

The Politics of Nature and Science in African History

Veranstalter: Basel Graduate School of History; Centre for African Studies Basel

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The international workshop „The Politics of Nature and Science in African History“ brought scholars from different disciplines such as history, anthropology, geography and politics together. All participants focused on human perceptions and dealings with the environment and the political dimension that accrue from these interactions. The aim of the workshop was to analyze the politics of nature, science and African history in a shared framework.

The workshop started with introductions by TANJA HAMMEL (Basel), PATRICK HARRIES (Basel) and MAANO RAMUTSINDELA (Cape Town). Ramutsindela suggested focusing on „politics“ in space (local, national, global) and time (synchronic and diachronic). The third dimension Ramutsindela raised awareness for, was the quality, respectively the articulations and negotiations in different places and contexts as well as the role and use of nature as a representative aspect of and scope for understanding science within a particular aspect of nature.

In the first panel „Natural History and Museums“, PATRICK GROGAN (Basel) concentrated on collecting as a business in his presentation „Ludwig Krebs and Carl Drège: two case studies of early 19th century German collectors of natural history specimens on expedition in southern Africa“. His discourse analytical approach to two Germans' personal records unfolded the dichotomy between negative stereotypical descriptions of „local“ guides and servants and the collectors' dependence on them. Besides this unappreciated cooperation, collectors were also dependent on networks of natural museums in the North, colonial regulators, settlers across the colony and an intellectual hub of knowledge production at the Cape. GABRIELE KRANZ (Hamburg) then focused on trade networks. Her paper „Research or Trade – On the Ori-

gins of the Botanical Museum of Hamburg“ compared the Botanical Museum in Hamburg with Berlin and Kew and carved out the unique set-up: It combined exhibitions of mainly economic plants and plant products with a botanical garden, a laboratory, a collection and a herbarium. Together with its high dependency on trading companies and its self-understanding as a colonial museum towards the end of the 19th century this nurtures the conclusion, that research was done for trade and that these two cannot be separately assessed.

The second panel „Conceptions of Land and Nature“ started with a presentation by TANJA HAMMEL (Basel) on „Changing Accounts of Nature in the second half of the 19th Century: Mary Elizabeth Barber in the Cape Colony“, where Hammel embedded her protagonist in the societal environment of the time by looking at her family, her relations to the different scientific, religious and political discourses and the historical events in southern Africa. Through this, a thorough characterization of Mary Elizabeth Barber and her changing conception from a euro-ego-centric anthropocentrism over a hyper-separation to a nature-human interrelationship in her late years emerged. The paper focused on Barber's production of knowledge and ignorance in terms of her deafness and silencing of the cultural significance of birds in amaXhosa culture, when raising awareness for the timely protection of insectivorous birds. ROMIE VONKIE NGHITEVELEKWA (Freiburg im Breisgau) presented a chapter of her PhD project on „Understanding landholding, land relations and property rights in land (in rural north-central Namibia)“. In the conceptualization of her fieldwork she first established the trains of thought behind understanding how possession or use constitute property *in* land rather than *over* land, for example property as a relationship and not as a thing.¹ This lays the ground for the assessment of governmental land registration processes with their liability for vertical conflicts but also helps to understand horizontal power relations. The division into pri-

¹Kevin Grey / Susan Grey, The Idea of Property In Land, in: Susan Bright / John Dewar (ed.), Land Law: Themes and Perspectives, Oxford 1998, pp. 15-51.

vate and common property, however, neglects that common property only exists in the presence of private property and gets conflated with non- or pre-property forms of managing land.² Thus, by analyzing the changes in land use, property in land and spatial set up of agricultural and cattle holding communities in rural Namibia and their utility-based land relationship which in its reciprocity is shaping their sociality, Nghitevelekwa illustrated how imported concepts of land dominate the discourse and the interventions around the land registration processes.

In the third panel „Conservation“, ANNETTE LAROCCO (Cambridge) in „The comprehensive hunting ban: the reassertion of the State in the processes of ‘participatory’ conservation in contemporary Botswana“, focused on (internalized) Western perceptions of land in Botswana, where the ‘uninhabited wilderness’ is about to become an area of wild life preservation. In a top down political process, game hunting is about to be replaced by photographic tourism and as a side effect, hunters and gatherers are supposed to become cattle herders like their sedentary compatriots. While the decree was honored with an English preservation award, the San understood the ban as a cultural assault. The hunting ban therefore symbolizes not only the imported conservation ideas of a small political elite but also the deep division between the urban Tswana-speakers, around whose identity the nation-building project took place, and the rural ethno-linguistic minorities that are acting in wildlife areas perceived as being on „the edges of sovereignty“ and now fear marginalization. INNOCENT SINTHUMULE (Cape Town / Thohoyandou) presented a similar case in his paper on „Transfrontier Conservation area (TFCA) and local communities in Mapungubwe Region“. This is another example of how effected people feel overlooked by central government(s). They know little about the TFCA itself, not to speak of participatory processes that take place far away in the cities. Governmental actors and private landowners participate in these meetings, but the communities that inhabit the land are not represented. In addition, the governments of South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe,

which are confronted with individual challenges, lack the effort to establish transparent and regular exchange. This would allow them to deal with the participating countries’ contributions of different types of land (sometimes a mix of governmental, private, communal land, sometimes only one type) or the ambiguity of border crossings. While boundaries for animals were removed, those for people have remained/remain. To this day, individual but synchronized solutions with a real participatory aspiration seem out of reach, leaving people on the ground as passive objects rather than co-creators.

The second day started with panel four „Landscape and Citizenship“ and SANDRO SIMON’s (Basel) paper „The Becoming of the Bamenda Wetlands“. Different aspects of instability, self-declared „care-takers“ and a unique set of adaptation strategies characterize the wetlands in the northwestern Cameroonian town. The „care-takers“ are farming on governmental land and established an informal formalized tenure system, which includes inheritance, renting and buying. While techniques, plants and ways of boundary demarcations get either newly „invented“ or imported from dryland and adapted to wetland conditions, preventive measures against returning and spontaneous flooding, thieves or animals fail widely, arguably due to the lack of cooperation. Nevertheless, strong individual relationships between seller and buyer, mostly grown from long-term leases, mark the core of the tenancy and cultivation system, so that in its daily embodiment, kinship and the state are widely absent. MARNIE GRAHAM (Sydney / Stockholm) in „You also bring your own material’: On identities, knowledges and interactions across difference in collaborative urban nature conservation at Macassar Dunes, Cape Town“ focused on data collected during „Heritage Week“ in 2012, where participants from diverse socio-economic, „racial“ and ethnic backgrounds were supposed to learn about each others’ histories, cultures, identities and places in the context of their individual rela-

² Pauline Peters, *The Erosion of Commons and the Emergence of Property: Problems for Social Analysis*, in: Robert C. Hunt / Antonio Gilman (ed.), *Property in Economic Context*, Lanham, MD 1996, pp. 351-373.

tionships to the Macassar Dunes. Imported conservation ideas, represented by governmental conservation experts on the site, stood in contrast to heterogeneous local perceptions of the land. The diverse local actors were therefore ambiguously seen both as key participants in urban nature conservation and as threats. To bridge these difficulties, a common esteem of the dunes and environmental protection for everybody's wellbeing is promoted, which requests the subordination of „local“ relationships with the Dunes to the universal value of conservation as well as ignorance towards the political history of the Cape Flats.

The last panel „Plants and Knowledge Production“ started with TANIA KATZSCHNER's (Cape Town) „Nurturing new thinking appropriate to our collective future and belonging – the need for re-memembering. A dialogue with aspects of 'invasive alien' vegetation management in South African cities“. Initiated through her personal experience of being branded an „alien“ at a border control, Katzschner started researching on the so-called „war on alien plants“ in South Africa. With the case of the war against invasive plants in South Africa, she carved out how hegemonic claims of humans over nature or the culture-nature dichotomy, the definition of the „strange“ through the known and the (borrowed) narratives of „indigenous“ and „aliens“ (still) dominate today's conservation interventions. She concluded that there is an urge to recognize and reflect on the relations between matterscape (material reality), powerscape (which might not only be determined by matterscape) and mindscape to identify holistic conservation approaches and to encourage a deeper sense of interconnectedness.³ With „Rethinking medicinal plants in South Africa“, DIANA GIBSON (Cape Town) analysed the problematic perception of plants as passive material entities rather than actants⁴ that exhibit agentivity⁵ in conservation efforts. Relationships emerge as plants acquire meaning and value as they are harvested, exchanged and consumed by human actors.⁶ This accounts in a distinct way for psychoactive plants, which go beyond their „role“ as supporters of basic needs (food) and serve

as connectors to different parts of ourselves.⁷ Like humans, they therefore participate in realities or world-makings, which are inherently political as other variations possibly exist and may be enacted according to the given socio-material workings. Such workings are however multilayered, such as the commonly described „traditional“ enactment that is closely associated with „traditional knowledge“ and therefore highly politicized and contested in contemporary South Africa. In „The ambiguous symbolism of flowers and botany in South Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries“, MELANIE BOEHI (Basel) outlined a genealogy of a language of flowers in southern Africa from 16th-century colonial science to colonial exhibitions, apartheid propaganda and post-apartheid tourism promotion. The inseparability of the past and the present is thereby omnipresent: Despite its loaded history of both protest and propaganda, the botanical complex and its representatives such as the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town have been perceived as apolitical and useful for building bridges between people in the post-apartheid era.

In the closing Open Forum Maano Ramutsindela suggested reflecting upon how and what kind of politics of science unfold at the levels of the local, national and global. A number of papers were concerned with the mostly hierarchical relationships between naturalists and government officials and „local“ people and thus studied how social inequality shaped knowledge production. In

³ MJ Zylstra, „God won't make bad things“. Insights into Youth Perspectives on Black Wattle Clearing: Implications for Education, Presentation at Fynbos Forum, Citrusdal 2010.

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor–Network Theory*, Oxford 2005.

⁵ Laura Rival, *Anamism and the Meanings of Life: Reflections from Amazonia*, in: Marc Brightman et. al. (ed.), *Shamanism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood in the Shamanic Ecologies of Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia*, Oxford 2010, pp. 69–81.

⁶ Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid geographies: Natures, cultures, spaces*, London 2002; Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1988.

⁷ Jean-Francois Sobiecki, *Psychoactive Ubulawu Spiritual Medicines and Healing Dynamics in the Initiation Process of Southern Bantu Diviners*, in: *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 44(3) (2012), pp. 216–223.

other examples, the national and the local were described as conflicting counterparts, especially when a territory was governed by the nation state, which was then affecting local people and their property. Accompanying this process the knowledge and government of nature (re-)defines concepts of citizenship and governmental subjectivity. Global conservation discourses and the international demand for „nature“ are shaping national agendas and their local implementation efforts. This calls for our focus on how the conditions that shape the situation on the local scale come into place, are legitimized and get contested.

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Patrick Harries (Basel) / Maano Ramutsindela (Cape Town) / Tanja Hammel (Basel)

Panel 1: Natural History and Museums

Chair: Davina Benkert

Patrick Grogan (Basel), The Drège brothers: natural history collectors on expedition in southern Africa, 1829 to 1833

Gabriele Kranz (Biological Centre Klein Flotbek / Botanical Garden Hamburg), Research or Trade – On the Origins of the Botanical Museum of Hamburg

Panel 2: Conceptions of Land and Nature

Chair: Anna Vögeli Litelu

Tanja Hammel (Basel), Changing Accounts of Nature in the second half of the 19th Century: Mary Elizabeth Barber in the Cape Colony

Romie Vonkie Nghitevelekw (Freiburg), Understanding landholding, land relations and property rights in land (in rural north-central Namibia)

Panel 3: Conservation

Chair: Giorgio Miescher

Annette LaRocco (Cambridge), The comprehensive hunting ban: the reassertion of the State in the processes of ‘participatory’ conservation in contemporary Botswana

Innocent Sinthumule (Cape Town / Venda), Transfrontier Conservation area and local communities in Mapungubwe Region

Panel 4: Landscape and Citizenship

Chair: Lorena Rizzo

Sandro Simon (Basel), The Becoming of the Bamenda Wetlands

Marnie Graham (Sydney / Stockholm), ‘You also bring your own material’: On identities, knowledges and interactions across difference in collaborative urban nature conservation at Macassar Dunes, Cape Town

Panel 5: Plants and Knowledge Production

Chair: Stephanie Bishop

Tania Katzschner (Cape Town), Nurturing new thinking appropriate to our collective future and belonging – the need for remembering. A dialogue with aspects of ‘invasive alien’ vegetation management in South African cities

Diana Gibson (Cape Town), Rethinking medicinal plants in South Africa

Melanie Boehi (Basel), The ambiguous symbolism of flowers and botany in South Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries

Open Forum

Chair: Maano Ramutsindela (Cape Town)

Tagungsbericht *The Politics of Nature and Science in African History*. 15.05.2014–16.05.2014, Basel, in: H-Soz-Kult 29.07.2014.