



*The Southern African Historical Society: 25th Biennial Conference “Unsettling Stories and Unstable Subjects”.* Southern African Historical Society, 01.07.2015—03.07.2015.

**Reviewed by** Angela Glodschei

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2015)

## **The Southern African Historical Society: 25th Biennial Conference “Unsettling Stories and Unstable Subjects”**

The 25th biennial conference of the Southern African Historical Society (SAHS) committed itself to the ambitious challenge of unfolding and destabilizing dominant myths in the prevalent narratives in Southern African history.

For those not familiar with the professional historical societies in South Africa, the SAHS is the traditional association for English-speaking historians in South Africa.[1] Founded in 1965 as South African Historical Society, the 2015 meeting represented the 50th anniversary of the society as well as its 10th anniversary of opening itself up to the Southern African region by changing its name to Southern African Historical Society.

The conference comprised all in all 62 panels, 233 papers as well as a special session for post-graduate students, numerous book launches, a free yoga session or city walk. Most of the over 250 participants were affiliated with a South African university. The second biggest group came from US-American universities, followed by the UK and regional Southern African universities as well as Australia. Only a small minority came from mainland Europe. This might be due to the fact that the conference of the SAHS unfortunately took place only one week before the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) in Paris.

The conference indeed gave an interesting insight into the South African historical landscape.[2] The panels showed a great spectrum and variety of topics and

approaches towards understanding the history of the Southern African region.

The major themes at the conference were socio-environmental history, the history of gender, sex and medicine as well as the history of war (WWI, WWII, Anglo-Boer War, South African Border War and decolonization wars) with numerous panels devoted to them.

The history of water was definitely one of the big things to take up Sandra Swart's (Stellenbosch University) words in her presidential address; there were four consecutive panels "Thirsting for the truth: water histories and watering histories". Likewise Jonathan Hyslop (Colgate University) in his keynote address highlighted the importance of warfare in history at the same time criticizing transnational history for dismissing this topic far too much although war produced one of the most globalizing effects and therefore social historians needed to pay more attention to global military power and decolonization.

Regionalism, the big topic of the SAHS conference in Gaborone, Botswana two years ago did not appear in this conference at all.[3]

A very interesting insight into the debates in Southern Africa delivered the first panel on historiography. The idea behind the organization of the panel was to problematize the notions of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial and how to look for a coherent periodization. Stacey Sommerdyk (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) suggested archeology as a chance to look at African history in contrast to paper histo-

ryâ of written stories that started with the Europeans. She further criticized the term âpre-historyâ for African history before written sources as well as the term âpre-colonialâ, which naturally assumes that colonization will take place. Furthermore the current terms pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial imply that African history centers on European interaction. In her mind the question remained how to look at African history without the European intrusion at the center.

Amanda Esterhuysen (U Witwatersrand) started by recounting the evolution of the disciplines archeology and anthropology in general and in South Africa in particular. Whereas archeology reproduces the colonial perspective by using such terms as natives, tribes, indigenous, savage and many more anthropology in Africa had lost its object after decolonization. In South Africa archeology was used as a huge nationalization project by dismissing European terms and instead developing own South African terms. Archeology was further used for justifying apartheid.

Joel Quirk (U Witwatersrand) asked the question of how Sub-Saharan Africa fits into a global history. In his opinion a global history approach towards African history could be used as a narrative for contradicting the European dominance in African history as ânot that long and not that strongâ. In his view the relative weakness of Europeans before the 19th century opened up the opportunity to reflect more about European absences in African history.

In general, at the conference, one could observe the dominance of social and cultural history in contrast to traditional economic and political history. However, transnational or global approaches were largely absent with only a few exceptions. The result was a somewhat dominant narrative of South African exceptionalism rather than efforts to put Southern African history into more global developments and connections.

At the special post-graduate session Shula Marks (emer.) talked about transnational connections between setting up rural health centers in South Africa in the 1940s and the World Health Organization, the Rockefeller Foundation, highlighting the importance of people who travelled and brought these ideas from China and Europe to South Africa. She argued that South Africaâs development of social medicine was largely influenced by ideas from outside and similar projects were established in Europe and China.

Peter Kallaway (University of Cape Town/ University of the Western cape) asked how the history of education in South Africa fits into the global debate of education

in the 1920s and 1930s, as colonial education was part of a much wider global discussion about education in that period of time.

At the very end the question remains if the conference indeed unsettled dominant narratives in Southern African histories. In the closing remarks Noor Nieftagodien (U Witwatersrand) complained about less interdisciplinarity at the present conference in contrast to past conferences. Further he bemoaned the fading of research on the state (as a single unit) and the economy. In contrast to that Mucha Musedwa (U Witwatersrand) acknowledged the growing regional approaches but called for more transnational approaches.

Personally I found that the 25th SAHS Conference gave an interesting insight into South(ern) African scholarship in history but I would argue that much more is needed to foster and strengthen the exchange between Southern African historians and those outside the region working on Southern Africa. The SAHS conferences could be a good starting point for such dialogue and should be used by scholars coming from other regions much more intensively.

In my opinion the post-graduate session was a great idea to gather the many junior researchers attending the conference. Particularly the problem of access to archival material and the quality of archives in South Africa was discussed extensively. Everyone in the room agreed that the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria as well as many other state archives in South Africa are in a desolate state, which makes their use a frustrating and tedious task for historians. In the closing remarks Prinisha Badassy (U Witwatersrand) also stressed the ongoing crisis in the state of affairs of the state and national archives but there seems to be no solution in sight.

On a last note: the organizers of the conference were up to date regarding social media practices. The conference was live tweeted and as all serious and wholehearted historians can only wish there is also an archive available of these tweets.[4]

#### Notes:

1 The Historical Association for South Africa (HASA) is traditionally the association for Afrikaans speaking historians, based at the University of Pretoria.

2 For the whole programme: <http://www.sahs.org.za/node/104> (last visit 10.08.2015).

3 See conference programme SAHS 2013 at the University of Botswana URL: [http://botswanabeckons.com/images/eventsimages/SAHS\\_2013\\_Programme.pdf](http://botswanabeckons.com/images/eventsimages/SAHS_2013_Programme.pdf) (last visit

10.08.1025).

Unfortunately there are no other programmes of past conferences online in order to get an overview of the development of topics in Southern African history

4 Archive available at <https://storify.com/jekjek19/sahs-2015-in-tweets> (last visit 10.08.2015).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Angela Glodschei. Review of , *The Southern African Historical Society: 25th Biennial Conference "Unsettling Stories and Unstable Subjects"*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45097>

Copyright © 2015 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.