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# Chapter 17

## Decolonizing Human-Animal Relations in an African Context: The Story of the Mourning Elephants



Angela Roothaan

**Abstract** In 2012, elephants from two separate herds walked about twelve hours to hold what seemed to be a vigil for their deceased rescuer, South African conservationist Lawrence Anthony. Their story was met with reactions varying from intrigue to disbelief, as standing ideas on non-human animals forbid us to think they might outdo humans in their capacity to sense the death of a close one, even across species-boundaries. In my chapter this story will be the starting point to critically address Western dominated philosophical views of human-animal relations, and explore it for its potential for a new philosophical environmentalism starting from an African context. The story holds several important elements that will be analyzed consecutively and will provide arguments for decolonized human-animal relations. First: the elephants' behavior has to be understood in the historical context of troubled human-elephant encounters, as well as land dispossession in (neo-) colonial contexts. Second: their 'family relationship' to the person who granted them asylum in his private nature reserve asks us to transcend the 'colonial' othering of non-human animals. Third: the elephants' potential to sense the dying of a 'relative' invites us to acknowledge distant 'feeling' perception, which is acknowledged in traditional, 'shamanistic' epistemologies. All three elements lead to understanding and accepting human perception and agency to be continuous with that of non-human animals rather than radically different. This chapter will make use of multi- and inter-disciplinary decolonizing approaches (Bamana, Kohn, Murombedzi, Plumwood).

The world is full of persons (people if you prefer), but few of them are human

The world is full of other-than-human persons

The world is full of other-than-oak persons

The world is full of other-than-hedgehog persons

The world is full of other-than-salmon persons

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An adapted version of this chapter will be published in Roothaan (2019).

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The world is full of other-than-kingfisher persons

The world is full of other-than-rock persons...

Graham Harvey, *An Animist Manifesto* (2012).

## 17.1 Introduction

In 2012, elephants from two separate herds walked about twelve hours to hold what seemed to be a vigil for their deceased rescuer, South African conservationist Lawrence Anthony. Their story was met with reactions varying from intrigue to disbelief, as standing ideas on non-human animals forbid us to think they might outdo humans in their capacity to sense the death of a close one, even across species-boundaries—not to mention that they would intentionally perform a mourning ritual.

In my chapter this story will be the focus point to critically address Western dominated philosophical views of human-animal relations, and explore alternative ontologies for their potential for a new philosophical environmentalism starting from an African context. At a point in time where environmental concerns are gaining more and more civil and public attention in African countries, environmentalism as such should be decolonized. Whereas mainstream conservationism is secularist, human-centered, and technology-focused, it might reproduce the attitudes that created so many of the environmental problems that face humanity in our present times. Therefore it is necessary to take a step back from solution-centered environmental discourse, and subscribe to the aim of widening ontological frameworks—in order to include alternative perceptions of nature (in this case more specifically non-human animals) in such discourse.

To this effect I will critically address mainstream conservationist environmentalism focused on non-human animals, and propose, alternatively, a dialogical intercultural frame of thought, which will address the politics of epistemologies, thus allowing the negotiation of varying views of nature. The upshot of this approach will be to forego the idea that any ‘system of thought’ can ever capture the essence of things in a definitive manner, while simultaneously avoiding a relativistic position, by maintaining that the phenomena we perceive are real.

The story of the mourning elephants holds several important elements that bring us to the kind of open-ended reflections at which this investigation aims. Their analysis and discussion will add to a decolonization of human-animal relations—which should be the foundation for a postcolonial environmental approach. Decolonization will thus be extended from the sphere of relations between humans to relations of humans to non-human animals (Plumwood 2003; Roothaan 2017).

The elements that will be looked into are: (1) the historical context of troubled human-elephant encounters, as well as land dispossession in (neo-)colonial contexts, adding background to the elephants’ behavior; (2) their ‘family relationship’ to the person who granted them asylum in his private nature reserve, inviting us to transcend the ‘colonial’ othering of non-human animals; (3) the elephants’ potential to sense

the dying of a 'relative', problematizing the mainstream denial of distant 'feeling' perception, which is acknowledged in traditional, 'shamanist' or spirit ontologies.

To conclude this chapter, I will show that all three elements lead to understanding and accepting human perception and agency to be continuous with that of non-human animals, contesting thus the idea of the human-animal divide. It will also be made clear that we can only arrive at such a view in a philosophically convincing manner by acknowledging the need to negotiate our epistemologies in the political realm.

## 17.2 Decolonizing Human-Animal Relations

The goals of wildlife conservation, on international, national as well as local policy levels, have long stopped to be just an (neo-colonial) interest from concerned Westerners trying to address the side effects of global trade and industrialization. Even though a certain evangelizing and patronizing approach, smacking of the ideology of civilization that went hand in hand with colonialist projects, is not absent from the many reports of NGO's and intergovernmental organizations working for the preservation of the natural richness of the earth—the research as well as the preservation work itself is just as well initiated by politicians, entrepreneurs and academics from formerly colonized countries. This means that the 'decolonization' of which I speak here is not meant to make a plea for transferring initiatives and programs from the hands of former colonizers to the formerly colonized—that is already taking place. The point I will make here addresses the fact that traditional, spiritual, shamanist<sup>1</sup> worldviews with which conservationist initiatives may have to deal when working in rural areas have never entered in environmentalist discourse as equal epistemic options. Before they can be considered thus, the dominant and dominating secularist worldview would have to be opened up to the politics of epistemologies at work in the environmental discourse.

With 'politics of epistemologies' I refer to the issue that certain descriptions of the conditions of true and valid knowledge dominate others by means of power systems regulating human investigation. While making a plea for an open, democratic discourse on knowledge within the limits of 'valid knowledge', hegemonic knowledge systems have always excluded criticisms of the conditions of validity of that same democratic forum. As a consequence, we may see elements of shamanist ontologies enter conservationist reports, but only within the strict confines of what counts as valid knowledge. Valid knowledge is understood to recognize the modernist categories of space and time and causality, of mind and matter, and to be technologically applicable for purposes of conservation of certain species or landscapes that are negotiated with the economies of tourism, industrial agriculture, mining and the production of items for global and local markets.

For an example of the above, let us refer to a report in which elephant protection plays a role. In a recent article in the *International Journal of Natural Resource*

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<sup>1</sup>A concept which I will use transculturally, cf. Roothaan (2015), 141–2.

*Ecology and Management* (2017) Abugiche, Egute and Cybelle describe that where traditional taboos to hunt and eat elephants are still remembered and partially adhered to (Abugiche, Egute, Cybelle: 64–65), this may be played upon to ensure future protection of the animal. They describe this as follows: “There is need for new and holistic wildlife conservation policies that will blend traditional systems of regulation, myths, rituals, and perception with existing wildlife legislation in the country to enhance conservation [...]” (ibid. 66). We see here, as well as in similar publications (cf. e.g. Hens 2006), that only the effects of traditional worldviews for conservationist practices are being considered, whereas the epistemic content of those worldviews, and thus their focus on a certain relationship with the elephants, is being ignored. This has several important consequences. Not only may it be questioned how taboos can uphold their power over peoples’ actions when they are cut lose from the original epistemic frame from which they stem, but more importantly this approach leaves the idea of ‘conservation’ as such—an idea that functions within a colonial worldview of human control over the earth and its creatures—undiscussed.

An environmentalist philosopher who has systematically discussed the politics of epistemologies—in a bid to decolonize our relationship with nature—is the late Val Plumwood.<sup>2</sup> In a 2003 article, she offers several conceptual instruments to step out of what she calls colonial and centrist relationships. Centrist, in my own analysis, is the frame that treats a specific worldview as the center from which to understand the world—it floats on an implicit and ideally invisible power relationship—preventing that alternative worldviews can take themselves serious and enter into full negotiations with the center. This is how Euro-American imperialism worked and still works, be it through political, military, economic, or cultural means. It makes those who adhere to non-modernist worldviews take an apologetic stance, or to present their knowledge systems in prefabricated categories of the center—such as ‘mythology’, ‘magic’ or even one I will use here for lack of a better one: ‘traditional’. A deconstructive approach can help us where we can hardly avoid such categories (if we want to indicate that they refer to an alternative to the modernist worldview)—to loosen their grip on our colonized minds. Such an approach is taken by Jacques Derrida in his famous essay *The Animal that therefore I am (more to follow)* (Derrida and Wills 2002). Plumwood, however, doesn’t take the road of deconstruction, but while accepting the philosophical use of oppositional categories, tries to enrich the concepts in which is spoken of the ‘alternative’ worldviews, thereby making them ready to hold to their own centre from where they understand the world.

Thus she speaks, instead of ‘non-human’ nature of ‘more-than-human’ nature (thereby decentering the human) (Plumwood 2003, 52). She proposes that we should resist the ‘backgrounding’ of humanist centrism, and ‘foreground’ the more-than-human instead—which then leads to viewing the human being as just one of the different agents peopling the earth (Plumwood 2003, 61). In the context of Aus-

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<sup>2</sup>Crucial to her later work in environmental ethics has been her experience, in 1985, of being attacked by a crocodile in the Australian wetlands where she was canoeing. The rare combination of someone surviving such an attack, and that person being a philosopher, has left us with completely new anthropological insights on what it means that human beings are ecologically meant to be prey, just like other hunted animals. Cf. Plumwood (1995).

tralian nature she insists that we refrain from speaking of it in terms of ‘wilderness’, as this ignores the impact of indigenous peoples (their agency) on their environment (Plumwood 2003, 62). Here she touches on the interrelatedness of colonializing relations of ‘centrists’ and decentered ‘indigenous’ peoples on the one hand and the same relations between human and non-human (more-than-human) ‘earth others’. Discussing postcolonial and deconstructive approaches I have argued elsewhere that where a Euro-American hegemonic outlook treats only certain humans (modern, white, especially male ones) as ‘really’ human, dehumanization of non-western peoples reinforces the diminishing of their worldviews, especially where these recognize the personhood of non-human animals (Roothaan 2017). Plumwood shows how Eurocentrism also denies positive qualities to non-European landscapes. In her example it is the Australian landscape that is viewed as “[...] as a deficient, empty land, a mere absence of the positive qualities of the homeland” (Plumwood 2003, 65). In fact, such emptying out concerns non-western humans, non-human animals, and even non-animal ‘others’ such as rocks, plants, and rivers:

In the colonizing framework, the Other is not a positively-other-than entity in its own right, but an absence of the self, home or centre, something of no value or beauty of its own except to the extent that it can be brought to reflect, or bear the likeness of, home as standard. (Plumwood 2003, 65)

Although her account is of the Australian case, where the indigenous Aboriginal people have maintained that their experience of the world is one in which the land is central, being the sacred and narrative subject from which human narrative and action depend, it can be taken as a paradigm to study other places where Western centrism has suppressed and ignored views that consider human beings as co-dependent with other beings. Especially her claim to treat ‘Earth others’ as agents and narrative subjects in their own right could help to philosophically open up to a story as the one which is taken here as our point of departure—that of the mourning elephants.

### 17.3 Troubled Encounters

When we investigate the story of the elephant herds that came to pay tribute to their rescuer Lawrence Anthony, it is important to avoid to let it ‘youtubify’ our response in a simplistic emotional manner. The story namely has many elements that evoke the centrism that are at the root of our troubled relationships with animals such as elephants. We like to cry for dead persons who remind us of our own beloved mourned ones, we are moved by the type of the rescuing hero—especially when he is a white male, who with his rational and responsible foresight, as well as his high morals, counters the cruel and chaotic effects of unbridled growth of human occupation of ‘wild’ nature in African societies—to preserve a beautiful animal that otherwise would perish. As sympathetic a person as Lawrence Anthony himself might have been (and we have to admire his openness to listen and speak to the elephants that were pushed out of their natural lands)—when we focus on him as

an elephant-whisperer, or as a savior of natural wildlife, we tend to background the complexities of the settler society in which the animals in this case were pushed to aggression.

Anthony himself has stressed in his 2009 book on his work with elephants, that the conversationist efforts he developed in his wildlife park Tula-Tula (which were the former hunting grounds of Zulu king Shaka) are in cooperation with ‘local people’, whom he tried to get involved in wildlife preservation and thus giving them jobs. The term ‘local’ should make us suspicious. Here we find a description that already marks certain people (and, implicitly, their aims and ideals as well) as ‘local’—over against the ‘higher’ national or transnational efforts of people like Anthony himself. Of course it were transnational economies that brought wildlife under threat in the first place, through their colonialist endeavours and the legal and political structures they left behind. The question regarding elephant (or any form of wildlife) conservation should therefore perhaps not be how to integrate locals in growing industries like eco-tourism and nature preservation, but rather how the effects of national and transnational economies that aim to create ‘progress’ by furthering material wealth could be curbed as such. The elephant herd that was saved from being shot by Anthony, would not have been in their situation in the first place, had not a certain part of the human race at one point in history declared that it possessed certain pieces of land and could control all living beings (including ‘local’ human beings) that were on it. After that event wild animals have to be ‘protected’ by fencing off pieces of land, also with ‘local’ people on them, that are then artificially singled out from the ‘normal’ use and abuse of the earth ‘outside’.

When one zooms in on what lies behind so many animal conservation stories, as Hector Magome and James Murombedzi have done in their work on the political and legal issues at stake in the management ownership of national parks, the complexities at the ground come into view. Discussing several cases from countries in Southern Africa such as Zimbabwe, Namibia and especially South Africa, they analyze the troubled relations between governments, private owners and local communities that form the net in which all together, the original human inhabitants, the newcomers, the non-human animals and non-animal others are caught. When one looks at the very historical circumstances that formed society in South Africa, one sees elements that prefigure the complications surrounding wildlife and nature reserves.

[...] land dispossession in South Africa was based upon apartheid policy, a racially based separate development strategy that was designed by government to advance and benefit the interests of its minority white citizens at the expense of its majority black people. Although colonial influence in South Africa dates back to 1652, when the first European settlers arrived, the land conquest was institutionalized when the apartheid government passed the Natives’ Land Acts of 1913 and 1936, which restricted land ownership by black people to just 13 per cent of the country’s total land area. The land set aside for black people consisted of fragments scattered in selected areas of the country, first called ‘native reserves’ and later ‘homelands’. This land was, with few exceptions, infertile and thus agriculturally unproductive. This situation forced many black males into the migrant labour system of the gold mines. (Magome and Murombedzi 2003, 109)

While land rights were differentiated as private (mostly white owners), national (the state, that under apartheid was organized towards benefiting the whites) or com-

munal (good enough for local people), along an axial line of a center and its peripheries therefore—non-human others were kept out of the balance altogether. Just until many species threatened to go extinct and people with power started to realize they had to do something about it.

In his article on the ‘devolution’ of wildlife management, Murombedzi provides further analysis of how post-colonial political, legal and organisational structures are no ideal frames to negotiate the needs of impoverished and often culturally and geographically uprooted ‘indigenous’ people, versus those descendants of the colonialists whose rights are often still served best by those structures. In South Africa e.g. policy makers have to deal with the dual system of land ownership:

Southern Africa today, and especially Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia, is characterized by a distinctive dual land-tenure system, with individual freehold tenure for a ‘modern’, mostly white, farming sector and ‘communal tenure’ for the ‘traditional’, exclusively black, farming sector. (Murombedzi 2003, 138)

Present day wildlife management has to try to involve the rights and needs of local peoples, whose traditional legal systems often aren’t even officially recognized—which creates, next to population growth, the growing predominance of factors such as Chinese consumerism in African markets, and an increasing desire of wealthy tourists from all over the world to see ‘pure’ ‘African’ nature: complicated issues, in which wildlife itself is unwillingly entangled. It is within such contexts that the story of Anthony’s elephants, who were threatened to be killed off because they were repeatedly trying to escape from their original wildpark and saved by him from that fate, should be understood.

## 17.4 Mourning Elephants as Moral Agents

Individuals such as Plumwood and Harvey (from whose ‘Animist Manifesto’ I took the motto above this chapter) have shown us that you don’t have to belong to an ‘indigenous’ people to be open to non-human others that speak and act, that tell about things, that mourn and perhaps even worship. In a world and time in which modernism has reached all corners of the earth and in which—albeit to different levels—we are all subject to humanist centering and estrangement from nature, as present in our dependency of globalizing streams of consumer goods like clothes, processed foods and industrially produced medicines, it is a complicated issue in general to get to really acknowledge non-human animals as our likes, as agents and narrative subjects. Besides the growing material dependency of people from *all* cultures, the cultural and religious missionizing projects that went along with colonialism have also led to curvy roads for those who want to recuperate alternative approaches to animals. An example is to be seen in the life of the Congolese former catholic missionary in Mongolia Gaby Bamana—who, after long years of trying to convert Mongolians, came to the conclusion that he couldn’t be successful in bringing them away from their shamanist worldview—as he couldn’t do what Europeans had done to his own



ancestors. This experience made him turn to a new career as a researcher in cultural anthropology, trying to understand the spirit ontology of the Mongolian herders, that draws quite different lines distinguishing ‘humans’ and ‘animals’ than usual in the Western view:

Analysis of research conversations I conducted and observations I made between 2010 and 2011 suggests that, in spite of the difference in species, herders considered dogs to be kin to humans (*neg yas*) because dogs are believed to share the same ontological nature as humans (*negtöröl*). Thus, dog and human spirits are connected (spiritual analogy), and one practical implication of such connection is the social relationship of solidarity in everyday life. (Bamana 2014, 2)

Bamana investigates why dogs have a special place in Mongolian herder culture. In contrast to horses, for instance, who are also favored domestic animals, only dogs have personal names. He finds that in a special way dogs are thought to be relatives of humans, and this not in an abstract metaphorical manner, but—it is believed—because they share their ontological substance, their spiritual essence, with humans. Dogs and humans, according to the herders, can be reincarnated into each other and share a mythological/spiritual descent. In the work of another present day anthropologist, Eduardo Kohn, we find an attempt at further philosophical explanation of interspecies relations in Amazonian shamanist cultures, that recognize relations that go beyond the modernist human-animal divide. Here too, we find human beings having a special relationship with dogs, who hunt with and for them (Kohn 2013, 131 and further). The people studied by Kohn analyze the dogs’ dreams as foretelling knowledge, like they do their own—and in doing so, they develop ways of communication that are open to diverse ways of giving meaning to events.

Elephants, one might say, are a completely different matter from dogs—as canines have lived together with humans for tens of thousands of years, while elephants up to this day are so called ‘wild’ animals. Wild here meaning not that they don’t have socially regulated behavior amongst themselves, but that there is no standing social relation between their own and human societies. When we meet an elephant we will have to first negotiate how we will communicate with each other, so to speak, whereas with domestic and farm animals there are already inherited patterns of communication in place. In the story of Anthony’s first encounter with the frustrated and angry elephants it is precisely his talent to do this which made him succeed in his effort to move the herd to his land where they could live without coming into further conflict with humans. In his book *The Elephant Whisperer* (Anthony and Spence 2009) it is described how Anthony, trying to convince the angry elephants to abstain from destructing the fence, speaks to the matriarch of the group, in English, making a guess that she will understand the tone of his voice, or that somehow his intent will come across. And it seems it did, because the elephants calmed down after he told them that their only chance at life and safety (their original matriarch had been recently shot) was to cooperate with him.

Of course many people are amazed at his courage to stand before an angry animal that could easily kill him and try to speak to it. We should not stop at such amazement however, but explain what it was that made his attempt at interspecies communication (to speak trans-species pidgin, as Kohn calls it—Kohn 2013) possible. One of the

possibility conditions of such a communication should be the understanding, the belief or trust, that the elephant is not totally alien to me. That there is some kind of kinship, may we think of it in evolutionary terms, that we share a biological ancestor and are ‘built’, and wired, in similar ways—or in terms of a spiritual common ancestry as in the case of the Mongolian dog-herder relationship. Another is, however, the understanding that elephants have agency, and therefore, intentionality: that they can show deliberate behavior, and are not just driven by ‘animal instincts’ as philosophers and scientists alike used to think for a long time.

Nowadays science is opening up to ascribing intelligence, intentionality, deliberation and agency to a growing range of species. In science, however, one can only maintain such ideas after hypotheses (that might spring from philosophical/theoretical renewals like the ones made by Plumwood and the likes) have proven to be true according to observed behaviors. Empirical evidence is the criterion of scientific truths. That is why modern cultures, that take scientific results as their ontological measuring stick, have such a hard time to acknowledge and take seriously the knowledge of shamanist cultures. Even though a shaman or sage from such a culture can say that he *knows* that humans and dogs, or elephants for that matter, are related spiritually—because he *saw* it in his trance vision—such experience is not considered to be empirical evidence. Empirical evidence is restricted to controlled and repeatable observations. In an attempt to open up modern science and philosophy to spiritual knowledge, William James therefore spoke of the need for a ‘radical empiricism’ which would take seriously *all* kinds of experience (cf. Bordogna 2008).

As Deborah Rose, who works along the lines Val Plumwood set out, points out rightly, it is the epistemological questions concerning a shamanist approach that are presently the hardest to answer—which made Plumwood opt for a future-oriented, ethical approach of non-human others, with whom we share being of-the-earth, being earthlings:

Most of her argument was laid out extensively in *Environmental Culture*. Here she put forward an interspecies ethic of recognition which depended on a particular stance toward the nonhuman world. That is, she was not making a set of truth claims about the world, but rather was asking what kind of stance a human can take that will open her to a responsive engagement in relation to nonhuman others. (Rose 2013, 97)

Although starting out from a concern about culture and identity rather than from ecological concerns, Nigerian philosopher Ekwealo likewise approaches his reevaluation of traditional approaches to nature from a discussion of ethics. He calls his approach ecocentric and holistic, and propagates that a new, decolonized environmentalism should be built on a new, Africanized, ontology:

Consequently, a correction of all environmental and human associations believed to be progressive would start on a philosophical level in which there would be an exercise in deconstruction of earlier metaphysical thinking and re-construction based on a new ontological foundation. It is only within this background that all ideas on conservation, sustainability, restoration and issues of peace, harmony and development would be possible. (Ekwealo 2017, 15)

Similarly, Michael Eze makes a plea for a new ethical approach to nature, and calls his version eco-humanism (cf. Eze 2017). Like Ekwealo, he argues for an African

approach to nature, which takes all being as being enlivened by vital force, a concept they both take from Placied Tempels' 1945 book *Bantu Philosophy*. As Ekwealo puts it, "[...] Africans believe that 'force' or 'spirit' is all pervading energy in the universe irrespective of the form or nature of its manifestation" (Ekwealo 2017, 55). Here I will not go into the question of whether Tempels gave a valid rendering of all-African metaphysical viewpoints,<sup>3</sup> but will turn to the question that these proposals for a new, Africanized, environmental ethics (like Plumwood in her more universalizing work), leave undiscussed: how to critically review their background ontology from an epistemological viewpoint.

Connecting to the above, therefore, this way out of humanist centrism, omits to challenge the politics of epistemologies that sustain the colonialist frames that still dominate how we view knowledge, and therewith, reality. While animists, as Plumwood and others call themselves, or holists, as Ekwealo and also Eze call themselves, make important moves in the realm of ethics—they leave the politics of epistemology to the side. If our endeavor to revalue the earth and its others, decentering us, humans, and recentering the earth, ignores political epistemological questions, we leave the struggle for 'truth' untouched. In our search for the right values with which to approach the earth, we should not avoid to mention the struggles to turn real world politics around. And real political struggles as they are fought everywhere, be it around the Dakota pipeline in the US or the Bela Monte dam in Brazil, or around the damage to original forest being done by large scale logging and farming from Asia to Central Africa, are also struggles about truth. If we try to answer the question which view of the world is the true or the right one, it will affect how real world politics is being done.

## 17.5 Distant Feeling: The Reality of the Spiritual

A question which I didn't pose, nor answer yet is why I choose the term 'shamanist' over animist, to refer to what I consider to be real alternatives to the modernist interpretation of reality. As Rose points out, the term 'animist' originated with 19th century anthropologists, who aimed to create dualist descriptions of 'civilized' and 'primitive' peoples. The primitives were the animists, who, believing that everything (not just sentient beings, but all natural phenomena) is enlivened by a spirit, failed to recognize the fundamental difference between mind and matter, and between humankind and everything else (Rose 2013, 96). Present day academic animists therefore self-identify in a oppositional manner, rethinking the view of animated reality in a positive manner. It is not so much its origins which made me move from describing my interest as animist (which I did before) to shamanist—but the fact that 'animist' is an ontological indicator instead of an epistemological one. If we just recognize there to be varying ontologies (stretching thereby the claim present in the

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<sup>3</sup>For a well-balanced review of Tempels' contribution to African philosophy, cf. Mosima (2016), 37–46.

singular use of the term), going together with cultural differences, we might easily slip in cultural relativism, and accept its side effect of letting existing power relations between knowledge systems remain in place. The term shamanist however, points to knowledge—and thus to epistemology. The shaman traditionally is the one who provides healing and direction for group members by entering upon a spirit journey.<sup>4</sup>

In order to tackle the politics of epistemologies, we should investigate the truth conditions of the spirit journey. To do so we should develop a wider epistemological model than the Kantian one, which restricts validity to those insights that keep to the boundaries of space, time and causality (cf. Roothaan 2012, 120). Shamanistic experience, now, does not do so—as the trance traveller crosses space without reckoning with time, and vice versa. Also causality does not seem to play a role, as the healing procedures of shamanist practice involve the possibility to put things that happened in the past (even among the ancestors) right, or attract events from the future to the now, as in the case of rainmaking or., e.g. the choice of a spiritual leader who is still an infant. The elephants in the case we are discussing seem to possess shamanistic abilities (in this description of them)—sensing across a distance, and possibly (although the descriptions from several media are not clear about this) even before the fact, the death of their ‘friend’—as they are supposed to have arrived at his house the day after he passed, having walked a long distance.<sup>5</sup> These abilities seem to have been recognized in certain African epistemological systems—like in that of the San, as described in the collection of myths and stories about animals in Africa by Shelagh Ranger. Citing Peter Garlake, she writes how animals are thought to have shared humanness with the human race, before different species God gave them different roles and behaviors. Therefore

Animals retain elements of their human past and nature; they conceive of themselves as human, are interested and involved in human affairs, will interfere in, help and hinder them. Animal behaviour is [...] rational, purposive, directed by values and customs and institutions. Animals have language. Some practise sorcery. Their knowledge transcends that of humans in some areas [...]. (Ranger 2007, 80)

This description has also something very specific to say about our case, for it continues—citing San people remarking that “‘animals know all things’, ‘they know things that we don’t’, they know what is going to happen: ‘an animal is a thing which knows of our death’” (Ranger 2007, 80). This would mean that not only elephants can have such knowledge, but all animals. Stories about the behavior of pets living with humans tend to confirm this. Like the one of the two dogs of a friend’s husband, who was terminally ill. The dogs would come into his room regularly, but on the day

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<sup>4</sup>Less accurately called a trance journey. Although the shaman induces his journey by entering a trance state, this is not the distinctive aspect of the phenomenon. It could be theoretically possible for certain individuals to make a spirit journey without the trance—to get spiritual knowledge so to speak directly, as is said of individuals who are extraordinarily wired to look into the spiritual realm (cf. Borg about Jesus).

<sup>5</sup>Now it becomes clear why I preferred the expression ‘spiritual journey’ to that of ‘trance journey’ for we do not know whether animals who show such abilities need to experience in a trance state. It might be possible that they, and human beings too, have this kind of knowledge while not leaving their everyday state of awareness.

that he was to die, they posted themselves at his bed, and stayed there the entire day until he was gone.

It is an important question how this kind of knowledge can be considered valid—we need wider conditions of possibility than the Kantian ones that restricts knowledge to that which can be known through the natural (empirical) sciences. The epistemology to measure knowledge like distant feeling and sensing death should take into account the wider reality of life: that of being in relation (as Plumwood also stresses) and that of realising things—an epistemology which I have named pragmatic-interactive—it measures knowledge for its potential for action-in-relation, or its “[...] furthering (in more or less successful ways) life as it is shared, and at the same time individually enjoyed” (Roothaan 2012, 128). Such an epistemology concurs with ideas of Plumwood *cum suis* that knowledge should be practice (future) oriented and should center relations instead of a certain species and its interest—but it goes beyond claiming this to be a right (moral) *standpoint*. It claims also to demarcate what is true and what is false epistemologically speaking.

The consequence of such an epistemological move now has to be that many aspects of the modernist humanist understanding of nature should be considered false, not furthering life as it is shared, nor as it is individually enjoyed—as they lead to extinction of our co-animals, to barren landscapes and to continuous sadness and fear in all those who do not belong to the centered group. Like it was the case with the elephant herd that was rescued by Anthony and his team. The turning point of the story how he rescued those elephants that broke loose continuously, and were about to be shot for it, lies in the efforts he made to talk to Nana, the matriarch of the herd, and to convince her that she should not fear while on his land (Anthony 2010, 64–79). Thus, the story is about more than preserving a group of elephants. It is more so about countering the view that only allows them to occupy the space of being a beautiful asset to nature, or a superfluous hindrance to human society—in both cases ignoring their own agency and potential for knowing about their oppressed situation.

## 17.6 Conclusion

What, now, has been the result of this analysis? It was the aim of this chapter to critically address Western dominated philosophical views of human-animal relations, and explore alternative ontologies for their potential for a new philosophical environmentalism starting from an African context. The story of the mourning elephants offered a good opportunity for this, as it finds itself at a crossroads of issues present in environmentalism. These issues are mainly those of

- (a) the specific political, legal and organizational structures in previously colonized societies that form the frame of troubled human-elephant encounters, as it was shown referring to the works of Magome and Murombedzi.

- (b) the questions concerning human-animal relations as such: can decentering the human animal help to understand the elephants' behavior over towards Anthony as towards a relative?
- (c) the issue of the conditions of possibility (the politics of epistemologies) of 'shamanist' knowledge, more specifically of being aware of events beyond space and time, like the vigil of the elephants seems to imply.

In treating these different issues, I wanted to show the intertwining of empirical (historical, legal, political, etc.), ethical and epistemological questions, being convinced that ethical approaches to real world issues should always also include awareness of the political backgrounds of these issues. In our case these political backgrounds imply the politics of things such as land-rights and democratic representation, but behind them they imply the politics of what may count as knowledge. I hope to have shown that an epistemological approach that adopts conditions of possibility based on interaction and life-enhancement, instead of the Kantian one that bases itself on causality, space and time, might support 'decentered' worldviews, such as the one of the San that entailed the knowledge that 'an animal is a thing that knows about our death'. Recognizing animals, to start with the elephants, to be capable of such knowledge, and of the intentional actions of compassion and giving back that are shown in their vigil for a human being they trusted, is then not just a nice ethical fringe on the dominant systems of power that go on to threaten life and well-being on this planet—but a critical act of resistance over against those systems. It would imply that we should listen more to what animals, being obviously wise and caring beings, have to say to us.

As a footnote to the above, we should recognize its implications—that not only non-human animals, like elephants, are capable of spiritual knowledge that defies space, time and causality, but that we, being animals also, have similar abilities. It seems however, that for the most of us, this kind of knowledge is harder to access than it is for more-than-human animals like the elephants, for all human cultures have developed varying strategies for inducing trance and/or meditative states in which such knowledge first can be accessed successfully.

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