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No Easy Talk about the Weather: Eliciting “Cultural Models of Nature” among Hai//om

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Introduction: The Domestication of Culture

A key point of concern in the discussion of cultural models of nature is the in-built distinction between culture and nature that continues to be problematic in comparative anthropology. Research in this domain therefore not only provides new insights into the diversity of cultural models around the world but also the opportunity for recalibrating what “culture” is and what it is not in this debate.

The culture concepts since the 19th century have been strongly influenced by the ages of “discovery” and colonization during which “culture”, denoting a collective with a separate way of life and a distinct view of the world, became an important tool for making sense of encounters with people who appeared to be different (see Wagner 1979). However, there is an older notion of culture that has been subdued but never quite disappeared. This old European culture concept is typically traced back to etymological roots in the Latin word “colere” (to cultivate / to nurse), linked up with an old sense of “economy” as derived from the Greek “oikos” (house) and “nomos” (rule), managing the house, as exemplified by “house-based societies” of today and the recent past (see Därmann 2011:112). What is highlighted here is that there are transgenerationally learned patterns that matter for the way in which human life on this planet is taking place. However, it is not difficult to discern a certain bias here that ties culture to a rather narrow horticultural worldview. The question that I want to pursue in this article is whether the repertoire of human ways of perceiving, of maintaining and of changing the environment is in fact much broader than the image of “man the gardener” and “man the householder” suggests. I base my argument on empirical field research with people in northern Namibia, more specifically with a majority population of Khoesan-speaking ≠Akhoe Hai//om who are nationally subsumed under the minority group category of “San” (formerly known as “Bushmen”).¹

Environmental and Social Changes.

The last 25 years have seen considerable changes in both environmental and social conditions in northern Namibia. Therefore, a major challenge to social science studies of environmental perception, of climate change and its implications is the attempt to bring together changes that occur in the natural environment with changes of cultural ideas and practices of agents living in this environment. Although it is generally assumed that there is no immediate or tight fit between environmental changes and changes to cultural models, we urgently require more data and better theories that explain the interrelation between ecological environmental changes and the transformations of cultural models. Comparing the results of the most recent field research with earlier visits to the field sites over the years (see Widlok, 1999) shows that there has been considerable change in almost all domains of life. On the one hand many local people are today much less mobile, restricted by land enclosure and the privatization of land while they are, on the other hand, confronted

with an influx of neighbours who intensify their agro-pastoral use of the land and make it more difficult to cultivate other land uses such as hunting and gathering. As a first step towards investigating cultural perceptions of the environment I have carried out some free listing tasks covering the domains of animals, plants and people.

The purpose of the free-listing task was to get a first impression about what locals, using their own language, consider to be salient entities that are relevant in environmental change. The instructions were kept simple in that I asked (in their own language) a variety of respondents who were already known to me: “What are the entities that belong to x ...?” (or “What is it that is part of x?”) whereby I would consecutively insert for “x” vernacular labels for the categories “animals”, “plants” and “humans” (and later on “the supernatural”, “the weather” and “the environment”, see further below). The idea was to get an impression of both the diversity and the consensus in ecological knowledge with regard to the relevant agents and forces that effect environmental change.

In the Namibian field site the first two categories, animals and plants, were largely unproblematic in the sense that they generated more or less long lists of terms for plants and animals. One of the most striking results was that, although the Hai//om in question now live in an area that for some thirty years has been depleted of game animals and has been subject to massive influx of cattle, sheep and other domesticated animals, the category of “animals” (*xamanin*) was still almost exclusively filled with names of wild animals from the bush. The fact that cows, chicken, goats and dogs were visibly and audible all around us—whereas the animals they listed were not—did not have an effect on the content of their lists. Only two (young) individuals included some of the domesticated animals, and only very late in the sequence. Similarly, only few mentioned domesticated garden plants while everyone’s listings were dominated by trees, bushes and other wild plants.

How are we to explain this discrepancy? The respondents were leaving out the animals and plants that were so prominent in their here and now and in the lifeworlds of their dominant agropastoralist neighbours. When questioning respondents subsequently, they were happy to include domesticated animals in the “*xamanin*” (animal) category, but like insects, these animals were clearly not the prototypical animals that constituted the category. It may be suggested that the term “*xamanin*” should be translated as “wild animal” instead of “animals” (as the compilers of dictionaries of neighbouring groups suggest, see Haacke and Eiseb, 2002), but if that was a strict categorical difference, then no extension towards domesticated animals should occur. Furthermore, the same phenomenon was observed with regard to the plant category (*hain*) which, when being prompted in the free listing tasks, is readily extended to include all kinds of domesticated plants and still produced a very marked preponderance towards “wild” plants.

I draw two conclusions from this evidence: Firstly, the case study underlines (once more) that the categorization into “wild” and domesticated species, natural landscapes and cultural landscapes (see below), and into productive versus appropriate uses of the environment is not universal. Secondly, the results are also an indication that respondents were indeed abstracting from what has been their everyday situation for several decades (and in some cases for their whole lives).

There seems to be no immediate feedback effect from environmental change onto the cultural categories.

Cultural Strategies of Categorizing the Environment

Free lists for animals and plants (and the sequences of these lists) differed across subjects in terms of length but the overall tendency of highlighting undomesticated species was robust across subjects. Results differed much more with regard to the other domains investigated in which the diversity was such that there were very fundamental differences in the strategies of categorization.

The free lists for the category “humans” (*khoen*), is a good example because it showed a strong bifurcation. While many respondents produced a list of ethnic groups living in the country (with more or less categories and with more or less completeness), there were several respondents who produced a very short list, consisting only of terms for their own ethnic group “#Akhoe” and that of the neighbouring “!Xû”. Both strategies follow well-known patterns of categorizing people in southern Africa: The categorization according to ethnic groups has been a dominant feature throughout the colonial period, in particular in South Africa’s sphere of influence that tried to cement ethnic categorization during the apartheid era. The second strategy responds to the wide-spread tendency for autonyms to translate as “real people/humans” and to implicitly or explicitly categorize other people as being outside that group, a tendency observed widely in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

At least over the last 25 years since Namibian independence, a lot of educational and media effort has gone into the broadening of the “people” category and the mobility of the population has been such that one would expect longer and more diverse lists to emerge under the key word “people”. Therefore, again, although people live in a wider social surrounding made up of many ethnic groups, and while they are dominated by other ethnic groups and by groups that are no longer defined only in ethnic terms but in terms of professions and in terms of holding offices in the state or in NGOs, they would only include in their free lists the two closely-related local hunter-gatherer groups as constituting the category “people” in their social environment.

While some respondents produced what we may want to call a birds-eye view, trying to cover all groups in the region, others produced an ethnocentric view. The interviews suggest that many respondents feel at ease to shift between the two perspectives, sometimes spontaneously or when reflecting on the issue. In either case, it seems that a few decades of social change were not sufficient to change the dominant cultural model. We may take this as an indicator that cultural models are not particularly quick in adapting to environmental change of the type that recent climate change and current political change produces. One working hypothesis for the ongoing research is therefore to see whether cultural models have a conservative bias in the sense that they are kept unaltered in a situation of change and that only in the long run this may eventually change the model. A few decades may be long in terms of the effects that man-induced climate change can have, but typically not in the context of established cultural models which may change at a much slower pace. The incongruence of the two transformations is a problematic that is important to

take account of not only in the practice of people confronted with environmental change but also in the social theories that investigate these situations.

The other indication that the preliminary data provides is that changes to the cultural model are not of an on/off binary type, but rather one of “gracious” transition in which different responses are latently present, co-occurring with one another. This has important practical implications because these latent (partial) models can be (re)activated when a situation comes up in which they are of relevance. Talking to people in conversation after the free listing task, I repeatedly noted that they were ready to agree that there were indeed other animals, plants and people which, when being questioned directly, they would also include in these categories. In other words, there were many more latent members of the categories “animals”, “plants” and “people” than those that were spontaneously realized. It seems that elements may fade in or fade out of a category and they can exist in a “dormant” state for considerable time. This is a major difference to the actual occurrence of natural species which may also increase or decrease but which in many situations of radical environmental change also disappear “for good”. The natural selection metaphor that many natural scientists have wholeheartedly internalized and which they often extend also to cultural features that go “extinct” shows its limits here, a point to which I shall return in the conclusion. The next point to consider is not only to ask what the environment consists of, how items are classified, but also what are the causal factors involved in environmental change.

Talking about Weather and Climate

A point that is frequently made in recent discussions of climate change is that local people may note and discuss changes in weather which, however, should not be confused with changes in climate, which are more long-term and often not as clearly perceptible than changes of weather. Tim Ingold has recently (2015:76) criticized the modernist tendency to consider weather as “localised instantiations” of climate and to divide the notion of atmosphere into measured meteorology and aesthetical metaphors. However, all of these notions (“weather”, “climate” and “atmosphere”) are abstract that need to be translated into sensuous features that affect people and that they feel comfortable talking about. Moreover, during field research in Namibia even the common assumption that “talking about the weather” is always an easy strategy in fact does not hold. It is noteworthy that Hai//om do not talk about the weather (let alone climate or the atmosphere) as an agent but rather about “the sun burning”, “the rain(s) failing” or “the wind(s) blowing”. The weather category in Hai//om (and other, related languages) that is being used as a translation of, say English media and international policy discourse is itself simply a compound of these agentive forces. The term */nanutsi//haotsi#ôab* literally translates as “rains-and-clouds-and-wind”, i.e. it contains a list in itself. Not surprisingly, when doing free listings for “weather” I received exactly the features that were contained in the compound term. The only additions to the list of three (rain, clouds, wind) were “sun” and “moon” in some of the free lists. Moreover, the term */nanutsi//haotsi#ôab* itself is hardly used in everyday discourse, it only comes in because it is used in radio broadcasting as a translation for the English term “weather”. The same hold for the

notion of “the environment” which Hai//om people have heard of, largely because these terms are used extensively in the national radio and by teachers, development workers and bureaucrats. There are terms such as *ǀnamibeb* and *!ha!hais* that were originally coined by official language committees and recommended for official usage (Haacke and Eiseb, 2002: vii), but which are not commonly used in vernacular speech. In everyday conversation these learned constructions are not widely spread. In free-lists and interviews I have used these terms interchangeably, confident that respondents would know roughly what I was interested in. The main results of these elicitation exercises is that respondents consistently produced rather short lists but which typically included items such as “houses/huts” and “fire places”. Thus, while the English meaning (and the official language policy in Namibia that is mapped onto it) primarily considers environment to be the natural environment with a latent extension to the man-made environment, I found the exact opposite with Hai//om respondents who were focusing on the man-made environment as that “which is around you” and extending it only into matters of “the land” when being prompted to do so in further conversation.

In sum interview data suggests that no abstract notion of “weather”, and even less so of “climate” or “environment” is being used in everyday conversation and that technical terms that have been created in Khoesan languages by the media, by government and non-governmental agencies are slow to enter local language use. Not surprisingly for a region of the world with highly erratic rainfall and serious problems of draught there is a lot of talk about rain (or its absence), but this is usually connected to the planning of specific activities. The same holds for “winds” which are strongly associated with disease and danger. In other words, weather (and the environment at large) is not a problem or a challenge in the abstract but something that one needs to take account of whenever planning an action, any action, or as Ingold (2015) would have it simply for leading one's life. For instance, forays into the bush are often not carried out under overcast rainy conditions during the wet season because it is known that snakes are very active under such conditions. Conversely, the onset of rains at the very beginning of the rainy season is an important factor for successfully harvesting swarming termites. However, all of these situations can be handled successfully and routinely without any reflection or conversation about the weather or the climate in overarching terms. In parallel to what I pointed out above for the categorization of animals and plants, there is no categorical distinction between on the one hand the “wild” vagaries of sun, winds and rains or the “natural” environmental features such as hills, dunes and rivers and on the other hand the human environmental action such as going hunting, moving camp, putting up a hut or making a fire and the results of these actions that are visible in the environment. Unlike many agricultural people in Africa (and the urbanized elites of today) who rigidly separate the (hostile) bush from the cultivated land, no such separation was detectable in interviews or in the free listing exercise nor in participant observation. *ǀAkhoe Hai//om* seem to have a seamless perception of their surroundings as one environment that combines both “natural” and “man-made” features.²

In fact, this matches the results of an enquiry into the last domain of agents that feature in this research and that may be expected to influence the environment, namely supernatural forces. There is little to no discussion of supernatural entities in everyday Hai//om conversations. As with many groups in Africa the creator God (*!xub*) is seen as otiose and as not actively interfering with human affairs. There is the notion of a so-called lesser god (*∕gāuab*), glossed by missionaries as “Satan” who is said to be present in sickness and healing, but again this is relevant only when dealing with concrete illnesses that require concrete measures, as for instance carrying out a trance healing dance (see Widlok 2001). The appropriate means of dealing with these powers is through ritual activity (above all through trance dancing) and is left out of propositional discourse. As a consequence, the category of “supernatural” is very hard to convey to respondents. In free listing various attempts consistently produced a one-entry category (*!xub*). I think the parallel ways of dealing with the “natural” forces of weather and of dealing with the “supernatural” forces once again underlines that distinguishing the two is not very productive or relevant in Hai//om everyday life.

When discussing related matters Hai//om does not provide a cover term for “supernatural”. When attempting to fall back to descriptors such as “things that you cannot see or touch” would occasionally provoked reactions such as “You mean like when you are blind?” or “Lions! You hear them but I never see one since I run away as soon as I hear them”. As already mentioned, a number of respondents named “God” (and “God” only) but there were isolated other responses which included “dreams” and “the wind”. The most marked pattern that emerged is that most respondents professed to lack knowledge of what cannot be seen and refused to speculate about it. There was no sense of anxiety or fear to talk about the domain, as one may suspect, but rather one of ignorance and a lack of ready-made propositions that people could rely on. Although most respondents are nominally Christians there is, at this stage, little evangelization taking place so that the temptation to use “borrowed discourse” of religious specialists with theological training is not pronounced. Rather, the category of the supernatural was effectively turned into “that which we [by definition] do not know much about”. It is noteworthy that in other parts of Africa the “supernatural” domain that ethnographers were able to elicit produces much longer lists but that in those cases, too, the degree of unpredictability and of conflicting forces that may prevent or provoke human life (or suffering) is considerable (see Widlok 2014). The conclusion that I draw from this is, again, twofold: Firstly, cultural models seem to differ not only in the ways in which they carve up or categorize the world but also in terms of how much they are pragmatically used as a *model of* exhaustibly explaining the world and as a *model for* changing or maintaining that state of the world.

Conclusions

The Namibian case study shows a remarkable stability of cultural models of nature despite ongoing ecological and economic changes. Undomesticated animals and plants are still named as prototypical examples for these categories even though many animal species that used to be hunted have disappeared and many undomesticated plants are no longer used as intensively as they used to be. The ≠Akhoe Hai//

om case suggests that cultural models and their features do not die out or get selected in the same way as natural scientists tend to think about the destiny of species in environmental change. Rather, it seems that human environments as cultural constructs are always limited selections from the surroundings. Instead of a one-to-one correspondence between environmental conditions and cultural models there appears to be a considerable degree of freedom in constructing different cultural models in one and the same environment. It also questions the assumption that humans are inescapably trapped in a cultural model of their environment in a similar way as biologists tend to talk about animals who are said to be “embedded” in their natural niches. The evidence suggests that Plessner had a point when he insisted that humans differ from animals in the way that they are not centred in their environment, but regularly take on an ex-centred position towards their “co-world” (see Plessner, 1983:86). If the creation of new representations of that world is an open process, then the task ahead for future research is to investigate how such new representations emerge and how existing cultural ideas are re-established that may have stayed dormant for considerable time. For as far as we can see now in the preliminary results of this project ≠Akhoe Hai//om seem to readily switch between alternative models in their everyday pursuits. Or, more precisely, they seem to cultivate ways of dealing with the environment that look very unlike the strategy of planning authorities which produce a model so that it can be realized (more or less mechanically) according to a preconceived plan derived from that model.³

Returning to the issues that I raised at the beginning of this contribution, I suggest that the Hai//om case study helps to develop a wider notion of culture as “cultivation”: Cultivation in this sense clearly not only applies to the land (things, materials) or to challenges provided by external natural changes such as climate change. Rather, cultivation – in the sense of creating, maintaining and altering cultural categories and the cultural ways of dealing with causalities – seamlessly involves social relationships and man-made conditions. Humans have to relate to animals and plants independently of whether they are “wild” or “domesticated”, they have to deal with an environment that is at the same time beyond control (sun, rains, wind) as well as a product of previous actions by humans (who make fires, build houses, kill animals etc.). The Hai//om notion of “environment” prototypically includes elements of the man-made environment and seamlessly merges with elements that in elsewhere are considered to be part of the natural environment. For Hai//om there is no reason for separating two categorical domains from the start in that they are intervoven. Such a wider culture concept would allow us to see cultivating and nurturing relationships across the board. It would also, importantly, introduce the idea that cultural models not only differ in their internal categorizations but also in the way in which any cultural model can be expected to be able to structure and shape the world. As I have shown, the Hai//om case defies an image of the environment as abstract passive material matter “out there” upon which humans act. At the same time the uncertainties and limitations that environmental forces set for human activity are not considered to be entirely external to what humans think and do but are built into what we elicit as cultural models of nature.

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Notes

- 1 Field research has been carried out in this area intermittently since 1990. Much of the data discussed in this paper has been collected in 2014 in the Oshikoto Region in northern Namibia, more specifically at several places around a farming area called "the Mangetti-West" farms. Support for this research was received from the NSF (Award 1330637) and the Collective Research Centre 806 funded by the German Research Council (see www.sfb806.de) which is gratefully acknowledged. My sincere thanks goes to all #Akhoe Hai//om who supported this work in Namibia.
- 2 In this respect they are in fact very close to the state-of the art scientific community in which this separation is also increasingly questioned.
- 3 It may be noted in passing that there is a parallel here in the way in which spatial orientation works in these settings. Hai//om solve spatial orientation problems differently from from Bantu-speaking residents of the same environment since they use absolute orientation systems (Neumann and Widlok, 1996, see also Levinson 2003). However, another striking feature is that there are many responses that need to be classified as "inconsistent". This means that there is not a clear and "clean models" understood as mechanistic blueprints that allow only a single strategy to individuals. Rather, this underlines the point that there is considerable freedom in the way in which humans use cultural templates (see Widlok 2007).