

NATURE

Vedaste Cituli and Christian Chiza



Behavynyl S 2025

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With the support of



Research commissioned by: Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD).

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Broadly speaking, the term “nature” refers to all the living (plants, animals) and non-living (minerals, water, fire) physical elements that exist on Earth. Other views consider these physical elements to be part of a larger system, such as an ecosystem, or biodiversity. The broadest interpretations associate nature with a cosmological dimension of harmony and wisdom.

Concept

What is the meaning of the concept of nature in terms of its various historical and geographical variations? Is there a consensus on the use of this term in scientific and media discourse? Not at all; several controversies have arisen.

Etymologically, the word nature is derived from the Latin verb *nascor*, which means to be born or to be forthcoming (Liogier, 2018; Ducarme, 2021). This verb therefore refers to one’s origin, to the manner of one’s birth. And from this verb comes the word *natura*, which refers to the idea of birth or origin (Liogier, 2018). In Latin philosophy, this relatively intuitive notion has been further complemented by a much more complex notion that has its origins in the Greek language, namely *phusis* (Ducarme & Couvet, 2020).

Phusis is derived from the verb *phuein*. It refers to that which becomes manifest because it is contained in the seed. Thus, *phusis* refers to the inherent self-growth of the plant, whose center of change is within rather than without. The term *phusis*

originates from the Indo-European root *bhū*, which refers to growth, especially in relation to vegetation (Naddaf, 2005, p. 168). This root is also found in other languages, such as the Pāli term *sabhava* and the Sanskrit term *svabhāva*. These terms refer to the actual nature of a given entity (Droz et al., 2022). For Merleau-Ponty, the concept of *phusis* helps to explain nature as an entity, the meaning of which cannot be determined by the mind (Merleau-Ponty & Séglaard, 1995).

This complex etymological journey has led different languages and fields of science to attach their own specific meanings to the mysterious concept of nature. In European philosophy, nature is understood in cosmological terms as the set of principles and foundations that define a living thing or being (Hess, 2013). As such, it refers to the intrinsic properties of a subject, its inherent qualities that allow it to be defined (Stroud, 2003). It is both its substance and all the specific characteristics that define it. Descola sees this as an understanding not only of matter, but also of the very nature of human beings (Descola, 2007). Nature, according to Hess, is a place of harmony and wisdom, an intelligence that governs the universe and ensures unity between the whole (the intelligible order) and matter within the sensible world (Hess, 2013). For the Stoics, nature is the source of the laws that shape human wisdom (Costa, 2015). All these trends objectify nature as a spatiotemporal reference and subjectify it as a physical entity (Bardelli, 2020a, p. 16).

Moreover, in ancient non-European philosophies, ancient Indian sages considered the substance or reality of nature to be the same as that of human beings. They saw nature as the natural culmination of the theory that the outer world and the inner world are governed by the same law of truth and righteousness (Datta, 1993). This ontological vision, which makes no distinction between human beings and nature, also characterized ancient Africans, especially indigenous peoples (Cituli et al., 2023).

Throughout history, a recurring debate has focused on whether nature is a non-human, spontaneous, and autonomous reality,

or whether it is defined in terms of interaction with humans. According to the culturalist thesis, nature is distinct from culture, which is human, social, intellectual, and technological. According to the naturalist thesis, however, nature includes both humans and society. The nature-culture pair is often associated with a third term, i.e., the supernatural. The supernatural may refer to occult forces, to the gods of polytheism, or to the one God of monotheism (Nay, 2008; Juignet, 2020); this force or forces then interact with the interconnection between humans and the environment around them.

European Christianity, for example, views nature as a divine creation of which humans are an integral part. Thus, the value of nature's existence lies in the kingdom of God (Callens, 2006). Driven by Christian ideas, nature (*natura*) began to be associated with the idea of creation (*creatio*). As a result, nature became the fruit of divine action and will (Droz et al., 2022). The question, then, is how do human beings interact with this divine creation? For some, humans are an integral part of nature; for others, humans dominate nature and have the right to exploit it. Other religions (Buddhism), however, have a different interpretation of the relationship between the supernatural, nature, and human beings (Datta, 1993).

Interpretations rooted in European Christianity have left their mark on the course of history, for example, in terms of how different scientific currents interpret the concept of nature. Rather than thinking of nature as a global entity, one might prefer to think in terms of the world and the universe. This distinction makes it possible to deconstruct nature, distinguish its various forms of existence, and visualize how these forms interact with each other (Juignet, 2020). While the natural sciences have tended to focus on the physical, chemical, and biological dimensions of nature, the social sciences have focused on its social dimensions. (Bardelli, 2020b). The environmental sciences combine both aspects. They understand nature as the environment with all its components. This includes the concept of the ecosystem and all existing relationships between humans and nature (Droz et al., 2022).

Over time, – and especially since the era of industrialization –, there have been fundamental changes in the Earth’s landscape. This has led to a radical change in the way we think about the interaction between landscape and human society. Different views have emerged: a harmonious relationship, a relationship opposed to and struggling with nature, or an ignorance of nature. (Geisler, 2003; Caubet, 2015; Couveinhes-Matsumoto, 2019; Sabourin, 2013). This has given rise to two trends within the environmental sciences. Some trends focus on the challenge of mitigating the perverse effects of human activities and promoting a more harmonious coexistence between humans and nature (Génot, 2000; Dumez et al., 2014). Others pit humanity against nature and see humans as the driving force behind their own destruction (Crutzen, 2007; Federau, 2017; Droz et al., 2022).

The latter trend is behind the conservation initiatives that have gained momentum in the 21st century. Amidst the anthropized spaces that now largely dominate the planet, conservationism aims to protect nature (Génot, 2000; Dumez et al., 2014). In addition to the careful conservation of the remaining ecosystems not yet exploited by humans, this approach also focuses on the protection of other socio-ecosystems, as well as all the complex relationships between the human and non-human worlds (Goffin,

all these debates show that the reflection on the concept of nature is fraught with contradictions and controversies.

1998). In the current Anthropocene, where capitalism takes precedence, conservation is at the forefront of the fight against environmental disasters (Ramouche, 2021). Others, however, see this initiative as a (neo) coloniality of nature that naturalizes places while dehumanizing them (Blanc, 2021; Lang, 2022). Moreover, it disregards the historical relation-

ships forged between humans and nature, as well as the different local perceptions associated with the nature-culture binomial (Descola, 2005).

Ultimately, all these debates show that the reflection on the concept of nature is fraught with contradictions and controversies. In the following section, we contextualize this debate within the African Great Lakes region. Specifically, we compare the views of nature held by students, environmental history teachers, political actors, and Batwa populations and their representatives.

Case studies

In this section, we summarize the different perceptions of the concept of 'nature' among scientists and an indigenous people in the African Great Lakes region. This analysis is based on data collected by Christian Chiza as part of his doctoral research conducted between 2022 and 2023, and on field studies undertaken by Vedaste Cituli in 2023 as part of his doctoral research. The first research project involved dialogues with secondary school history teachers in the city of Bukavu, in eastern DRC, while the second focused on Batwa populations and leaders in the Republic of Burundi and South Kivu, in eastern DRC, as well as students enrolled in the Faculty of Environment and Sustainable Development at ISDR-Bukavu. The aim of the study was to grasp their understanding of the concept of 'environment', 'nature', and the underlying ontological visions.

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It is worth mentioning that the concept of 'nature' can take on different meanings depending on the worldview, social status, and generation of the interlocutors. Despite this diversity of meanings, the politics of 'nature conservation' appears to be increasingly the primary reference when trying to assign meaning to nature. Most of the interviewees saw nature primarily as a means of protecting the environment.

Some of the students interviewed defined nature as “all elements surrounding humans [...], including all terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems”. For others, the ‘human’ element was absent from their representation of the environment. For instance, a student from the Department of Environment and Sustainable Development at ISDR-Bukavu asked, “Are you talking about nature? For us, it’s the ‘Mazingira’, which means ‘forest’ or ‘park’, and its components (flora and fauna)”. A history teacher at a secondary school in Bukavu defined nature as “the environment, the surrounding

elements, the physical milieu”. This exclusion suggests a divide between the environment (Ferdinand, 2019) and this history teacher’s social representation.

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In contrast, the Batwa indigenous people and their representatives saw the concept of nature as closely linked to their traditional habitat. To them, this concept refers to the forest, a space that transcends the mere agglomeration of trees and

includes the other living beings that inhabit it. In this sense, indigenous people see themselves as part of the forest, and therefore part of nature. This cosmological vision of indigenous peoples – which makes no distinction between the living and the non-living world – is further demonstrated when one talks about nature. According to a Mutwa representative from Burundi: “When we talk about nature, we see the forest where we used to live [...], unfortunately it has now been turned into a park” (Interview conducted in Bujumbura, on 29/07/2023).

However, this perception of nature – which is still widespread among the older generations – is no longer overwhelmingly shared by the new generations of indigenous people. For them, nature is synonymous with protected forests. These protected forests refer to all types of protected areas, mainly parks and nature reserves (Dudley, 2008).

Overall, our fieldwork shows that while some people see 'nature' as an 'environment', 'park' or 'forest', others see it as an 'ecosystem', 'physical environment' or 'something to be conserved'. Perceptions vary according to people's world-views, social status, and generation. Therefore, it is a multifaceted issue that requires multidimensional analysis. Throughout history, the definition of 'nature' has changed considerably and remains subject to multiple and often divergent or even contradictory interpretations.

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