INTRODUCTION

NATURE AS LOCAL HERITAGE IN AFRICA: LONGSTANDING CONCERNS, NEW CHALLENGES

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The concept of natural heritage or patrimony1 increasingly informs biodiversity conservation initiatives in Africa. The idea that a country’s natural resources constitute a heritage that local resource users have a stake in preserving and passing on to future generations represents an alternative approach to resource conservation that privileges local knowledge, control and management. This locally and culturally oriented conceptualization of natural resource conservation arises from the tensions and land-use conflicts associated with state-led conservation efforts that begged for alternative approaches (Anderson and Grove 1987; Neumann 1998; Moore 1993). The greater appreciation of indigenous resource management skills (Nietzschmann 1973; Richards 1985; Carney 2001) combined with political-economic reforms such as decentralization and land privatization, have sparked interest in grassroots ‘conservation with development’ approaches that are rooted in local cultures and their socio-spatial organizations (Peluso 1992; Stevens 1997; Western and Wright 1994). The concept of natural heritage draws attention to such alternative ‘regimes of nature management’ (Zerner 2000: 16), in which communities hold a stake in preserving species and landscapes on their own terms.

1 The word ‘heritage’ is the most common translation of the French term ‘patrimoine’ as opposed to the more literal translation of ‘patrimony’. For example, UNESCO translates the term ‘patrimoine naturel’ as ‘natural heritage’ in its foundational text, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, signed in 1972. From then on, ‘heritage’ has been used in all its official texts. Its common usage explains why we have adopted it in this set of articles. It goes without saying, however, that the terms used in specific countries and cultures are not always equivalent to ‘heritage’ and that their meaning varies according to different actors and historical and geographical contexts.
This shifting perspective on resource conservation, with its emphasis on local cultures and capacities, and the devolution of control to local communities, is promising but remains poorly conceptualized (Descola 1999; Dugast 2002; Posey 1999; Peluso and Watts 2001). This introduction and the articles that follow seek to contribute to these longstanding concerns and new challenges by examining natural heritage, territory and identity in relation to each other. At a time when neo-liberal reforms (decentralization, privatization) are being grafted onto community-based organizations and local knowledges, it is important that we give greater attention to how nature, communities, resources and management practices are conceptualized, prioritized and (re)configured to ensure that livelihoods and environments are truly enhanced in a sustainable and equitable manner.

The concept of natural heritage gained momentum in the debates surrounding the application of international conventions on the environment. The 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity posed the problem of the just and equitable distribution of benefits stemming from the use of biodiversity, and thus focused attention on the access to, management and control of natural resources especially by local actors. Conflicts over resource appropriation, their wise use or conservation and the role played by local communities raise a number of important questions linking notions of territory, natural heritage and environmental knowledge.

These linked notions are interpreted and manipulated according to certain interests and the dominance of environmental policy frameworks (Smouts 2001; Barbault et al. 2002; Martin 2002; Forsyth 2003). Their multiple meanings have elicited numerous debates within scientific communities (Jeudy 1990; Humbert and Lefeuvre 1992; Babelon and Chastel 1994; Nora 1997; Brechin et al. 2003; Fairhead and Leach 2003). In the context of the global North, they have been the object of numerous publications over the past twenty years (Lamy 1996; Poulot 1998; Chevallier 2000; Rautenberg et al. 2000). In contrast to the many conferences and publications on the topics of land rights and territories in Africa (Bassett and Crummey 1993; Blanc-Pamard and Boutrais 1994; Blanc-Pamard and Cambrezy 1995; Blanc-Pamard and Boutrais 1997; Benjaminsen and Lund 2001; Juul and Lund 2002), there has been relatively little written on the theme of natural heritage (Graham et al. 2000; Chaléard and Pourtier 2000; Bart et al. 2002). This gap in our understanding motivated the creation of the interdisciplinary research group Heritage and Territory (UR026) at the French Institute of Research for Development in the National Museum of Natural History, Paris, a group that subsequently became Heritage, Territory and Identity (UR169). Research conducted by this group was the focus of an international symposium held at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in April 2003.

The ‘patrimonialization’ of nature – that is, the construction of nature as heritage or patrimony, and its transmission from generation to generation – is often considered a tool for sustainable natural resource management. Research conducted in Africa and Madagascar reveals
the diversity of processes and actors involved in the making of natural heritage (Cormier-Salem et al. 2002). Three main and closely related questions have been the objects of our investigations. The first concerns the pertinence of the notion of natural patrimony in the context of African countries, the criteria for selection, and the status of the living elements that are viewed as heritage objects. The second embraces the actors and the logic of their strategies. The third considers the effects of these processes in terms of their environmental and socio-economic dynamics, and the links between claims to heritage, territory and identity. These questions were debated over the course of the symposium and continue to be the subject of our fieldwork in diverse sites in Africa. This introduction outlines the initial results of our research and sketches future research directions.

THE PERTINENCE OF THE NOTION OF NATURAL HERITAGE IN AFRICA

Is this notion a simple transfer of a Western idea and thus a certain conception of nature to Africa? The idea of patrimony, the origins of which lie in civil law and Western religions with reference to the goods inherited from the father – the primary meaning derives from the Latin word *patrimonium* (Rey 1992) – has in our time a much wider referent than the family, designating the objects and places valued in the memory of a nation, and even of humanity, that are preserved and transmitted to successive generations. It tends to be applied to a large range of domains from historical monuments to immaterial goods. In the global North, the heightened interest in natural heritage is related to concerns about putting in place effective policies for environmental protection. What is the situation in Africa?

To evaluate the pertinence of this notion to African societies, field research was undertaken in diverse political ecological settings, from the Sahel (Niger, Burkina Faso) and savanna regions (Cameroon, northern Côte d’Ivoire) to the tropical forest (Côte d’Ivoire, Benin) in West Africa. Methodologically, two principal ways of identifying heritage objects were employed: the first involved searching for equivalent terms and corresponding categories in local languages; the second consisted of identifying natural elements considered by local communities to be sufficiently important to be conserved and elevated to a status comparable to that of natural heritage.

Thus, in the light of the state of knowledge and the results of our initial research, it turns out that the notion of heritage, however much it refers to Western systems of thought, resonates with multiple meanings in Africa. The terminology and the social-historical forms vary considerably according to different contexts. Nevertheless, one encounters the characteristic attributes of a heritage object which have already been described elsewhere (Babelon and Chastel 1994; Cormier-Salem and Roussel 2000). These features are threefold and inextricably related. First, in order for a natural object to be recognized as having heritage status, it must be inherited from the ancestors. Second, it must
be transmitted to descendants. And third, the patrimonial object must be managed in a sustainable manner by a group that identifies itself with that object. This final feature, group identity, is a fundamental trait. A group must have a stake in the heritage object. The consciousness of heritage-making expresses itself at multiple scales, from the level of the family (clan, lineage, etc.) to the national and global levels.

Diverse living elements can be utilized and protected as heritage. All levels of biodiversity are concerned, from the infra-specific level of animal races (see the contribution of Boutrais on cattle breeds in this issue) and plant varieties (see Elias and Carney in this issue on the shea butter tree) to the landscape and ecosystem levels (see the article by Bassett et al. or Cormier-Salem 2006 on mangrove). Heritage can also consist of products, practices and knowledge related to certain aspects of the living thing (see Roussel and Verdeaux on the products of Ethiopian gardens). It can also be comprised of the logic and social systems that these natural elements support in some way: a relation to nature, a place or past, to modes of appropriation, rules of use, or specialization (see Luning in this issue on lineage-held lands).

Of course, these designations are not unchanging. Certain elements can lose their heritage status while others might acquire it. The content of a natural heritage is thus susceptible to alterations in the context of religious and political change, environmental transformations or diffusion of new ideas, products and peoples (through migration, for example). In Africa the erosion or transformation of ancestral cults by the spread of Islam and Christianity has turned sacred groves into profane places that are no longer protected from the axe (Dugast 2002; Juhé-Beaulaton and Roussel 2002). Thus certain elements that were previously the object of implicit or explicit conservation measures have now lost their meaning and value and are no longer preserved. Such is the case with certain cattle races or formerly taboo animals. Conversely, new natural elements can be invested with a patrimonial or identity dimension. This is the case, for example, of many varieties and products of maize and manioc, plants that were introduced to Africa from the Americas (Chastanet 1998).

MULTIPLE ACTORS, STRATEGIES AND SCALES OF NATURAL HERITAGE CONSTRUCTION

The process of creating natural heritage in Africa is evidenced by the lists of threatened species and protected spaces that continue to grow. At first sight, two major types of processes can be identified: exogenous ones that originate at the international scale and endogenous ones that are more locally derived. In many instances, the two merge and thus become indistinguishable in origin (Fairhead and Leach 2003).

The best-known and principal processes involved in the making of natural heritage are associated with foreign actors, environmental lobbies, large non-governmental conservation organizations (the World Wide Fund for Nature, the World Conservation Union, Conservation...
International) and scientific experts who together are the principal instigators of the official lists of endangered and protected species. One only has to cite the red list of CITES (Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species), the biosphere reserves of UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Programme, and the World Natural and Cultural Heritage sites as evidence of these external designations of natural patrimony. The history of these exogenous designations is well documented (Mackenzie 1988; Grove 1996; Neumann 1998; Adams 2004). They date from the late nineteenth century with the establishment during the colonial period of game reserves for hunting by foreigners and continue today in the creation of national parks by modern states (Rodary et al. 2004). This history is replete with exactions made on the peoples living in or adjacent to the protected areas who have frequently been expelled, displaced and deprived of access to and use of their customary resources. It also provides many examples of imbalanced land-use patterns between protected areas that are little more than private reserves of a foreign elite engaged in trophy hunting or ecotourism, and non-protected areas that are subject to intense demographic pressure and overuse of resources.

As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the construction of natural heritage can be advanced by local populations and organizations. There are, for example, totemic species and sacred forests that can be considered forms of biodiversity conservation (Figure 1). In addition, there are village lands (terroirs) and territories upon which local peoples depend for their livelihoods, with which they identify and which they control through ritual offices (see the contributions of Bassett et al. and Luning in this issue). These customary institutions, more or less formalized and recognized by official institutions, play a major role in the development, management and control of resources that are susceptible to gaining heritage status. One must nevertheless emphasize that these local organizations are far from being homogenous and unchanging. Their power and legitimacy for laying claim to a patrimony according to the larger political, economic and social contexts. We return to this point, which is critical to understanding the limits and contradictions of participatory natural resource management policies.

For each of these processes, whether they be official or not, and whether they emanate from an administrative initiative or from a local community, the choices made are as diverse as the cultural representations of nature that underlie them. Official designation of elements of biodiversity is often based on scientific approaches to nature: the rarity of a species and the floristic diversity of a site justify its classification (see Adou and Roussel in this issue). But other criteria exist. The Paris Convention, for example, takes into consideration the aesthetic, symbolic and historical value of retained sites. The fact remains that ‘spectacular’ and ‘cornucopia’ nature tends to be over-represented in official lists while more banal elements of biodiversity, or those that do not enjoy a favourable public image, are more often forgotten (Slater 2000). Lists of protected species are much richer in dolphins and orchids than in cockroaches and ants, and enchanting
FIGURE 1 Sacred grove in the city of Korhogo, Côte d’Ivoire. Photo: T. Bassett, 1981.

places are more often established as heritage sites than foetid swamps (Cormier-Salem 2006).

The articles in this collection illustrate the complex logics inherent in the decisions and choices guiding the making of heritage objects (and, conversely, their non-designation), and allow us to investigate the role of specific processes more effectively. For example, is the religious process of making places, spaces and species sacred a form of heritage making? In the realm of cultural identity, what might be the links between the heritage status of a natural object or a specific technique with its place of origin, a terroir, or its association with a particular culture? Are there aesthetic and visual criteria such as the beautiful, the rare and the useful that enter into the definition of the heritage object? If so, how do these criteria articulate within these societies? How do struggles over controlling the economic value of natural heritage engender conflicts (over evictions, opportunistic hunting and logging, for example) that result in the impoverishment of these spaces of heritage building? Does the link often thought to exist between biodiversity protection and poverty reduction have any
meaning outside of conservation discourses? What environmental policy initiatives lead to resource depletion or preservation? What are the political motivations and implications of creating protected areas for the management of natural heritage by local groups? Finally what cultural value is accorded to the concept of biodiversity by local groups? Why is it that the value of diversity is so often reduced to its most simple utilitarian expression?

Of course, one must also be aware of naive and populist conceptions of what constitutes local communities. These are typically ridden with internal contradictions between seniors and juniors, men and women, herders and farmers. The notion of the ‘local’ is ambiguous since it encompasses actors with divergent interests, practices and affiliations. The complexity of the term is evident in the categories of local resource users that appear in the conservation literature. Divisions are often made between ‘autochthonous’ persons (locals, residents) and ‘allogenes’ (migrants, strangers), between ‘indigenous’ populations and ‘immigrants’, and between administrative authorities and resource users.

This diversity of actors and resource management goals often produces conflicting views. What is seen by some to be a natural heritage and worthy of conservation is viewed by others as a constraint on development. What for some is a ‘spectacular’ species or territory is simply ordinary for others. Nor is there much agreement on how these contested resources are to be managed. Contentious views over the value and function of the biophysical world lead to competition and conflict over resources and territories.

The designation of nature as heritage thus mobilizes numerous actors and institutions from the local to the global scales. Our research underscores the frequent discordances between exogenous and endogenous processes. While the former tend to privilege environmental questions and the conservation of nature, the latter are more often preoccupied with the reproduction of their social systems and the preservation of their traditions, culture and resource rights. This dichotomy between local and global processes, and the endogenous and exogenous, simplifies a more complex reality. In fact the making of natural heritage brings into play a host of actors who, at their different levels, reinterpret the project, give it their own readings and adapt it to suit their needs. Natural heritage-making is thus a complex process that entails negotiations, recompositions and institutional reconfigurations (Pottier et al. 2003) that invariably change the meaning and substance of the patrimonial object. As ‘nature’ is preserved and memorialized, the object itself changes into a socio-natural thing or hybrid that reflects its conjoined biophysical and social realities (Forsyth 2003: 85–91; Mitchell 2002: 50–3). When it becomes entangled with struggles over land, natural heritage-making can become the locus of considerable tension and conflict. It can also become the source of innovations.
Heritage claims in Africa often serve to mediate territorial and identity claims (Berry 1993; Zerner 2000; Cormier-Salem et al. 2005). Land rights play an important role in this construction of collective attachment to the biophysical world. By this we mean a relationship that goes beyond agricultural land and its appropriation and encompasses resource uses besides farming, such as fishing, livestock raising, hunting and gathering. Access to these resources seems less defined by the mode of appropriation than by socio-spatial rights of access and use, as well as of exclusion. They have been the subject of a number of works of synthesis and management manuals (Reyna and Downs 1988; Le Bris et al. 1991; Bassett and Crummey 1993; Le Roy et al. 1996, Lavigne Delville 1998) that underscore the inadequacy of Western conceptual tools to local circumstances. Geographers associated with the French Institute for Development Research have been particularly engaged in advancing our understanding on this issue from the publication of the case studies comprising the *Atlas des terroirs et des structures agraires* to the recent series of publications coordinated by Blanc-Pamard and Boutrais (1994) (see also Bassett et al. in this issue).

The allocation of heritage status to an object often seems to be induced by its rarity (real or perceived) or by the difficulties posed by its access and control. Each heritage process is accompanied by a change in territorial organization and rights of access and resource appropriation in an area (Berkes 1989; Le Roy 1999; Smouts 2001). Indigenous and local communities that historically have been excluded from conservation territories are increasingly being designated as the privileged beneficiaries of these areas (Cormier-Salem 2003 and 2006; Stevens 1997). In keeping with the Convention on Biological Diversity and in view of the co-viability of ecological and social systems (a reconciliation of environment and development), the transfer of resource management authority to local communities (Ostrom et al. 2002) is becoming more common, especially in the current context of the disengagement of African states and decentralization (Hulme and Murphee 2001).

The construction of nature as heritage is a source of conflicting interests and competition, but it can also be the source of innovative modes of community-based natural resource management. The valuing of local knowledge and places through geographical origins labelling (Bérard and Marchenay 2004; Bérard et al. 2005) or through ecotourism (or nature-based tourism) are just two contrasting alternatives to either utilitarian exploitation or exclusionist protected reserves. The diversity of resource use innovations related to conservation includes the development of new and the reinforcement of old uses (aquaculture, agro-forestry), the taking back of reserves by displaced communities, the multiplication of land management projects (small dams, multi-use protected areas). Ecotourism is often promoted as a sustainable use of biodiversity, in connection with the localized protection of species that
have become rare such as large mammals and unusual trees. However, ecotourism can itself engender new resource conflicts or occur in places that are difficult to access because of poor infrastructure. If it is to be an alternative to resource depletion and rural outmigration, ecotourism must be accessible and its benefits widely distributed amongst local people if they are to have a stake in conserving ‘their’ natural heritage (Young 2003).

This range of conservation initiatives leads one to identify the agents, places and networks implicated in the innovation processes. Some of these strategies seek to take advantage of favourable conditions such as the emergence of new markets and technologies that give added value to place-based resources and production processes. Other strategies are more defensive in nature, in that they respond to particular constraints such as population movements and fluctuating river courses. In some cases, newly adopted techniques and management schemes (territorially based resource management plans, for example) seek to marginalize newly arrived peoples by labelling them as ‘non-local’.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Natural and social scientists are in some agreement in recognizing four levels of biodiversity: genes, species, ecosystems and, finally, societies and their practices (Barbault et al. 2002). Technical ecological knowledge, long ignored if not denigrated by experts of the global North (Richards 1985; Scott 1998), is now viewed not only as a tool for conservation of biological diversity but as in itself a heritage object worthy of conservation (Posey 1999; Cormier-Salem and Roussel 2002; Bérard et al. 2005). This new paradigm is finding numerous expressions in conservation policies at the international, national, regional and local scales and has opened up a vast field of research.

A first set of questions bears on the ambivalent notion of ‘local’ (autochthonous, indigenous, traditional), on the legitimacy of local actors in claiming a natural heritage and marginalizing or excluding other actors’ access to it, and on the risks of freezing local practices in time and space and thus stifling local innovations (Peters 1996; Zerner 2000). Indeed, one striking contradiction of natural heritage making is the impoverishment of biodiversity when the elevation and preservation of one species or product and its associated practical know-how takes place at the expense of others (Bérard and Marchenay 1998, 2004; Barham 2003; Bérard et al. 2005; see Roussel and Verdeaux in this issue).

A second set of interrogations centres on the links between heritage management and long-term development. Under what circumstances do customary institutions, social practices and cultural values participate, intentionally or not, in natural resource conservation (Johannes 1989)? Are local communities, by virtue of their proximity to natural resources, the most capable of preserving them (Dugast 2002)? In Africa, examples and counter-examples abound of populations of
would-be environmentalists who cut down forests, set fires and slaughter wildlife when the state attempts to enclose their customary lands as protected areas (Neumann 1998; Kull 2004).

A third set of questions concerns the preservation of local environmental knowledge, its economic value and its legal protection. Thus, instruments such as ‘geographical indications’ or ‘regional parks’ constitute both legal measures and alternative public policies for biodiversity conservation. The main question is their social acceptability, whether they enhance or diminish diversity, and their economic repercussions. Concerning the latter, it is important to evaluate the profits, market and non-market, to estimate their direct and indirect effects at diverse levels (economic, social) and multiple scales (local, global), and to understand the strategies of the actors (individual or collective innovators; endogenous and exogenous innovations) implicated in the heritage-making process. It is also important to consider the regimes of appropriation of patrimonial resources and to analyse the processes of coordination and negotiation aimed at the definition and application of new legislative and institutional frameworks – the ‘certification’ of certain sites or skills, for example.

This special issue is a good opportunity to highlight the principal questions raised by the conservation of resources and the implication of new public policies whose watchwords are: the fight against poverty, environmental justice, sustainable development, and conservation with development, as it is expressed through win–win ecology (Rosenzweig 2003). Whether environmental conservation and economic development are reconciled depends on the influence and agendas of certain stakeholders involved in environmental policy making. Sustainable development, defined as the successful reconciliation of environment and development, is thus a political objective and outcome. As the contributions to this volume emphasize, the conservation of biodiversity is as much a social and political issue as an environmental one.

Despite its prominence in conservation and development forums in Africa, the notion of natural heritage is an ambiguous scientific concept and it is difficult to operationalize. Its construction is not always related to pressing environmental problems and it also fails to address the needs of the societies concerned. These processes generally surpass the strict framework of biodiversity protection to become the object of social, economic, legal and political struggles that are difficult to control. They lead us to raise questions about the discordances or divergences between heritage, territory and identity claims.

Moreover, they place local communities and indigenous peoples at centre stage whose commitment to nature conservation should not be assumed. Having long been viewed as the principal destroyers of the environment, local resource users are now considered to be the guardians of our planetary garden. Yet they are often little prepared or motivated to assume this role if conservation initiatives threaten to undermine resource access and use, and opportunities to improve their livelihoods. The effectiveness and long-term nature of conservation efforts are not foregone conclusions. They depend on the outcome of
negotiations and particular power relations among all the actors that preside over the construction of nature as heritage.

THE CASE STUDIES

The articles collected in this special issue do not pretend to address all the questions raised by the social construction of nature as heritage. They aim, rather, to illustrate the complexity of the processes at work by way of multiple case studies and analytical frameworks. They bring original and complementary insights as they investigate heritage making at different spatial scales and levels of biological and social diversity. The sequencing of the contributions follows a scalar logic that goes from the micro to the macro levels, from species-specific examples to entire landscapes and social systems, and from local resource use to international discourses and interventions.

Thus, Jean Boutrais’s focus on cattle races among Fulani cattle herders of West Africa is situated at the species level. Boutrais first demonstrates that the idea of natural patrimony exists among the Fulani but that it is also a very dynamic notion. Fulani pastoralists of Cameroon and Burkina Faso idealize certain cattle breeds for their appearance and performance to the point that these breeds form part of the Fulani’s cultural identity. Yet, when they migrate into ecological zones that adversely affect animal health or performance (in terms of milk yields or productivity, for example), they are quick to cross their cattle with local breeds for the advantages that crossbreeding confers. The Fulani’s contrasting discourses and practices provide an excellent example of the social construction of nature. On the one hand, the Fulani’s notion of an ideal cattle breed that is passed on from generation to generation conveys a sense of unchanging nature. However, their active manipulation of ancestral breeds contradicts this static notion of natural heritage preservation. The new breeds, like the old, are actively selected and valued by pastoralists under changing social and ecological conditions. One could argue that it is both these crossbreeding skills and the idealized cattle breed itself that are the objects of heritage conservation among the Fulani.

The contribution of Marlène Elias and Judith Carney is similarly situated at the species level – the shea nut tree – although the scope of their inquiry, like that of Boutrais, transcends the individual species. Their discussion moves from the local user to the international consumer and addresses the implications of the multiple relationships along the shea commodity chain for rural women’s livelihoods in Burkina Faso.

First, Elias and Carney conceptualize African shea butter as a natural heritage product that is strongly gendered. Women are the principal collectors and processors of shea nuts. The nut-processing knowledge and techniques are handed down from mother to daughter. Differences in butter processing and shea tree management produce regionally distinctive shea butter whose quality is appreciated by buyers and sellers.
of shea products. Second, complementing Roussel and Verdeaux’s article on the potential of marketing Ethiopian heritage products in the geographical indicators framework, Elias and Carney argue that the growing demand for shea butter by cosmetic firms and chocolate companies bodes well for improving African women’s incomes and agro-forestry protection. However, there are multiple links in the shea commodity chain that suggest that these anticipated benefits may not be captured by rural African women. First, men’s claims to shea trees in parklands under their control affect women’s access to this primary resource. Men are increasingly seeking to profit from the shea nut economy by requiring women to share some of their profits. Second, the mechanization of butter processing and the quality regulations associated with geographical indications and fair trade criteria threaten to standardize the in situ heritage of shea butter processing and shea tree management. Third, the greater role played by large food companies in processing shea butter is creating a neo-colonial trade structure in which African women sell raw shea nuts that are processed overseas rather than in their communities. These trends suggest that the cultural and botanical heritage of shea is at a crossroads.

The third contribution is situated at the level of humid forest ecosystem in Côte d’Ivoire, specifically in the classified forest of the Monogaga. The originality of this work by Adou Yao and Bernard Roussel is threefold. First, they take an ethnobotanical approach to local land use and floristic categories that they then use as the basis of their phyto-ecological study of woody vegetation. Second, they take a comparative approach to examine the impacts of local farming practices and state management of forest cover on species diversity. Their findings are innovative for Côte d’Ivoire and Africa in general by challenging the commonplace image of forest farmers as destroyers of forest ecosystems and by contrasting farmers’ and botanists’ appraisals of what constitutes valuable species. Thus, the value accorded by botanists to certain species and their heritage status derives from diverse criteria such as rarity, endemism, and their being exemplary of a certain vegetation type. These criteria are not the same as those used by forest farmers in evaluating forest ‘wealth’. Farmers are not attracted to the ‘dark forests’ of the botanists but rather to old fallows and secondary forests. Yet this case study finds old forest fields to be richer than ‘black forests’. In the end, what farmers seek to transmit to future generations is the practical knowledge and land rights that make living in forests possible over the long term.

The following two contributions examine the relationship between the construction of natural heritage and territory. Sabine Luning asks what it is that constitutes natural heritage: the land-based resources, or the knowledge and ritual practices that make this land productive? Her case study among the Maane sub-group of the Moose (formerly spelt Mossi) of Burkina Faso focuses on the creation of ritual territories and the role of land priests in managing relationships between human and land spirits to ensure both human and land productivity. The Maane link land degradation to the erosion of customary institutions
and knowledge, to ritual neglect, and to the diminished authority of land priests. While the Maane recognize that demographic pressure has produced demand for arable land on the Moose (Mossi) plateau, they ultimately interpret the disappearance of the bush as a consequence of a breakdown in their socio-cultural system.

Thomas Bassett, Chantal Blanc-Pamard and Jean Boutrais discuss the origins and evolution of the terroir concept in the French geography and development planning literatures as an example of the shifting meaning of socio-natural heritage. As first developed by French academic geographers, the terroir approach revealed how nature–society interactions produced distinctive cultural landscapes that expressed a group’s socio-spatial organization. The parklands of the Moose of Zaongho in Burkina Faso and the mountain terraces of the Mafa of northern Cameroon were mapped and interpreted as constituting the socio-natural heritage of these groups. Today, the notion of terroir as local heritage is instrumentalized by African governments, international aid donors and NGOs in their quest for politically correct spaces of intervention for wildlife preservation and land privatization. In their hands, the terroir has become a mode of governance that aims to modify local resource use, control and access patterns to conform to the objectives of conservation and development planners. The process of constructing these so-called culturally appropriate action spaces has turned these neo-terroirs into arenas of land-use conflict as certain groups view them as vehicles for reclaiming the heritage of their ancestors that has fallen into the hands of ‘outsiders’. This instrumentalization of the terroir, with its emphasis on ‘autochthonous’ rights and control of conservation and development territories, has transformed these more inclusive heritage spaces of French geography into terroirs of exclusion and violence.

The last contribution, by Bernard Roussel and François Verdeaux, evaluates the potential of geographical indications, or origins labelling, as an instrument of biodiversity conservation, with special emphasis on the preservation of local knowledge. The authors analyse the challenges in developing such a system in the case of Ethiopia, renowned as the origin of many plants and products, notably coffee. Beside the issues of the legitimacy and efficacy of transferring this Northern expertise (France’s origins-labelling know-how, for example) to the global South, two questions appear particularly pertinent for this special issue: Who owns this knowledge? How should it be remunerated? The first question leads to an evaluation of the status of the keepers of knowledge, and especially of the juridical standing of local communities. The second question is more economic and leads one to reflect on the just and equitable distribution of profits derived from the valorization of local knowledge.

This final contribution does not end this issue but rather opens up an array of questions on the nature of local heritage: from whom and for whom is it transferred? Is socio-natural heritage a public or private good? Who comprise the communities that make claims to nature as a local heritage? As the contributions to this special issue demonstrate,
there is no one definition of the ‘local’ since it is always a socio-spatial arena in which identity and resource control are tightly intertwined in determining who is local or who isn’t. The diversity of case studies, approaches and perspectives presented in this collection may stimulate further debate about the stakes of socio-natural heritage preservation and the place of local peoples at negotiating tables.

REFERENCES


