

The thinking africa Newsletter

Africa through its diaspora: telling histories of the impossible

Siphokazi Magadla -

From 13-15 December 2011, I attended the last workshop hosted by the University of Cape Town's Centre for African Studies (CAS) under the theme "Thinking Africa and the African diaspora differently: theories, practices, imaginaries". After much national debate on the politics of its transformation into part of the School for Critical Enquiry in Africa, it seemed appropriate for the last CAS event to revisit the institutional politics of African studies. An important limitation of the political efficacy of African studies projects has always been their location in untransformed academic environments where gate-keeping – through surveilled curriculum, academic appointments or limited research resources - prevents radical changes.

Ogwang (Makerere) evoked Chinua Achebe's imagery of 'carrying water and fire in the same mouth' to describe this tension of insisting on new ways of thinking while still finding ourselves wrestling with old ways of doing and thinking. I was relieved that the closing conversation between Pumla Dineo-Gqola (Wits) and Anthony Bogues (Brown) articulated the possibilities of using the experiences of the African diaspora to rethink Africa. For a conference that reflected on the relationship between Africa and its diaspora it seemed strange that only two of an estimated fourteen panels focused on diaspora imaginings. Bogues insisted that by taking the lessons from the African diaspora seriously as telling "histories of the impossible" one would be able

to appreciate the significance of the Haitian revolution as in its own way a redemption of Africa. In other words, the shifting nature of questions and meanings of return by the African diaspora has made the diaspora a political category of practice that can and perhaps should inform the study of Africa and beyond, and also contribute to global perspectives on questions about living and dying. Gqola argued that her work on slavery in South Africa unravelled the diaspora as a site of untidy identity formations that gestures in numerous directions while offering insights into how ways of remembering inform current ways of being. In a different panel Meg Samuelson of Stellenbosch University insisted that the Indian Ocean is another exciting new way to engage the position of Africa from a global perspective as it situates Africa in a global network of trade and the global movement of people between the north, south, east and west.

Rethinking Africa through the Indian Ocean paradigm is symbolic due to the fact that Cape Town is the meeting point of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans where historical slave routes intersect(ed). While much scholarship has been devoted to Africa's relationship with its diaspora on the other side of the Atlantic, much still needs to be done to uncover how movements across the Indian Ocean are reflective of an emergence of a post-binary world which positions Africa as an important actor within the changing politics of the south. Africa's ability to theorise itself differently within this changing context is imperative. This use of space and

movement of Africans, a movement to and out of Africa as a place that allows for "displacement and circulation, in-betweens and intersections" *[to page 2]*

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**OLD LAND -
NEW PRACTICES ?**

THE CHANGING FACE OF LAND AND
CONSERVATION IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

2012

Conference on land practices

11th – 14th September 2012, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
A joint initiative between Rhodes University, University of the Free State and University of Witwatersrand.

Histories of the impossible

and which evokes questions of home and homelessness as argued by Achille Mbembe, suggested to me that taking the diaspora more seriously will allow us to also appreciate the untold histories of the postcolonial African diaspora whose intersection between 'home' and 'homelessness' can be argued to reflect the intricacies of the African state today. Therefore, not only must we take seriously the histories of the slave diaspora, but also the movement of the diaspora of the postcolony which continues to be facilitated by the varying opportunities and challenges of the African state after independence and which urges us to explore new ways and places of thinking.

However, as Anthony Bogues warned, thinking about the diaspora differently is only significant if this paradigm allows us to uncover the histories and contemporaries that would allow the subaltern to speak and, in so doing allow us to understand the language in which the subaltern speaks.



**September 2012
Conference on land practices**

The 'land issue' is omnipresent across post-colonial Africa. It is a highly contentious and contested topic, which at times has proven explosive (Zimbabwe, Kenya), or else a persistent focus of identity politics (Tanzania, Sudan), or central to historically rooted struggles for equality and restitution (South Africa, Botswana). Yet, the legacy of colonial land use management from which these struggles are borne, continues to inform contemporary conservation policy practices. They are also conceptualised and legitimated by a fusion of international environmental and neoliberal market agendas and regional and national policy exigencies, framed by diverse socio-economic development challenges. One of many 'solutions' borne of this conjuncture has been the spread of conservation and environmental protection strategies which promise to 'deliver' on the requisite national economic and

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environmental priorities in adherence to broader international and regional prerogatives.

Such promises are bound to the success of market orientated strategies for the preservation of Africa's biodiversity. Furthermore, they are tied to the commoditisation of wildlife and wild spaces, and the 'mass production' thereof in a range of state-owned, private or joint partnership ventures, including parks, farms and conservancies. The results are not yet fully comprehensible, but it is evident that the post-colonial echoes the colonial, and in this continuity conservation and environmental protection strategies may perpetuate historical insecurities through the alienation of local communities from land ownership and management practices. This conference aims to contribute to the development and sharing of knowledge and expertise with an explicitly pan-African focus. Specifically, it seeks to critically engage with the nexus between post-colonial land use changes and the development of conservation initiatives across the continent at both the theoretical and practical level with cognisance of their historical precedence. The conference themes are listed on the next page.

- George Barrett

CONFERENCE ON LAND THEMES

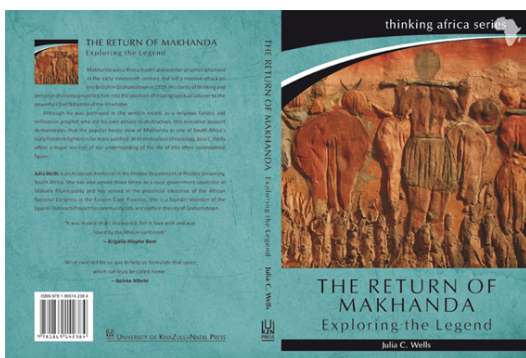
- Conservation as post-colonial land use option;
- Historical and contemporary ecological imperialism;
- Land use and identity politics;
- Gender dynamics and conservation land use strategies;
- Alienation, (in)security and conflict;
- State and private environmental/conservation agendas;
- Community-based natural resource management;
- Market driven environmentalism and conservation in Africa
- Continuities and divergences in colonial (and apartheid) and post-colonial environmental narratives
- Theoretical debates and practical realities- never the twain shall meet?

Deadline for paper and panel proposals: 30 march, 2012

For more information visit:

www.oldlandnewpractices.co.za

The Thinking Africa Book Series



We are very pleased to announce that we have secured an agreement with UKZN Press for the publication of the Thinking Africa Book Series. We plan to publish at least one volume a year and will launch the series with the release of our first volume over the Grahamstown National Arts Festival (28 June - 10 July). We could not have hoped for a more appropriate volume to launch this series with than *The Return of Makhanda, Exploring the Legend* by Julia Wells, history professor at Rhodes University. She provided us with the following description of her book.

***The Return of Makhanda* offers a reconsideration of the history of one of South Africa's most controversial African leaders.** Makhanda is most remembered for leading a massive attack of up to 10,000 men against the British army at Grahamstown in 1819. The failure of his forces to defeat their enemies has long been attributed to Makhanda's prophecies that the bullets would turn to water rendering him more of a fool than a hero. The study grew out of a rapidly rising popular interest in celebrating Makhanda's memory as one of the earliest and most pre-eminent heroes in the tradition of struggle against invading alien forces. In the years following the advent of democracy in South Africa, positive remembrances of Makhanda quickly overtook the long legacy of negative portrayals in classic history texts. For example, prominent among the Makhanda revival events was an art exhibition developed for the 2000 National Arts Festival, using community artists to interpret what the battle at Grahamstown meant to them. My research for the book then started in earnest as a response to the enthusiasm to know more, arising within a community of traditional leaders who could claim direct descent from the key role-players in Makhanda's days. From the outset, they wanted their own stories and histories to be recorded and used. Having been instigated by these popular moves to re-appropriate the history of Makhanda, this book offers a revisionist approach which takes into account both today's sentiments and a careful reconsideration of the written texts which have evolved since the days when Makhanda lived. My findings show that the negative portrayals of Makhanda emanated from a strong sense of rivalry between himself and Ntsikana, as each sought to become the head spiritual advisor of Chief Ndlambe, probably around 1815. When Ntsikana did not succeed, he withdrew and eventually found a base aligned to the *to p4]*

first English missionary to live among the Xhosa people. His family formed the nucleus of one of the oldest Xhosa Christian communities who had direct access to the missionary press. Their denunciation of Makhanda was so intense that it dominated all early publications in both isiXhosa and English. The representation of Makhanda as a power-crazed spiritual extremist was immediately taken up by the English settler press and history-writers, which passed it along for generation after generation. A deeper interrogation of written sources, however, produced a different picture. Witnesses who met Makhanda in person all described him in a favourable light, as a respected and dynamic leader. Similarly, certain texts written in isiXhosa also reveal high levels of respect and veneration for the man, viewing him as someone who very well-articulated the needs and wishes of his people.

When the events that led to the attack on Grahamstown are put into their wider historical context, it also becomes clear that the motives behind the war could hardly have been inspired by misguided religious beliefs. The fact that the Xhosa people were fighting to regain land that had once belonged to them emerges as the root cause. The battle is said to be at the centre of the fifth war of dispossession, the first having taken place more than 40 years earlier. In each conflict, as in 1819, the primary outcome of Xhosa fighting was the displacement of Dutch-speaking farmers from the area known then as 'the Zuurveld.' The only thing that was new or different about the war in 1819 was the size and scale, showing that the Xhosa people were determined to

rid their area of European encroachment once and for all.

This study shows that in fact the Xhosa tactics of night raids and quick, small strikes had been highly effective in the months prior to the major battle at Grahamstown. It was their very success which triggered high levels of panic on the part of the British, who declared a state of emergency and mustered every available force to defend themselves. Further, the evidence reveals how determined the Xhosa forces were to recover large quantities of cattle that had been taken from them by the British commanding officer, Lt. Col. Brereton in late 1818. The British had to keep moving the cattle for nearly 300 kilometres to the west of Grahamstown before they could be considered safe.

An important sub-theme in the reconsideration of the history of this era is a fresh understanding of the complex relationship between the two dominant Rharhabe Xhosa chiefs at the time, Ngqika and his uncle, Ndlambe. They have been traditionally portrayed as zealous rivals who would stop at almost nothing to undermine each other. Use of oral evidence and texts written in isiXhosa reveal a deeper dimension to the relationship, which was one of respect and cooperation much of the time. The younger chief's insecurity as a leader in the shadow of his popular uncle and regent propelled him to seek support and assistance from the British who arrived in the area just at the time that he ascended to his position as a newly-initiated young man. However, by the time the fifth frontier war drew to a conclusion, he had been taught that the foreigners were not to be trusted,

as he personally lost considerable areas of land. By contrast, Chief Ndlambe, with Makhanda as his closest advisor, is remembered as a stalwart defender of Xhosa rights at all times.

An important element in the heroic portrayal of Makhanda is the fact that he escaped from British imprisonment on Robben Island in 1820. Through the use of court records and trial transcripts, the details of this escape are recounted. Since Makhanda was kept apart from the main body of prisoners, he was not the one to initiate the fighting which resulted in temporary freedom for many prisoners. Rather, the records show that the leaders of the escape effort were men who had been imprisoned for their defence of their land from colonial forces in the area of the Eastern Cape. The fact that they paused in their flight to ensure that Makhanda was taken with them is taken as evidence that his freedom was one of the motivating factors of the whole plot. This further underscores the strength of Makhanda's character and reputation. The escapees took three boats and rowed to the mainland before several, including Makhanda, were drowned. Many survived, but were then recaptured in the mountains to the north of Cape Town. The title of the book reflects the spirit of Makhanda and his dedication to fight for the rights of his people, which returned in the late twentieth century to eventually usher in a new democratic order in South Africa. This study makes it clear why he is remembered as a hero of the long-standing struggle for basic rights in South Africa.

- Julia Wells, professor in history, Rhodes University, Grahamstown