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Lenggenhager, Luregn ; Miescher, Giorgio

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RECHERCHE • FORSCHUNG • RESEARCH

SPACE IN TIME: LANDSCAPE NARRATIVES AND LAND MANAGEMENT CHANGES IN A SOUTHERN AFRICAN CROSS-BORDER REGION

■ GIORGIO MIESCHER AND LUREGN LENGGENHAGER

Space in Time is an interdisciplinary joint research project which aims at developing a feasible, interdisciplinary methodology that merges different data produced by distinct research practices (geography, history, and environmental science). This Swiss South Africa Joint Research Project is led by the University of Basel and University of Cape Town and also includes the University of Namibia, the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, and the University of Venda.

The project's geographical focus is the lower Gariep (Orange River) in the South African/Namibian border region, the historical Namaqualand. The area is currently experiencing a new chapter in a long and complex history of changing land use and resource management. The area, which includes parts of the Northern Cape in South Africa and the ||Karas Region in southern Namibia, is dissected by the perennial Gariep, a vital water artery in an otherwise (semi-)arid landscape. The region has seen a number of different land use and resource management systems over the past 200 years. Increasing global economic integration as well as apartheid-motivated delimitations of commercial farms and labour reserve economies have most prominently influenced land use and the social organisation of society in the region. Currently, large-scale agriculture and nature conservation projects dominate land use in this post-apartheid cross-border region. These large-scale projects are contested by those who claim their own rights to land and land use, among them formerly disadvantaged and often very poor communities living in Namaqualand.

Given its diverse history and the often conflictual articulation of multiple land claims, the region provides an ideal starting point for an analysis of different narratives around land use and management. Placing these narratives in a broader historical and socio-political perspective furthermore allows for a more balanced discussion of land use that aims to transcend some of the antagonisms between the various stakeholders, local, national and international ones.

The project examines, firstly, the history of land use, land management and land claims and its changes. Secondly, the project looks at how these changes inscribed themselves onto the landscape and how transformations of landscape reflect changes in land use. Pivotal are, for example, environmental changes, especially with regard to soils, vegetation and water resources. In order to account for these diverse short- and long-term transformations, and in an attempt to synthesise their analysis—by transcending disciplinary frameworks—the project develops and deploys multidisciplinary methodological approaches for the purpose of theorising landscape narratives.

Central in this respect are what we call interdisciplinary “landscape archives.” By this we mean a conceptual and practical tool which considers the materiality and discursiveness of landscape and hence looks at evidence of landscape narratives and representations, the physical environment (e.g. soil profiles with regard to radionuclide concentration, visual (3-D) data on soil erosion and accumulation etc.), archival documentation (e.g. written, visual and map material), oral (re-) collections and local/indigenous knowledge. We propose such an archive to become an integrated research tool, for example as a (theorised) digital platform and database. Here the purpose is to construct an archive of the landscape that generates and supplies scientific data gathered in close communication with selected local and regional actors, and design it as a tool applicable and accessible beyond the limitations of the research project itself.

Gariep (Orange) River close to its mouth in Oranjemund (Phil Greenwood 2017).



Based on the findings of our research we want to question and reassess current land and resource management regimes and challenge dominant “landscape narratives.” We want to provide a platform to different and differing claims (e.g. those of marginalised communities), which can serve as a basis for future negotiations on more inclusive and equal land use. This is of particular importance as recent initiatives, such as trans-frontier parks, generally justify their land use policies through references to the environmental and socio-political history of the cross-border landscape that are often rather based on imaginaries than on solid evidence. A critical assessment of these recent initiatives will start with the assessment of the archives, histories and bio-geographical contexts to which these initiatives relate themselves and on which policies and livelihoods, resettlement schemes and even climate change politics are designed.

While Space and Time is still in an early phase, we nevertheless made some inspiring and valuable experience of working in a tri-national and interdisciplinary team. In August 2017 most project partners did first preliminary field trips in international and interdisciplinary groups to the research area. These allowed to get a sense of the landscape, establishing first ideas for potential research sites and to formulate questions to the experts from other disciplines. These questions will be further developed and discussed in the project’s first workshop to be held in Cape Town in January 2018. More workshops, international exchanges of researcher and students, as well as long-term field stays are planned.

Giorgio Miescher is Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow for Namibian and Southern African Studies at the Centre for African Studies. Contact: giorgio.miescher@unibas.ch.
Luregn Lenggenhager is a postdoc in and the coordinator of the project Space in Time. Luregn earned his PhD in History from the University of Zuerich. Contact: luregn.lenggenhager@unibas.ch.

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Project team: Maano Ramutsindela (Environmental & Geographical Science, University of Cape Town), Giorgio Miescher and Luregn Lenggenhager (Centre for African Studies, University of Basel), Klaus Kuhn and Lena Bloemertz and Phil Greenwood (Department of Environmental Science, University of Basel), Martha Akawa (Geography, History, Environmental Studies and Tourism Management, University of Namibia), Dag Henrichsen (Basler Afrika Bibliographien), Ndidzulafhi Innocent Sinthumule (University of Venda).

Website: www.zasb.unibas.ch/spaceintime

Next page: Namibian project team on field trip (picture: Martha Akawa 2017).

