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White Belonging and Brokerage at a South African Rural Frontier

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the case of a broker who played a key role in introducing a model of rural development to the Limpopo Province which is based on an adaptation of UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme. His brokering is situated in the cultural politics of land, showing how enterprising whites may combine their roles as trustees in development projects with their, increasingly challenged, subject position as landowners. Demonstrating how this broker forges alignments, the paper emphasises the agentive roles of situated brokers who translate spatial conservation-development imaginaries across different contexts, produce a space of intermediation and help construct provisional natural-cultural assemblages. This assembling over time became increasingly disarticulated with societal pressures to deracialise land relations, highlighting in turn the moral ambiguity associated with liberal whites seeking to obtain a stake in societal transformation.

KEYWORDS Anthropology of brokerage; whiteness; nature conservation; place; land

Introduction

Manifestations of post-colonial nature conservation are pertinent topics for anthropological writing. They provide good entry points for understanding problematic notions of stewardship and how new societal discourses like 'participation' and 'deracialised society' are translated into economic benefit-sharing models and conservation territories (see Neumann 1998; Hughes 2006; West *et al.* 2006). Especially in the context of South Africa's highly racialised nature conservation system, we have witnessed ambitious projects to invite 'blacks' back into the frame of nature conservation (Singh and van Houtum 2002; Fabricius *et al.* 2004; Büscher 2013). A persistent focus in these studies has been on the historical figure of the conservation 'expert', who is implicated in depoliticising what are essentially deeply problematic

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questions of who controls land use and how economic and political power are distributed in the management of conservation. With a focus on historical continuities in Indonesia's nature conservation interventions, Li (2007a) famously described how the strategic production of authoritative knowledge has sustained generations of development experts through practices that 'render technical' and abstract away from local realities.

This paper provides a detailed overview of a development expert and private landowner pushing for new-style conservation in South Africa. It ethnographically explores his efforts to import and translate UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme, against the background of intense struggles over land rights. The context is one of a racialised rural frontier, where different individuals, groups, public authorities and government programmes vie for control of the right to govern land and determine land use options. This competition is fuelled by a government that produces multiple entitlements: simultaneously suggesting racial redress and rights to development for the 'historically disadvantaged' whilst also inviting white landowners to occupy key positions as project managers of such pro-poor nature conservation initiatives. The main protagonist acted as a translator – shaping a field of intervention in which conservation policies appear coherent and in which he can insert himself (see Merry 2006; Mosse and Lewis 2006). Yet, contrary to most studies of brokers in development, I do not analyse this intermediary role in a certain developmental configuration or with the aim of exposing gaps between the 'promise of development' and actual practice. Rather, I argue that in socio-natural assemblages, brokers are the assemblers who produce more or less stable social-spatial frameworks and who transform their physical environments as part of this brokering.

The extended case study below shows how this intermediation ties symbolical and material resources to each other and produces new trusteeship positions. It demonstrates how struggles for land are articulated through the introduction of new (international) conservation frameworks and the pertinence of race in the assembling of post-apartheid nature conservation models. At the same time, the case illustrates the importance of conceiving of brokerage as producing 'things' (e.g. project buildings and landed property) to be claimed and owned and not merely as a field of intermediation linking and enabling aid flows between higher-order authorities and local recipients. Whites' trusteeship positions provide an entry point to understand shifting political economies of land and racialised privilege, as well as contributing to a more materialist approach to brokerage. Below, I will first elaborate the analytical perspective in relation to brokerage in development studies and anthropology. Thereafter, a detailed study of the assembling by the landowner and owner of a high-end 'wilderness retreat' in the Western Soutpansberg area of the Limpopo Province will be presented. This individual's journey from being a new arrival in 1994 to becoming a champion in local conservation-development, will demonstrate the practices of brokerage that went into assembling this particular socio-natural assemblage. The case study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2005 to 2007, with revisits to the area in 2009 and 2013.

White Trusteeship and Brokerage in Nature Conservation

Recent scholarship has aimed to revive the figure of the broker in development settings (Lindquist 2015; Introduction this issue). An important aspect explaining this revival is the changing nature of governance and how its contested, internally heterogeneous and de-territorialised nature calls for brokerage and related practices to bridge seemingly disparate worlds (Bierschenk *et al.* 2002; James 2011). This literature asserts the importance of seeing fields of intermediation as entry points for unravelling more complex wholes by ethnographically exploring the practices that constitute connections. We may increasingly view brokering in a more tentative guise; with aims of ‘forging alignments’ (Li 2007b) and ‘translation’ (Mosse and Lewis 2006) that break with statist ideas of patronage and intervention as a neatly bounded, discrete space.

At the same time, older questions regarding the broker as a figure of moral ambiguity remain relevant given their roles as ‘double agents’: caught in-between disparate worlds, often with dual memberships and driven by motives to extract (aid) rent and exploit the lack of direct access by marginal groups in society (Merry 2006). Brokers’ actions are therefore productive of hierarchical systems of exchange; whether they act as community ‘gatekeepers’ maintaining political patronage systems (Koster 2012), reinvent culturally embedded patronage systems (Piliavsky 2014) or maintain a certain ‘aid chain’ (Bierschenk *et al.* 2002). In the context of these unequal aid relations, further moral ambiguities are found in the way that improvement schemes maintain gaps between the worlds of the ‘governing’ and ‘governed’ and assign power and privilege to the development expert in doing so (Agrawal 2005; Li 2007a). In explaining this ‘trusteeship’, Li (2007a: 5) refers to practices of development workers that structure ‘a field of possible actions’ and a technical, manageable domain that inscribes boundaries between these two worlds. This highlights how the space of intermediation itself is the site of social action and struggles for appropriation (see Lindquist 2015).

In the context of post-apartheid nature conservation, we have witnessed how heterogeneous elements present in politics and society are reconciled. For example, the internationally acclaimed Peace Parks or Transboundary Parks initiatives show how different ideological languages pertaining to neoliberal economic growth, racial redress and ancestral rights frameworks become blended (Hughes 2006; Ramutsindela 2007; Büscher 2013). Post-apartheid governments have been instrumental in promoting public-private-partnership models and have relied greatly on pre-apartheid conservationist networks in forming these (Kepe 2009). The case study below discusses a similar ‘state-invited space’, showing how governmental nature conservation agencies actively seek out pre-organised white landowners whom it feels can support their governance processes in logistical and financial terms and through their expertise. Trusteeship, it follows, gives room for whites facing a challenge to their political agency more generally, and their position as private landowners more specifically, to reassert themselves and find new (non-property) ways of engaging the state and society at large (see also Hughes 2010). Intermediation by white brokers, therefore, is closely related to a project of building a post-racial society but is equally informed by the anxieties and cultural disorientation associated with rapid changes in the political economy.

This dual positionality as trustee and landowner, that is occupied by the protagonist of this story, leads me to explore the link between intermediation for new conservation models and racialised politics of land and belonging. The introduction of new conservation models may challenge existing land rights frameworks and surpass land claims by other local groups (Fay and James 2009). In the context of Limpopo province, where the government is implementing a programme of historical redress for land rights, the introduction of nature conservation initiatives provide new layers of complication and heighten competition. This is especially true in cases where the new model itself becomes a landscape-planning tool in its own right, aimed at ‘resolving’ the mosaic of competing land claims. This duality allow us to also conceive of trusteeship as something more than mere intermediation between two ‘wholes’ and instead as producing enduring material-social imbrications. Besides considering the relational and organisational resources and competencies brokers’ bring to bear, we should also consider how trustees draw on their private properties as a resource and as sites for staging new principles of nature conservation and producing their identities. Such a view foregrounds a more emplaced approach to brokering, showing how grounded practices and located acts of labour produce a ‘material and discursive terrain’ (Moore 2005: 23; see also McFarlane 2011). In the following case study, I will argue that that brokering comprises an act of racialised place-making that addresses the materiality of land and which naturalises white trusteeship.

Building Bridges and Appropriating Platforms: Early Beginnings of a Liberal Landowner

In 1993, at the height of South Africa’s turbulent transition to democratic rule, Etienne Goldmann purchased a 2500 hectare mountain farm in the Western Soutpansberg area, in what is now the Limpopo Province.¹ On partial retirement from his position as town planner, he brought his personal wealth, work experience and vision to convert what was a typical game lodge farm into a high-end eco-tourism retreat, mostly targeting foreign tourists. In a region known for its conservative white Afrikaner farmers, his arrival heralded the arrival of a more moderate, worldly and liberal white man who could set a new precedent in redefining racialised land relations. Early encounters confirmed this. In recognition of a pre-apartheid land claim to his new property, he duly renamed the farm ‘Hamasha Wilderness’, after the family that had been forcibly removed from the farm under the previous government. He held regular meetings with the family’s representative, offering to help compensate for their loss by sharing with them in the farm development and inviting the clan elders to participate in his planned project of recording and disseminating ancestral folklore.

Upon arrival, he also sought contact with the traditional leadership of neighbouring Kutama-Sinthumule, a former-Bantustan some 15 kilometres down the mountain. As a charitable goodwill gesture, he made a monetary donation towards the establishment of a pre-school or crèche for local children in 1999. This act was the start of a long-term relationship with individuals in the Kutama-Sinthumule traditional leadership, whose members would later serve on various managing committees initiated by Etienne.

One of these members explained their relationship: Chief (*Khosi*) Kutama, described himself as Etienne's 'bridge' into the community 'because now Etienne wants to be close to these people'. The member added that Etienne had a no-nonsense business approach to local community development Africans: 'he is someone who helps people who help themselves'. The latter point corresponded with Etienne's preference for 'win-win' projects that also benefitted the development of his mountain farm and tourism business. For example, inviting community traders onto his property to cut the eucalyptus trees – not indigenous to the area and notorious for their extensive water use – so that they could sell it as firewood for heating and cooking.

Besides the neighbourly relations, Etienne's previous work in the development of the Central Business District in the regional capital confirmed his reputation as a 'mover and shaker' who commanded an extensive network of local businessmen and officials. Some of the contacts he made in this period would also serve on the Hamasha Venda Arts and Culture Trust initiated by Etienne, and ensured that he could obtain an audience with regional officials when presenting his developmental vision. Etienne's reputation was further cemented through the visit of then State President, Thabo Mbeki, to his ecolodge in 2003. The President had signed the guest book with a phrase that captured the essence of the grander vision Etienne was starting to develop: 'the story of the Mountain should be told in all its intriguing richness and given the possibility to contribute to a better future for all humanity'. This excerpt was duly reproduced in the many draft 'discussion documents' and PowerPoint presentations provided by Etienne. For local community members this connectedness implied a promise of state support for service delivery and prioritisation in state-led development programmes. It also signposted political affiliations and portrayed Etienne as having an affinity with the progressive, rights-and-compensation-oriented discourse promoted by the ruling ANC party.

Relations with white neighbours were built through his involvement in the Western Soutpansberg Conservancy; an initiative by private landowners that had begun around 1991 but had since fallen flat. The initial members were mostly established cattle and game farmers who had by their own admission hoped to use the Conservancy to ward off pending land redistribution claims to their properties that would inevitably follow the 1994 democratic election. They employed the language of fences and consolidating 40,000 hectares of private land: 'A fence surrounding the whole Conservancy will first be erected' and members 'must see to it that a large number of people are not allowed to settle in the area' (Zoutpansberger, 6-2-1998). Whilst Etienne did not buy into this fencing strategy and instead endorsed community engagement, he appropriated the platform and became its chairperson by uniting a handful of conservation-oriented landowners who shared his approach to conservation and community-friendly regional development. The Conservancy was revitalised in a decentralised policy context where government sought out legitimate local institutions and expertise with which to consult on rural development planning issues. Due to the work of three local ecologists and property owners, one of whom used his mountain farm to host foreign students in ecology and biodiversity conservation, the Conservancy gained standing as a regional think-tank for conservation-friendly development and as a scientific authority on mapping the biodiversity status of the mountain and wider region.

Etienne's intermediation shows how he effectively connected and brokered between two disparate worlds: rural communities and conservation agencies dispensing authority and resources. It showed the making of a 'relational infrastructure', consisting mostly of existing networks, on which he could build for conveying new symbolic and material resources (Bierschenk *et al.* 2002: 30). Yet, at the same time, the brokerage did not put him in a fixed developmental configuration. New nature conservation frameworks would have to be translated and territorialised in order to create a measure of policy coherence in the face of many competing interests within his extensive network.

Translating Conservation Territories: The Vhembe Biosphere Reserve

By 1999, post-apartheid state departments started rolling out some of their policies in a manner that would impact the future of the Western Soutpansberg area. This often unfolded in contrasting ways, with limited coordination between departments. Initially, the programme of land restitution appeared to present the greatest challenge to rural land relations and future development options. With a focus on compensation for past injustices, post-1994 land restitution aimed to compensate communities and families who lost a right to land as a result of the past racist land policies and practices (see Walker 2008). In the Soutpansberg area, this translated into over 90% of the white-owned properties being under a claim by communities and family groups. The majority of the claims to the mountain remain unresolved to this day, partly as a result of the limited capacity of the responsible state body to process overlapping community claims and the complex nature of negotiations with current landowners. Claims by conservationists that the mountain is of exceptional value due to its natural heritage and biodiversity status have also complicated the land restitution process and in some instances pitted the Land Affairs and Environmental Affairs departments against each other.

Whilst by 1999 negotiations between property owners and officials from Land Affairs started to unfold at interpersonal levels, the Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) started to devise plans at a landscape level. The province could count on the Kruger National Park to generate much-needed revenue, but otherwise it saw tourists bypassing environmental areas and towns off the beaten track. The Western Soutpansberg Conservancy duly noted the hidden potential of the 'Forgotten Mountain' as a unique biodiversity hotspot. In conjunction with DEAT, Conservancy members developed a vision for the region that would link up the scattered pockets of biodiversity. Termed the 'Golden Horseshoe' the plan linked the two other Provincial Biospheres in the Province (Waterberg and Kruger to Canyon) to the prospective Vhembe Biosphere. Structured around the travelling European tourist with their rental car, the Soutpansberg Mountain featured as the northernmost point of interest. The move coincided with future opportunities for leisure markets based on community-based tourism and eco-tourism. The plans spoke of attracting a 'new tourist' who sought a unique travel experience to 'a region or attraction that is totally undeveloped' (STRISA 2004: 35). But attracting this tourist required the formal protection of biodiversity and cultural assets. Against the backdrop of

unresolved land claims, diverse land uses and high levels of rural poverty, this approach required a sensitive solution.

UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme provides a novel, consensus-oriented framework for bringing environmental awareness and eco-tourism to local communities. Policy guidelines imply an open-ended, negotiated 'self-regulatory planning process' in which development strategies, boundaries and management principles are not given but agreed upon amongst 'current users'. UNESCO's guidelines state that applicants have to make a substantive argument for illustrating the unique biodiversity and/or cultural heritage status of an area, motivate the logistics of how it will be managed, and lastly illustrate its developmental and education function. It remains vague on consultation and governance procedures, referring to flexibility as a quality that enables it to be tailored to diverse cultural contexts and development needs. To its advantage, the Biosphere framework offers a high 'distinctive capacity for decontextualisation and recontextualisation' in terms of the lack of strict bureaucratic procedures and the limited standardisation of the rules that UNESCO applies to its management (Collier and Ong 2005: 11). Limits to its translation in this context were however evident in the extent to which it would be absorbed into national policies, local administrative procedures and alignment with redistributive efforts like land reform. South African manuals for Biospheres adapted notions of self-development and 'jointly promoting sustainable utilization' from UNESCO's guidelines by referring to a responsibility to 'empower Local Communities to take control of their development and conservation functions' in order to promote their 'economic upliftment'. Marking this mismatch with national policies, the meeting of the South Africa's National Committee noted the main constraint to the implementation of Biospheres countrywide was the challenge of not being formally recognised in 'the National system of [nature conservation] legislation and policies' (SAMBC 2014: 12).

The novelty of Biospheres also lies in their potentially immense scale in accordance with UNESCO's division of Core-, Buffer- and Transition Zones that allows different sets of conditions to apply to different areas (Pool-Stanvliet 2013). 'Core' conservation areas have to be under some form of formal protection, whereas in the outer 'Transition' areas, land uses such as town development and high-input commercial farming may take place as long as the population is targeted for environmental education. A 2004 Provincial planning document linked this expansive scope to popular ideas of indigenous conservation by including as 'Transition' or 'Buffer' zones 'areas where traditional lifestyles and indigenous uses of biodiversity are practiced (including sacred sites)' (Shaikh 2004: 3). According to officials, the landscape-planning scale offered the added benefit of providing an integrated framework for the various fragmented forms of overlapping plans at municipal, district and provincial levels and provided a model for negotiating unresolved land restitution deals.

The model implied a landscape-level use of zones and the establishment of ecological and social corridors that could link protected conservation areas to marginalised communities at its fringes, and thereby 'involv[e] local communities in and around protected areas in all spheres of planning and developing protected areas' (de Klerk 2003: 4). A discussion document from 2004 authored by Etienne, emphasised that

the framework offered more options to local communities than formally protected areas seeing as it is a 'management tool' that 'requires all stakeholders to sit around a table' and decide on the area's optimum future.² Its proponents stressed that any boundaries decided upon would remain open, assuring audiences that the process was governed by 'soft laws' agreed upon through deliberative processes. It was further highlighted that the protected area status of core or buffer areas would not change because Biospheres were not being acknowledged in national legislation.

White Trusteeship in the Biosphere Steering Committee

Delineation of the reserve boundaries and the identification of suitable environmental education projects would initially be done by an interim committee, which consisted of 'stakeholders' identified by the applying DEAT department. The responsible officials argued that 'existing structures on the ground' would have to be mobilised to prepare the nomination, and anticipated phasing out their initial involvement once a permanent management committee was established. The first interim steering committee was divided into three task teams according to the conservation, logistical and development functions stated in UNESCO's guidelines. In line with tried state practices of consultation, the DEAT department sent invitations to 'all known parties' for an introductory meeting and in consequent stages hosted and chaired steering committee meetings. The Western Soutpansberg Conservancy played a critical role in filling out the nomination form, especially because of the work it had already done in scientifically mapping regional biodiversity and establishing a network with local landowners who were involved in local community-oriented development projects.

By 2005, the official number of stakeholders was 15, although meetings were also open to invited speakers and ex-officio members (I joined the committee as 'scientific advisor' and was later attached to the Development Function task team). The convenors of the three task teams were Conservancy members, with Etienne acting as chairperson of the committee and convenor of the development task team. On the grounds that the planned Biosphere overlapped multiple jurisdictions, government officials from various levels always constituted the majority. However, this group of officials was both malleable and generally ill-informed as a result of the common practice amongst officials of sharing portfolios and sending delegates on their behalf. Officials from Land Affairs, which handled the land restitution claims, did not attend. It was seen as DEAT's responsibility to circulate the minutes and 'regular progress reports' to other state departments. In line with South Africa's controversial acknowledgment of traditional leadership in local government representation (see Claassens and Cousins 2008), five traditional leaders represented the black population living within the proposed boundaries.

The task of the white convenors was to synthesise the available information on biodiversity in the proposed area and select hotspots for conservation by: recording Red List data species and geomorphology, identifying 'core conservation areas' according to UNESCO's criteria, and compiling a list of so-called 'demonstration projects'. Conservancy members were later also tasked with collecting letters of support from

private landowners residing in the buffer zones. The fact that these white, local landowners fulfilled these roles was not seen as problematic; either by government officials who were glad to outsource the arduous task of data consolidation mapping to private parties, or by the convenors. After I observed the lack of a public awareness-raising campaign for the pending Biosphere and raised the point that the Biosphere may be an exclusive contract between state and private landowners, the Conservation convenor responded as follows:

The idea came from the Department of Environmental Affairs and it has been run in a dismal manner by this department throughout the process... It is definitely not a social contract between white landowners and government. In fact, very few white landowners are aware of the process (this came out clearly in the process of obtaining endorsements from landowners in the buffer zones). The Department [DEAT] and the Steering Committee has gone to great efforts to ensure that this does not become a 'white driven' process... It was only after they realized that they could not do it without our help that we were allowed to get involved. Any involvement of whites has been through their expertise. All the basic issues, e.g. the boundaries, the core areas, the name, the logo, etc. were either taken by the department or by the Steering Committee. Although the process was never properly publicized, I get the impression that it is enthusiastically supported by community leaders and black politicians. They also see this as their property.

The quote confirms how whites tended to explain their limited role as that of impartial expert called upon to participate in a 'state-invited space' (see Introduction, this issue). It also shows how, in post-apartheid conservation and development planning, a diverse set of interests, including that of those who have a stake as knowledge brokers and private property owners, are acknowledged as valid and therefore offer room for all stakeholders to attain 'their rightful place' at the table (Büscher 2010). Landowning whites assumed the role of trustee, in ways strongly associated with the role that development experts assume as facilitators of participatory processes and actors employing scientific tools in the service of a newly defined public good. More specific here, was how representation enabled the reversal of whites' minority position, and how the Biosphere process enabled them to find ways of engaging society and being players in the statist project of deracialisation and rural transformation (see also Hughes 2010). This engagement, however, did not imply a simple role as go-between. Rather, it entailed a proactive stance by white brokers to produce spaces of deliberation, which drew away from local realities and produced spatial planning frameworks that competed with pre-existing ones.

The authority bestowed on the white convenors through their association with a willing state came with responsibilities and also an unforeseen, enduring commitment. Interim committee members had been motivated by a common goal to obtain the Biosphere status as soon as possible, especially in view of the prospect of competing land claims. However, the Conservancy convenors had envisioned withdrawing after nomination, and surrendering day-to-day management to the government or a hired consultant. In 2007, with the nomination form near completion, officials, in their turn, had also foreseen stepping out of the process, with the official chairing the committee meeting arguing that 'we are just here to facilitate, not run the Biosphere'. The convenor

of the Conservation function retorted: 'I am just one member of the steering committee. Because of my technical knowledge I have helped compile the application.' Despite objections, a quick election procedure by this official meant that the convenor was coerced into the next management committee. Another two members were nominated in absentia after their names had been called out. After a quick show of hands, Etienne was re-elected as the chairperson for the management committee.

Spatial planning tools, however, also gave whites future options for stepping out of the process. The Western Soutpansberg Conservancy area was presented in the nomination form as a 'buffer area' owing to its diverse land use and unprotected status. Plans to have the private properties encompassing the Conservancy protected in the future were, however, foreseen by its members. Biospheres are evaluated in two-yearly cycles when UNESCO allows submissions for new 'core areas'. In order to bank this future expansion, the task teams came up with a notion of 'clusters' planned around eight of the Provincial Parks that already had protected status. A 2004 paper discussed the adoption of the notion of the clusters as follows:

We can start with clusters around sensitive conservation hotspots and later expand these areas where necessary. This will facilitate the administrative process and ensure that no part of the mountain is left out in the initial process. Each cluster can have its own steering committee under an umbrella steering committee or facilitation committee. The cluster areas will all form part of a single larger biosphere reserve in the application to UNESCO ... New environmental legislation that is in the pipeline will improve the situation but the biggest challenge for this cluster will be to convince UNESCO that privately-owned core conservation areas could be viable within our socio-economic setup. The existing Soutpansberg Conservancy could be an important tool in incorporating this region into the biosphere reserve.

The cluster preference found its way into the plan, with one such cluster planned around a Provincial Nature Reserve, with the Conservancy included as a surrounding buffer zone. Despite frustration at not being able to convince state officials to push for the aforementioned recognition of Biospheres in national legislation, Conservancy members sought alignment with informal policy initiatives like the Bioregional Framework of the South African Biodiversity Institute, which confirmed the area's status as biodiversity hotspot.

The nomination form was approved by UNESCO in 2009. The boundaries of the Biosphere reserve spread from the initial Western Soutpansberg Conservancy to an expansive area in which over 1.1 million people reside and which covers 30,700 km², including the major attractions of Mapungubwe Heritage Site to the North and the Kruger National Park to the East. This vastness reflects the aforementioned corridor approach to bioregional conservation and the aim to link up dispersed conservation areas. It also mirrors a certain state redistributive logic; it straddles five municipal areas in the hope that 'more state' means more capacity to channel funds to local communities.

The oscillation between engagement and detachment by white trustees shows how their intermediary roles and engagement are marked by both risks and moral ambiguity. Translation of the bioregional frameworks had the hallmarks of neo-paternalism, as illustrated by the matter-of-fact nature in which the state invited them in and saw no

problems with their roles as trustees. Yet, the Conservancy members' attempts at withdrawal and their hard work to create a context in which they could act as meaningful brokers, also highlights how trustees did not simply work to reinstate dominant policy discourses as information brokers in an aid chain (see Mosse and Lewis 2006; Li 2007a). Instead, they co-created a new imaginary of rural development and a new social contract through an alliance with the state and traditional leaders.

All parties involved were aware that the novelty of the unfamiliar income-generating activities for rural communities, focusing on eco-tourism, cultural tourism and ecologically sensitive farming, would require hands-on demonstration projects to illustrate the new principles to the 'man in the street'. This notion of 'making tangible' to the rural poor, in turn opened up possibilities for rural whites like Etienne to stage their developmental projects as exemplars illustrating the new economic potential for the area as well as the ideological principle of bringing the rural poor into the framework of nature conservation through what he called 'actually delivering partnerships' modelled around a notion of a community-public-private-partnership.

Making and Staking Boundary Places: The Centre for Indigenous and Appropriate Knowledge

Etienne's trusteeship in the Biosphere went hand in hand with his brokering of a number of place-based projects, which also featured as 'demonstration projects' in the Biosphere nomination form. As mentioned above, the intention was to communicate conservation principles and to reconcile nature preservation – traditionally the domain of whites – with the need for wealth creation in local communities. These localised projects brought into focus a second aspect of Etienne's trusteeship, which was more similar to the roles played by local development brokers. His foreseen role would be as go-between, bridging the gap between higher-level authorities distributing resources and granting decision-making power and the marginalised black communities living within the Biosphere. It led him to convert parts of his mountain property into a demonstration project. This process inadvertently shaped his own social identity in more morally ambiguous ways, given that it blended his positionality as trustee with that of private landowner.

As mentioned, Etienne had already transformed the former game farm into a Wilderness sanctuary, thereby producing an exemplary local business model for high-end eco-tourism. This conversion, through physical labour, management and marketing, merited the qualification of his farm in 1999 as a Natural Heritage Site through the national Natural Heritage Site Programme. Etienne uncovered centuries-old hunter-gatherer San cave drawings and reintroduced indigenous trees and wildlife. The former hunting camp was stylistically rebuilt by a renowned Venda wood carver using traditional methods and materials and was duly dubbed the 'Venda Cultural Village'. Its construction brought him in touch with a network of local artists and inspired him to develop a second traditional dwelling, the Hamasha Wilderness Centre for Appropriate Technology and Indigenous Knowledge, completed in 2004.

The centre hosted workshops for black youth in traditional crafts and organised meetings between potential investors and community representatives.

As a testimony to his growing network, Etienne obtained grants from the Irish government and the South African mining giant De Beers for erecting these buildings and hosting the first woodcarving workshop. He also enrolled Afristar, a leading community-conservation non-governmental organisation, to draft a host of strategic documents that took on a generic and flexible form. These documents were tweaked to various institutional languages, and show the multi-sited nature of Etienne's conservation network. They also demonstrate Etienne's coordination and linguistic competencies in employing development speak and staging his new project to potential investors, officials and community representatives (see Bierschenk *et al.* 2002: 21–23). Whilst the centre intended to preserve cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge of the Venda tribal group at large, its unofficial goal was to contribute to the development of the Kutama and Sinthumule communities at the foot of the mountain with which Etienne had established good relations.

The centre advanced a particular interpretation of environmentally and culturally appropriate technology. The seven income-generating activities included wood carving, pottery, drum making, textiles, beadwork, cultural performances and traditional healing. Project planning invoked the urgency of the erosion of this indigenous knowledge but offered little insight as to how this dissemination related to the resolution of land rights and more specifically the numerous unresolved land restitution claims on private properties. A more abstract idea of ownership emerged that involved the protection and registration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems:

Local communities or individuals do not have the necessary knowledge or the means to safeguard their property in a system, which has its origin in very different cultural values and attitudes. Indigenous and local communities have a stockpile of knowledge about their flora and fauna – their habits, their habitats, their seasonal behaviour – and it is only logical and in consonance with natural justice that they are given a greater say as a matter of right in all matters regarding the study, extraction and commercialization of indigenous knowledge. (CATIK, undated document: 3)

Through external funding and hosting of workshops, the centre started to function as a centre of dissemination. One particular workshop in 2007 marked its new function as a regional 'think-tank' to preserve indigenous knowledge. Here Etienne took the initiative to set up a new community-public-private-partnership by bringing members of the Kutama traditional leadership, several of whom sat on the Hamasha Venda Arts and Culture Trust, in contact with a researcher from the Bioprospecting unit of the semi-public Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research. In his presentation, the researcher from the Bioprospecting Unit explained his recent efforts to develop a registration programme for indigenous plants with the purpose of conferring intellectual property rights to communities. In the initial stages, this meant making an inventory of traditional medicine species that could be commercially exploited and then registering the intellectual property rights to the traditional medicines in the name of communities, typically in the name of the traditional leadership. The follow-up stages envisioned a role for the parastatal as a strategic community partner in terms of facilitating the

commercial exploitation of these plants by identifying suitable land areas for commercially growing medicinal plants, attracting private investors and public funding and overseeing negotiations between external parties and empowered communities. The visiting researcher hinted at the potential of this commoditisation model for job creation, invoking their recent success at establishing a factory elsewhere in the province where a natural mosquito repellent was produced from the indigenous 'hoodia plant'. A candle was circulated in the meeting and slides presented of beaming women along a production line shaking the researcher's hand.

In reference to the role of brokers like Etienne, the researcher stated that registration of traditional medicine could be done in the name of 'all people who associate themselves with Venda culture'. He then turned to Etienne, saying: 'this person can be a relative newcomer. The important question being, is he known in this area?' Thus the development project that reinforced the ideals of pre-modern, natural ownership vested in tribal leadership also envisioned that ownership of cultural products could be handed over to brokers like Etienne. When I later confronted Etienne with my concern that such a project was likely to empower unelected, hereditary leaders and pointed out the problematic of constituting the rural poor as tribal subjects, he responded:

I somehow feel that Africans have a different view of the management of a project. In this regard I refer to the tribal system which in itself is an indigenous knowledge system. We westerners do not really understand it. I suspect that we need to not only look at indigenous knowledge but how it is to be managed. This is a subject in itself.

Etienne's response reflects the ways in which ownership over cultural assets and products can itself be owned and subjected to new forms of governance (Fay and James 2009). It also resonates with a classic continuity in nature conservation efforts in South Africa, whereby chiefs and 'model tribes' are constructed as natural beneficiaries in conservation-development blends (see Robins and van der Waal 2008). In this case, a racialised notion of project competency and management was constructed, that aimed to open up space for brokers like Etienne as the strategic partner in intermediary roles who could help communities adopt modern management standards, tie in investors and help coordinate complex support networks. Brokerage here was not about mediating direct access to existent programmes. Instead, like the arrival of the 'new tourist', it was dependent on certain conditions occurring (such as the arrival of investors) and other factors remaining unchanged.

The Centre for Indigenous and Appropriate Knowledge effectively acted as a physical boundary object or 'boundary place' (Koster 2014); a site for hosting guests and an interracial meeting point, a laboratory for trying out community-public-private-partnerships and a place embodying and realising the developmental vision that the Biosphere stood for. At the same time, the centre embodied the 'gap' it purported to bridge and its role was not only useful in illustrating practical opportunities and enabling new relations, but also as a site of 'material representation'; reaffirming the divide between the disparate social worlds it was connecting (McFarlane 2011). The way it was assembled from various elements and produced by connecting various

sites, is testimony to Etienne's exceptional set of skills and competencies. Yet, the emerging institutional multiplicity, intricacy of connections and territorial entanglements also marks an unwieldy and temporary assemblage, which harbours in it the uncertainties that follow from articulating other practices, projects, and materialities (Moore 2005).

Invoking the Biosphere in Defence of Place

Most local landowners like Etienne lived under the uncertainty of having land restitution claims on their properties. These claims were made by local groups or communities through the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994. This reclamation procedure posited that after publication of a land claim in the government gazette and research on the claim's validity by a purpose-built state commission (the so-called Regional Land Claims Commission), officials would enter into negotiations with property owners to seek ways of compensating the land claimants for the historical loss of land rights. Etienne faced two such land claims; one by the Hamasha family, who claimed historical rights to his private property, and another territorial claim by the Kutama traditional leadership that straddled numerous mountain properties. Etienne had maintained good relations with both groups, who had both been drawn into his network and included as beneficiaries in suggested development projects. The aforementioned Chief Kutama also featured on the executive board of his Hamasha Arts and Culture and Development Trusts.

For reasons unclear to me, the relationship with the Hamasha family turned sour. Etienne explained that he had received little response to his offer to allow the claimant community to come up the mountain and cut the exotic eucalyptus trees for firewood – a win-win situation in his mind – but otherwise offered little explanation as to why the dialogue was continued through the officials of the Land Claims Commission. Questions from officials regarding his stance as a 'willing seller' were initially met with a readiness to collaborate and enter into formal negotiations. However, rather than offering his property for land redistribution, he volunteered his assistance as an information broker collecting data from hard-to-reach private landowners. A 2006 e-mail to a senior commission official specifies his possible contribution:

I confirm our [Western Soutpansberg Conservancy] willingness to assist your Department with negotiations between claimants and landowners with the aim of arriving at a long term holistic and integrated land tenure and socio-economic solution for the area. In particular, we have an excellent working arrangement with the Kutama and Sinthemule Local Communities which are the two major communities in the area. Kgosi [Chief] Kutama has been involved in the process from the outset ... As agreed, as a first step, I confirm that you will obtain a list of all the properties on the Western Soutpansberg ... that have been gazetted [published in government gazette] and that are due to be gazetted with the aim of our assisting you in achieving the desired objectives. As stated to you, the proposed Biosphere Reserve has provided us with an opportunity of achieving these objectives. Due to the national and regional importance of conserving the bio-diverse Soutpansberg, the Biosphere process offers the basis of contributing towards a unique socio-economic solution for the economic upliftment of the local communities in the area.

The Biosphere reserve, which at the time was not yet awarded this status, was invoked here as a model to negotiate outstanding land restitution claims. The move implies a rescaling of a land claims process which usually unfolds at an individual property levels, to a scale in which the Conservancy could act as a key negotiating body. For the Land Claims Commission, which already faced considerable political pressure to deliver numbers of settlements, it meant surrendering its constitutional mandate to investigate and negotiate claims to an intermediary organisation.

When asked a few weeks later how negotiations with the Commission were proceeding, Etienne sighed, 'I am fighting a losing battle.' He was referring to being distrusted as a private landowner and was frustrated by how officials failed to 'look at the bigger picture' – the development of sustainable, integrated land use solutions at landscape level. He accused Commission officials of an unconstructive approach, focusing on his positionality as a private landowner in ways that reduced the dialogue between him, the land restitution claimants and state officials. Yielding a pamphlet of the aforementioned hoodia medicinal plant factory, he lambasted the officials' 'short-term vision':

They were very friendly, chatted to me at forehand, I had my slide projector there, and as I started talking, not halfway through my presentation, they interrupted me, in a very antagonistic, very rude, very intimidating way and said to me: 'Are you accepting the claim or are you going to oppose it?' My answer was, if the claim is valid I will consider accepting it, but I have not yet completed the research in ascertaining that decision, which I'm busy with. But I want to talk about the big picture, 'We are not interested in the bigger picture.' They got up and walked out.

By this time, Etienne had started to dispute the validity of the Hamasha family land claim. Having described commission officials as 'extremely militant' and conducting poor investigation into the validity of his land claims, he hired two anthropologists to do archive research into the historical land rights of his property and surrounding area. In keeping with colonial-era archive material, which tends to define blacks' land rights and sovereignty in terms of tribal rule, the researchers dismissed the Hamasha claim. In their view, historical evidence showed that the Hamasha clan could only ever be a mere sub-headman falling under Chief Kutama. With this new evidence, Etienne explained that he would only consider selling his land to Chief Kutama and bargained that he should retain his role as the manager of the eco-lodge and community projects he had initiated:

Now my personal view, and this is the anthropologists' preliminary finding, is that the rightful claimants are the other ones [Kutama]. When I speak to Khosi [Chief] Kutama we are at one with everything; there must be ownership, the rightful claimants must be acclaimed. If Hamasha is part of that valid claim so be it. Furthermore, I have considered personally the possibility of accepting that valid claim and then remaining there, that is one of the options discussed elsewhere in the country.

Indeed, precedent had been set in land restitution's various mentorship modalities, which allows former landowners to manage farms on behalf of rightful land restitution claimants in institutional arrangements like joint ventures or so-called Strategic

Partnerships (see Derman *et al.* 2010). A more concrete partnership proposal had actually been submitted by Etienne to the Commission around the same time. In it he presented his neighbour as a ‘willing seller’ and explained he could assist in redeveloping the farm into a ‘demonstration project’ in line with the Biosphere model. He tentatively offered his mountain property also as part of the deal under the following terms:

Notwithstanding the submission that there may not be a valid claim on Hamasha Wilderness, we [the Goldmann family] is [sic] willing to consider the inclusion of their property into the project, subject to the Goldmann family retaining the right to lease and manage the property.

He argued that such lease agreements should be considered as a general principle of post-apartheid rural development, ‘where existing expertise and experience currently exists’. This offer should also be understood in light of the way in which the land restitution programme has been widely criticised for handing over valuable land to inexperienced blacks who have no means and skills to develop it.

Two years later Etienne announced that he had finally achieved a ‘major breakthrough’: a constructive dialogue with officials who took a new stance towards his model-building ambition. He had invited Commission officials to his farm and connected them with seven members of the Biosphere Steering Committee. In Etienne’s words, the outcome was an ‘acceptance by the Land Claims Commission, of the Biosphere principles’ and a request from the commission for information from the DEAT Department, who had by then submitted the Biosphere Nomination form, to send details regarding the implications of the Biosphere Reserve. Consequently, the Provincial DEAT Manager wrote a letter to the leading Commission official entitled ‘the Significance of the Biodiversity of the Soutpansberg Mountain – a Framework to be Considered in Land Use Options and Land Use Management of the Land Claims Processes in the Area’. Although the Biosphere had not yet been awarded by UNESCO, it presented the division of the proposed Biosphere into zones as the instructive framework with which to ‘evaluate all proposed land use options that emanates from the land claims process’.

Quoting extracts from the nomination form, this letter extensively discussed the merits for acknowledging a buffer area and more especially the Soutpansberg Mountain as a bioregional hotspot for biodiversity, effectively presenting the Biosphere as an environmentally sensitive area in which the state has responsibility for limiting land use changes that affect its status. This can clearly be understood as a call to dismiss restitution claims that involve resettlement of community groups and agricultural activities not considered appropriate in terms of Biosphere principles. In acknowledgment of the lack of formal recognition as a protected area, the senior official stressed that formalisation was imminent: ‘the Soutpansberg mountain will be identified as a core area and must be declared a protected area according to the National Environmental protected Areas Act’.

Etienne continues to own and reside on his mountain property. Formal recognition of the Biosphere in national legislation is still pending, as is the installation of the prescribed formal management committee and management plan for the Vhembe Biosphere. Land restitution claims to the Western Soutpansberg have also reached a

virtual stand-still, with most land claims to mountain properties remaining unresolved due to their complex territorial nature and concerns over the lack of support to be given to claimant communities to sustainably use redistributed land and sustain livelihoods there.

Conclusion

This paper traces the various stages of an environmentalist project brokered by private landowners. It shows how well-positioned whites who face challenges to their land rights try to rework their subject position as landowners by constructing a form of trusteeship (see Li 2007a). Their new trustee position is due to them being 'invited in' by the state and the associated 'privatisation of the responsibility for development' enables them to claim and occupy strategic positions as champions of nature conservation-oriented development models and pro-community development projects. As has been argued elsewhere, brokerage unfolds against the background of competing elements of society in South Africa, including market-oriented growth strategies, neo-liberal discourse which stresses the self-management of conservation territories and redistributive policies aimed at improving the economic positions of the poor. Brokers use the opportunities that these competing elements provide to blend and rework them in meaningful ways, in turn suggesting the emergence of new brokerage roles (James 2011).

The trustees' role as expert mediator involve practices of translation whereby foreign models such as UNESCOs Man and Biosphere Reserve are tied to a local contexts. This requires the types of individual organisational, linguistic, relational and staging competencies that are associated with the work of brokers offering development assistance (Bierschenk *et al.* 2002; Mosse and Lewis 2006). Vague international frameworks like UNESCO's Biosphere leave room for interpretation and, in conjunction with state-induced mobilisation of 'local stakeholders', produced platforms for deliberating the Western Soutpansberg's future in a way that afforded white landowners considerable influence. It has been shown how the forging of alignments by a group of local Conservancy members and private landowners gave rise to adopting this model as a provincial spatial framework by the Environmental Department. Besides this territorialisation outcome, a parallel form of translation involved the creation of so-called 'demonstration projects' on the private properties of white trustees. The mediation role intended to connect with the 'man on the street' by employing community-oriented workshop formats and using a purpose-built Centre for Appropriate and Indigenous Knowledge to illustrate and justify the potential of community-public-private-partnerships. However, the way in which buildings and private property were employed in service of an imaginary of cross-community collaboration, marks the use of material, 'boundary places', which became new sites of interaction but also served to inscribe the distance between the disparate worlds of white trustee and community beneficiaries (see Koster 2014).

Such material and spatial imbrications of trusteeship, shed new light on how to conceptualise brokerage. Trustees did not act as mere go-betweens or intermediaries, mediating

between pre-existing developmental configurations. Their practices drew a dividing line between 'governing expert communities' and 'governed communities'; however, they were decidedly more productive of new arrangements and spatialities and powerful geographical imaginaries. In this regard, I suggest that the focus of much anthropological work in development studies on the gap between developmental schemes and their practice (see Li, 2007a) or actual outcomes (see Büscher 2013), misses the point that forms of brokerage impact and shape the very landscapes to be occupied by these brokers. In this light, the recent symbolical and material overlappings of such brokers are to be understood in terms of how they articulated with and responded to a situated history of racialised struggles over land and belonging (see Moore 2005; Hughes 2010).

Consequently, the moral ambiguities produced through state-trustee-community encounters revolve around the re-racialisation of place and territory. What was described as brokerage in 'defence of place' actually involved efforts to subvert the state programme of land reform through the imposition of new nature conservation frameworks. It also involved the entanglement of the subject positions of trustee and private landowner, and showed how the main protagonist of this paper blended these positions by suggesting new possibilities of staying on his property as farm manager whilst also leasing his property back to new landowning communities. In the context of competing land claims in rural South Africa, we witness how the ownership and entitlement associated with landed property, now shifts towards and becomes blended with ownership by white trustees over cultural products such as indigenous knowledge systems and cross-community management tools.

Notes

1. Where relevant, names and other identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy/identity of individuals.
2. Document by E. Goldmann entitled, 'The Potential for Sustainable Biosphere Development in the Limpopo Province. A Way Forward for the Soutpansberg and its People', 7 September 2004, material in private possession.

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