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Boonzaaier, C.; Wels, H.; Okech, R.; Kieti, D.; Duim, V.R. van der

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7

The call of ‘thinking wild’ in times of climate disaster: Indigenous wisdom from Southern Africa

C. Boonzaier and H. Wels

7.1 Introduction

‘Can “thinking wild” help’ (Brown, 2019: 4) to start decentring the human in the Anthropocene and in the context of the current climate disaster³? Can ‘indigenous cultures’⁴, like the Khoisan in southern Africa, but also others on the African continent and around the world, help us explore this ‘wild thinking’, in which ‘(a)ll beings and all landscapes connect and interact in reciprocal ways’ (Bekoff, 2014: 6)? It is these cultures that have been able, against all odds and despite processes of systemic marginalisation, to keep ideas alive about ‘the vitality of Nature’, recognising that mountains, rivers, and ancestral spirits are intimate aspects of their lives (Robins, 2022). We think they can, in our times of mass extinctions⁵, or, as Griffiths refers to it, “the age of the endlings” (2021: 75), by means of both learning and unlearning (cf. Olson, 2012). Smith (2022) ends his book on Khoisan history with a quote from Ian McCallum: “For all the so-called advances and advantages of modern civilisation, we have to be aware that something important has been lost in the process. Many of us, perhaps too many, have lost our sense of wildness” (2022: 208).

3 Secretary-General Warns of Climate Emergency, Calling Intergovernmental Panel’s Report ‘a File of Shame’, While Saying Leaders ‘Are Lying’, Fueling Flames | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases (un.org), accessed 7 April 2022.

4 We are very much aware of the critical debates surrounding the concept of ‘indigenous’ (Peters & Mika, 2017), but we find many of the alternatives and synonyms, like ‘aboriginal, autochthonous, born, domestic, endemic, native’ (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/indigenous>, accessed 7 April 2022) all also come with their own problematic complexities and connotations. Therefore for this chapter we stick to the word ‘indigenous’.

5 The 6th Mass Extinction Really Has Begun, Scientists Warn in Newly Published Study (sciencealert.com), accessed 22 March 2022.

As a result of her ‘elemental journey’, exploring what it means to think wild, Griffiths tells us how she “felt a kind of *radical empathy* with everything” (2006: 403, italics added), and that, “(e)ven months later, seeing a bird that had been shot out of the sky made me leap back in pain because I felt the stab of the bullet in me” (ibid.). Tsing (2015: 17) speaks about empathy as the ‘art of noticing’ (see also Barnes, 2018). This is a radical empathy that leads to a wild and essential kindness that is wise. “In its etymology, what is kind is natural and therefore, ‘(w)hat is most natural is most wild and what is most natural (...)’ is most kind” (Griffiths, 2006: 147). This kindness and “unsentimental tenderness” (ibid.) is what ideally leads to coexistence (cf. Bekoff, 2013) amongst species in animate landscapes on this planet. There is no room for anthropocentrism within a wild thinking, where “the boundaries between person and place, or between the self and the landscape, dissolve altogether” (Ingold in Smith, 2022: 40), leading to a ‘becoming with’ alterity (Haraway, 2008; Wels, 2013).

In this short essay commemorating our beloved colleague and friend Bob Wishitemi, whose kindness and wisdom spoke to all authors contributing to this edited volume, the authors tell stories about what is often referred to as ‘indigenous’⁶ cultures and ‘indigenous’ research methodology (Chan, 2021), based on their own modest personal, professional and ‘elemental journeys’ in search of ‘thinking wild’ and striving towards radical empathy. They relate how these endeavours have contributed to both learning and unlearning along the way (with no claim whatsoever that they have reached their destination).

7.2 Storytelling by Chris

At the heart of landscape is land. In pre-colonial times there were no fixed boundaries between different indigenous communities who lived on the land. Communities occupied land in clusters of clans. Each cluster clan settlement was composed of closely related families. All these clans communally shared land, which the community leader held in trust for the community. The clans usually had a headman who was their political link to the community leader.

The land was still so open and in abundance that there was little pressure on it. As one old man explained to me, the extent of a community’s territory was determined by the criterion of “as far as the eye could see”, when standing

⁶ We realise that the concept ‘indigenous’ is contested (Stewart, 2017), but we will not delve into that discussion in this chapter in this particular edited volume.

on a mountain. With these unfixed frontiers between communities, land was regarded as a shared resource in which people and livestock moved and that they could use freely. This freedom of movement was possible because people lived in relatively small communities (such as clans), and because of the abundance of land space and availability of natural resources such as grazing and water. As people were few, conflicts were initially minimal.

As more groups entered and invaded the formerly open spaces, natural features such as rivers, hills and mountains were used as markers of boundaries between them. Where such natural markers did not occur, groups often fought each other, especially over natural features that they considered essential to survive, such as pastures and water.

When clans of a particular community grew and expanded and moved further afield, the land they had covered was automatically regarded as belonging to the community leader of these clans⁷. Anthropological field research that the author conducted in recent times has revealed that this view has not changed, as land occupied by communities is still regarded as belonging to the community leader of whose area of jurisdiction they form a part.

Traditional communities put more emphasis on people than on boundaries. Land was only important as a form of exchange for political alliance. In other words, land was only used as a means of attracting valuable assets, of which people were the most important. Groups switched allegiance without tensions and hostilities (cf. Setumu, 2012). An excellent example is found in the Lowveld of South Africa, where families from different ethnic groups (Sotho and Tsonga) have lived together peacefully for decades on land that is now being claimed by them. Tsonga families had no problem recognising the authority of a Sotho headman and vice versa when they drifted into the unoccupied land as family groupings from different ethnic groups.

The community leader held the land on trust for all the groups which paid allegiance to him. He could allocate land for settlement to a particular group in exchange for acknowledgement of his authority. The question of allegiance far outweighed the other uses of land which that particular group could derive.

⁷ This situation has a specific implication for land claims in present-day South Africa. Clans that had broken away from the mother unit (community), being relatively few in numbers, often settled on land which was later surveyed and demarcated by government surveyors as farms. The whole farm was usually claimed by the clan/community who had settled on it before it was demarcated by the government surveyors, irrespective of the fact that the claimant clan/community had only occupied a small piece/portion of the farm.

The reason why people would seek political alliance with a community leader often depended on the particular attributes of a leader. Rainmaking powers, for instance, played, and still play, a considerable role in attracting people to a particular leader. In the South African context, the rainmaking powers of the so-called Rain Queen, Modjadji, are well-known and in the past attracted many different groups to pay allegiance to her. Other leaders were given names related to their rainmaking powers, like in the case of *Mnisi* (literally: rainmaker), a Tsonga community leader in South Africa. Because of his rainmaking powers, people used to pay allegiance to him as he would ensure that the land would get rain and hence produce heavy crops.



Figure 7.1
Thabana ya Kgoši (left) (“little mountain of the chief”), *Thaba ya badimo* (right) (“mountain of the ancestors”), and Ntebele mountain (centre) (“where the Ntebele clan once lived”) (photographed by Boonzaaier, 2013)

The worldview of indigenous peoples with regard to land reveals itself clearly when looking at nature reserves or wilderness areas, like for instance the Masebe Nature Reserve, situated in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The case of the Masebe Nature Reserve is telling its own story. According to the geological record, this nature reserve is characterised by impressive sandstone mountains that were formed about 650 million years ago. However, the people who occupied it⁸ before it was developed into a nature reserve have

⁸ The Langa-Ndebele migrated from KwaZulu- Natal in the 17th century and eventually settled west of present-day Mokopane in Limpopo Province of South Africa.

different culturally determined views about it, as they have attached intangible meanings to these tangible objects. Some of the mountains are regarded as the abode of the ancestors and have been accordingly named “mountain of the ancestors” (see Figure 7.1). Since particular mountains are regarded as the abode of the ancestors, over time the land has also acquired social and religious value.

On top of other mountains are pools that are regarded as the dwelling place of a mythical snake, called *mamogašwa* in Sotho language, that can harm people should they enter these pools. Other mountains have historical significance because battles were fought there against other ethnic groupings and even against Europeans who invaded the Langa-Ndebele land and space (Boonzaaier & Wels, 2016). The shared cultural values and worldview regarding these wilderness objects have undoubtedly contributed to the community’s sense of identity. Moreover, no distinction was made between nature and culture. Nature was culturally meaningful, as much as cultural meaning was built on spirited natural features of the landscape.

Masebe Nature Reserve has been developed by relocating the people who lived there to locations outside the fenced area, leaving their ancestors’ graves behind. Like most other nature reserves in South Africa, Masebe Nature Reserve has become inaccessible to the people who once lived inside the fenced area. This situation causes a lot of discontent since people cannot access to the graves to bring offerings. In times of crises such as drought and famine, people need to bring sacrifices to the ancestors’ graves to acquire relief. When interviewing community members in one of the settlements adjacent to the Masebe Nature Reserve, one man expressed his frustration with the situation by jumping up and down, holding his hat in his one hand and shouting: “The fence must go down”! (Boonzaaier, 2010: 60). In the people’s view, they have been deprived of land that was the abode of their ancestors.

As such, the people do not only depend on the Nature Reserve and all its natural features (fauna and flora) for their survival, but also on their ancestors. Land has indeed a more profound meaning to indigenous peoples/communities than only the physical features that characterise it from an outsider’s perspective (Figure 7.2). Therefore, the Masebe Nature Reserve serves as a telling example of the important role that land plays in creating community identity.



Figure 7.2

Ntona Daniël Malope pointing out to *ntona Mathekga* a feature in the landscape to which cultural meaning is attached (photographed by Boonzaaier, 2013)

From the Masebe Nature Reserve example, it is clear that any project concerning land, such as the development of nature reserves in areas occupied by indigenous communities, should consider the ancestral spirits as possible role players/actors.

The sacred Lake Fundudzi and Baleni hot spring are yet two other examples of the close association between nature and culture. An incident that occurred some 15 years ago at Baleni hot spring (Figure 7.3) suffices to illustrate this point. Baleni is a geothermal spring which is situated about 30 kilometres east of Giyani, the capital of the former Gazankulu homeland under the previous political dispensation. Harold Kolkman (2002: 38) when conducting research for his Master's dissertation on Baleni, describes it as follows:

This spring issues at an altitude of 380m in a reed-covered swamp near the south bank of the Klein Letaba River. The swamp, which is oval-shaped, is about 415 m in length with a maximum width of 150m. Hot water issues near the south-western end in a small pool that is surrounded by exceptionally tall reeds... The principal eye is at the southern end of the pool, marked by a vigorous emission of gas bubbles with a strong odour of hydrogen sulphide. Temperatures of 40°C to 44°C and a water flow rate of 1.5 litres to 3 litres per second have been measured.

Tsonga women occasionally visit here to extract salt from the pan around the margin of the swamp.

Some 15 years ago the hot spring suddenly started to cool down. Since the whole area surrounding the spring is regarded as sacred land, this strange event was ascribed by the Tsonga in the nearby settlements to the wrath of the ancestors. The reason for this wrath was that the necessary rituals had not been performed since a cultural camp⁹ had been erected in the proximity of the spring for the accommodation of visitors to the spring. However, after a brief period of cooling down the spring started heating up again. Geological records show that the same thing had happened some forty years before this event. It is not clear whether the event can be explained geophysically. However, in the minds of the people the whole event has re-affirmed their worldview regarding the inseparable link between nature and culture. Nature is seen as a shared entity of which they are a part.



Figure 7.3

Baleni hot spring. In winter, when the water level drops, a salt crust forms. This crust is scraped off by the local women to produce salt (Source: Terblanche, 1994: 77)

⁹ The cultural camp forms part of the African Ivory Route concept, in which an integrated series of camps, in traditional homestead style, have been erected in selected areas of the Limpopo Province for the purpose of tourist accommodation, accompanied with traditional cultural experiences (History of the African Ivory Route | African Ivory Route, accessed 6 May 2022).

To conclude, when indigenous people talk about land, they imply people. In the Bantu languages, the term for land always implies people. Space without people, such as a wilderness area, is meaningless; culture and nature are not seen as opposites, or binaries. On the contrary, nature and landscapes become filled with meaning when they become a spirited place for the living, shared with the ancestors. ‘Thinking wild’ in these stories does not separate people from nature or natural landscapes, but instead recognises them as an integral part of nature, next to, and together with, other tangible and intangible features.

7.3 **Storytelling by Harry**

I was not, like Chris, born and bred in South Africa. Instead I was born, and have lived ever since, in the Netherlands. My knowledge of the region of southern Africa, its landscapes and its people, is limited to my research life in academia, that started in the second half of the 1980s. After spending time in Zambia for my MA research, in the 1990s I went to Zimbabwe to do my PhD research. Ever since I have been doing research in South Africa on nature conservation. My stories on southern African ‘indigenous wisdom’ in this chapter are derived from both my lifelong reading on a wildly-wide range of South and southern African topics (although I will not constantly refer to literature as it would interrupt the flow of the story), and my many research visits, long and short, over a period of close to forty years, as well as teaching and supervising many generations of students on all of these topics. In this chapter I want to focus on how, through this life of research, reading and teaching on South and southern Africa, I have both learned and unlearned with regard to the ‘art of noticing’.

Nature conservation in southern Africa is soaked in neo-colonialism. It has been, and to a large extent still is, a white men’s affair (cf. Adams, 2004). For quite some years, this prevented me from noticing, or paying sufficient attention to, indigenous African cosmologies, not specifically on nature conservation as such, but on how they lived in and with nature before colonial powers ‘invented’ nature conservation in southern Africa and branded every African almost automatically as a potential poacher to be kept as far away as possible from what was conserved (cf. Steinhart, 2005). In that way I perpetuated the marginalisation of African knowledge in my research and writings on nature conservation. In trying to ‘unlearn’ that bias, by reading and talking to African colleagues, I came to understand something that Chris mentioned above: there is no separation between nature and culture in (most) African cosmologies and

ontologies. That distinction came along with Western colonialism. As one of its consequences, the Yellowstone National Park model was used to inform management models for protected areas in Africa (Beinart & Coates, 1995). Going beyond this nature-culture divide also made me aware that the distinction between human and animal has been colonially imposed and is not recognised nor shared in its Cartesian sense by most of the indigenous ontologies in southern Africa. Cascading even further, I started to notice also that the strict binary between mind and body is not common to most southern African ontologies. The essentialist mind-body binary, as well as the culture-nature divide which is in sync with, and paralleling the mind-body binary, were both discarded for embracing inclusivity as enchanted webs of significance, inspired by San cosmologies and tracking practices. Empathy is no longer restricted to humans, but stretches as far as the senses and the mind can carry it, into enchanted and spirited landscapes full of shared sentience, sensuality and multiple meanings and ambiguities (cf. Myburgh, 2013; Latour, 2017).

Because of my trajectory over the years I now feel not only more able to make sense of nature conservation in southern Africa, but also of the huge phenomenon of climate disaster and how we as humans have tortured Gaia to the level that her temperatures are rising, as a sign that she is 'ill'. Radical empathy through the art of noticing is based on a wise and kind curiosity and constant alertness on what might be overlooked to the detriment of striving for a radical empathy. Foster (2016: 210), musing at the end of his book about a radical methodology towards understanding earth and its critters, concludes what, to us, is at the heart of his endeavours towards radical understanding ... reciprocal love.

Therefore I am concluding my little story with a poem by Harry Owen that touches on many of the (implied) aspects of Chris' and my stories. 'As with Harry Owen's previous collections, *The Cull*, new and resurrected poems, reflects his lifelong fascination with, and growing concern for, the natural world, especially in relation to damaging human interactions with it' (blurb). The world is not only about the human species. We share this world through our senses with fellow sentience. Culture is part of nature and the other way around. Landscapes and earth have agency. Anthropocentric world views salvage and violate the land and the planet. The art of noticing can possibly reunite humanity with planet earth. Poetry can sometimes capture in words what academic writing cannot. Therefore I include the following lines from a poetry book that this other Harry appropriately entitled 'The cull', as a metaphor for the sheer brutality of humans in killing fellow sentience and salvaging the planet while not reciprocating its love:

pay attention

To yourself : body, breath, blood : and listen :
Vibrations in air, flesh, in bone : permit
Slow atoms to rebound, sound yourself

In : out : release, unplug : wax exotic :
Dance : let go : be what you've never allowed
Yourself to be : the taboo of deafness :

Snakes dance too : the very ground vibrates
Gyrates : hearing skin, sensing the earth move :
Upright, prostrate, sin of Eden : become

Serpent, glide : muscle, rib, side : know us, taste
Us : quickening tongue : loam : granular stuff
Of world : root, slide, foam of swept beefwood :

Listen to its thrum, its flow outstretched there
In the sun like an adder : taste the voice of tree/snake/earth/us : trust the turf's
fragrance
Pay attention : feel the joys creaking'
(Owen, 2017: 10)

7.4 Final reflections

'Thinking wild,' as is clear from the references in our introduction, is not necessarily the same as 'thinking *African*'. So our question about 'thinking wild' has got nothing to do with the 'Wild Africa' that is so often marketed to potential tourists from around the world. Actually, all the authors that we cite on '(thinking) wild' in this chapter have a Western-European background. It seems that it is currently in vogue to write about 'wild' and that these authors turn to 'indigenous cultures' around the world for inspiration, because they have been the custodians of this ancient wisdom. "In an age of climate catastrophe, environmental activists have *returned* to ideas about the vitality of Nature that were once universally held by humanity, and *have been kept alive by indigenous cultures*" (Robins, 2022, italics added). '(K)ept alive' *against all odds*, we would like to emphasise and add. Through the extremely violent times of imperialism, colonialism and post-colonialism, the most marginalised people (Comberty et al., 2016) have been able to keep knowledge and con-

cepts alive that can ‘save’ us now. They know about the ‘web of life’ of which humans are a part like anything else on this planet, from critters, to ancestors, to landscapes both urban and rural, wild and domesticated, not less and certainly not more. Southern African ontologies and cosmologies can help us find our way back and forward to the knowledge we once shared as humanity and find back our place *amongst* non-human others instead of on *top* of everything else; in this way decentring humans.

To live up to this challenge of changing our worldview is fundamentally important. And we better do it incredibly fast, according to the three latest IPCC reports, if we want to keep our planet a place for humans to live on. Simon Barnes (2020: 2) writes, “(w)e’re not just losing the wild world. We’re forgetting it. We’re no longer noticing it. We’ve lost the habit of looking and seeing and listening and hearing”. In the rest of his book he presents us with 23 exercises to train our skills of noticing, to make us alert again to the (natural) world around us. Many of the exercises basically refer to rather simple and basic tracking techniques, using the various senses and the interpreting mind to notice. The San of southern Africa are considered by many to be the master trackers of all time (Liebenberg, 1990). Originally without a written language, developing their intimate knowledge of the land and everything on it over thousands of years by literally being *part of* the southern African landscapes, the San are, in a way, the personification of this incredible ‘art of noticing’. That is why their ontologies and cosmologies can be read for inspiration for our current dramatic time and age (Guenther, 2020a; 2020b). Once we as humans across the globe start noticing again, we simply cannot remain seated, but will be propelled into action in order to start living *with* the planet again, instead of *off* the planet. As a tribute to, but also in the spirit of, Bob’s work on climate change, these stories are a call to ‘think wild’, and will hopefully lead to a world that is characterised by coexistence rather than anthropocentric plunder leading towards climate disaster.

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