile their own well-being with the well-being of their natural resources since they are the ones who own the resources, commodify them and will suffer the immediate losses. The question how to achieve such a dialogue across an epistemological trench without normatively attacking cultural convictions of others certainly causes several additional problems. Starting such a process is also a question of awareness of the

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<sup>105</sup> "Proponents of CBNRM initiatives in such areas should be made aware of the fact that mediums and diviners draw upon a worldview that is based on a fundamentally different paradigm from that of sustainable development. The former is more concerned with maintaining a harmonious balance between the social, ecological and spiritual worlds, while the latter embraces a philosophy of progress based on the modern global economic system. It would be a mistake to assume that all members of a community are as committed to development and entering the market economy as are those who promote such initiatives. Development often accentuates social inequalities, such as those between young and old, male and female, those with formal education and those with none, between those with the control over and access to financial and political resources and those without. The commercial use of natural resources, even if it is ostensibly done for the good of the community involved, may often directly threaten the spiritual and social integrity of the area. This is because it alters concepts of ownership and exchange of resources that, in turn, govern the nature of these spiritual and social relationships." (Bernard and Kumalo, "Community-based": 121ff.).

<sup>106</sup> See for an example Bernard and Kumalo, "Community-based": 121.

reality of cultural models and imaginations which in dealing with real world hardships and mysteries can be a burden on social and natural capital.

Scientific efforts to understand the cultural causes and complexities of detrimental impact may be of help in linking discourses and in *informing* conservation efforts by multiple authorities, agencies and landusers. When it comes to the thicket of cosmological beliefs and spiritual ecologies, science, however, is not in possession of a methodology for objectivity. Rather, and with the following final observation I want to underpin my reflections, scientists can become as much enmeshed in the costly mysteries of human-environment interactions as local Kavango landusers. During the course of the conference I described in the introductory anecdote I had a *private* conversation with a hard-nosed English natural scientist from South Africa one evening. He told me the story of a dispute he had with an unreliable gardener at his house. When he fired the gardener the man cursed him. Afterwards strange and disturbing things started to happen to him and his family inside the house. In his long quest for an explanation he had arrived at the point of considering whether the man had managed to apply magic forces, e.g. by hiding some *muti*<sup>107</sup> in his house. He confessed that more than once so far he had considered either selling the house and moving elsewhere or consulting a witchdoctor.

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<sup>107</sup> More generally know term equivalent to the Kavango word *mutji* for magic traditional medicine.

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