



MARINE SCIENCE SYMPOSIUM

OCEAN ANCESTORS

Cultural perspectives on whales & dolphins.

BEACON ISLAND RESORT, PLETTENBERG BAY

DR MATTHEW ZYLSTRA

Organisation for Noetic Ecology

SATURDAY

12 JULY 2025



SESSION ONE

9.00 AM - 10.45 AM



BOOKINGS AT www.plettoceanfestival.co.za

Ocean Ancestors

Traditional knowledge & cultural perceptions
of whales and dolphins : an exploratory study



Dr. Alejandra Vargas

Zodumo S. Khowa

Prof. Bernadette Snow

Dr. Matthew J. Zylstra

(NVT | Nelson Mandela University)

(University of South Africa)

(Nelson Mandela University | University of Strathclyde)

(Org. Noetic Ecology | CST - Stellenbosch University | KI)

Rationale



- ❖ **Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK):** evolving place-based knowledge held by (indigenous) groups with multi-generational links to an area
 - ❖ Cetaceans often play a key role in SA folklore, identity and spirituality but little has been documented across academic and policy discourse
 - ❖ SA cetacean diversity, conservation significance & growing ocean pressures; with biocultural diversity loss (displacement, semigration, disinterest)
with risks of incomplete consultations or exclusionary practices (Shell)
- => Need to understand TEK & how to integrate into ocean policy & practice**

Exploratory Research Aims

- ❖ **Document existing TEK, folklore, beliefs, and cultural practices related to whales and dolphins in 4-5 coastal regions**
- ❖ **Share findings to support the co-production, maintenance and intergenerational transmission of this knowledge**
- ❖ **Explore integration of cetacean TEK into biodiversity conservation planning and legislative processes**

Research Process



**SCOPING
REVIEW**

Diverse
Literature

SAMPLING

4-5 Sites
WC, EC, KZN,
MOZ

Permissions
Recruitment

**DATA
COLLECTION**

Semi-
Structured
Interviews
Storytelling /
Experiences

**DATA
ANALYSES**

Thematic
Analysis
(Grounded
Theory)

**PARTICIPANTS
FEEDBACK**

Workshops
Individual
Comms

**DATA
PRESENTATION**

Report
Policy Brief
Community
Resources

Results: Literature (1)

Bernard 2010; Joseph 2021

- ❖ **Scant TEK**
 - ❖ **Dolphin: Symbolic consistency across SA cultural traditions - healing, initiation & communication with spirit realm**
 - ❖ **Messengers of the Water Spirits (Xhosa & Zulu traditions):**
 - ❖ **Symbolic Role: Facilitate encounters with water divinities**
 - ❖ **Guides Between Worlds: Calling / Escorting the initiate through liminal spaces – from water back to land or into ritual spaces**
- 

Results: Literature (2)

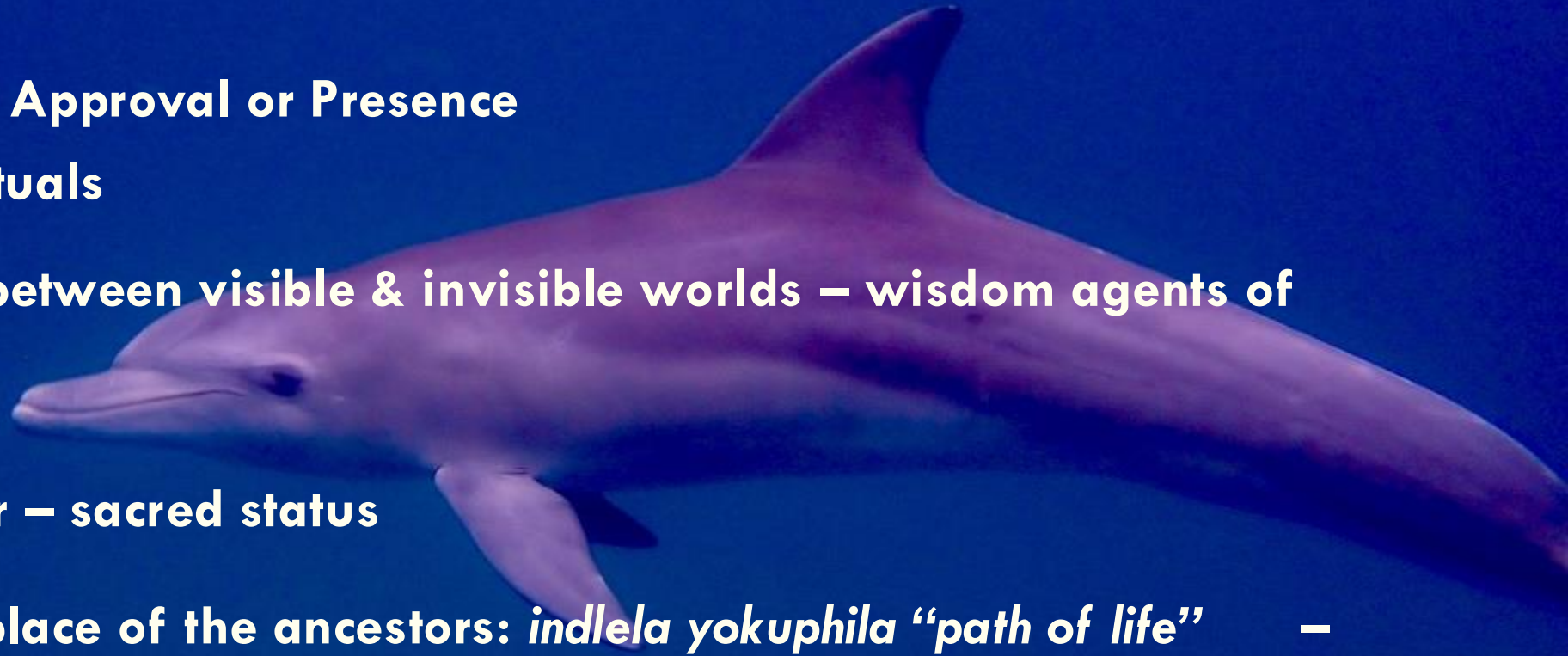
- ❖ **Signs of Ancestral Approval or Presence**

- ❖ **Omens during rituals**

- ❖ **Spiritual bridge between visible & invisible worlds – wisdom agents of communication**

- ❖ **Emblems of power – sacred status**

- ❖ **Ocean as resting place of the ancestors: *indlela yokuphila* “path of life” – journey of the soul, where people may inhabit marine mammal [Zulu]**



Interim Results: Interviews (1)

1. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

- ❖ Seasonality & Behaviours
 - ❖ Linked to fishing, habitats, events (sardine run)
- ❖ Traditional Uses: Strandings / Beachings
 - ❖ Oils, ointments, medicines, food & agricultural 'boosters', festivities, euthanasia concerns

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"When dolphins are active and jump it is a good sign for fisherman to get fish." [Covie]

"Dead dolphins' bones... used when planting maize... will produce a great harvest."
[Coffee Bay]

"Whale fat... used to cast away evil spirits by applying it to the face."
[Coffee Bay]

Interim Results: Interviews (2)

2. Cultural Significance:

- ❖ **Protectors: rescuers & guardians**
- ❖ **Guides (*Ithongo lamanzi*): dreams, initiations**
- ❖ **Messengers: ancestor acknowledgement**
- ❖ **Healing: inseparable from the ocean**
- ❖ **Source of joy: awe, respect & reverence**

"They save us
from sharks &
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[Coffee Bay]

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[Covie]

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"If you swim with a
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"They save us from sharks & danger"
"If you swim with a child in the ocean and lose it, dolphins save the child"
[Coffee Bay]

"I would see myself swimming underwater with orcas... being initiated through dreams... many in our family trained through the marine world...taken under by whales for training"
[Kenton]

"We always watched the dolphins as they surfed the waves — it was amazing... we just watched them and left them be."
[Kranshoek]

Entangled Experiences

*"Ancestors are the ones that connect
with dolphins and whales... we cannot
practice cultural activities if our
ancestors have not brought them to
us."*

[Coffee Bay]



Interim Results: Interviews (3)

3. Threats:

- ❖ Pollution (plastic, fishing line / discards)
- ❖ Seismic testing & noise pollution
- ❖ Sea vessel traffic (incl. tourist boats)
- ❖ Capitalism, modernity (whaling, customary v statutory law)
- ❖ TEK losses due to historical displacement, difficult access (incl. permitting requirements), certain Christian narratives
 - ❖ Sacred Sites – use or lose

Interim Results: Interviews (3)

"There are a lot of threats...
fishing gear discarded...
braided fishing line is strong, so
it's bad news."
[Covie]

"Seismic testing and
commercial fishing... the
noise and the bycatch...
have [had] a real impact on
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[Kranshoek]

"Flooding the ocean with
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[Kranshoek]

"Why do we need permits to access our ancestors? It's our land."
[Kenton & Dwesa-Qwebe]

"Flooding the ocean with boats... is a violation. Whales should not be corrupted or disturbed."
[Kenton & Dwesa-Qwebe]

"Sacred sites must be used or they lose their power."
[Kenton & Dwesa-Qwebe]

"We can't even go to the places we used to fish - it feels like we're not welcome."
[Kranshoek]

Caveats - Considerations

- ❖ Coloniality: “afterlife” of colonisation as enduring mindset of control, separation, extraction ...
- ❖ Selective applications of TEK to suit purposes
- ❖ TEK is not static, historical, linear nor ‘a resource’ - it’s living, evolving & shared for “relational repair”

Entangled Experiences

A black and white photograph of a man in traditional Maori attire, including a feathered headdress (hongi) and a beaded necklace. He is standing in a cave, looking out towards the ocean. The cave has large rock formations and stalactites hanging from the ceiling. The ocean is visible through the cave opening, with waves crashing against the shore.

“...during a ceremonial horn blowing to honour God for all life on Earth, I saw a whale react to the sound. It had been swimming in one direction, but after I blew the horn, it turned around. It truly felt as if it responded — like it heard and acknowledged the sound.”

[Kranshoek]

Integral Ecology

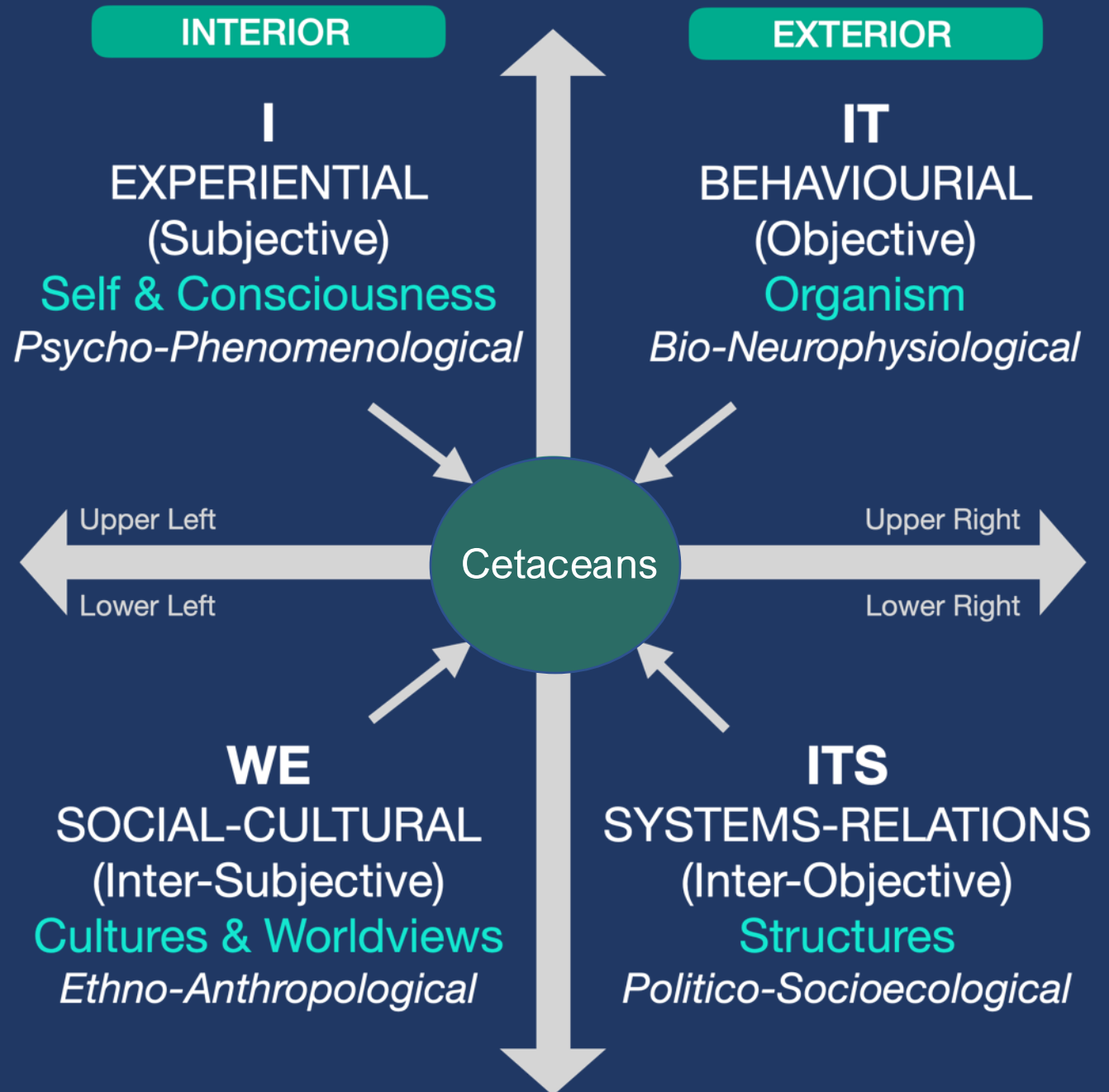
Uniting
Multiple Perspectives
on the
Natural World

Incomplete processes:
What else is missing?

Adapted from Wilber (AQAL) and
Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman 2009

INDIVIDUAL

COLLECTIVE

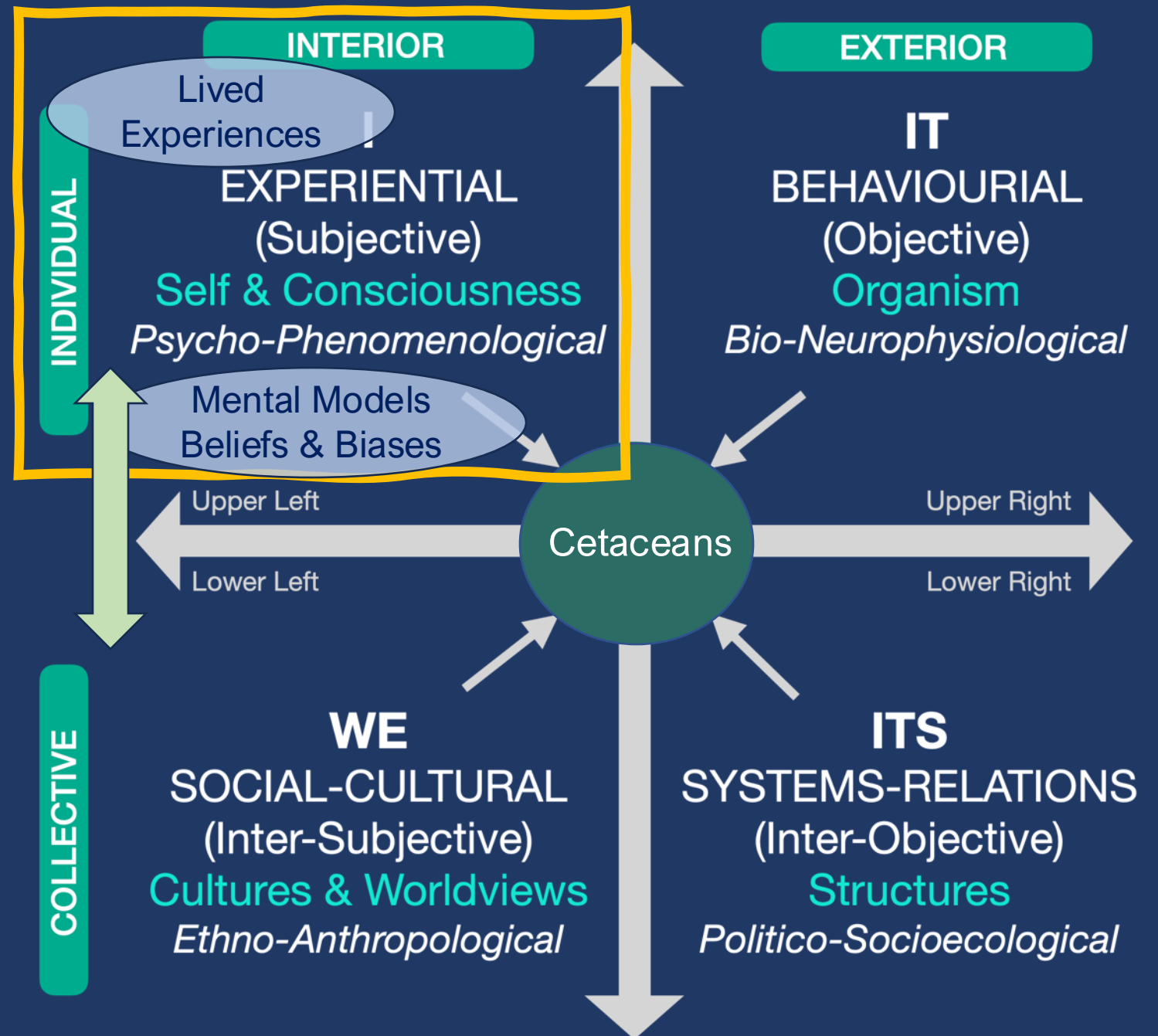


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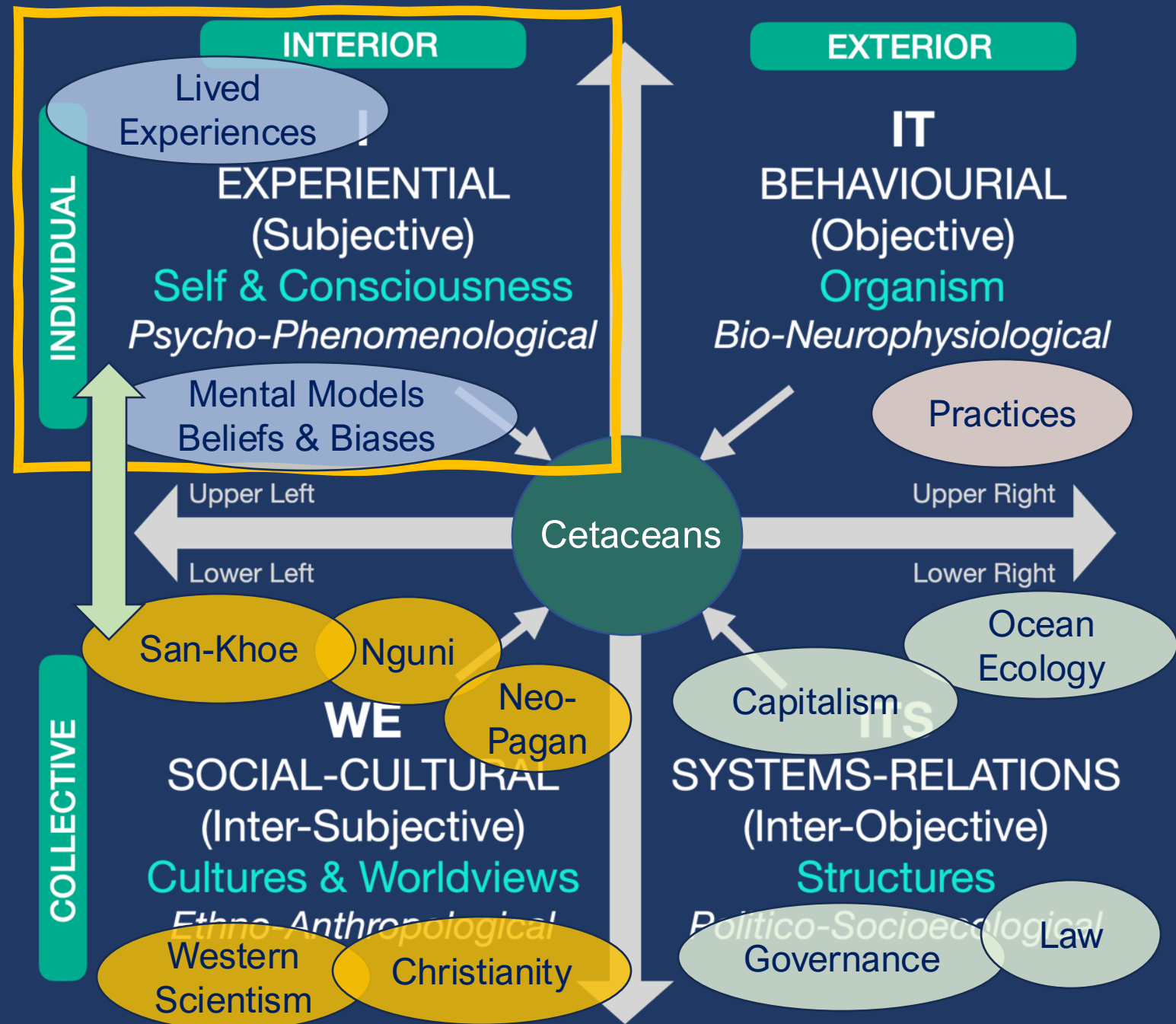


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Summary: Toward a Noetic Ecology

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- ❖ Cetaceans as kin, guides, messengers between worlds (if a separation exists) - **indicators** for ecological & spiritual harmony & emotional wellbeing
 - ❖ Ritualised & pragmatic connections to land & seas
 - ❖ Deeply **embodied relationality** where ocean health is linked to the **vitality** of **cultural identity** and practice
 - ❖ Integrating **different ways of knowing** nature – how?

Potential Significance

- ❖ Supports culturally inclusive marine conservation (“it’s not about us, without us”)
- ❖ Enhances legitimacy and efficacy of management plans (transdisciplinarity)
- ❖ Recognizes and respects traditional knowledge systems (“beyond belief”)
- ❖ Upholds biocultural heritage
- ❖ Re-enchantment of the world



uKhozi (orcas) as isilo (spirit guides)

"Reality" v Interpretation

"Whether or not the phenomenon actually exists is ultimately irrelevant:

*What is important to acknowledge is that such encounters are being perceived - **the interpretation exists** - and therefore it may have a **causal power** on attitudes and behaviour towards [one's self, others] and the environment."*

~ Dr Maarten Jacobs



Acknowledgements

- **Interviewees:** Elders, Fishers, Healers, Knowledge Holders
- Prof. Hendri Coetzee (NVT)
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