



Britta Rutert, Hansjörg Dilger,  
Gilbert Motlalepula Matsabisa

Bioprospecting in South Africa: Opportunities and  
Challenges in the Global Knowledge Economy  
– a Field in the Becoming



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Center for Area Studies  
Boltzmannstr. 1  
14195 Berlin  
Germany  
Tel. +49 (0)30 838-52881  
Fax: +49 (0)30 838-52873  
[geschaeftsstelle@cas.fu-berlin.de](mailto:geschaeftsstelle@cas.fu-berlin.de)  
[www.fu-berlin.de/cas/](http://www.fu-berlin.de/cas/)



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## Abstract

Bioprospecting in South Africa as well as in other parts of the world is an old field with new political, economic and socio-cultural implications. While in colonial and pre-colonial settings the search for exotic flora and fauna prevailed, nowadays the search for and exploitation of biodiversity for commercially valuable genetic and biochemical resources is predominant. In South Africa, a wide range of actors has become involved in the field of bioprospecting over the last two to three decades: medical researchers, traditional health practitioners (THPs), herbalists and plant collectors, politicians and NGOs are all involved in this realm.

This working paper presents first results from an ongoing research project funded by the DFG (German Research Foundation) on “Bioprospecting in the African Renaissance: From Muthi to Intellectual Property Rights” at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin (FU Berlin). The authors discuss diverging concepts of property in relation to plants and knowledge about plants, different modes of knowledge protection and disclosure in the context of bioprospecting, and the attempts of South African NGOs to establish Intellectual Property Rights and patenting mechanisms on behalf of “indigenous communities.” The paper argues that the field of bioprospecting in South Africa has been shaped not only by the country’s Apartheid and post-Apartheid history, but also the complex dynamics of cultural identity and the (scientific as well as economic and social) aspirations of a wide range of actors to become involved in the emerging global knowledge economy.

## Zusammenfassung

Bioprospektion in Südafrika ist ein altes Terrain mit neuen politischen und ökonomischen Implikationen. Während in der Kolonialzeit nach exotischer Flora and Fauna gesucht wurde, wird heute die Suche nach kommerziell nutzbaren genetischen und biochemischen Ressourcen vorangetrieben. Um diese zu finden, bedarf es der Unterstützung (indigener) Wissensträger, die in engem Kontakt mit Natur und Umwelt stehen. Während der letzten zwei bis drei Dekaden sind Diskurse und Dynamiken im Kontext von Bioprospektion in Südafrika von einer Vielzahl von AkteurInnen geprägt worden: medizinische ForscherInnen, traditionelle HeilerInnen, HerbalistInnen, PflanzensammlerInnen, PolitikerInnen und NGOs – sie alle spielen eine jeweils spezifische Rolle und konstituieren zusammengenommen das neu entstehende Feld der Bioprospektion.

Dieses Arbeitspapier präsentiert erste Ergebnisse eines DFG-finanzierten Forschungsprojekts zum Thema „Bioprospecting in the African Renaissance: From Muthi to Intellectual Property Rights“ am Institut für Ethnologie der Freien Universität Berlin. Die AutorInnen stellen insbesondere drei Themen vor, die das Feld der Bioprospektion in Südafrika gegenwärtig prägen: divergierende Konzepte von Eigentum in Bezug auf Pflanzen und Pflanzenwissen; verschiedene Formen des Schutzes bzw. der Preisgabe von Wissen; und die Bemühungen von südafrikanischen NGOs um den Schutz intellektuellen Eigentums „indigener“ Bevölkerungsgruppen. Das Arbeitspapier zeigt, dass Bioprospektion in Südafrika nicht nur von den Apartheids- und Post-Apartheids-Politiken des Landes geprägt wird, sondern auch von den komplexen Dynamiken kultureller Identität und den vielschichtigen (wissenschaftlichen, ökonomischen und sozialen) Hoffnungen und Aspirationen, mit denen unterschiedliche Akteure in das Feld der Bioprospektion im Kontext einer sich etablierenden globalen Wissensökonomie eingetreten sind.

## About the authors

Britta Rutert, M.A., studied Social Anthropology at the University of Heidelberg. She then worked for several international institutions, amongst them the GTZ (German Technical Cooperation), the DED (German Developmental Service) and the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) before starting as research associate in the DFG funded project “Bioprospecting in the African Renaissance: From Muthi to Intellectual Property Rights” at Freie Universität Berlin.

Contact: [britta.rutert@gmail.com](mailto:britta.rutert@gmail.com)

[www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/mitarbeiter/wimi\\_aus\\_drittmitteln/rutert/](http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/mitarbeiter/wimi_aus_drittmitteln/rutert/)

Prof. Dr. Hansjörg Dilger is a Junior Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin. He is principal investigator of the DFG project “Bioprospecting in the African Renaissance” and responsible for the conceptual and methodological framework of the research. He is head of the thematic cluster “Medical Anthropology” at FU Berlin ([www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/arbeitsstellen/medical\\_anthropology/](http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/arbeitsstellen/medical_anthropology/)); his other research interests include the anthropology of religion (esp. Pentecostalism and Islam) and the anthropology of education and learning. He is also a board member of the FU Center for Area Studies.

Contact: [hansjoerg.dilger@berlin.de](mailto:hansjoerg.dilger@berlin.de)

[www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/mitarbeiter/professorinnen/dilger/](http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/mitarbeiter/professorinnen/dilger/)

Dr. Gilbert Motlalepula Matsabisa is currently the Director of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Health) Lead Programme (IKS) at Medical Research Council (MRC) South Africa. He is the member of various committees and institutions, amongst them the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS) and the WHO Afro Regional Expert Committee on Traditional Medicines. He serves in the Steering Committee on the Regional Initiative on Traditional Medicines and HIV and AIDS in Eastern & Southern Africa (RITMA) and on the steering committee on access and benefit-sharing review of the Biodiversity Management Act. His collaboration with the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology contributed to the realization of the respective DFG project.

Contact: [motlalepula.matsabisa@mrc.ac.za](mailto:motlalepula.matsabisa@mrc.ac.za)

[www.mrc.ac.za/iks/ikscontact.htm](http://www.mrc.ac.za/iks/ikscontact.htm)

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