

CANTANHEZ NATIONAL PARK: HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVE LANDSCAPES

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Abstract: What we think about nature and landscape is deeply cultural. Habitats are not abstract places. Many landscapes are produced by human cultures, even the ones named «wild» or «pristine». We identify the changes occurred in the landscape of Cantanhez National Park (CNP) according to local peoples' perceptions since the period before the «liberation war», until today. We address the influence of hegemonic development narratives and how these influence the perception of the CNP landscape by locals. Our data reveals that locals are often influenced by «West» categories: the process of nature commodification accompanies global conservation narratives, which are a product of the dominant socio-economic system. But the complex knowledge of the landscape assists locals building these «wild» landscapes, which tourists seem to enjoy. Knowledge transmission cannot only be described as a simple top-down process, since locals adapt and use/re-shape these concepts in a complex negotiation. Our analysis is based on data mainly collected in 2016, through direct observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in Creole.

Keywords: landscapes; local perceptions; Cantanhez National Park; Guinea-Bissau.

Resumo: O que pensamos sobre a natureza e a paisagem é profundamente cultural. Os habitats não são lugares abstratos. Muitas paisagens são produzidas pelas culturas humanas, mesmo as chamadas de «habitat natural» ou até «pristinas». Identificamos as mudanças ocorridas na paisagem do Parque Nacional de Cantanhez (PNC) de acordo com as percepções das comunidades locais desde o período anterior à «guerra da libertação» até hoje. Abordamos a influência das narrativas de desenvolvimento dominantes e como estas influenciam a percepção da paisagem pelos locais. Os dados revelam que os locais são frequentemente

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influenciados pelas categorias «ocidentais»: o processo de mercantilização da natureza acompanha as narrativas conservacionistas dominantes, que são um produto do sistema político e económico dominante. Mas o conhecimento complexo da paisagem ajuda os locais a construir essas paisagens «selvagens» que os turistas apreciam. A transmissão de conhecimento não pode ser vista apenas como um processo simples de cima para baixo uma vez que os habitantes locais adaptam e usam/reformulam esses conceitos numa complexa negociação. A nossa análise é baseada em dados recolhidos sobretudo em 2016, via observação direta e entrevistas semiestruturadas.

Palavras-chave: paisagens; percepções locais; Parque Nacional de Cantanhez; Guiné-Bissau.

INTRODUCTION

The way human communities interact with other living beings is essential for human adaptation. When adapting, human communities enhance their chances to persist and survive for endless generations in world landscapes¹. Such adaptation implies co-evolutionary processes that go beyond the human species. It is crucial to have empirical studies on the different ways in which people produce livelihoods, ensuring the reproduction of life. Especially if we are looking to the myriad of ways that human beings and nature are related and how people of a given society conceived that interaction². Human beings produce society when they act on the surroundings and thus produce culture and create History. According to Ingold³ we live and act upon environments. The current global narratives define environment as «myriads of landscapes, wildlife, and peoples from around the globe»⁴. What we think about nature and landscape is deeply cultural. Habitats are not abstract places. In fact, what we think about nature is deeply cultural, and landscapes are no exception to this rule⁵. Ethnosphere encompasses all interactions between ecosystems and human communities⁶ and can be defined as political, religious, economical and normative perceptions and attitudes towards ecosystems and its wildlife⁷. It is the sum of all thoughts, beliefs, myths and institutions made manifest today by the myriad cultures of the world⁸. Such thoughts incorporate the complex web of human-ecosystem relationships⁹, which include human perceptions of landscapes and wildlife. Humans value ecosystems and wildlife elements differently¹⁰. Most landscapes are a product of human cultures, even those that some authors named «wild» or «pristine»¹¹. Some of these «wild» landscapes are located in the global South

¹ GADGIL & BERKES, 1991.

² GODELIER, 2011.

³ INGOLD, 2011.

⁴ INGOLD, 2011: 95.

⁵ NYAMWERU & SHERIDAN, 2008.

⁶ DAVIS-CASE, 2002; CASANOVA *et al.*, 2014.

⁷ NYAMWERU & SHERIDAN, 2008.

⁸ DAVIS-CASE, 2002.

⁹ GARIBALDI & TURNER, 2004.

¹⁰ DAVIS-CASE, 2002; CASANOVA, 2008.

¹¹ ADAMS, 2010.

hemisphere, where the capitalist mode of production is not in its most advanced developmental state. «Wild» landscapes and its wilderness are one of the most powerful concepts in conservation¹². One could consider that the last remaining sub-humid forests in West African¹³ fall into the category of «wilderness». Nevertheless, «wilderness» is a dangerous concept because in its idyllic roots, it does not conceive human presence and, therefore, it expresses the separation of human society from the realm of nature, which is one of the two canonical characteristics of Western tradition thinking¹⁴, common amongst societies that live under the Christian-Judaic paradigm¹⁵. Western conservationist thinking is deeply connected to the worldview of a threatened world. According Leach and Mearns¹⁶ the powerful and well-known picture of environmental change is the driven force behind many environmental policies.

The concern with global environment, nature and biodiversity conservation is not a new topic¹⁷. However, since the 70s the programs of international institutions, governments, State institutions, NGO's and all the type of formal and informal organizations from around the globe transformed this concern into a major topic that is present in all national and international agendas. Although protected areas are not a recent phenomenon¹⁸, much attention has been paid to the loss of biodiversity since the 1970s until now. That attention has contributed to the growth of protected areas¹⁹. The Stockholm Conference held by the UN in 1972 was very clear regarding the human responsibility towards the environment. The fourth principle²⁰ states that:

Man has a special responsibility to safeguard and wisely manage the heritage of wildlife and its habitat, which are now gravely imperilled by a combination of adverse factors. Nature conservation, including wildlife, must therefore receive importance in planning for economic development.

The association between conservation and development is in action. Community-based conservation became one of the most used concepts in conservation projects²¹ as well as the key idea of win-win relationships between conservation, development and local communities. This concept was «beneficial in aggregate terms for communities,

¹² CRONON, 1995.

¹³ CASANOVA *et al.*, 2014; IBAP, n.d.

¹⁴ INGOLD, 2011.

¹⁵ CASANOVA *et al.*, 2014; CASANOVA, 2016.

¹⁶ LEACH & MEARNNS, 1996.

¹⁷ See ORLOVE & BRUSH, 1996.

¹⁸ There are several examples of colonial policies in Africa and Asia establishing game reserves and National Parks (ORLOVE & BRUSH, 1996; WEST *et al.*, 2006).

¹⁹ ORLOVE & BRUSH, 1996; WEST *et al.*, 2006.

²⁰ UNITED NATIONS, 1972.

²¹ BROCKING *et al.*, 2012; COFFMAN, 2006; HULME & MURPHREE, 2001.

relative to the pre-existing regimes of fortress conservation or purely coercive conservation»²². The proposal for a win-win strategy, where communities and wildlife could benefit from a harmonious system has fallen successively²³.

Environmentalism and community-based conservation constitute a powerful narrative that interferes with the way people perceive their surroundings. Both can be seen as capitalocentric tools, narratives that were born in the West and that were (and are being) exported worldwide²⁴. It is important to state that many local communities in the global South hemisphere have been living, adapting and surviving along thousands of years and have their own ways of relating with the environment²⁵. In many cases no lessons need to be learned from the «West», from the so-called «developed world». In fact, Western societies should look at the ecosystems where they live for millions of years and assess the way they have been relating to the environment. The Western world history is known for colonialism, racism, habitat destruction, perceiving nature as a commodity, and wiping out entire species until extinction²⁶.

More than accidental artefacts of specific cultures, traditional conservation practices are probably the result of long reciprocal interactions between sympatric organisms through out evolutionary history²⁷. Such reciprocal interactions have been changing via nature commodification that reaches the global South hemisphere via globalization²⁸. Dualism between humans and nature is the social-construct from most Western civilization where humans do not recognize their role as mammals and primates and engage in a constant need to separate themselves from other animals²⁹.

In the present paper we aim to assess how local communities living in Cantanhez National Park (CNP, formerly known as Cantanhez Forest National Park) perceive and produce their landscape and how global conservationist narratives³⁰ may influence this speech and points of view.

STUDY BACKGROUND

CNP — also known by the locals as Cubucaré — is a protected area (lat: 11016'42.78"N; long: 14054'42.30"W) officially created by decree in March 2008³¹. The CNP stretches along a considerable part (105,700 ha) of the Cubucaré Peninsula in the

²² HULME & MURPHREE, 2001: 281.

²³ ADAMS & HULME, 2001.

²⁴ MOORE, 2016.

²⁵ E.g. BLACKBURN & ANDERSON, 1993; ANDERSON, 1996; GADGIL *et al.*, 1998; TURNER, 1999; MINNIS & ELISENS, 2000.

²⁶ MOORE, 2016.

²⁷ GADGIL & BERKES, 1991.

²⁸ MOORE, 2016.

²⁹ CASANOVA *et al.*, 2014; CASANOVA, 2016.

³⁰ See CAMPBELL, 2002.

³¹ COSTA, 2010; TEMUDO, 2012.

South of Guinea-Bissau. CNP was formed one year earlier in a meeting between traditional political leaders from all Cubucaré villages, state institutions (IBAP) and a national NGO that worked since the very beginning on the park project³².

According to INEP's 2007 demographic data, as well as the data provided by Carvalho³³, the population living inside CNP increased about 150% in 50 years, having an estimated population of 25.000 people.

The Cubucaré peninsula is often referred by its inhabitants as Nalu floor («tchon di Nalu»: c), since this ethnic group was the first to inhabit the region³⁴. Apart from the Nalu, Cubucaré is home of innumerus ethnic groups such as Balanta, Fula, Sosso and Mandinga, among others.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is supported by three months of fieldwork in CNP and by scientific knowledge about the area of study produced by other researchers³⁵. We carried our data collection from January to April 2016.

For the present paper we conducted 45 semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and direct observations in order to obtain the qualitative data necessary to fulfil the proposed goals. The interviews were focused on agricultural practices, feeding habits, relations with organizations acting inside the CNP (State institutions, NGO's and researchers) and local perceptions on landscape change.

An interpreter was used, as many informants did not speak Creole but only other local languages. Informal conversations were conducted in the last month of the data collection period.

LANDSCAPES ON THE MOVE

In the present paper the concept «landscape» is used to refer to the myriad of living and non-living organisms that together form the environment, thus including humans and the ecosystems that support life. The Cubucaré people do not have a word for «landscape». They use the word «matu» (the forest that surrounds the villages) — which is also where they cultivate crops, orchards, to the places where ritual ceremonies occur («matu sagradu» or sacred forest, especially among the Nalu). To simplify, we will use the word «forest» to refer to the landscape that is beyond the villages («tabankas»).

To distinguish wild animals from livestock, locals call the first ones «limarias di matu» (bush animals) and «limarias di kasa» (house animals). Every single place that constitutes their environment is a valuable place. This contrasts with the western

³² TEMUDO, 2012.

³³ CARVALHO, 1949.

³⁴ FRAZÃO-MOREIRA, 2009; TEMUDO, 2009.

³⁵ E.g. Casanova has been working in CFNP since 2006 and in Guinea-Bissau since 2003.

«wilderness» visions that exclude humanity from the natural world³⁶. In fact, they probably do not conceive the «landscape» as «other» such as anthropologists or tourists. This is due to the fact that they are «victims» — not in the negative sense — of their condition of existence, a condition as said by Ingold³⁷ of «immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence».

Cubucaré people are mainly farmers and forest may be turned into cultivated land. For tourists who visit the CNP, forests are a product of the sublime land, a product of nature. Local people tend to speak about forests in two different, even though connected, ways. Very often, they talk about its importance to social reproduction and also mention the danger forests face. They see forests as something that is threatened, ironically, according to them, due to their own fault. A connection between population growth, forest depletion as well as hunting pressure is well established in local narratives. It is very common to hear that the lack of rain is due to deforestation. Many of the Cubucaré people describe technically the water cycle to explain how deforestation interferes in the weather and the lack of rain. This technical narrative, carefully explained with all the details, is a narrative also disseminated by local NGO's.

In CNP, agricultural production techniques continue to rely on traditional models based on human labour while machinery and animal traction almost do not exist. Rice is the basis of all Guinean cooking. There are three main agricultural practices: two are for rice production (mangrove swamp rice and swidden agriculture) and one for orchard production.

Population growth is a key argument used by local people to resume how swidden agriculture has increased in the past decades. Informants also pinpoint cashew as the major force of deforestation:

There are more people than mangrove swamp rice plots. [...] some people started cutting the bush, but then we saw the values of the bush and we started to cut as well, to get cashew. (B11 07/02/2016)

According to our informants, this major change into rain fed rice (swidden agriculture) is recent when compared with the mangrove swamp rice (that does not imply deforestation). Mangrove swamp rice is practiced since immemorial times. Meanwhile, since the last decades of colonization, cashew plantations rose. And this cashew increased not only due to population growth but also due to the decrease of mangrove swamp rice sites.

Most mangrove swamp rice, locally known as «bolanhas salgadas» (Creole), was planted by the Balanta ethnic group. According to our informants, nowadays this

³⁶ CRONON, 1995.

³⁷ INGOLD, 2002: 153.

technique is part of an inter-ethnic system of knowledge exchange. Nalu and Sussu ethnic groups also produce rice using this system, even though the Balanta are connected with the origin and source of the technique, and are usually seen as the ones who master it. This agricultural technique («bolanha salgada» is the only one capable to produce rice surplus³⁸. Its use has decreased since the «liberation war» (1963-1974) and never fully recovered, as one of the informants mentioned:

Before the war, there were many bolanhas salgadas, but then the liberation war began. In ancient times we planted a lot, because it rained a lot. Then, during the fighting times, bolanhas salgadas were abandoned. During the struggle for independence the Portuguese troops attacked the tabanka and the people move away to live far away from the roads, in other places [...] When the airplanes came, we fled from the bolanhas salgadas to the bush because when they saw a person in the bolanhas, they would drop bombs. (B 30/01/2016)

According to Temudo³⁹ the Balanta were the ethnic group that recovered better from the bombing of mangrove swamp rice fields, mostly due to the fact that they had a deeper technical knowledge of mangrove swamp rice system. Since historical times this rice planting technique has always been associated to this ethnic group while for other ethnic groups, rain-fed rice was a rapid solution. As previously mentioned, rice is the basis of every meal in the country. The importance of rice can be seen when people say they starve because there is no rice but other food items are available⁴⁰. Many factors are responsible for the lack of mangrove swamp cultivated rice such as the mobilization of labour force (due to the migration of young people to the capital, Bissau, or other cities) or the generalization of formal education throughout the country, pushing still more the Cubucaré people towards the rain-fed rice. According to our informants, rain-fed rice does not demand such labour force as mangrove swamp cultivated rice.

The liberation war (1963-1974) caused irreparable damage on the mangrove swamp cultivated fields by damaging the dikes. Furthermore, people turned their attention to cash crops (cashew) since, according to our informants; this was being encouraged by the State during the 1980s. Informants referred that cashew cash income has allowed households to buy rice rather than to produce it, and cashew is much more easy to grow than to cultivate rice in mangrove swamps.

Balanta people are also cultivating their own cashew orchards and, according to our informants, the process of acquiring land is not going well since the traditional agreement between Balanta and Nalu (as previously mentioned, the last are known as

³⁸ TEMUDO, 2009.

³⁹ TEMUDO, 2009.

⁴⁰ E.g. beans, cassava, fish, among other — see COSTA, 2010.

the «landowners») established that Balanta should mostly occupy the mangrove areas, where they could plant rice.

«ENVIRONMENTALIST» VISIONS AMONG THE CUBUCARÉ PEOPLE

People living in CNP pay attention to the forest, which is the place where they live: any change is understood as having potential consequences on their lives. According to our informants, the forest inside CNP was vaster than it is today. Very often, informants mentioned that:

There was a lot of forest, you could walk on the forest for a long time, and it was only forest. (B6 04/02/2016)

First, landscapes should be understood and seen inside a specific cultural spectrum. Cubucaré forest is for many outsiders an idyllic landscape where endangered species occur: that is the case of chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes verus*) and other species. The Guinean-Bissau State along with local traditional authorities did agree about creating the CNP. The forests along with most species that live there are now protected. In 2016 there was still a lack of law enforcement in the area. One must ask, law enforcement for protection from what or whom? Governmental authorities argue that the forests must be protected, and it must be ensured that the sustainable exploitation of natural resources occurs mainly for resident communities. Activities that concern central authorities range from reducing illegal fishing and hunting; reducing illegal exploitation of forest resources such as wood; controlling the expansion of slash-and-burn agriculture to the cashew monoculture control. Central authorities are also concerned with population growth and the human migration phenomenon that are both responsible for increase pressure on natural resources. The same concerns are central to the local NGO working at CNP. In fact, these concerns were also expressed by some of our informants.

Nevertheless, this does not need to be understood as an uncontested truth. Since undated times, the Nalu have had traditional ways of preserving their landscape and the forest. As expressed by one of our Nalu elderly informants:

My great ancestors were planting and cutting. But, first of all, our fathers [...] created forests reservations, after that people began to admire the reservations, because our ancestors had reservations. At our parents times, they said to us that what is in the forest was not to eat at once. (N42 10/03/2016)

But we must also pinpoint different narratives amongst the Nalu people, probably influence by the *entrepreneur* narrative that accompanies the globalization process⁴¹. In February of 2007, Casanova & Sousa heard the following from an informant in the CNP:

I sell entrances to people so that they can watch a football game in my TV. I spent money buying the TV, the parabolic antenna and the generator. I also spent money in diesel. I have to amortize the equipment and also, I need money. So I charge entrances in my place because i have a business to run. Others hunt and sell «limaria di matu» in the city and earn a lot of money... they can even start their own business or buy a zinc roof; these are not Nalu but others. Everyone needs capital. (N52 02/2007)

In the conservationist dominant narratives⁴², much emphasis is placed in local communities versus natural resources, in which resources are not enough. This would lead to a stagnation period where human population growth would not be manageable according to the resources available. Such neo-Malthusian approach has been widely accepted in conservation⁴³, and Guinea-Bissau is not an exception⁴⁴. According to Temudo⁴⁵, the connection between population growth and resource over-exploitation is not based in empirical data; rather it is based on pre-conceived assumptions. Local people are adopting the same ideas. This can turn into a real problem in the future, if we think that Nalu resource management is changing with the implementation of the CNP and with the globalization process. Nowadays we hear locals talking about the «benefits of tourism», and that «biodiversity brings money». The transformation of nature into a commodity raises other issues that were not problematic a few decades ago but are now. In the past, a farmer would accept that part of his crop would be lost to wild animals (crops are right in middle of forests so wild animals would consume part of it). Nowadays farmers look at that part of their crop (that is lost of wild animals) and they see money that they do not earn, which results in the death of animals that crop raid. On the other hand, cashew cash crops have a specific goal: accumulate capital (just like previous cash crops that used to be more widely present in the past such as peanut, for example). Thus, promoting the sustainable use of wildlife by via national and international organizations is in part based in the perceived need to give wildlife and economic value⁴⁶. Freese⁴⁷ argues that giving wildlife a market value without implementing control regimes might encourage unsustainable exploitation of species. Furthermore, it has often

⁴¹ CAMPBELL, 2002; MOORE, 2016.

⁴² CAMPBELL, 2002.

⁴³ LEACH & MEARNS, 1996.

⁴⁴ TEMUDO, 2009.

⁴⁵ TEMUDO, 2009.

⁴⁶ ROE, 1991.

⁴⁷ FREESE, 1996.

been assumed — particularly in «developing countries» — that economic benefits are key to gaining support for conservation of protected areas and species. However, this assumption has proven false in some situations⁴⁸. If economic benefits are not perceived or valued as significant by its users, conservation and protected areas will not be sufficiently supported. In May 2019 Salvaterra had the opportunity to visit some informants in CNP and heard how in recent times law enforcement has become stronger. The CNP guards are not community-guards anymore. Now they receive a salary and to each of them were given a motorcycle to support their daily work. A CNP central headquarter was built. Locals perceive this as a sign of money entering but only centered in the people that work in conservation. The relation between some locals and traditional and national political authorities is tense and marked by conflict and co-existence. According to one informant:

My father worked for the Park in the past 10 years and he doesn't even have a proper chair to sit on. We want to change the agreement made by our parents in 2007.
(N3 05/2019)

Also in 2019 a traditional leader in CNP told us what he expects from the conservation institutions to be a priority: schools and water pumps. «The NGO's and the governmental organizations are not helping the population as we expect», stated the traditional political leader.

It appears that the win-win strategies, mostly based on the value of wildlife (for tourists) are not working, in part due to the lack of tourists.

FINAL REMARKS: LANDSCAPES & DEVELOPMENT

The value of forest traditional use, despite being important, is no longer the only one: the monetary income that forests can provide, through the commodification of the forest (and its «products»), is now a process spreading throughout the region, and it can be identified in the local narratives. Social change is a certainty. Communities and cultures are not static and they have been constantly influencing each other throughout human history.

«Forests have value» not because «forests give us everything» (S31 01/03/2016) but also because «animals that tourists want to see live in the forest» (S31 01/03/2016), moreover, «it is in the forest that we plant cashew» (B23 22/02/2016).

Cashew orchards are seen for some, as development, since via this cash crop, motorcycles, zincs roofs, mobile phones, flashlights are bought, but also schools for

⁴⁸ ROE, 1991.

children and medical care can be acquired. Many argue that (cashew) monocultures are problematic in terms of human security and biodiversity.

Local narratives tell a story where there is a form of nature commodification, deeply influenced by State institutions and NGOs. This type of nature commodification has behind a conservationist win-win strategy, trying to persuade local people to adopt new narratives and behaviour (e.g. «touristification») with the promise of a future income provided by eco-tourism. Many locals now attribute a market value to the forest and the animals living there.

Use, value and significance of landscape are constantly being shaped in local people's imaginaries. The same is true for what is considered development. These imaginaries express the dualistic vision of nature, produced by the western tradition. We should keep in mind that the roots of western environmentalism have a connection with colonialism⁴⁹.

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⁴⁹ GROVE, 1996.

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