

# ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: THE CASE OF NALUS AS AN ARENA OF ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICT

*Governança ambiental no Antropoceno: o caso de Nalus como arena de conflito ontológico*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine how the creation of an environmental preservation project in Cantanhez, Guinea-Bissau, fits into a structural context of economic and ideological interests that generate conflicts between different ontological perspectives regarding the utility of nature. To achieve this goal, neoliberal institutions that shape democracy under the influence of Holocene thought (Hardt, 2019) are questioned; this thought has established the main categories of contemporary environmental governance and the political instruments that determine ways of relating to the environment. The methodological conduct adopted in this work consists of a qualitative approach, whose techniques include a literature review and documentary analysis. Perspectives are presented that intertwine an ontological approach challenging the hegemonic bases of Western environmental governance, without losing sight that these bases integrate the environment into a neoliberal eco-market where the knowledge underpinning ontological modes of nature-society mediation gains eco-mercantile value. Therefore, debating environmental governance in the Anthropocene implies problematizing the ontological assumptions of environmental governance of neoliberal democratic institutions.

**Keywords:** Environmental Governance; Anthropocene; Ontological Conflict; Guinea-Bissau.

## RESUMO

O propósito deste artigo é examinar como a criação de um projeto de preservação ambiental em Cantanhez, Guiné-Bissau, encaixa-se em um contexto estrutural de interesses econômicos e ideológicos que geram conflitos entre diferentes perspectivas ontológicas sobre a utilidade da natureza. Para alcançar esse objetivo, questionam-se as instituições neoliberais que moldam a democracia sob a influência do pensamento holoceno (Hardt, 2019), o qual tem estabelecido as principais categorias da governança ambiental contemporânea e os instrumentos políticos que determinam modos de se relacionar com o ambiente. O conduto metodológico adotado neste trabalho constitui-se a partir de uma abordagem qualitativa, cujas técnicas consistem em uma revisão de literatura e análise documental. Apresentam-se perspectivas que entrelaçam uma abordagem ontológica que contesta as bases hegemônicas da governança ambiental ocidental sem perder de vista que são essas bases que integram o ambiente a um eco-mercado neoliberal onde os conhecimentos que fundamentam os modos ontológicos de intermediação natureza-sociedade ganham valor eco-mercantil.

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Portanto, debater a governança ambiental no Antropoceno implica problematizar os pressupostos ontológicos de governança ambiental das instituições democráticas neoliberais.

**Palavras-chave: Governança Ambiental; Antropoceno; Conflito ontológico; Guiné-Bissau.**

## RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es examinar cómo la creación de un proyecto de preservación ambiental en Cantanhez, Guinea-Bisáu, se inserta en un contexto estructural de intereses económicos e ideológicos que generan conflictos entre diferentes perspectivas ontológicas sobre la utilidad de la naturaleza. Para lograr este objetivo, se cuestionan las instituciones neoliberales que moldean la democracia bajo la influencia del pensamiento holoceno (Hardt, 2019), el cual ha establecido las principales categorías de la gobernanza ambiental contemporánea y los instrumentos políticos que determinan modos de relacionarse con el medio ambiente. La metodología adoptada en este trabajo consiste en un enfoque cualitativo, cuyas técnicas incluyen una revisión bibliográfica y análisis documental. Se presentan perspectivas que entrelazan un enfoque ontológico que cuestiona las bases hegemónicas de la gobernanza ambiental occidental sin perder de vista que son estas bases las que integran el medio ambiente en un eco-mercado neoliberal donde los conocimientos que fundamentan los modos ontológicos de intermediación naturaleza-sociedad adquieren valor eco-mercantil. Por lo tanto, debatir la gobernanza ambiental en el Antropoceno implica problematizar los supuestos ontológicos de la gobernanza ambiental de las instituciones democráticas neoliberales.

**Palabras clave: Gobernanza Ambiental; Antropoceno; Conflicto Ontológico; Guinea-Bisáu.**

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues extend beyond the mere formulation of public policies, embedding themselves in a broader framework for understanding and interpreting diverse realities. These realities, being inherently contextual and situational, defy universal approaches, making environmental governance an ontological battleground. Central to these disputes is the critique of modernist ontologies, particularly in the Anthropocene — a human-dominated epoch that challenges traditional governance paradigms. The interplay between competing ontological perspectives shapes how policies are conceived, negotiated, and implemented, revealing profound implications for both local and global environmental strategies.

This article examines environmental governance within neoliberal democratic frameworks, focusing on its roots in Holocene thinking, which assumes environmental stability and anthropocentric dominance. By exploring the establishment of Cantanhez National Park in Guinea-Bissau, the analysis highlights ontological conflicts between local communities and externally driven actors in conservation efforts. Employing qualitative methods — literature review, document analysis, and participant observation — the research investigates how governance practices reflect and contest hegemonic ontological assumptions. These methods enable a nuanced critique of the intersection between local knowledge systems and global governance norms.

The first section traces the historical establishment of Guinea-Bissau's Cantanhez National Park and examines ontological dimensions of environmental challenge management. Contrasting traditional local lifeways, it analyzes how this process is intertwined with neoliberal frameworks for addressing environmental and community concerns. This section concludes with a case study of territorial disputes within the park. The second section explores the concept of the Anthropocene and its critiques, highlighting how modernist worldviews have shaped governance practices in the Global South. It also delineates how Western ontological frameworks commodify nature, juxtaposing them with relational, non-anthropocentric perspectives. As a foundational mode of existence, ontology shapes institutional and interpersonal relationships, frames political agendas, and defines the significance of environmental factors. This foundational perspective has significant practical implications for addressing socioecological challenges in the Anthropocene.

The third section probes ontological dimensions of environmental governance, emphasizing the complex interrelationships between humans and non-human nature and the power hierarchies shaping socioecological dynamics. It interrogates the limitations of Holocene thinking — predicated on environmental stability — and foregrounds the evolving human-nature relationship in a rapidly changing world through the lens of the Anthropocene. The discussion underscores the need for environmental governance to adopt inclusive approaches that incorporate diverse ontologies, particularly those of marginalized groups in the Global

South. This section further examines the ontological implications of the Anthropocene, advocating a shift from anthropocentrism to relational frameworks emphasizing human-non-human interconnectedness. It engages concepts such as intra-action, multinaturalism, and ontics, proposing an ethical reorientation grounded in ecological interdependence and interspecies solidarity.

The conclusion synthesizes the intricate relationships between environmental governance, the Anthropocene, and ontological conflicts in Guinea-Bissau. It reveals how conservation initiatives, land acquisition, and intergenerational/ethnic disputes manifest divergent valuations of nature. To navigate Anthropocene governance challenges, it calls for inclusive strategies that tackle socioeconomic inequalities, center local communities, and honor ontological pluralism. Ultimately, it argues that sustainability and justice require holistic solutions fostered through dialogue, collaboration, and equity.

## 1. THE ENVIRONMENT AS AN OBJECT OF CONTESTATION: THE CASE OF NALUS AS AN ARENA OF ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICT

The environment often becomes an arena of ontological conflict due to different worldviews, ontologies, and cosmologies underlying conflicts around the environment. In other words, the treatment of the environment, according to Jalcione Almeida (2016), can be understood through three main approaches. The first one is related to management and conservation, influenced by neoclassical economics and consequently the emergence of environmental economics. The second approach views the environment as a stage for social conflicts. The third approach considers the environment because of overcoming old paradigms and the search for new “models” influenced by a systemic perspective.

Regarding the first approach, Emma Marris (2011) argued that the concept of an unaltered and untouched nature is illusory, as nature is constantly changing. Marris (2011) challenges the conventional idea that the purpose of preservation is to restore nature to a state prior to human influence. According to Marris, it is necessary to consider human involvement in maintaining biodiversity, which requires establishing realistic and sustainable goals for conservation and preservation.

It is important to keep in mind that conservation activities can involve conflicts over the management of a particular natural resource, which leads us to the second approach. In *Cultivating the Nile: The Everyday Politics of Water in Egypt*, Jessica Barnes (2014) examined how the administration of Nile River water played a crucial role in shaping political and social dynamics over time. Barnes (2014) explored the concept of hydro-politics, which addresses the intersection of political issues and water resource management, investigating how water control intertwines with the exercise of political power and how water-related decisions can have significant implications for a country’s political and social stability.

By describing the everyday practices related to access, supervision, and use of water, Barnes (2014) argued that the criteria determining the direction of water flow in each part of the irrigation network, the distribution of scarcity and abundance, water quality and salinity – as well as which lands should thrive or remain fallow – raise crucial questions about a hydro-politics that involves prioritizing the meaning that water assumes for various actors dependent on the Nile.

Hydro-politics encompasses an arena in which diverse interests are at stake: farmers seeking to divert water from the canal into the desert to expand their lands, officials responsible for determining that no more water can be redirected to Fayoum without compromising the capacity for treating water runoff, engineers at the Aswan Dam restricting discharges from the dam to prevent infrastructure erosion. Therefore, the scarcity faced by Om Fatma is partly a result of strict limitations on the amount of water she can use but is also caused by excesses in other parts of the management system of this natural resource. Thus, while water politics is not limited to the highest levels of government, as it is shaped and influenced by everyday practices of ordinary people, hydro-politics creates a conflicting arena in which political and economic elites often gain advantages at the expense of marginalized communities (Barnes, 2014).

Regarding the third perspective that highlights the issue of paradigm shifts and the search for new paradigmatic models, it invites us to consider the ontological turn as a theoretical and philosophical framework essential for understanding how the arena of conflict is organized. This goes beyond the physical confrontation between social actors and has its roots, first and foremost, in the ontological way of perceiving and interacting with the world. It is in this sense that Marisol De la Cadena (2015) examined how Andean indigenous ontologies clash with Western approaches to nature and how these conflicts influence environmental policies.

De la Cadena (2015) highlighted the close connection between people's everyday practices in the Andean regions and environmental issues, where human activities impact the environment and are influenced by it. Furthermore, the way people understand the world and ecology is related to their political struggles and demands for rights, which aim to safeguard their ways of relating to the environment. Therefore, there is a significant focus on the importance of non-human agency, as communities establish interpersonal and intersubjective relationships with non-human elements, including rituals, healing practices, and other forms of interaction that play a fundamental role in their cultures.

These three perspectives on the treatment of the environment are somehow in agreement with Almeida's argument (2016) that the environment is a continuous source of contradictions, disputes, and collaborations among social agents, becoming a central theme both theoretically and empirically. In other words, the environment is treated as an object of study as the logic of the presented arguments, patterns of formed alliances, and postures and justifications seeking legitimacy in different situations are analyzed.

The variety of worldviews challenges the dominant anthropocentric perspective that places human beings at the center of all considerations, but also the ecocentric view, which attributes intrinsic value to nature, can raise concerns within conservation practice regarding ontological differences and, consequently, involve disputes and among social agents. Ontological environmental issues have political and power implications, as states, companies, NGOs, academics, technicians, activists, civil society, and ordinary citizens justify their perspectives by forming political alliances, whether of low intensity or not, around specific environmental problems.

The ontological mode of the Nalu people, which underpins the local management of natural resources, is observed in the distribution of land plots belonging to each settlement, which also includes residential and cultivation areas. There are small forest niches located in dense and sub-humid forests called "matos malgos" (matos malgosse) that serve for spiritual purposes and from which no resources can be extracted. The use of forests surrounding the matos malgosse is limited, serving only for the collection of honey and firewood, wild fruits and roots, as well as hunting. This organization provides an understanding that Nalu hegemony over the management of "natural resources" is inscribed within a framework of permanently negotiated power relations and anchored by cultural values (Temudo, 2009; 2012).

Historically, the nationalization of land after Guinea-Bissau's independence was a crucial factor that determined new directions in preservation policy, as it was at that time that state representatives took on the role of preserving the Cantanhez forests, which were not previously officially considered a National Park. Exogenous factors contributed to the reduction, if not the subjugation, of this management form, and its effect was due to the Structural Adjustment Program, driven by the demands for increased cashew and rice production due to rising prices for producers (Temudo, 2009).

It was in this context that, in 1985, a concession of 1,200 hectares of land was granted to the Diocese of Bissau for the establishment of cashew plantations—known as the Ponta do Vitória or S. Francisco da Floresta area—which became the largest cashew plantation in the region. In the 1990s, uncertainty regarding land ownership, stemming from debates over the Land Law and the creation of a natural park, triggered a process of land appropriation in open-forest areas, marking the entry of new actors in Cubucaré.

In 1992, mango orchards were introduced under the promise of satisfying presumed European market demand as part of a forest-protection project and the establishment of that same natural park. However, the cultivation techniques brought in by this initiative contradicted traditional agroforestry practices which, from an agroecological standpoint, are more suitable for local conditions and for enhancing carbon-capture potential (Temudo, 2009).

This contradiction adversely affected the performance of rituals that prohibited free access to the natural resources of the *matos malgosse*. Consequently, the concept of democracy arising from the 1994 elections became contested among different ethnic groups concerning access to — and autonomy in the use of — the Cantanhez forest resources (Temudo, 2009). John W. Bruce et al. (1992) demonstrated that state concessions create opportunities for large-scale land grabbing. Indeed, this mechanism allowed the political and economic elite to acquire vast tracts of land belonging to rural communities under the pretext of establishing mango orchards — promising a European market that would secure often insufficient financing. Moreover, this practice failed to increase production, culminating in conflicts with smallholders.

Such conflicts have structural roots: once the land became state property, local land rights and institutions – whose ontological modes of relating to nature were deemed residual compared to technical and scientific environmental approaches – were disregarded. The introduced orchard-construction techniques clashed with traditional agroforestry methods, which, from an agroecological perspective, are better adapted to local conditions. Additionally, the project document blamed fruit cultivation and rice farming for ecological imbalance, concealing the fact that it was the establishment of orchards that reduced the annual area devoted to slash-and-burn agriculture – thereby contributing to a significant increase in woody vegetation cover. Finally, the project proposed replacing upland rice cultivation with swamp rice cultivation, even though farmers resort to that method only during food crises because of its comparative disadvantages (AD *et al.*, 1992).

Attributing responsibility for environmental degradation to the inhabitants of Cantanhez implies that their way of interacting with nature is facing a crisis—perhaps an “ontological” one. However, the project intervention exposes a contradiction and incompatibility between two socio-productive approaches. On the one hand, there is a management system that considers the environment a living, active entity, going beyond economic or utilitarian dimensions. On the other hand, there is a regime based on modern techniques that adopts a preservation-and-conservation perspective aimed at exploitation and non-democratic decision-making, where the environment becomes both a “commodity” and an object of study.

The initiative to create the Cantanhez National Park began in 1992, supported by the local office of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and various donors who encouraged three newly created NGOs—driven by public servants—to implement a project called “Safeguarding the Cantanhez Forests.” During this process, these externally introduced institutions were named as project protagonists, limiting their representativeness and undermining the traditional gerontocratic power of the local population over forest use and management. Consequently, the project’s documentation did not involve local participation: external agents and a small group of farmers’ associations and NGOs were depicted as the sole protagonists (AD *et al.* 1992).

Even more serious, the project demarcated forest areas beyond the boundaries of sacred sites dedicated to spiritual activities, intensifying hostility among NGOs, the government, and local communities, who realized that access to “resources” was being restricted to a select few. Furthermore, the ethnographer observed that the unregulated entry of project professionals, researchers, funders, and evaluators (“the white people”) into areas reserved for spiritual practices—whether for visits or unauthorized research—generated suspicion among other ethnic groups. They feared that the Nalus had sold their lands to outsiders. Simultaneously, the Nalus themselves wondered why their forests were being invaded, suspecting an attempt to appropriate natural resources and steal their *irãs*, thus threatening their culture (Temudo, 2009).

The sacred dimension of nature—which until then had preserved large volumes of dense sub-humid forest—has been damaged by development interventions. These include land-law reforms and projects for creating a natural park that, under the guise of protecting the area from predatory actions, invested in activities to enhance environmental understanding at territorial-planning and forest-area-delimitation levels, as well as in public-awareness efforts (seminars, study visits, photo exhibitions, film productions, school contests). These activities targeted the urban population to promote the image of NGOs before donors (Temudo, 2009).

According to Luís Catarino *et al.* (2012), the historical relationship between the resident population and nature reflects the current state of “natural resources” in the region. These are traditional values linked to resource-management systems – especially those of the Nalu ethnicity – which have maintained resource preservation in a well-conserved manner. Although intensive use of accessible areas may create the perception of rapid forest degradation, future biodiversity maintenance in Cantanhez will only be possible with the participation and commitment of the local population.

The Cantanhez National Park creation project – despite its physical-violence footprint and its overlap with land-law debates and the evolving practical and conceptual implications of democracy in interethnic relations – also involved symbolic violence. Territory-delineation actions followed a technical orientation deemed most viable for conservation, in a scenario where political and technical bodies supersede traditional ontological systems. All forms of traditional management that harmonized with Nature – including the use of local place, animal, river, and tree names – became considered residual against a preservation approach focused on “environmental economy” and “sustainability.”

In this context, to what extent do the Cantanhez forests become an arena for identity-and-nature disputes and alliances, or for specific ways of relating to the environment? Can the formation of the “Union of Co-Management Committees of the 15 Reserved Matos of Cantanhez” by rural youth — aimed at countering inequalities in this process and criticizing the older generation for being easily influenced by project agents — be seen as an intergenerational clash driven by differing visions of what Cantanhez represents?

Temudo (2009) argued that the 1997 Kyoto Protocol revived biodiversity management and preservation concerns, which had been central at the 1992 Rio Convention. Biodiversity must be considered within a broader ecological context. Thus, the way Cantanhez populations manage their “natural resources” based on their ontologies aligns with these global concerns. Their dual approach — protecting vast forests while transitioning from a forest-consumptive production system to a diversified fruit-tree cultivation system — shows how a traditional-knowledge-rooted strategy can reconcile economic growth with nature preservation.

## 1.1. THE CASE STUDY

During the colonial era, the forests endured extensive bombardment, which exacerbated their destruction despite their designation as a protected area. Following independence, the Cantanhez Initiative project appropriated this status to justify conservation efforts (Temudo, 2009; 2012), even as it extended demarcations beyond the sacred zones reserved for spiritual practices. This expansion ignited conflicts that persisted long after the park’s official establishment in 2011. Thus, the park can be understood as a collective construct — both colonial and post-colonial — shaped by diverse actors and interests that marginalize local ontologies. The resulting implications include: i) tensions between local communities and park authorities; ii) conflicts between people and wildlife (the so-called “humans and non-humans”); and iii) territorial disputes among neighboring villages.

My current focus is on the territorial dispute between two neighboring villages, Cambeque and Camgote, arising from the implementation of preservation policies. The conflict centers on the legitimacy of identifying and demarcating the forests along their shared border within Cantanhez National Park. Originally, Cambeque owned the forest and, in a gesture of hospitality, allowed a newly arrived family to use a portion of its land for agriculture. Over time, this family grew into a separate community, complicating the territorial arrangement.

Because the two villages’ forests lay adjacent, the elders of Cambeque did not see the need for precise boundary markers. However, when the park authorities later delineated forest territories within the park’s remit, that omission fostered mistrust between the inhabitants of the two villages. Notably, only the community that began as “guests” received official recognition and access to local tourism services, while Cambeque — the original landholder — went unacknowledged.

The situation was worsened by an informational sign at the main entrance bearing only the guest community’s name. Tourists arriving at the park read this sign, then collect their itineraries at the local entrepreneurs’ headquarters, where they learn of the ecological attractions linked to that community. Motivated by what they read, visitors often head directly there — guided by members of the recognized village — thereby reinforcing Cambeque’s exclusion.

This context not only perpetuates the undervaluation of the village that ceded its land but also highlights the unequal dynamics in which visibility and recognition are disproportionately attributed to the guest community. Consequently, the current signage distorts the local reality, underscoring the urgent need to reevaluate demarcation and recognition practices so that they fairly reflect the legitimate claims of both villages.

The two signs illustrate distinct circumstances: the first, on the left, refers to Amindara — relocated beyond the IBAP headquarters entrance after a conflict severed its ties with the village chief. The second, on the right, once marked Cambeque but was removed amid disputes over forest boundaries. Leaders of the village that originally ceded the land are demanding that the current sign be taken down and replaced with new markers acknowledging their claim to the forests. In contrast, the guest community insists on keeping the existing signage. One interviewee expressed frustration, stating:

“We are the rightful owners of the forest, yet our names were omitted from the signage. As a result, when tourists arrive, they are greeted by others because our community is not even mentioned on the plaque,” she explained, underscoring the severity of their marginalization. “We go hungry because we were told that if we preserved our forests, we would benefit from tourist visits

— but we receive no benefits from our own land. We, the women, suffer the most: children do not tell their fathers when they are hungry; at dawn, they come straight to their mothers to ask for food.”

The sign in question was installed during the operation of the NGO Ação para o Desenvolvimento (AD), at a time when no one contested the delineation between the two villages. However, over time, the village youth noticed that other forested areas were being identified by their respective community names, prompting questions about the validity of the original boundaries. This awareness culminated in a meeting where a member of the park management committee addressed the issue of the demarcations. The unsatisfactory response, that the forests belonged to both villages, sparked indignation.

This doubt over the lack of equitable recognition led the youth to wonder why both village names were not displayed together on the sign. Their unrest reflects a growing critical consciousness and a demand for territorial justice, marking a shift in social dynamics and expectations around natural-resource management. One interviewed resident proposed removing the plaque, which was eventually taken down and stored at the IBAP headquarters. This act symbolizes a step toward reexamining established power relations and correcting a perceived injustice. She emphasized that the new generation, as it becomes more educated and aware of land-ownership rights, is increasingly prone to conflict. Future confrontations could be especially intense if the youth from the village originally featured on the plaque claim exclusive management of the forest, using documents — such as the plaque itself — to legitimize their stance.

This context not only reveals the intricate web of relationships between the communities but also highlights the vulnerability of the institutions responsible for park management. The absence of comprehensive dialogue and recognition of local particularities perpetuates disputes and risks intensifying existing tensions. Moreover, privileging the host village on the signage illustrates how administrative decisions can shape public perception and alter socioeconomic dynamics between groups.

Investigating the territorial conflict between the villages exposes considerable institutional ineffectiveness in dispute resolution. This shortcoming is evident in the park’s management practices, where the lack of an equitable, transparent approach to boundary demarcation and recognition of territorial rights exacerbates local tensions. There is a clear absence of robust institutional structures to facilitate constructive dialogue between the communities. As a result, the leaders of the village that ceded part of their land feel sidelined and ignored — their demands unaddressed by park-management policies. This neglect not only perpetuates disparities but also erodes trust in the authorities, who are perceived as unable to navigate the complexities of local territorial relationships.

## 2. THE ANTHROPOCENE

In the context of this work, understanding the notion of otherness serves as a basis for critical analysis and reflection on environmental governance in the Anthropocene, using the case of the Nalus as an arena of ontological conflict. However, it is necessary to clarify that, from this point on, I will explore the concept of the Anthropocene, highlighting the criticisms it has engendered and showing how it relates to ontological issues in the interaction between humans and the non-human world.

The chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Jozef Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer (2002) coined the term *Anthropocene* to designate a new geological epoch characterized by the pervasive influence of human activity on the biosphere — that is anthropogenic practices. The Anthropocene marks a new stage in the history of Earth and humanity, one in which natural and human forces have become so entangled that the fate of each determines the fate of the other (Chakrabarty, 2013).

The Anthropocene is a concept that demands new perceptions and new policies in terms of the relationship between institutions, society, and nature. It requires new conditions of possibilities that imply new ontological.<sup>2</sup> Paradigms, from both an analytical and an empirical point of view, arise precisely because there is an ontological turn in the world of philosophical, anthropological, and social studies of science and technology in general. New narratives, whose epistemological conditions are rejected by conventional laws that

<sup>2</sup> The ontological turn in anthropology, advanced by scholars such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, Marilyn Strathern, and Bruno Latour, emphasizes the existence of multiple ontologies—distinct ways of understanding and interacting with the world. It critiques the naturalization of cultural categories, arguing that these are socially and ontologically constructed rather than fixed. Key works include Viveiros de Castro’s *Inconstancy of the Savage Soul* (2002), which explores indigenous ontologies; Descola’s *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2005), which examines cultural ontologies; and Strathern’s *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), which analyzes

legitimize and validate what is considered right or wrong in science, emerge, claiming their own space and the possibility of self-narrating ways of living.

The Anthropocene, by drawing global attention to inevitable changes in the structure and functioning of the geochemical and geoeological processes of the Earth's system, has brought to the forefront discursive formations ideologically marked by positions and interests linked to institutional political issues, activism, international cooperation, and public policies. Therefore, since the Anthropocene demands new stories and a relationship between culture and nature, scientific debate and political discourse are not only connected to it and indicate different types of interpretations of reality, but are also part of reality itself: everyday politics, activism, conservation practices, and the discourse of sustainability.

The Anthropocene not only reveals that the dichotomous division between culture and nature (Latour, 1994), visible in the natural, social, and human sciences, standardized and defined by the Archimedean standpoint, constitutes a "civilizational" setback, but also underscores the urgency of recognizing the contribution of new ontologies in the study and perception of global problems such as climate change. Therefore, it poses an important challenge to move away from Holocene thinking (Hardt, 2019), which focuses on the human, competition among actors, and multi-level governance, while the Anthropocene<sup>5</sup> demands a post-humanism that involves the human and the non-human, plurality and solidarity among actors, and global governance.

The contribution of actors in the following section, as in the case of Escobar and Pardo (2005; 2008) on perspectives that determine modes of environmental governance, the considerations of Henrique Leff (2015) on the distinct characteristics of actors operating in the field of ecological management, and the attention drawn by Anna Tsing (2019) to the implications of the concept of the Anthropocene, draws our attention to what I call ecological subjectivity in the Anthropocene, in the face of plural realities that require horizontal dialogue. Hence, the importance of debating the ontological assumptions of environmental governance to identify and problematize hegemonic ontologies and make room for a debate that considers the ontologies of the Global South, which have been eclipsed throughout the so-called civilizing process.

In this sense, the starting point can be to rethink different environmental perspectives. That is, we must determine whether to adopt deep ecology (Prates, 2021), as in John Muir's interpretation of nature as sacred – a conception that views nature as beauty and harmony, which must necessarily remain untouched. Or reformist environmentalism, which stems from an optimistic belief that technologies will advance enough to sustain the current way of life while producing fewer negative environmental impacts. This eco-optimistic stance is referred to as the "good Anthropocene," where the possibility of geoengineering could reverse the climate catastrophe or offer a related solution. Alternatively, there is the notion of Earth system governance (Lundershausen, 2019), which proposes investing in political ingenuity to promote social changes capable of reducing human interference in the Earth system.

So far, it remains to be investigated whether the idea that *Homo sapiens* has disrupted the reproductive cycle of nature and assumed the geological destiny of the planet suggests that this destiny will lead us to a place where an "ideal" way of life without risks can be constructed. Is this place our present, or is it still to come? Maike Weißpflug (2019) reminds us that the way we live—and the technologies we choose or reject — will shape a specific way of navigating toward the future as agents of global culture.

Maike Weißpflug (2019) emphasized that the insight of the Anthropocene lies in the fact that nature is transient and, therefore, historical. In other words, not only is the concept of nature subject to change, but the concept of history has also been redefined, considering the new understanding of nature as dynamic and mutable. This leads to a new discussion on how human societies relate to the natural environment and what responsibility they have for its crisis. It is worth noting that Hickmann (2019) has already argued that the current debate is heavily focused on how humanity can adapt to various environmental changes, while the true political and social causes of these changes are largely neglected.

This draws our attention to the dialogue between science and politics at a level where the former is not "colonized" by the latter. Therefore, it is necessary for the environmental crisis, sustainability and unsustainability, as well as proposed solutions, to be addressed at a multi-scalar, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and interinstitutional level. Now, the Anthropocene, arising amidst uncertainties, marks the possibility of new utopias and ontologies. Once it is realized that the freedom proclaimed by the Enlightenment is now in crisis

<sup>5</sup> It involves the intricate interplay of relationships and perspectives related to the environment that shape viewpoints on specific ecological issues. This includes political aspects, priorities in environmental diplomacy, research focus, acceptance or denial of climate change – related events, denialism, lack of environmental sensitivity, and the clash of conflicting interests and visions (crises of ontological dialogues) competing for legitimacy in accessing and using particular elements of the environment – such as water, forests, animals, and so on.

— as it is one of the reasons we are reaching planetary boundaries — the concern for the condition of over 7 billion humans and multiple living organisms expresses a need to redefine the social contract.

This redefinition would aim to build political-economic institutions truly committed to a new political affection between societies and nature. This would require ontological politics, which, according to Mol (2008), presupposes a dialogue between the conditions of possibility with which we live, the real, and the political. However, it is important to clarify that, in the present conjuncture, different conditions of possibility have never been structured as results of decisions.

Now, would the new utopia also be a *eutopia*? New ontologies and utopias must necessarily guide us toward programs that include the non-human, which implies decentralizing the Human in the sphere of producing conditions of existence. Tsing (2019, p. 225) argued that “[...] meaningful sustainability requires the resurgence of multiple species, that is, the rebuilding of habitable landscapes through the actions of many organisms.” The author further clarified that most sustainability experts tend to focus exclusively on human initiatives and projects. However, many forms of human life endure across generations because they are harmonized with the resurgence of diverse species.

### 3. ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

This section delves into the ontological dimensions of environmental governance, focusing on the intricate relationship between humans and the natural world, as well as the power structures that shape social and ecological interactions. By framing the Anthropocene as a central concept, it explores the inadequacies of traditional Holocene thinking, which assumes environmental stability, and highlights the shifting dynamic between humans and nature in a rapidly changing world. The discussion emphasizes that environmental governance must move beyond top-down approaches, considering diverse ontologies and realities, particularly those emerging from marginalized communities in the Global South.

The Anthropocene has often been critiqued as a globalocentric narrative that marginalizes specific cosmologies and socio-environmental conflicts. This universalist perspective has frequently overlooked how communities in the Global South navigate climate change and ecological challenges within the ruins of imperial and colonial systems. These communities possess valuable ecological knowledge and alternative governance practices that are largely absent from mainstream scientific and policy discourses. The section advocates for a rejection of globalocentric views in favor of inclusive, bottom-up approaches to environmental governance.

The underrepresentation of the Global South in the Anthropocene debate remains a pressing issue. Jens Marquardt (2019) highlights the dominance of Northern institutions and English-language research, which account for the vast majority of academic contributions on the subject. This linguistic and institutional disparity stifles the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and alternative perspectives from the Global South, limiting the scope of solutions to environmental crises. Marquardt’s findings underscore the need for greater inclusivity and recognition of diverse voices in global environmental discussions.

Kathryn Yusoff (2018) critiques the Anthropocene’s oversimplified narrative that generalizes human responsibility for climate change while ignoring historical and racial inequalities. She examines how colonialism and racism have contributed to environmental degradation, with Black and Indigenous communities disproportionately affected. Yusoff introduces the concept of “racial capitalism” to emphasize the intertwined exploitation of natural resources and marginalized labor. Her work advocates for a decolonial approach to environmental governance, challenging power structures that perpetuate inequality and ecological harm.

Yusoff further proposes an Africanized perspective on the Anthropocene, highlighting the critical role African communities and the diaspora play in resisting environmental exploitation and shaping global ecological dynamics. This perspective underscores the importance of incorporating historically marginalized voices and experiences into the broader environmental discourse, reshaping the Anthropocene as a concept that acknowledges systemic inequities and diverse contributions to sustainability.

Yamakoshi and Leblan (2013) trace the roots of contemporary environmental preservation in Africa to the colonial era, during which vast natural areas were established to protect wildlife and landscapes. However, the colonial legacy continues to influence conservation policies, often sidelining traditional,

ethnic-philosophical approaches to environmental management. In Guinea-Bissau, for instance, the imposition of technical-scientific approaches and capitalist values threatens Indigenous governance systems and ontological understandings of nature.

Environmental governance is understood as the use of institutionalized power to direct processes and outcomes related to environmental matters. This involves institutions shaping what happens to the environment and how these effects are achieved. It focuses on interventions that change incentives, knowledge, decision-making processes, behaviors, and identities regarding environmental issues. Examples include international agreements, national policies, local decision-making structures, and environmental NGOs. The inclusion of local communities' voices provides critical insights to address environmental challenges and promote equitable resource allocation (Lemos & Agrawal, 2009).

In the Anthropocene, environmental governance must be democratic, addressing power disparities and promoting collaboration. Ayşem Mert (2019) advocates for a reimagined democracy to respond to environmental crises. The growing disillusionment with traditional democratic institutions makes this rethinking essential. The Anthropocene challenges Western democratic ideals, questioning the global dissemination of democratic values since the Cold War. These values influenced global governance in organizations like the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions but are increasingly contested.

Epistemic pluralism is crucial for environmental governance in the Anthropocene, as it emphasizes the inclusion of diverse knowledge forms. This includes human and non-human elements, allowing nature to regain agency. Lorimer (2012) and Biermann & Lövbrand (2019) highlight that non-human perspectives must be integrated into governance, enabling a more inclusive approach to environmental decision-making.

The Anthropocene carries significant implications for democracy and governance. Lövbrand et al. (2015) argue that the concept challenges traditional democratic frameworks, suggesting a post-natural, post-social, and post-political ontology. The post-social aspect separates environmental change from social categories such as race, class, and gender, overlooking the inequalities inherent in environmental issues. This omission raises concerns about the viability of democratic solutions that promote equity and justice (Wallbott, 2016).

The post-political ontology of the Anthropocene assumes that ecological collapse is imminent, making new governance mechanisms difficult to create. The urgency of reducing human impact on ecosystems highlights the challenge of establishing equitable governance structures in a time of crisis (Biermann & Lövbrand, 2019). This perspective marginalizes democratic debate and relies on technical, scientific approaches to address environmental issues.

In the Anthropocene, techno-scientific solutions dominate environmental discourse, sidelining knowledge from less industrialized regions. This exclusion reinforces power imbalances, with knowledge from dominant groups being considered universal. Mert (2019) critiques this approach, emphasizing the need for epistemic pluralism to address the complexities of environmental crises. Non-Western and marginalized voices must be included in decision-making processes.

The post-natural ontology challenges the idea of nature as a stable, separate entity. In the Anthropocene, nature is no longer a distinct, uncontaminated force but is domesticated, technologized, and commodified. This shift in perspective redefines the relationship between humans and nature, suggesting that humans no longer merely interact with nature but actively shape it. Tsing (2019) further argues that non-human beings are social actors in the Anthropocene, intertwined with human society.

In "Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy," Latour and Weibel (2005) argue that democracy extends beyond governance systems and involves constructing public consensus on global issues. They propose an "object-oriented democracy," where technical objects, ecosystems, and non-human actors influence political decisions. This challenges traditional democratic frameworks and calls for more inclusive decision-making processes.

Latour and Weibel's concept of an object-oriented democracy recognizes the agency of non-human entities. In such a democracy, both human and non-human entities participate in decision-making, requiring innovative methods to represent non-human interests. This approach challenges the anthropocentric focus of traditional governance and promotes a more holistic understanding of political agency.

Latour (1999) further explored the interconnectedness of nature and society, challenging the separation of the two in environmental governance. He emphasized that politics must consider the environment and non-human actors, recognizing their agency in shaping political decisions. This view opens spaces for more complex, integrated approaches to governance in the Anthropocene.

Donna Haraway (2016) advocates for an “extended kinship” that includes all forms of life, challenging traditional biological kinship structures. Her concept of the Chthulucene, which critiques the Anthropocene, is grounded in environmental justice. Haraway argues that social inequality is inherently tied to environmental inequality, urging collective action to confront the challenges of the Anthropocene.

Karen Barad (2007) explores the ethics of responsibility in the Anthropocene, emphasizing that our actions have concrete impacts on the world. She argues that knowledge production is inherently ethical, and researchers must be aware of the implications of their work. Barad’s concept of “mattering” underscores the importance of recognizing who and what deserves attention in environmental governance.

David Chandler (2018) critiques the ontopolitical foundations of the Anthropocene, arguing that the political interpretation of environmental change often assumes a hierarchical distribution of power. He challenges the linear, universal approaches to knowledge and governance, emphasizing the need to abandon these models in favor of more inclusive and democratic approaches to environmental governance.

Maike Weißpflug (2019) questions how the history of the Anthropocene is narrated, proposing that new philosophical frameworks are needed to reconnect human practices with their environmental consequences. Drawing on the works of Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, Weißpflug suggests that a resonant Anthropocenic narrative must account for both human actions and their impacts on the Earth.

Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016) argue that current models of environmental governance in the Anthropocene often validate the status quo, perpetuating the dominance of the technocratic system. Chandler (2018) emphasizes that these models must be challenged to move beyond anthropocentric views and embrace more inclusive forms of governance that account for the interests of both humans and non-humans.

The question of agency in environmental governance calls for a broader understanding of sustainability that includes ethical, political, and intercultural dimensions. It suggests that environmental governance should move beyond economic models that romanticize complex environmental issues. This would involve coordinated actions that address the root causes of environmental problems and promote more equitable and sustainable governance practices.

#### 4. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ONTOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Yadvinder Malhi (2017) examined the ontological implications of the Anthropocene, drawing on Lorimer’s perspective. He highlighted that the concept has sparked debates about the need for new worldviews to address life on a planet dominated by humans. While originating in the natural sciences, the Anthropocene has evolved into a cultural zeitgeist, inspiring philosophical, cultural, and political discussions about humanity’s impact on Earth. This shift challenges traditional ways of thinking and behaving, particularly as humanity confronts planetary boundaries and nature’s feedback systems.

Malhi also referenced the works of Latour and Viveiros de Castro, who proposed a ‘multinatural’ ontology for the Anthropocene. This perspective emphasizes hybrid socio-natural entities formed through relational processes. Latour criticized the modern tendency to separate humans from nature, a view evident in the eco-modernist manifesto. Tsing (2019) added to this discussion by exploring the “ontological turn,” recognizing the coexistence of multiple knowledge systems or ontologies. She questioned the possibility of other forms of multiplicity, which led her to further reflections on this theme.

Ontologies are philosophies of being, and it is not clear to me that any organism other than humans cares about philosophy. However, perhaps the situation changes when we consider Helen Verran’s term “ontics.” Ontics are not philosophies but practices in which modes of being are performed. Anyone can do ontics, whether they are interested in philosophy or not. A deer, a plant, a stone: they all have ontics, even if they don’t have ontologies. Moreover, ontics are more humble than ontologies; they do not demand taking up all the space. Many ontology thinkers divide the world into contrasts. There is Ontology A and Ontology B, and they will never meet. Ontics, in contrast, touch, overlap, and work around each other, changing and interacting in each other’s presence. There are axes of coordination as well as refusals (Tsing, 2019, p. 265).

Humans should embrace both ontics and ontologies to recognize shared identities across diverse forms of existence. This perspective challenges the anthropocentric narrative that positions humans as the sole protagonists and victors of history, highlighting the tendency to center humanity in storytelling. In the Anthropocene, this approach redefines concepts of action and agency. According to Franziska Müller (2019, citing Braidotti and Haraway), the limitations of Holocene agency call for rethinking actors and agency to include non-human entities. This post-human and ecological perspective involves decentering human agency while recentring the survival of ecosystems, with humanity as an integrated part. Agency, in this context, is rooted in interspecies solidarity and empathy for mutual vulnerabilities, emphasizing the interconnectedness and rights of all Earthly beings.

Karen Barad (2007) explores how principles of quantum physics can reshape our understanding of action and ethics, proposing that reality must be seen from a perspective that highlights the inseparability of the observer and the observed, as well as matter and meaning. She challenges traditional distinctions between subject and object, suggesting that the concept of “intra-action” better captures how matter and meaning emerge together within a shared context.

Barad’s theory is grounded in quantum entanglement, where particles are interconnected in ways that transcend independent understanding, and she extends this idea to the broader world, viewing reality as co-created through interactions between observers and their environment. In her work on the ontology of agency, Barad (2007) asserts that reality is inherently agential, meaning that all beings, human and non-human, have agency in shaping reality through their interactions. She proposes that identities are not fixed but emerge from the relationships beings form.

Jensen (2017) discusses Actor-Network Theory, which treats the social and natural worlds as interconnected through continuously evolving networks of relations, emphasizing relationality in both material and abstract realms. Eduardo Kohn (2013) furthers this by asserting that communication and meaning-making are not exclusive to humans but are present throughout nature, challenging human-centric views of cognition and communication.

David Abram (1996), a philosopher and ecologist, highlights the importance of sensory experience in shaping consciousness and our connection to the environment. He critiques the overemphasis on vision and hearing in modern culture, arguing that it limits our understanding of nature. For Abram, language is more than a communication tool; it is a means of engaging with the world, deeply intertwined with both ecology and culture. The loss of linguistic diversity reflects the loss of ecological diversity, as the way we narrate nature influences how we interact with it.

## CONCLUSION

The situation of land acquisition by the political and economic elite in Guinea-Bissau, driven by structural adjustment policies that impact the local mode of production, coincides with the beginning of a discussion on land law, divergences in the interpretation of democracy, and the emergence of a project to implement a natural park that generated intergenerational and ethnic conflicts. This scenario demonstrates how, in a context where conflicting economic and ideological interests are at stake, deeply different perspectives on the value of nature arise.

It is justifiable to analyze this situation as part of the post-independence challenges faced by Guinea-Bissau, considering that the underlying structural constraints of demands for democracy and economic openness have resulted in land grabbing and interethnic conflict. Other ethnic groups challenged the authority of the Nalu, arguing that democracy implies the equitable distribution of decision-making power over natural resource management. Similarly, the promotion of production — including cashew cultivation — combined with the promise of foreign credit, encouraged the political and economic elite to make land concessions.

This situation involves the integration of nature into an environmental economy, where the knowledge sustaining the interactions between nature and society becomes a valuable commodity. The (inter)generational and ethnic conflicts arising from this process illustrate how capitalism and its ideologies affect the subjectivities and perspectives of social groups.

The Nalu and other ethnic groups in Cantanhez struggle to maintain their socio-productive strategies, ensure subsistence and autonomy from a patriarchal system of natural resource management, and preserve

their ways of communicating with nature and their ancestors. Although they are open to interacting with different ways of life, the “myth that the ‘whites’ steal from them” constitutes a source of spiritual insecurity and becomes one of the reasons for defending their territories in a context where the state is not only absent but also supports a new conservation project that restricts their access to certain areas.

In this sense, the notion of environmental otherness can explain the condition of the Nalu, referred to as environmental otherness (Alves, 2022), as it opens up comprehensive, conversational, denunciatory, existential, political, and belonging possibilities. This notion can guide us to: (a) develop more complete relationships; (b) expand perspectives on the environment; (c) reformulate interactions based on dialogue; (d) overcome binary, hierarchical, colonizing, and exclusionary views; and (e) define new identities, connections, and forms of coexistence that, by diversifying life, enable the urgent emergence of new ways of existing that do not perpetuate relations of domination over diverse natures.

Therefore, a more prominent role for ontological conceptions that challenge the current trajectory of our planet is necessary. We must question the perspective of an engineer who, belonging to the dominant group in the West in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation, proposes a geological engineering that would restore ecosystems destroyed throughout history, repair the ozone layer, and significantly widen the gap between our capacity for destruction and planetary boundaries. This engineer would lead us toward a “New Holocene” with a new philosophy of life, rather than a culture full of exclusions. However, we must also question whether this geoengineering and its engineer represent a kind of “savior” — a “son of a new God” of the West — offering salvation through excessive eco-optimism about the environment.

When I express myself metaphorically or even utopically, my goal is to highlight that the debate about the relationship between society and nature remains rooted in Cartesian dualistic thinking. This thinking has shaped what is known as ecological discourse in the political and social sphere, and even today it is common to find scientific literature and partisan political discourse defending nature preservation based on the idea that the intensification of production and consumption harms ecosystems. This perspective leads to a need for a compassionate attitude towards nature, as if humans were external to it.

However, maintaining ecosystem balance is crucial for the existence of life on the planet, including human life. Environmental preservation is not only about ensuring that non-human forms of life can thrive; it is also not solely about correcting injustices committed against nature and its inhabitants. The need to care for the environment reveals how deeply we depend on it for our own survival. Furthermore, the Anthropocene has highlighted growing anxiety in the face of uncertainty regarding the dangers of socio-climatic changes.

The discussion presented in this article may appear “intricate” when analyzing three categories in isolation: environmental governance, the Anthropocene, and ontological conflicts. However, it is important to emphasize that these elements are interconnected. The emergence of the Anthropocene, for example, challenges traditional institutions of environmental governance, which have been predominantly influenced by what is known as Holocene thinking — a mode that has excluded ontologies or gerontocratic modes of natural resource management, such as those of the Nalu. These institutions approach the environment from technical and scientific perspectives, often neglecting the cultural and spiritual dimensions of human-nature relationships.

Addressing the challenges of environmental governance in the Anthropocene requires a shift towards more inclusive and holistic approaches that recognize the diversity of ontologies and value systems. This includes engaging local communities and indigenous peoples as active participants in decision-making processes, acknowledging their traditional knowledge and practices, and respecting their rights and autonomy over their land and resources. It also entails reevaluating dominant economic paradigms that prioritize profit and growth over ecological sustainability and social well-being.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that environmental issues are inherently interconnected with social and economic dynamics. Environmental degradation often disproportionately affects marginalized communities and exacerbates existing inequalities. Therefore, addressing environmental challenges requires a multidimensional approach that considers social justice, human rights, and economic equity.

In conclusion, the situation of land acquisition, intergenerational and ethnic conflicts, and the emergence of a conservation project in Guinea-Bissau reflects the complex interplay between environmental governance, the Anthropocene, and ontological conflicts. It highlights the need for more inclusive and holistic approaches to environmental management that recognize diverse ontologies, engage local communities, and address social and economic inequalities. Moving forward, it is crucial to foster dialogue, collaboration,

and mutual understanding among different stakeholders to find sustainable and just solutions to the environmental challenges we face.

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