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Going Back to the Roots: *Ubuntu* and Just Conservation in Southern Africa

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Abstract

Given growing human influence on the earth system's functioning, caring for nature has never been this critical. However, whether for economic interests or 'wilderness' preservation, attempts to save nature have been grounded on a Western scientific philosophy of separating it from people's ways of living, especially through 'protected areas'. Under the banner 'convivial conservation', which advocates socio-ecological justice and structural transformations in the global economic system, an alternative idea called 'promoted areas' has been proposed, advocating for conservation which promotes nature for, to, and by humans. Here, we argue that 'promoted areas' are best fitted with decolonial thinking in conservation science and practice. In southern Africa, one available 'decolonial option' is *Ubuntu* philosophy, which is anchored on the ethical principle of promoting life through mutual caring and sharing between and among humans and nonhumans. *Ubuntu* disengages from western ways of knowing about human–environment interactions, as it is predicated on promoting the many links between humans and nonhumans. From this, we argue that instituted through *Ubuntu*, 'promoted areas' re-initiate a harmony between human beings and physical nature, as practices of individualistic, excessive extractions of nonhuman nature are discouraged, and human–nonhuman relationships based on respect, solidarity, and collaboration are celebrated.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, decoloniality, convivial conservation, promoted areas, caring for nature, social justice, southern Africa

Abstract in Swahili: https://bit.ly/3KmiPcd

INTRODUCTION—CONSERVATION IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Worldwide, human activities are causing a precipitous decline in biodiversity and ecosystems (Brondizio et al. 2019), giving rise to growing discussions about how to 'save nature' in and beyond the current era of the Anthropocene, so-called to signify a period of large-scale and partly irreversible human-made changes to our environment (Hickel 2020). Systematic action to care for and save nature has thus never been this critical. However, many of the currently recommended strategies for conserving our environment are grounded in scientific philosophies premised on separating nature from human lives and livelihoods (Adams and Mulligan 2003; Salleh 2016; Domínguez and Luoma 2020), including through the concept of protected areas. While conservation thinking and practice varies across contexts (Adams 2003), conservation in southern Africa[1] has seen significant colonial influences, both historically and at present (Murombedzi 2003; Mbaria and Ogada 2016). As the US-inspired 'fortress conservation' (Brockington 2002) model, instituting strict separation between people and nature, inspired British hunters to create spaces and institutions dedicated to preserving fauna across the Empire, in sub-Saharan Africa, protected areas grew rapidly prior to 1960 to set aside land before colonial rulers lost power (Brockington et al. 2008). However, protected areas entail socio-ecological consequences for those who live close by, distributing fortune

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code:	**Website:** www.conservationandsociety.org.in
	DOI: 10.4103/cs.cs_33_21

and misfortune among different stakeholders (Brockington and Wilkie 2015).

Consequently, alternative approaches prioritising socio-ecological justice seek to challenge the inequities produced and reproduced by the dominant modes of conservation. One example is the convivial conservation proposal (Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020), which among other measures seeks to replace protected areas with 'promoted areas' to create conservation strategies which promote nature for, to, and by humans rather than protecting it from humans. Especially in contexts with longstanding (neo-)colonial influences, facilitating social justice in conservation is predicated on careful decolonial and decolonising reflections to deconstruct colonial structures in thought and practice. Following Murove (2014) and Tamale (2020), we hereby use 'decolonial deconstruction' to represent an epistemic movement which exposes the 'darker side' of Eurocentric epistemologies and builds alternative epistemologies and philosophies. Therefore, inspired by 'decolonial options' (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009; Mignolo and Escobar 2015)—i.e. focusing on problems created through the coloniality–modernity matrix of power and addressing them through de-colonial thinking—we identify conservation in southern Africa, and the socio-ecological injustices it has entailed, as such a problem. A 'decolonial option' for crafting context-fitting, decolonial conservation alternatives, in our view, is *Ubuntu*, a southern African philosophy rooted in notions of communitarianism, reconciliation, relationality, and interdependence (Ramose 2015; Nkondo 2007; Naicker 2011; Chemhuru 2019a).

Our paper thus asks: how does *Ubuntu* philosophy relate to radical ideas such as 'convivial conservation' in support of socio-ecologically just approaches in southern Africa? Specifically, how can *Ubuntu* help adapt convivial conservation's suggestion of promoted areas to the southern African context? With our work, we contribute to an emerging literature on decolonising conservation (e.g. Brockington et al. forthcoming; Collins et al. 2021), adding a specific focus on *Ubuntu* in light of the convivial conservation proposal to address conservation injustices in southern Africa. We see *Ubuntu* as a viable and necessary decolonial option for conservation in southern Africa, which can enrich convivial conservation's vision of facilitating socially just conservation. We thus contribute to the literature by bringing a specifically decolonial lens to the discussion on convivial conservation (cf. Krauss 2021).

To answer these research questions, our paper first reviews the history of conservation and particularly protected areas in southern Africa, emphasising the influences of colonial, and cognate, mind-sets. In a second step, we critically introduce the convivial conservation vision with an emphasis on the 'promoted areas' philosophy. After discussing the philosophical and practical tenets of *Ubuntu*, we reflect on the degree to which *Ubuntu* can help advance promoted areas and socio-ecological justice more generally. We argue that *Ubuntu* can help enrich convivial conservation proposals, particularly in southern Africa, by providing a long-established relational ethos of care between human beings and physical nature. By discouraging practices of individualistic and excessive extractions of nonhuman nature and embracing relationships between humans and nonhumans based on respect, solidarity, and collaboration, *Ubuntu* can foster decolonial conservation alternatives focused on socio-ecological justice.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE 'PROTECTED AREAS' PHILOSOPHY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Nature conservation through the creation of protected areas (PAs) has a complex history in southern Africa's ecosystems. At different periods, colonial authorities established PAs—as reserves, game-controlled areas, national parks, and private parks following the western model of conservation—to control and exploit revenues from hunting while evicting local populations (Neumann 1998; Kiwango et al. 2015; Noe 2019). The management and use of wildlife were thus firmly under the colonial governments. For example, in the then Tanganyika (now Tanzania), the Germans issued the first regulations for the use of wildlife for both the Europeans and the local communities in 1891 (Nelson et al. 2007). The creation of PAs was moulded after the 'Yellowstone National Park' model, which is grounded on a separation of nature from human lives and livelihoods (Adams and Mulligan 2003; Neumann 1998). This 'fortress conservation' model came to redefine land use in colonial territories through the strict separation of people from nature in the quest for leisure and consumptive utilisation (Brockington 2002; Brockington et al. 2008; Dressler et al. 2010). Mfune (2017) notes that the power of the PAs philosophy lies in the scientific narratives about human–environment interactions. The invention of biological sciences such as forestry in the late eighteenth century introduced what Scott (1998) describes as tunnel-vision knowledge forms: they brought into sharp focus limited understandings of complex realities to make careful measurements and calculations more viable. From 1900, the United Kingdom, with German support, began to apply the sciences in establishing uniform and standardised conservation policies and practices (Neumann 2002). For instance, several 'international' conservation conferences held in London recommended a system of national parks and set up convictions which criminalised traditional hunting practices, labelling them as savagery and threatening to flora and fauna. Colonial administrators thus recruited the sciences to rationalise nature, making it amenable to colonial states' exploitation, justifying separation between people and nature and cementing colonial ideas about nature (Adams and Mulligan 2003). The philosophy thus reproduced through colonial conservation a dualistic view of nature as distinct from people and society—seeing locals and their livelihoods as threats to ecosystems (Mfune 2017). As such, the colonial rule purported to bring order to the perceived chaos of the local communities, thereby disrupting traditional management systems (DeGeorges and Reilly 2008).

These colonially constructed worldviews shaped conservation and particularly PAs in the region, with significant social

consequences. Securing control over natural resources was key to the early formation of the colonial states in Africa (Neumann 1998; Scott 1998). Europeans colonised not only humans, but nature as well, in stark contrast to the African understanding of the inherent union between nature and society (Murombedzi 2003). The philosophy dismissed existing interactions between humans and ecologies. Rodgers et al. (2002) describe the pre-colonial freedom to convert and use resources for East Africans, with practices of conservation of scarce resources such as water springs and dry-season grazing through community sanctions. Resource control through the creation of PAs was important for the German Kaiser, and later, the British crown in colonial Tanganyika (Neumann 1998). The Selous Game Reserve was one of the first of its kind (Noe 2019). A complex set of rules was formulated to regulate resource access and use in both the forestry and wildlife sectors in the colony. Mirroring the London recommendations, all African settlement, cultivation, charcoal-burning, and grazing were outlawed in the newly created enclosures (Neumann 1998). For instance, the Maasai—predominantly livestock herders—were regularly evicted out of their interactions with surrounding ecosystems (e.g. the Serengeti, Mkomazi, Manyara, and Tarangire National Parks), blamed for competing with and excluding wildlife from water sources and good pastures (Brockington 2002). The separation of nature from humans subordinated indigenous interests to commercial exploitation by the colonial settlers, as local people and their livelihoods were considered a hindrance to colonial economic interests (Maddox et al. 1996). In South Africa, DeGeorges and Reilly (2008) report that colonial rules excluded Africans from hunting because their methods were deemed 'un-sporting'. They introduced the Game Law Amendment of 1891, based on British Laws which banned Africans in South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe from their traditional hunting practices (DeGeorges and Reilly 2008; Murombedzi 2003). Such thinking disrupted local resource-use practices and notions of negotiated access to natural resources (Maddox et al. 1996), of communal property relations and customary land resources in African societies (Noe 2019). The use of European ecological sciences can be viewed as one of the outworking bureaucratic rationality dimensions used to secure their control over new colonies, marking the start of resource dispossession processes (Adams 2003).

In postcolonial African states, the colonial 'flavour' in conservation laws and practices is still visible (Wily and Mbaya 2001). This manifests in two ways. First, it is an independent state's mission to strengthen the political and economic authority needed to drive modernisation processes and control patronage resource networks (Nelson 2010). This happens through the rapid expansion of the PAs network. For example, currently, Tanzania has the largest PAs network, in which about 40% of the country is under some form of nature protection (Noe et al. 2017). In Zambia, PAs cover about 30% of the country's total land area, while national parks cover about 18% and Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) cover a further 24% of the total land area in Botswana (Musumali

et al. 2007). Attempts to initiate and implement the so-called 'community-based natural resource management' (CBNRM) approaches have all been modelled after the same problematic philosophy (Nelson et al. 2007; Kiwango et al. 2015; Mfune 2017). For instance, while it had been assumed that WMAs as a form of CBNRM would deliver both conservation and development goals, it is only conservation which seems to have gained, whereas development promises remain largely elusive. Kiwango et al. (2015) show that the creation of WMAs since 2003 in Tanzania has added about 3% to the total land area under protection. While the increased PAs networks have undoubtedly attracted more tourism investments, the local communities continue to bear the costs of conservation with a near-absence of promised development benefits (Noe et al. 2017; Kiwango et al. 2018).

The second way in which the colonial legacy is manifested is the creation of postcolonial conservation spaces which continue to produce conservation goals which neglect the intimate relationships between people and nature. The current resurgent forceful measures to apply the PAs philosophy, termed as 'militarised conservation' (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2015; Mabele 2017; Duffy et al. 2019) intensifies concerns over the colonial legacy in Africa's conservation spaces. Many of the current PAs follow the colonial-era forceful evictions of communities in the name of conservation and disease control. The evictions of the Maasai from Serengeti in 1959 is a case in point (Brockington 2002). In this case, militarised conservation refers to measures taken to respond to a conservation conflict (e.g. poaching of elephants, rhinos, and gorillas) which use more forceful and armed conservation measures and technologies originally meant for the military (Duffy et al. 2019). While it is often presented as a legitimate 'war' to save endangered species, Duffy (2014) warns of the dangers as it may be used to enforce repressive and coercive policies, threatening social and environmental justice. What all this means is that there is a need for radical alternative conservation approaches grounded on decolonial and social-justice objectives. In the next section, we discuss one proposed approach called 'convivial conservation'.

CONVIVIAL CONSERVATION AND 'PROMOTED AREAS'—A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE?

'Convivial conservation' has been suggested as a radical alternative to other dominant conservation ideas (Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020). Against a backdrop of other early twenty-first century paradigm-shifting proposals for conservation which are built on pre-existing market-based ideas (new conservation) or protection ideas (e.g. Half-Earth), convivial conservation sets itself apart by questioning some fundamental premises on which pre-existing conservation ideas have been built. It moves away from the market-based ideas perpetuated, amongst others, by the 'new conservation' proposals (Marvier et al. 2012), which propose embracing the private sector and its opportunities. Convivial conservation challenges the capitalist premise on which new conservation, akin to mainstream

conservation[2], is built. Equally, it questions the human–nature dichotomy prevalent in both mainstream approaches and protectionist ideas, including the ever-higher proportions of the planet to be reserved 'for nature' (cf. Wuerthner et al. 2015; Wilson 2016). As such, convivial conservation seeks to go beyond both the capitalist premise of market-based approaches and the exclusion-based premise of strictly separating certain humans from nature. It sees both paradigms as, in different ways, promoting or countenancing an economic model which is built on capitalist, exponential growth, and as promoting or countenancing inequality-perpetuating ways of stressing divisions more than the many links between and among humans and nonhumans (Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020).

The convivial conservation vision encompasses several different elements (Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020). Firstly, it proposes shifting from PAs to promoted areas, which do not suggest that 'anything goes', but instead propose a more positive, democratic way of engaging with these spaces, which celebrates the many links between humans and nonhumans (Sandbrook 2015; Fletcher 2017). Secondly, it suggests moving from framing conservation as 'saving nature' to celebrating both human and nonhuman nature, thereby challenging the above-discussed human–nature dichotomy and the notion of saving only nonhuman nature. This approach would be replaced by celebrating diversity cognisant of differential needs and broader political-economic dynamics. Thirdly, convivial conservation highlights supporting engaged visitation over touristic voyeurism, shifting from short-term touristic, elite access towards long-term engagement (Fletcher et al. 2020). A fourth component challenges spectacular ways of engaging with nature, e.g. with an emphasis on charismatic megafauna, in favour of promoting everyday nature in all its splendour (Cronon 1996). A fifth component focuses on moving away from privatised expert technocracy towards common democratic engagement, emphasising that all humans should be able to live with all nature rather than having relationships mediated through top-down, technocratic knowledges, akin to visions proposed by the Territories and Areas Conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (ICCAs) Consortium (Borrini-Feyerabend and Campese 2017).

Our study will focus on the first element, moving from PAs to promoted areas. The reason is threefold: firstly, PAs have played a key role in shaping the socio-ecological geography of conservation in southern Africa, as discussed above. Secondly, given the role which PAs have played in distributing fortune and misfortune (Brockington and Wilkie 2015), they are an obvious starting point in any discussion on socially just conservation approaches. In combination, this means that PAs in this part of the world are a microcosm of various issues which those seeking to decolonise conservation have raised, ranging from producing and reproducing historical and colonial injustices to the role and recognition of whose knowledges and visions of conservation count (Adams and Mulligan 2003; Asiyanbi and Lund 2020; Domínguez and Luoma 2020; Sungusia et al. 2020; Krauss 2021).

Based on the aforementioned history of PAs in southern Africa, three points are particularly relevant in challenging PAs from the perspective of convivial conservation. Firstly, conservation institutions have been subject to accusations of imperialistic meddling and neo-colonialism based on examples of recreating patterns of exploitation by privileging elite access and trophy-hunting or using colonial imagery in marketing towards tourists (Brockington et al. 2008; Mbaria and Ogada 2016). In PAs, though they differ considerably in how much use is permitted and by whom across diverse categories (Dudley 2008), there are structural similarities with excluding subsistence use in favour of elite access. Secondly, as discussed above, PAs have been argued and demonstrated to have significant impacts on the livelihoods of adjacent communities (Brockington and Wilkie 2015; Oldekop et al. 2016), which can perpetuate dynamics of inequality. Finally, only specific types of knowledge and knowledge holders are incorporated into conservation and PA management, which can mean that resident populations or indigenous knowledge holders are rendered invisible or ignored (Asiyanbi and Lund 2020; Rubis and Theriault 2020). All these dynamics, we argue, merit questioning as part of any radical alternative and decolonial options.

The suggestion of promoted areas, based on Büscher and Fletcher (2019, 2020), differs from PAs in several key respects relevant to the decolonisation and deconstruction of the dominant conservation philosophy. Very explicitly, they are not about protecting nature from certain people, which emphasises boundaries between human and nonhuman nature despite the many links which connect them (Sandbrook 2015; Fletcher 2017). Rather, promoted conservation areas are to "promote nature for, to and by humans" (Büscher and Fletcher 2019: 286; 2020: 92) without relying on revenue from tourism and elite access, welcoming people as visitors, dwellers, or travellers, and not temporary invaders. As Büscher and Fletcher (2019) acknowledge, this is predicated on a wider context geared towards conviviality, instead of exploitation or productivity. They propose emphasising all that is valuable in and about current PAs, without permitting all behaviour and actions. However, the key difference is not positioning nature against humanity and population growth, but instead building an integrated value system which does not depend on destroying, but on 'living with' nonhuman nature. This system would equally be predicated on continuous debate around what activities are permissible, and which would go against sustainable democratic development (Büscher and Fletcher 2020).

To develop radical alternatives, there is much about Büscher and Fletcher's (2019, 2020) vision of promoted areas which compares favourably to PAs. Regarding the first above-described criticism of PAs, promoted areas would not continue the colonial tradition of excluding residents in favour of elite access or legitimising the extractive behaviours which have placed people in the privileged position to gain such access. Linking to the second point of reproducing inequalities, the explicitly democratic setup instead could give voice to local residents in the continuous debates about what is and is not

permissible in promoted areas. The idea of promoting all which is valuable equally has the potential to give stronger voice to locally based value systems, including *Ubuntu,* prioritising more relational, equitable ways of linking human and nonhuman natures. Thus, as the vision takes strong interest in the interconnectedness of human beings with nature, it essentially supports the potential of *Ubuntu* in reinvigorating African environmentalism (Chemhuru 2019b), as further explored in the next section.

However, more work remains to be done to flesh out the details which can make or break the ability of promoted areas to offer radical, more equitable alternatives. A first, crucial observation concerning Büscher and Fletcher's (2019, 2020) idea of promoted areas is that very important details on the 'how', 'who', or 'what' remain murky. Who would be driving and determining the modalities of this transition from protected to promoted areas? Who would own land or use rights going forward? How would disputes be resolved if there were disagreements on what is, or is not, permissible in a 'promoted area'? In keeping with both Illich's ideas of conviviality (1973) and Elinor Ostrom et al.'s work on common-pool resources (1999), such decision-making would need to be devolved to local levels, which is predicated on robust rules and genuine democratic devolution, neither of which are givens. It is unclear how in the detail such dialogue- and democracy-based structures would work in terms of promoting and protecting the interests of more vulnerable community members based on gender, income, or (dis)ability, never mind intergenerational interests. Moreover, the proposal does not offer definitive answers on how promoted areas are, or are not, different from existing community conservation projects, and how they have incorporated vital insights around power dynamics or risks of elite capture (e.g. Noe and Kangalawe 2015; Zafra-Calvo and Moreno-Peñaranda 2017). More fundamentally, why would this shift be desirable for the majority of current PAs, since it means moving away from a key unique selling point they had hitherto championed? If they did shift, how would promoted areas overcome historical injustices perpetrated in the name of conservation, possibly on the same land? The convivial conservation idea of historic reparations, i.e. material and non-material compensation for past inequities, is a viable starting point. However, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) themselves acknowledge the need for context-specific solutions, which require solid methodology and the implementation of broad-based, participatory engagement with the needs of all to identify and overcome decades or centuries of injustice with multidimensional and inclusive solutions.

Another key point is the role of indigenous knowledges in shaping promoted areas. The idea of continuous, inclusive debates as the basis of determining permissible behaviours and positive outcomes for 'promoted areas' is predicated on the involvement of local voices. However, precisely how local knowledges would be incorporated in shaping and managing promoted areas remains unclear. In the minefield of local, communal, state, and private land rights and interests, how can convivial conservation elevate local and traditional knowledges

to a status in which they can challenge the make-up, logics, and policies of such promoted areas over and against all competing logics? Incorporating local knowledges systematically may be the most reliable defence against promoted areas, or convivial conservation for that matter, becoming yet another monolithic mega-idea which is unable to be responsive to, cognisant of, and adaptive for the differential local needs and histories which Büscher and Fletcher (2019, 2020) recognise. How can this be ensured? Finally, what if traditional, local knowledges would reject all external ideas given external imposition's bleak histories, instead choosing a completely different set of rules? On all these counts, we believe that *Ubuntu*-based notions could be helpful to adapt convivial conservation to southern African contexts and address the queries we raise above, as we further flesh out below.

UBUNTU AS A 'DECOLONIAL OPTION'

Ubuntu is a philosophy and a way of life associated with many African societies. Ewuoso and Hall (2019) refer to *Ubuntu* philosophy as African ethics. Linguistically, the word *Ubuntu* originates from the Nguni cultures—Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele—in South Africa and Zimbabwe (Le Grange 2019), although Gwaravanda (2019) notes that *Ubuntu*-related values can be used to represent environmental thinking from related cultures[3] in Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. It is a particular ethic of care for other human beings as well as the physical world (Waghid and Smeyers 2011; Ewuoso and Hall 2019).

In this paper, we see *Ubuntu* as an ethic of care predicated on the practices of mutuality and sharing between humans and nonhumans. Thus, we conceptualise the idea of promoting nature for, to, and by humans rather than protecting it from humans, following such an ethic. So, with mutual caring and sharing, indigenous human beings benefit from nature through appropriate ways of relating and interacting with the nonhumans, as under *Ubuntu*, a person's needs are met in relations to others' needs. That is, in the *Ubuntu* ethic, there is no conception of anthropocentricism, as humans and nonhumans are moral counterparts. The ethic articulates the human interconnectedness and dignity which an individual has towards other beings (Waghid and Smeyers 2011), as expressed by the popular maxim "A person is a Person through others" (Terblanché-Greeff 2019: 97). It suggests that a community is a triad composed of the living, the living-dead (ancestors), and the yet-to-be born. This depicts life as wholeness, as life extends to the environment and past and future generations (Terblanché-Greeff 2019). 'Other beings' and 'others' here include all other entities which are not human beings, giving *Ubuntu* its distinctive respect for life of humans and nonhumans (Mawere 2012).

So, *Ubuntu* represents indigenous ethics for salient behaviours and ways of thinking about the relationality between a person and other persons and nonhuman beings. It has recently been used as a moral foundation for societal reconciliation from the resource injustices which black

Africans suffer since the colonial and apartheid South Africa (Molefe and Magam 2020). Communion, relationality, and reconciliation thus make up core elements of the *Ubuntu* philosophy, advocating communal relationships and political implications which allow individuals "to experience their lives as bound up with the good of their communities, as opposed to liberal politics that is mainly concerned with securing conditions for individuals to lead autonomous lives" (Nkondo 2007: 91). In that sense, *Ubuntu* focuses on concerns for the equal and just distribution of resources between and amongst societies (Etieyibo 2017). It is such African ethics that makes *Ubuntu* "less individualistic and anti-egoistic…and...more communal than Western ethics" (Ewuoso and Hall 2019: 97). These *Ubuntu* ethics may not be necessarily unique to African societies, but they certainly were not imported from other continents (Ewuoso and Hall 2019).

Some scholars thus conceptualise *Ubuntu* as an alternative knowledge framework which contrasts with current Western ways of thinking and knowing about human interactions with nature in southern Africa (e.g. Nkondo 2007; Mawere 2012; Ramose 2015; Chibvongodze 2016; Molefe 2019). For these scholars, *Ubuntu* brings an African discursive lens in the generation and justification of knowledge as well as the rationality of beliefs and ethics in both conservation and development (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018; Chemhuru 2019a; Terblanché-Greeff 2019). With *Ubuntu*, "knowledge is generated and justified through communal discourse and through the cultivation of relations with others" (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018: 230). *Ubuntu* articulates what Tavernaro-Haidarian (2018) calls a 'deliberative epistemology', which contrasts the individualistic and competitive Western ethics, closely linked to capitalist economies and their destruction of ecosystems (Terblanché-Greeff 2019). In contrast to Cartesian epistemology, *Ubuntu* values communality, caring, and respect for others (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018). Under *Ubuntu*, a person's humanness thrives on incessant interactions with other entities, humans, and nature (Ramose, 2015). Nature has then a moral status as it sets the teleological dimension of existence, making humans and nonhumans moral counterparts (Chibvongodze 2016; Chemhuru 2019b). These values suggest an ethic of sufficiency, whereby one's needs are met in relation to others' needs (Terblanché-Greeff 2019). They particularly gel well with convivial conservation and its element of promoted area as a form of 'living well with' both humans and the physical world.

Against the aforementioned history of the coloniality of conservation knowledge and practice, some African scholars conceive *Ubuntu* as a tool for transformation in the context of formerly 'colonised' southern Africa (e.g. Murove 2014; Chilisa 2017; Naude 2019; Tamale 2020). This thinking aligns with the movement for the decoloniality of knowledge. Decoloniality involves disengaging, disrupting, and delinking from legacies of western patriarchal knowledge philosophies and their legacies of socio-political injustices and epistemic domination (Mignolo 2011; Tamale 2020). Simply put, decoloniality "means decolonial options confronting and delinking from coloniality, or the colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo 2011: xxvii). Within this broader movement, we consider *Ubuntu* a decolonial option for advancing projects of epistemic decolonisation in southern African conservation—convivial conservation being one such project in our case. This parallels with Naude's (2019) argument for *Ubuntu* as an example of how to decolonise Western knowledge foundations. For Naude (2019), *Ubuntu* represents the strongest form of de- and re-contextualisation and decentring of the coloniality of knowledge in Africa. Within this perspective, decentring colonial perspectives to re-initiate social justice thus becomes an important decoloniality goal.

The ethic of *Ubuntu* becomes an antithesis of dehumanising conditions which the coloniality of knowledge brings in different facets of African day-to-day lives (Murove 2014; Tamale 2020), including conservation (e.g. Chibvongodze 2016). As knowledge coloniality produces social inequities and disrupts the moral fabric of African life (Mignolo 2011; Murove 2014), *Ubuntu*'s task is to reinvigorate African notions of social justice (Letseka 2014; Chilisa 2017; Tamale 2020). One such dehumanising condition is the above-discussed PAs philosophy, whereby colonial state conservation dehumanised local people through 'enclosures' of nature away from human lives and livelihoods (Nelson 2010). In relation to this process, as a decolonial option and tool to deconstruct knowledge coloniality, *Ubuntu* brings possibilities for a 'new humanity', as entrenched colonial structures which dehumanise people are epistemically dismantled and disobeyed (Mignolo 2011; Tamale 2020). As a project of decolonisation, *Ubuntu* thus brings back African traditional ethics of justice and fairness. It does so by informing the indigenisation of knowledge production systems. Museka and Madondo (2012) see *Ubuntu* as a tool to indigenise environmental pedagogy for creating the culture-specific ecological education ingrained in African ethics. Chilisa (2017) points out that ecological sciences are one of the systems which need indigenisation. There are ongoing efforts: for instance, the South African Ministry of Education has replaced the old colonial/apartheid Eurocentric science curricula with inclusive curricula which exemplify *Ubuntu* values such as humanness, communalism, interdependence, equity, social justice, and moral responsibility (Ogunniyi 2020). As there is no *Ubuntu* without fair communal justice (Letseka 2014), such indigenisation of sciences and curricula represents a decolonial attempt to deconstruct and re-contextualise knowledge and practices which inform and address ecological problems, respectively.

The discourse *Ubuntu* has not, however, gone without challenges. Gwaravanda (2019) questions the generalised conceptions of *Ubuntu* across diverse African cultures and communities, arguing that *Ubuntu* represents the cultural standpoints of the Nguni cultures and not of the societies in East, West, and Central Africa. Instead, as Ewuoso and Hall (2019) put it, *Ubuntu* represents a philosophical construction which "unifies a wide array of the moral judgments and practices found among many black Africans spanning a large geographical area in sub-Saharan Africa, and over a

broad time period" (Ewuoso and Hall 2019: 96). The spirit of *Ubuntu* thus lives on across African societies. Tamale (2020) shares her experience regarding how rural folks from Egypt to South Africa and Senegal to Ethiopia exhibit *Ubuntu* in their unfettered hospitality and generosity towards her, a total stranger. For Tamale, *Ubuntu* is by no means a romanticism for the long-gone African past. Nonetheless, there are still concerns about whether *Ubuntu* can provide an escape from epistemic coloniality when languages expressing *Ubuntu,* publication and dissemination outlets, and interpretative categories are borrowed from the West (Naude 2019). This is a fair criticism. However, as Tamale (2020: 22) asserts, what is important with the discourse around *Ubuntu* as a decolonial option is "to sharpen our consciousness about Western coloniality", while being aware that "it is impossible to reject everything Western *in toto*", but still demanding the redistribution of the control of knowledge, institutions, and authorities. The goal for redistribution links *Ubuntu* with other indigenous epistemes such as *Swaraj* in India and *Buen vivir* in South America as decolonial projects of deconstructing capitalist development for social justice (Kothari et al. 2019). Afro-descendant groups in South America are invoking *Ubuntu* to gain a more nuanced understanding of *Buen vivir* (Le Grange 2019).

So, *Ubuntu* has the potential to foster a celebration of both human and nonhuman natures. Its operationalisation in the spirit of promoted areas may be currently lacking, but its principles such as relationality, communitarianism, solidarity, and mutuality are relevant for changing the PAs approach. Moreover, lessons on how it could be operationalised can be drawn from several initiatives. For example, Mawere (2012) shows how the Shona people in Norumedzo communal area, south-eastern Zimbabwe, are using *Ubuntu* in conserving thicket forest (*Jiri*) rich in edible stink bugs (*Encosternum delegorguei*) locally known as *Harurwa,* and loquats locally known as *Mazhanje*. Both locals and strangers are advised through the area's Chief, surrounding Chiefs, and the Police Chief not to tamper with *Jiri*. When the *Harurwa* and *Mazhanje* season comes, the area's Chief pays tribute to both the Police Chief and surrounding Chiefs, exhibiting practices of sharing and mutuality. The mutual sharing fosters a sense of resource ownership and care even for outsiders. Reinvigorating such ethics requires wider "epistemological rupture", a moment of destroying old ways and forming "new modes of knowing that create new conditions of possibility for seeing, understanding, and thinking" (West 2016: 7). This is happening with changes of education curricula which present nature as having no other reasons to exist except serving human interests (Museka and Madondo 2012). The vision is to tame science to promote human virtues and social justice within societies (Ogunniyi 2020). The mission is thus about harnessing benefits of ethics which are within indigenous people's existential realities, grounding them in *Ubuntu* to evoke the eco-friendly indigenous traditions and environmental consciousness and stewardship which is written in people's hearts (Museka and Madondo 2012).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have argued that for southern Africa, the proposed convivial conservation revolution is best fitted with decolonising conservation science, policies, and practices in order not to impose another external set of ideas around conservation, but incorporate the deconstruction of the hegemonic philosophy. We explored the potential of *Ubuntu* as a decolonial option (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009; Mignolo 2011) to facilitate a decolonial reimagining of conservation in southern Africa through its ethos of relationality and communality. We have used the ethos of communion, justice, and relationality enshrined in *Ubuntu* to discern the ethics of coloniality in conservation philosophies in southern Africa. Colonisation and coloniality have left traces in the policies and practices of conservation in southern Africa to this day, resulting in diverse socio-ecological injustices both past and present[4]. As possibly their most prominent example, we have focused on the protected areas which practice the strict exclusion of local residents to the benefit of wealthy far-away visitors. At the same time, we have used *Ubuntu* to question and query the radical proposals of convivial conservation, including promoted areas, as potential vectors of decolonial deconstruction and harmonious human/nonhuman coexistence in southern Africa. We show below how our thoughts on *Ubuntu* could help promote decolonial, equity-focused conservation, and we address the questions raised about convivial conservation's and promoted areas' applicability to southern Africa.

Such decolonial deconstruction is in the first instance premised on decolonising epistemologies and knowledges by delinking from the colonial matrix of power. As the science underlying protected areas continues to be rooted in Western ontologies and epistemologies, often without ways for local or traditional knowledges to contribute or be taken seriously (Asiyanbi and Lund 2020; Rubis and Theriault 2020), decolonial thinking becomes synonymous with "being epistemically disobedient" (Mignolo 2011: 54). *Ubuntu* thus becomes an epistemology of transformation (cf. Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009). It facilitates delinking from the Western ontologies and epistemologies not in the sense of abandoning them, but in inventing decolonial visions, horizons, and discourses for a postcapitalist future (cf. Mignolo 2011). *Ubuntu* becomes a tool for channelling epistemic disobedience with regard to how hegemonic conservation science and practice define human–environmental interactions. There are some limitations to *Ubuntu* as discussed above. However, we have highlighted where and how *Ubuntu* diverges from the tools of hegemonic conservation science and practice, and leveraged its grounded, relational insights as vectors of decolonial action specifically regarding protected areas and the alternative proposed by convivial conservation—promoted areas.

We see an *Ubuntu* ethos thus as a powerful tool to promote local, indigenous knowledges and ontologies in establishing and managing promoted areas beyond traditional conservation science. *Ubuntu* carries a wider

African communitarian approach (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018). This aligns with one of the goals of decoloniality, which is to have social organisations centred on what Mignolo (2011: 52) asserts as the "indigenous notions of the communal" which points toward a non-capitalist horizon of society, which is "the overall horizon of decolonial options" (p. 311). Highlighting the relational and communal responsibility between human and nonhuman natures as the starting and end point of all knowledge, *Ubuntu* can thus help shape and animate promoted areas' idea of celebrating all life—human and nonhuman, charismatic, and non-charismatic—through an ethos of relationality. Besides, the relatedness between the humans and nonhumans suggests an interconnectedness between the two entities, attesting that the principle of separating humans from the nonhumans was never an African moral ethic. The interdependence between humans and nonhumans allies with what convivial conservation represents in the terms of conviviality, i.e. "the building of long-lasting, engaging and open-ended relationships with nonhumans and ecologies" (Büscher and Fletcher 2019: 286). For adapting convivial conservation to southern African contexts, *Ubuntu* would thus offer a viable avenue to integrate indigenous knowledges into promoted areas and convivial conservation more generally, addressing one of our above-explained concerns by avoiding external imposition and promoting local knowledges, needs, and histories (cf. also Krauss 2021).

What is more, *Ubuntu* can therefore help overcome the separation between humans and nonhumans rooted in the coloniality–modernity nexus precisely because of its relational ethos. The schism between human and nonhuman nature which emanates through strict protected areas from an abiding Western human–nature dualism (Salleh 2016) negates the moral accountability of an individual to other humans and nonhumans on which Ubuntu is premised (Murove 2014). Building on Murove's (2014) insights, we further argue that the colonial-rooted scientific philosophies premised on separating nature from human lives and livelihoods are grounded on distorted assumptions and understandings of human beings in African contexts. The efficacy of *Ubuntu* lies in relational rationality, i.e. the understanding of a human being as a relational being shaped with ethics of sufficiency, communitarianism, solidarity, and interdependence. This challenges the Eurocentric, individualistic, and self-interested understanding of a human being which tragically dominates the science behind the PAs philosophy. Protected areas as a philosophy of modernity in environmental conservation was thus a contradistinction of African traditionalism in human–nature relations. Precolonial modes of human–nonhuman relations were seen as a traditionalist way of organising the world, to be replaced by modernity through the systematic separation of nature from human lives and livelihoods, including by way of protected areas. The idea was that, as Mignolo (2011: 3) puts it, "there is no modernity without coloniality". The colonial experience of conservation in southern Africa is both centred on the promise of modernity and

also is a tangible manifestation of modernity's repercussions for human lives and livelihoods, particularly in the light of the socio-ecological inequities it continues to produce.

Ubuntu defines individuals through their relations to other humans and nonhuman others, challenging any Cartesian nature–human dualisms which are at the root of the strict exclusion of local residents from PAs. Instead, *Ubuntu*'s interconnectedness and mutual respect negates a need for exclusion for the purposes of safeguarding protection, instead supporting promoted areas' overcoming of human–nature separations through a sense of mutual responsibility rooted in relational self-identities. Equally, *Ubuntu*'s relational ethic of care could help address our concerns about how to flesh out vital details of convivial conservation in regard to owning land and use rights and shifting decision-making power to the local level: the *Ubuntu* philosophy could help organise effective dialogues to manage governance, resolve disputes and conflicts, and protect the interests of vulnerable community members based on gender, income, (dis)ability, and intergenerationality.

Finally, *Ubuntu* significantly adds to the promoted areas proposal by providing a moral justification for choosing sufficiency as a purposeful economic strategy. Contrary to some objections that *Ubuntu* may be reinvigorating an ideal romanticised African past, it is rather a continuous, relational lived experience "espoused as a contradistinction to *laissez faire* capitalism and economic liberalism which undergird the oppressive status quo" (Tamale 2020: 232). This quote highlights *Ubuntu*'s potential also for overcoming the socio-ecological injustices resulting from unbridled economic growth and extractivism given the emphasis on safeguarding the well-being of all, including those previously at the receiving end of socio-ecological injustices engineered by PAs often for touristic benefits. In *Ubuntu*, economic relations are not defined by endless accumulation of wealth, rather following the principle of sufficiency in society and in natural resources and the environment, as the prerequisite to social equality (Murove 2014; Ramose 2015). In the *Ubuntu* ethic, the principle of sufficiency thus guides an individual's accumulation and consumption of wealth (Murove 2014). Since promoted areas, as does convivial conservation as a whole, propose moving towards an ethos of economic sufficiency instead of extractive, capitalist logics, *Ubuntu* and its strong respect for other beings and all of nonhuman nature can help justify morally and ethically shifting away from infinite wealth accumulation for the benefit of people and planet. This sufficiency ethos would thus address our queries about how and why protected areas, and the wider economic system, would move away from profit orientation towards more relational understandings of value, a shift on which convivial conservation is predicated. While this would require a reorganisation of society and economy more generally, we focus here only on the benefits which this ethos of sufficiency would entail for conservation in southern Africa.

Convivial conservation overall could thus benefit from *Ubuntu* in terms of promoting relational ideas, ontologies, and philosophies from southern Africa, through the ethics of caring and mutual respect for humans and nonhumans, and

the concomitant moral justification for choosing economic sufficiency. Following postcolonial African scholars, Murove (2014) argues that any decolonial deconstruction project in African societies has to be based on the ethic of *Ubuntu*. As Chivaura (2006) asserts, sustainable approaches to endogenous conservation and human development cannot be attained by using imposed non-African notions. We therefore agree with Murove's position in the sense that convivial conservation as a project of deconstruction of the thinking and action around human–environmental interactions has to be grounded in the movement for decoloniality of knowledge. For the above-stated reasons, *Ubuntu* is a viable decolonial option for conservation in southern Africa which can enrich convivial conservation's promoted areas' proposal to the benefit of all. We welcome further research which empirically tests our theoretical discussion by building *Ubuntu*-informed promoted areas in southern Africa. A second avenue for further research could review how our suggested adaptations of convivial conservation link with other local contexts with distinct histories and needs across the globe. Finally, we would welcome a systematic discussion of how our proposals on adapting convivial conservation relate to broader global attempts at decolonising conservation.

Author contribution statement

The paper was born out of common conversations and concerns and is a result of a collective intellectual process. The order of the authors is thus arbitrary and the paper can be seen as reflecting a truly collaborative effort.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of competing/conflicting interests

The authors declare no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

Financial disclosures

Data availability

NA

Preprint archiving

There are no pre-review or pre-print versions of this manuscript

NOTES

1   We hereby use 'southern Africa' to refer to the region comprising the sixteen member-states of the southern African Development Community (SADC). https://www.sadc.int/member-states/

2   Brockington et al. (2008: 9–10) describe mainstream conservation as the globally dominant mode of conservation in terms of ideology, resources, and practice. Its network building prioritises the interests of western and/or urban elites and businesses, while aiming to implement conservation strategies rooted in particularly the American conservation movement, such as strict protected areas.

3   With other linguistic variants values such as *Botho/Matho* in Sesotho, *Hunhu* in Shona, *Umuntu* in Bemba and *Vhuntu* in Venda, *Ubuntu* represents culturally contextualised environmental ethics in southern African societies (Gwaravanda 2019).

4   We acknowledge linkages to environmental justice, as our paper looks at similar dynamics common in the environmental justice literature. However, we do not delve into explicit linkages between environmental justice, convivial conservation, and *Ubuntu*, as this is beyond the paper's focus.

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