

# BIO-PROSPECTING VS. BIO-RESPECTING Seeing Forests as Culturally Embedded Spaces

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**Abstract:** The concept of 'bio-prospecting' refers to the activities of utilising planetary biodiversity for commercial purposes. Bio-prospecting itself has been frowned upon in (developing) countries and contexts where impoverished regulation, and both policy and 'policing' mechanisms are vulnerable to commercial, corporate and sometimes even, governmental manipulation. The idea of 'selling nature to save it' is in conflict with many communities who believe in having a more harmonious kinship with the bio-diverse natural world, through a relationship of respect and reciprocity. This essay focuses on one such community; that of traditional African diviners or sangomas and reveals their perspective of 'bio-respecting'. The essay is positioned through the narrativised lens of the sangomas' culturally embedded understanding of respectful harmony and represents a perspective of mutually beneficial 'bio-respecting'.

**Keywords:** Bio-prospecting, Bio-respecting, Diversity, Ecology, Resources, *Sangoma*

## 1. Introduction

The concept of 'bio-prospecting', in the literature, refers to the activities of utilising, or put more bluntly, 'exploiting' planetary biodiversity for commercialisation purposes. This planetary diversity exists in terms of the ecological, botanical and zoological resources and is often richly unique.<sup>1</sup> Noel Castrels argues that

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<sup>1</sup>Colin Macilwain, "When Rhetoric Hits Reality in Debate on Bioprospecting," *Nature* 392, 6676 (1998): 535-540; Padmashree Gehl Sampath, *Regulating Bioprospecting: Institutions for Drug Research, Access, and Benefit-sharing*, New York: United Nations University Press, 2005; Shane Greene, et al, "Indigenous People Incorporated? Culture as Politics, Culture as Property in Pharmaceutical Bioprospecting 1,"

the premised rationality of bio-prospecting “buys its logical and moral power at the expense of its practical relevance.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), an agency tasked with coordinating environmental activities in line with environmentally sound policies and practices, points out the glaring lack of clear rules and principles guiding international bio-prospecting, pointing out that “under the current legal regimes there is a vacuum of regulations for bioprospecting activities.”<sup>3</sup> Closer to home, one notes that South Africa passed the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (NEMBA) a decade ago in 2004. This Act spells out that any research, development or commercial application of indigenous biological resources or traditional knowledge would require a permit referred to as a ‘bio-prospecting permit’ and a ‘bio-cultural protocol’ which is a document established in conjunction with the relevant stakeholders such as the community. Although meant to be conditional on informed consent, the preservation of environments and benefit-sharing, this was not always the case and bio-prospecting (sometimes labelled as bio-piracy!) itself has often come under fire in countries and contexts (South Africa included), where impoverished regulation, and both policy and ‘policing’ mechanisms are ‘flimsy’ and prone to commercial, corporate and sometimes even, governmental manipulation.

‘Bio-respecting’ on the other hand, while sharing some ‘aural’ kinship with the word bio-prospecting, is a neologism that I have assembled, and means, quite simply, exactly what it says –

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*Current anthropology* 45(2), 2004): 211-237, and more recently, Sayan Bhattacharya, “Bioprospecting, Biopiracy and Food Security in India: The Emerging Sides of Neoliberalism,” *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 12, 2014, 49-56.

<sup>2</sup>Noel Castree, “Bioprospecting: from Theory to Practice (and Back Again),” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28, 1, 35–55, 2003, 35.

<sup>3</sup>“Bioprospecting in the Global Commons: Legal Brief,” <<http://www.unep.org/delc/Portals/119/Biosprecting-Issuepaper.pdf>> 3, (10 November 2014).

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respecting the natural bio-planetary diversity, even when choosing to utilise it. This respect, tied to a notion of mutually beneficial reciprocity, rather than being fed by solely an environmental or humanistic mindfulness, is also sustained by a religio-cultural and spiritual consciousness. This kind of perspective is not one of sole consumerist and utilitarian awareness (as the narratives in this essay reveal); it upholds on the other hand a supportive and nurturing awareness and consciousness of nature.

However, while the word bio-respecting may well be constructed anew, the concept of environmental use and awareness and respect in terms of a (particular) cultural framework is not new among many communities.

Recognising this and using this as a starting a priori premise, the *Convention on Biological Diversity*<sup>4</sup> codified a ‘contractual document’ through several ‘articles’ and objectives of recommendations, and was formally adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This document, conceived as a ‘living’ document, acknowledges, according to Anthony Githitho, the “customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable requirements.”<sup>5</sup>

That said, this essay does not go into the debate and the ongoing controversies around (as the noted social philosopher and Indian feminist Vandana Shiva claimed), whether bio-prospecting is in fact a sophisticated form of biopiracy.<sup>6</sup> The essay chooses selectively to focus rather on a group of healers or *sangomas* and their understanding about forests and groves as

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<sup>4</sup>“The Convention on Biological Diversity,” <<https://www.cbd.int/doc/legal/cbd-en.pdf>> (20 September 2014).

<sup>5</sup>Anthony Githitho, “The Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests and Biodiversity Conservation,” in C. Lee and T. Schaaf, eds., *Proceedings of UNESCO-IUCN ‘Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes’*, Tokyo, Japan (30 May–2 June 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Vandana Shiva, “Bioprospecting as Sophisticated Biopiracy,” *Signs*, 32(2), 2007, 307-313.

sacred spaces and places, and their perspective of what I have termed 'bio-respecting'. The essay works from the understanding that for the *sangomas* the earth's resources are sacred and are embedded in particular 'sacred' and wider cultural understandings or religio-cultural worldviews. There is thus a recognition that many communities (such as the *sangomas*), conceive a vital link between biological diversity and cultural diversity, both of which point to the acknowledgement of the (universally) imperative and urgent need for the sustainability of the natural environment. This essay in turn narrows its gaze onto the religio-cultural milieu of African Traditional Religions and how forests or sacred groves are conceptualised and understood by the *sangomas* within these traditions. The essay unpacks how respect and harmony is conceived in and through this category of (spiritual) healers and how they construct their understanding of groves and forest spaces. It does this by proceeding through four short narrative interviews with *sangomas* (from a larger qualitative sample of twelve participants) in African Traditional Religions, and how they see forests and groves. The essay thus focuses on forests and groves as one example of bio-diversity that demands respect and a sustainable approach.

## **2. The Preamble of *Convention on Biological Diversity*: Window into the 'Text'**

The preamble of the *Convention on Biological Diversity* begins and opens with addressing the '*Contracting Parties*', (the various custodians) and states:

- Conscious of the intrinsic value of biological diversity and of the ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values of biological diversity and its components,
- Conscious also of the importance of biological diversity for evolution and for maintaining life sustaining systems of the biosphere,
- Affirming that the conservation of biological diversity is a common concern of humankind,

- Reaffirming that States have sovereign rights over their own biological resources,
- Reaffirming also that States are responsible for conserving their biological diversity and for using their biological resources in a sustainable manner ...<sup>7</sup>

The above declarations can be distilled into four shorter ‘utterances’ or in Sanskrit, ‘*Mahavakyas*’ that speak to the notion of respect.<sup>8</sup>

- Consciousness of the intrinsic value of biological diversity...
- Consciousness of the importance of biological diversity for maintaining life sustaining systems...
- Affirming that the conservation of biological diversity is a common concern of humankind...
- Reaffirming that States are responsible for conserving and using their biological resources in a sustainable manner...

While the first two statements relate to an epistemological perspective, of ‘being conscious’ and a cognitively embedded ‘knowing’ of the value and importance of the diversity of the environment, the latter two statements speak to an affirmation of the very ‘being’ of the bio-diverse environment, in the sense of the biological richness and resource diversity of the environment as a whole. The preamble further goes on to say, rather provocatively and beautifully:

There is only one earth, but there are many different worlds. Different worldviews do not only have significant political and socio-economic repercussions but they also determine the way in which people perceive and interact with nature, thus forming their specific culture. Natural ecosystems cannot be understood, conserved and managed without recognizing the human cultures that shape them, since biological and cultural

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<sup>7</sup>“The Convention on Biological Diversity.”

<sup>8</sup>In the South Asian Indological tradition, a *Mahavakya* is a ‘Great Uttering’ of immense significance. The ‘Utterings’ which I have distilled from the longer preamble statements are fundamentally important in as much as they are simple.

diversities are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. Together, cultural diversity and biological diversity hold the key to ensuring resilience in both social and ecological systems.<sup>9</sup>

This preamble speaks to the anthropologist in me as it makes critical reference to the fact that it is 'human cultures' that shape natural ecosystems. Embedded in such a perspective is also something fundamental to an anthropological approach; the importance of two parallel notions – that of cultural universalism and cultural relativism. The notion of cultural relativism or particularism, in this instance, lies in the illustration of the relatively varied ways that people perceive and interact with nature. The notion of cultural universalism on the other hand, is encapsulated in the understanding of the essential truism that biological diversity holds the key to ensuring resilience in both social and ecological systems.

### 3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The empirical data (i.e., the narratives) was collected with the aid of two research assistants. While I conceived and structured an interview schedule of open ended questions, the interviews were conducted by the research assistants who had, through their previous research, brokered a relationship with a group of traditional healers practicing in the Durban area of the KwaZulu-Natal province. The research assistants, both senior social science students, were seen as effective fieldworkers<sup>10</sup> as they were trained in qualitative methodologies and knew that the questions could be fluidly and organically reshaped (when and if the need arose) to meet the needs of the specific interview and specific participant. The research assistants were thus able to use their pre-established rapport with the healers, together with the methodological training given, to invite the *sangomas* to share their views on forests and sacred groves.

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<sup>9</sup>Githitho, "The Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests," 28.

<sup>10</sup>One of the research assistants was also proficient in the local language of *isiZulu* and was able to conduct interviews with participants who chose to answer the questions in *isiZulu*.

The small community of participants were thus purposively sampled. All the interviews were conducted in the homes of the *sangomas*, which were also the spaces in which they practiced their healing craft. These spaces were deemed as being the most comfortable for the traditional healers to be interviewed. The interviews themselves lasted between thirty to forty five minutes, depending on the availability of the participants. These interviews were also recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. The transcribed material was then thematically coded and analysed.

Narrative analysis was used to analyse the responses. Once the transcribed material was ready, it was read over several times to gain familiarity with the empirical data against archival and textual research. The data was then cast within an interpretive framework which in turn does not assume there to be a dominant singular truth claim. The understanding was that the *sangomas'* narratives revealed an epistemic of privilege and were capable of revealing an insider and emic perspective based on their experiences as traditional healers and as followers of African Traditional Religions. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

The essay is couched, theoretically, within the scaffold of an epistemological feminist 'standpoint' position and follows the contours of the claim that it is from the perspectives of the relatively marginalised, diverse and socially 'less privileged groups' (in this instance the *sangoma*) that less distorted and more 'privileged' knowledge can be gained. Emerging from the intellectual tradition of second wave feminism, Standpoint theory, as expounded by its noted protagonist Sandra Harding,<sup>11</sup> and other feminists such as Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock and Patricia Hill Collins, attempts to give voice to those groups that are usually marginalised. Traditional healers (*sangomas* or diviners and *nyangas* or herbalists) while respected within much of the African community, are still relatively marginal, made to

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<sup>11</sup>Sandra Harding, *Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

squat on the borders of a health care system and practice.<sup>12</sup> It was noted in the 'New Partnership for Africa's Development' (NEPAD) Health Strategy, that with the additional encroachment of 'Western' health care systems in South Africa on the practice and livelihood of traditional healers, the roles of the diviner and herbalist have become increasingly blurred, undergoing "a strange process of mutation as the continent modernizes."<sup>13</sup>

A decade later, much has changed and 'traditional' health practice has been 'mainstreamed' within South Africa in 2004, by the active promulgation of the 'Traditional Health Practitioners Act, No. 35'. However, this, in some respects lies in legislature and policy, and in many respects still does not meaningfully impact on traditional healers being fully embraced within wider (Western) constructions of health and healing.<sup>14</sup> The healers are thus understood within this essay, as representing marginalised voices, speaking from a particular 'standpoint'. This essay in turn, in positioning a discussion on sacred groves and forests as seen

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<sup>12</sup>Maheshvari Naidu, "Wrestling with Standpoint Theory: Some thoughts on Standpoint and African Feminism," *Agenda* 24(83), 2010, 24-35.

<sup>13</sup>Human Resources Development Programme notes that "The situation of traditional medicine remains weak in most countries because of the insufficient evidence of safety and efficacy of traditional medicines; lack of knowledge of attitudes, practices and behaviours in traditional medicine; lack of coordination between traditional medicine and the rest of the health system; inadequate documentation; lack of protection of intellectual property rights and endangered medicinal plants." <<http://www.touchtech.biz/nepad/files/documents/115.pdf>> (20 September, 2014).

<sup>14</sup>Maheshvari Naidu, "Constructing Patient and Patient Healthcare: Indigenous Knowledge and the Use of *Isihlambezo*," *Indilinga: African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge System*, Vol. 12(2), 2013, 252-262. Here I have argued that the hegemonic narrative of the Western biomedical discourse appears to further 'push' reliance on indigenous herbal remedies underground, thus rendering its use invisible against the more visibly positioned and championed Western reproductive health care and prenatal medicines.



through the eyes of the traditional healers, privileges their epistemic standpoint.

#### **4. The Interviews with Sangomas: Windows into ‘ConTEXTS’**

The interviews and the narratives, excerpts of which are presented, are offered as insights and epistemological ‘windows’ into the discussion on the sanctity of forests and groves within African Traditional Religions as seen by the traditional healers.

It is believed in many religions that nature is sacred and the dwelling place of the gods.<sup>15</sup> The concept of ‘sacred’ in most societies implies something set apart, holy or revered. It is maintained through the strength and the very architecture of spiritual beliefs and social rules and norms within that community,<sup>16</sup> as clearly visible through the following narratives.

Mrs Nkosi is 52 years old and is a *sangoma*. The interview took place in her home where she shares with us the ‘water’ she uses for her clients, the room she meets them in, and the snuff she sniffs. Mrs Nkosi believes that the ‘ancestors love the smell of snuff.’ Mrs Nkosi shares:

*I believe that in the natural setting of Africa, we were given a lot of forests and these places became the dwelling place of most of our ancestors, which we don't have much anymore. I believe that the forests in their virgin states are sacred for the indigenes of the earth (ancestors). But now everywhere is so foreign and unfriendly. This is a place where they sometimes live in because, remember, we used to have lots of forests and we used to live just next to the forests or even in the forests, so they stayed there [in the forests] so that they can be close to us. ...Yes they [forests] are of great importance and we need to respect these spaces. Beside the modern knowledge that they are windbreakers and all of that, we also used to use the forests as shelter. Many sangomas as well use the leaves from the trees and the herbs for certain rituals and as medicine. I know that there are particular trees that are used for specific rituals amongst the Zulus like the ilhahla*

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<sup>15</sup>J. Ylhäisi, “The Significance of the Traditional Forests and Rituals in Tanzania: A Case study of the Zigua, Gweno and Nyamwezi Ethnic Groups,” *Silva Carelica* 34, 2000, 194-219.

<sup>16</sup>Githitho, “The Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests,” 28.

*tree or some people use umhlankosi (plants used during funeral rituals). Another plant we use is called umsinsi (the lucky bean tree). Many people believe that it gives them luck and they plant it even in their homes. Definitely the forests should be respected and protected ... you see it's a two way street. We take care of them and they take care of us. My first encounter with my guardians was when they took a rest in the bushes next to my house. So imagine if I have to say these bushes should be burnt down or something. I will feel like I am saying to them disrespectfully 'I don't want you staying anyway close to me'. But I need them because they communicate to me. Many sangomas use the trees and the leaves. It is unfortunate that those Europeans came in the name of colonization and made us do away with much of what we believed in and practiced. The very things that we practiced and had no problem with, they came and made us feel like it is bad. Now many people are even scared to go the forest and make use of any leaves even when they know that the leaves have helped many people.... just because we are told that our medicine is not scientific; it is dangerous and all that. Until you know what this people want in Africa, Africa will not be able to free itself. They will continue to harm us again and again. We were doing very well before these westerners came. And I think we would have been better than we are now if not for them and their invasion. They come here, take certain ideas from us ... and try and sell them as their own...*

For Mrs Nkosi, the forests are sacred ground, and this space is qualitatively and substantively different from other spaces, as this is 'where the ancestors dwell'. In African Traditional Religions and in the understanding of many African communities, the ancestors are not merely the deceased. They are the kinship members that inhabit another sphere, while being at the same time intimately involved in the material affairs of their earthly kin folk. The noted Africanist scholar Opuku declared that "The dead have an independent existence. They do not continue to live merely because they are remembered by those who are living, for

the fact of life and non-life is not dependent on the memory of human beings, for human memory does not create life.”<sup>17</sup>

Ancestor worship speaks of a worldview where there are levels of involvement and genealogical linkage between the living and the dead, as well as the world of the living and the world of the dead.<sup>18</sup> While God is conceptualised as the ‘original ancestor’ or *uNkulunkulu*, God is not directly worshipped and perceived to be somewhat removed from the day-to-day events of the people. The actual routinised welfare of people and the community is accepted as residing in the hands of the ancestors, or the *Amadlozi* who mediate with God or *uNkulunkulu* on their behalf.

The *Amadlozi* are critically important. Mrs. Nkosi points out that the ancestors dwelling in the forests and groves are to be likewise contextualised as critically vital. She also comments that “we don’t have them [forests and groves] much anymore, they are not there as shelter.” The erosion of these spaces is understood as a direct erosion of the dwelling spaces of ancestral beings tasked with the well-being of the community. The sustainability of the natural environmental spaces of the forests is thus seen by the *sangomas* as directly threatened by a lack of respect, and in people failing to sustain the dwelling spaces of the ancestors. Not sustaining the dwelling spaces of the ancestors, in the opinion of Mrs Nkosi, in turn has direct negative reciprocal impact on them and their well-being.

Mrs Nkosi believes that the ‘westerners’ have ‘taken’ (robbed) certain ideas from the local indigenous people and attempted to market these as their own. In an article in the online science magazine, *Science in Africa* the journalist Melissa Wray points out in 2004, “South Africa’s great biodiversity is a magnet for unscrupulous collectors around the world who crave the exotic and unusual, and its national parks are seen as an obvious place

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<sup>17</sup>A. K. Opoku, “African Perspectives on Death and Dying” in A. Berger and P. Badham, eds., *Perspectives on Death and Dying: Cross-cultural and Multidisciplinary Views*, Philadelphia: Charles, 1989, 14-22, 19.

<sup>18</sup>Mahesvari Naidu, “‘Transcendent’ Genealogical and Kinship Relations: Afterlife in African Traditional Religions,” *Journal of Dharma* Vol. 37(4), 2012, 411-426, 411.

to find concentrations of unusual flora and fauna.”<sup>19</sup> According to Richard Crompton,

*IziNyanga* are genuine conservationists, a reminder of Zulu people’s caring customs, not just to their people’s well-being but also to nature. They epitomise sustainability by both protecting the plants and trees they need for medicine, but equally replenishing this indigenous flora for purposes of biodiversity conservation.”<sup>20</sup>

Mrs Zama is 48 years old and she is a long practicing *Sangoma*. Mrs Zama shares:

*Traditionally as Africans, we see the forests as a place of safety and a place that brings us life. It is a place of safety because during wars or anything, people are able to go hide either in the hills or the forests. And it is a place that gives us life because we used to depend on the food from the trees and all of that. And of course there are powers in the forests. I usually get my many kinds of muti [traditional medicine] from the forests. When I need to get muti, I get directed by my guardian to pick this or that leaves that, which I will then give to those who come to me. But before I do that, I put God first in everything I do. I pray and because I believe that my ancestors are also messengers from God, whatever they say to me I believe it is God who has asked them to say it... We need to take care of our forests ... I wouldn't want to wake up some day and realise that a particular herb that I use for my muti no longer exists you know. So people need to protect the forest. Although I understand that nature has given us certain things and it's upto us to use it in ways that best suit us. Like*

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<sup>19</sup>Melissa Wray, “Thieves Are Plundering Our Heritage,” <<http://www.scienceinafrica.com/old/2004/july/biopiracy.htm>> (12 November 2014).

<sup>20</sup>Richard Compton, “Muti Farm to Curb Abuse,” <[http://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/muti-farm-to-curb-abuse-1.1231352#.VI\\_M4qn8Kcw](http://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/muti-farm-to-curb-abuse-1.1231352#.VI_M4qn8Kcw)> (12 December 2014). The same newspaper also points out that unscrupulous practices also exist among those local individuals who are imposters, and claims: “This region is being flooded by people posing as *iziNyanga*. They are gathering scavengers, people who are raping our province’s natural heritage and selling traditional Zulu customs down the drain.”

*the chicken for instance, some people eat it while others use it for rituals. I can't tell people to stop eating chicken because I use it for rituals. They cut and eat; I pray on it and use it during a ceremony. So some people may use the trees for cooking, some may use them for building, but I use the leaves and some roots for my muti and such trees need to be protected. But because not everyone knows which trees these are, the best thing is to just leave everything. After all these days we have many ways of cooking so that we don't have to cut every little tree we see here.*

The Eneji *et al* study points out that traditional African societies had many shrines, “which were associated with big trees such as mimosop, fig trees and baobabs, iroko, mahogany”<sup>21</sup> among many others, and these trees, together with the vegetation around, offered sacred places for worship. Their study stresses, much in the same vein as Mrs Zama does in her interview, that the African people believe that the forests and trees and groves provided a dual purpose; spiritual and material. Like the interviews reveal, African people did not only attach importance to trees and herbs for solely spiritual purposes, but also because the bio-diverse trees, herbs and plants in the forest in general were useful in enhancing human life in material and beneficial health terms. Apart from being “symbols of god’s presence among people, trees were seen as medicine to man and animals.”<sup>22</sup>

Mrs Zama points to the power inherent in the forests. It is a place that people can go to ‘to be safe’, she shares. More importantly, the forest itself is a place of immense power. This power is in turn immanent in the *muti* or medicine that she harvests with permission from and guidance of her ancestors, and which she uses in her healing rituals as *sangoma*.

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<sup>21</sup>C. V. O. Eneji, G. U. Ntamu, J. O. Ajor, C. B. Ben, John E. Bassey and James J. Williams, “Ethical Basis of African Traditional Religion and Sociocultural Practices in Natural Resources Conservation and Management in Cross River State,” *Journal of Research in Peace, Gender and Development*, Vol. 2(2), 2012, 34-43, 32.

<sup>22</sup>Eneji, “Ethical Basis of African Traditional Religion,” 37.

Mrs Ncogbo is 35 years old and even though she was relatively young, she has been a *sangoma*, in her words, “for many years, ever since receiving the ‘call.’” In her words,

*I feel we are all connected. There is a connection that runs through nature, be it the trees, human beings, the animals or even things that seem not to have life like the hills and all that. There are also some forests that people go there to worship. Even in some cultures, people pray to certain trees. So the forest is a sacred place in its way. Like the herbs I use for healing, I also get them from certain trees in the forest and these herbs are very special to me. So it means where I get them from is also a special place. Although most times the ancestors have to decide which leaves I use and from which tree, I have also been taught about the use of certain leaves during my initiation. So if I am walking by the road and there are some shrubs, when some people may think they are just useless weeds, to me they are of great importance because I have been taught about their use.*

*I think we have a role in preserving and protecting the trees and our forests because of the importance of the forest to us. Even from an environmental perspective, you hear that we should plant trees because they help slow the force of the wind, they protect the soil, and they are home to animal and all that. Nowadays there is the whole talk about global warming and how trees should not be cut. So yes trees are important and need to be protected. Remember I also make use of the leaves and roots from the trees; so if they are all cut down what will I be using then? And that will mean not having the herbs and leaves to use in healing people. So yes, we should all be able to protect the forests. Being harsh to our environment or other people can bring a curse on us. So you see some plants are not growing ...then they begin to wonder what is wrong. It is because they [people] might have ‘wronged the soil’ that is why. Yet both need to take care of each other...we are connected you see... So we need to always remember that we are living to help each other, the trees give us medicine; the soil gives us food and all that.*

Mrs Ncogbo’s relatively young age belies her deep wisdom. She speaks with profound respect and reverence for the natural forests. This respect for the rich biodiversity which she sees in the forests is intimately tied to her sense of interconnectedness which she speaks about in reciprocal terms. She shares what she

experiences as an inherent inter-connectedness of everything, both people and nature, seeing them as joined and needing to reciprocate in caring for each other in harmonious terms. She also says rather evocatively, that when certain plants fail to grow, that it is a sign of a ‘curse’ brought about by the fact that people have somehow deviated from a relationship of reciprocity and that people have somehow ‘wronged the soil’ or disrespected the land and the rich diversity the land holds. Her understanding is that disrespecting the forest is synonymous to having ‘*wronged the soil*’.

Githitho reminds us that in many non-western societies, traditional sacred areas fulfil functions similar to those of legally protected areas in the West and are deeply embedded in local cultures and traditional belief systems. Githitho points out that the traditional communities often offer sanctuaries to rare species and “play an important role as potential gene pools that can be used to restore degraded environments.” He adds that in multiple instances, “sacred natural sites are also important reference places of cultural identity.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise Eneji *et al* point out,

The tenets of African religious and cultural practices is premised on the ascription of psychic powers to some or part of the environment as the abodes of the gods of the land and how these abodes are protected. The protection of the abodes of the gods from entrance, utilisation and exploitation does latently encourage conservation and management of natural resources.<sup>24</sup>

As research amongst the Mijikenda people of Kenya and the *Kaya* forests show the most important part of the *Kaya* forest traditionally was the *Kaya* itself, the central clearing; in a metaphorical and literal historical sense, the ‘home’ or hearth of the community. This tended to be set at the centre of the forest, also the central ‘heart’ and site to be respected.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Githitho, “The Sacred Mijikenda *Kaya* Forests of Coastal Kenya,” 29.

<sup>24</sup>Eneji, “Ethical Basis of African Traditional Religion,” 34.

<sup>25</sup>Githitho, “The Sacred Mijikenda *Kaya* Forests of Coastal Kenya,” 28.

Haverkort *et al* remind us that several studies in the context of different African societies have stressed the importance of sacred groves in relation to the efforts of the 'rural people' to appease the spirits related to rainmaking, bountiful crops or ill health.<sup>26</sup> For when a member of the extended family dies, they are not regarded as being 'dead' in the Western sense of the word, but rather to have 'disappeared from sight' (*ushonile*); in other words they are out of sight, but not gone. Traditional spiritual healers like the *sangomas* in turn, as conduits between the living and the ancestors, play an important role as agents seamlessly linking both these (continuous) realms (of living and deceased) and facilitating adequate rainfall, good crops and good health. *They* are thus the people capable of connecting the living with the deceased (the ancestors). They are also instrumental in continuing and perpetuating beliefs of respect and reverence to the forests, as *both* the dwelling spaces of ancestors *and* of plant bio-diversity, through their healing and medicinal practices (which also draw on the beneficence and guidance of the ancestors).

It is this rich reciprocal circle which their perspective presents. Their religio-culturally embedded understanding of forests and the trees and natural vegetation in forests and groves, thus provide a glimpse into a simple but powerful understanding of nature and the rich bounty it is capable of potentially providing if one lived in reciprocal harmony with it (nature).

## 5. Conclusion

A number of international gatherings have been convened, such as the early 1998 UNESCO symposium on "Sacred Sites, Cultural Diversity and Biological Diversity," which index an increasing realisation of the importance of sacred sites as a component of protected area networks.<sup>27</sup> Sacred natural sites are defined as

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<sup>26</sup>Bertus Haverkort, David Millar and Cosmas Gonesse, "Knowledge and Belief Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa" <[http://88.198.249.35/preview/h\\_Evl68eTtvDUiQ1CNH0uKVK5CaFKzf5W8FOXUR9yUs/5-KNOWLEDGE-AND-BELIEF-SYSTEMS-IN-SUB-SAHARAN.html?query=Water-Spirits-in-Africa](http://88.198.249.35/preview/h_Evl68eTtvDUiQ1CNH0uKVK5CaFKzf5W8FOXUR9yUs/5-KNOWLEDGE-AND-BELIEF-SYSTEMS-IN-SUB-SAHARAN.html?query=Water-Spirits-in-Africa)> (20 September, 2014).

<sup>27</sup>Githitho, "The Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests," 28.



areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities.<sup>28</sup> Conceiving spaces such as forests and groves as sacred sites thus, in semiotic terms, heightens the worth of a space, in both spiritual as well as material terms. These ‘material’ terms, however, rather than holding signification and significance in terms of potential for bio-prospecting, is about these spaces being given a (sacred) signification and connoting wider benefit for humanity in the context of their (sangomas’) healing practices. This is the ‘medical’ worth which is also evident in the narratives that the *sangomas* share. Also to be noted that the *sangomas* and their narratives do not point to any one particular sacred site or forested space, but to the sanctity of such spaces in general as the (powerful) dwelling spaces of the ancestors. Rather than considering a particular concentrated site as ‘sacred’, their perspective draws attention to an understanding of nature as a whole a sacred resource.

Studies such as the recent Eneji *et al* study show cognisance of this cultural perspective and the notion of what can be termed as ‘natural capital’<sup>29</sup> and recommend that modern conservation programs should integrate and embed traditional indigenous knowledge systems into the various programmes and activities constructed for the conservation and management of natural resources designed for the well-being of the planet.<sup>30</sup> Such a recommendation is potentially powerful in the orientation and perspective it offers for what I have referred to in this essay as bio-respecting. As scholars remind us, and indeed as the

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<sup>28</sup>G. Oviedo and S. Jeanrenaud, “Protecting Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples,” in J. Mallarach and T. Papayannis, eds., *Protected Areas and Spirituality: Proceedings of the First Workshop of the Delos Initiative, Montserrat, 23–26 November 2006*, Gland, Switzerland: IUCN and Montserrat, Spain: Publicaciones de l’Abadia de Montserrat, 2007.

<sup>29</sup>A definition of capital is “a stock that yields a flow of valuable goods or services into the future.” R. Costanza, H. E. Daly, Natural Capital and Sustainable Development, *Conservation Biology* 6 (1992), 37-46, 37.

<sup>30</sup>Eneji, “Ethical Basis of African Traditional Religion,” 35.

narratives presented reveal, in traditional African societies, many hold fast to beliefs that trees and forests are the manifestation of the power of the Supreme Being or *uNkulunkulu*, and view these as ideal dwelling spaces for the ancestors.<sup>31</sup> We would be naïve to assume though, that this is a novel or wholly innovative recommendation. It appears to be rather, almost commonsense. However, the fact that it continues to feature as a 'recommendation' means that even though it may well be 'commonsense' to integrate traditional indigenous knowledge systems into the design of bio-prospecting projects; the reality is that it continues to be largely absent from such programming. Hence the sustained plea for something that is 'obvious' good sense and best practice (in the language of policy and praxis), and against both patent based as well as non-patent based bio-piracy as well as poorly regulated bio-prospecting.

Sayan Bhattacharya points out that historically there has been "prolific scientific interest in the lifestyles, knowledge, cultures, histories, and worldviews of indigenous peoples."<sup>32</sup> In terms of this scientific (and commercialised!), 'interest' in the bio-diverse resources, the transition from bio-piracy to bio-prospecting is described as the transition from imperialism to globalization, and a shift away from exploitation of nature toward management of biodiversity.<sup>33</sup> Yet, this is in a sense, part of the conundrum, not least of which is the reality that globalisation itself is a highly uneven and potholed process benefitting some and not others, with some even seeing it as a form of (capitalistic) neo-imperialism. And while both bio-prospecting and bio-respecting presuppose a built-in reciprocity, the reciprocal relationship is conceived very differently in the former. The former, i.e. bio-

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<sup>31</sup>Eneji, "Ethical Basis of African Traditional Religion," 37.

<sup>32</sup>Bhattacharya, "Bioprospecting, Biopiracy and Food Security," 49-56.

<sup>33</sup>Amanda J. Landon, "Bioprospecting and Biopiracy in Latin America: The Case of *Maca* in Perú," *Nebraska Anthropologist*, 1(1), 2007, 63-73; Nigel David Christian, *From Biopiracy to Bioprospecting: An Historical Sociology of the Search for Biological Resources*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2007.

prospecting, assumes that the "resource is 'property' in the sense that an individual or group of individuals literally owns the resource."<sup>34</sup> This flies in the face of a perspective of 'bio-respecting' which holds that the resources belong to all and could not be and should not be 'patented' by any one individual or group so that no one distinguished group could or should claim ownership in a commercial sense.

This kind of perspective however, has come under a range of pressures and threats in the wake of the various processes of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism. It lies outside the purview of this brief essay to deconstruct the politically fraught relationship between bio-piracy and bio-prospecting and the politically nuanced ramifications of the legislature and policy around bio-prospecting. The essay instead works through the theoretical lens of standpoint theory and the narrativised windows of a group of *sangomas* to draw attention to 'bio-respecting' as a perspective that is religio-culturally embedded and distinct from 'bio-prospecting', and attempts to show how differently the notion of reciprocity is understood within the two perspectives. The *sangomas* act as an excellent example of a community of people who are able to draw on the material (biological and botanical) resources of the forests and groves in a manner than is not exploitative, but mutually respectful, reciprocal and nurturing.

Bio-prospecting on the other hand conceives (ideally), of reciprocity in terms of informed consent and mutual benefit among all groups that are seen as contributing to the knowledge or product, for example the healing (pharmacological) benefit of a plant. However, as Amanda Landon points out in the context of her work with the *Maca* in Perú, South America, this also brings up problems associated with what has come to be referred to as the 'privatization of life'. Landon states, rightly so, that the "privatisation of biological materials is a concern because it can result in a monopoly over certain natural resources."<sup>35</sup> This also

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<sup>34</sup>Landon, "Bioprospecting and Biopiracy in Latin America," 64.

<sup>35</sup>Landon, "Bioprospecting and Biopiracy in Latin America," 65.

strains and renders duplicitous and hypocritical (to an extent) the notion of biological resources as the 'common heritage of humankind', when this so called common heritage becomes commercially packaged and inserted into a capitalistically driven market place of commodities. For access to this market place is highly differential, is necessarily highly privileged, and so quite often lies outside the means of the local indigenous communities. Thus while corporate restriction on the traditional lives of indigenous peoples may limit access to the natural resources such as medicinal plant that they have traditionally used, financial restrictions thereafter limit access to the final culled (and commercially packaged) product.

Thus while as Bhattacharya points out that the "economic relevance of biodiversity is increasing because of the changing patterns of consumerism, globalization and emerging environmental problems,"<sup>36</sup> the *sangomas* are concerned with a grassroots level, 'eye on the ground' concern, that involve the well-being of the people who patronise them. Herein then lies the crucial difference; while the agents and various stakeholders within a (legitimate and regulated) bio-prospecting project, might conceive of material well-being that might well benefit various actors in the project (including the local community), the *sangomas* couch and understand this 'well-being' as also being sanctioned and guided by the ancestors, as the meta-physical guardians tasked with the well-being of the people. This well-being is in turn conceived in spiritual and sacred terms, and is thus also meant to operate on a humane ethical system rather than (merely) a legal ethical system.

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<sup>36</sup>Bhattacharya, "Bioprospecting, Biopiracy and Food Security," 50.