

Africa Knows! It is time to decolonise the minds

Report of panel H45: *Knowledge and action*

16th February 2021

Reporter: Beatriz Alves

Convenors

- Marieke van Winden – African Studies Centre Leiden. Organizer of the conference *Africa Knows!*
- Harry Wels – Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Organizational anthropologist. His research is primarily focused on organizational structures of cooperation in the context of nature conservation in Southern Africa.
- Marja Spierenburg – Leiden University. Professor in Anthropology of Sustainable Development and Livelihoods at Leiden University (the Netherlands) and Research Fellow at Stellenbosch University (South Africa). Her research focuses on the role of the private sector in nature conservation and land reforms in Southern and East Africa and its impacts on local communities' access to land.

Contributors

- Harry Wels
- Marja Spierenburg

Abstract of the panel

In some parts of Africa, the enduring land question is a visible colonial legacy, with a continued struggle centred on issues of ownership and management of agricultural and mining land property. Intellectuals who become 'action researchers' in favour of land redistribution often have to cope with forms of violence, racism, and nationalism, that challenges their integrity. How to manage that? How to deal with the criticism that activism 'corrupts' academic research? Is neutrality in this type of research possible? What does it mean to be an 'action researcher'?

Papers presented

- Title: "Reflections on organization ethnographical fieldwork in Zimbabwe – 'action researcher' or not?"
- Author: Harry Wels

During my PhD research on private wildlife conservation in the second half of the 1990s in Zimbabwe, the Land Question was a daily central topic in mainstream media. With the increasing tensions that arose due to the political and economic crisis of 2000, many of 'my respondents' became suspicious of my research. On one hand, white farmers mocked me by saying that I was a foreigner who had come to Zimbabwe to 'check on how they treated their blacks'. On the other hand, the neighbouring black communities suspected I was some sort of 'spy' hired by the white farmers. In the Land Question debate and in my publications, I tried to take a social justice stance, but I do not know if I was always successful in doing so. In this paper I attempt to verify if I deserve to label myself as an 'action researcher' or not by reflecting auto-ethnographically on this research trajectory.

- Title: “Power and politics in stakeholder engagement: farm dweller (in)visibility and conversions to game farming in South Africa”
- Authors: Femke Brandt, Jenny Josefsson, and Marja Spierenburg

We discuss tensions inherent in multistakeholder approaches addressing conflicts over natural resources as well as the involvement of stakeholders in research. Our discussion is built on knowledge generated by extensive research on the impacts of private farm conversions to game farms in South Africa, where significant increases in farm conversions have been observed since the 1990s. We reflect on a series of multistakeholder workshops that we organized, partly as a requirement of the funding agency. The workshop aims were to disseminate our research findings among the stakeholder groups and explore ways to mitigate the negative impacts of conversions. We discuss how we organized the engagement process in ways that sought to address the power differences between game farmers, the State, and farm dwellers. By considering the complexities of stakeholder relations in the farm conversion context, we gained a deeper understanding of the politics of land and belonging in the still unequal post-apartheid rural landscape. Based on experiences from the research as well as the workshops, we take a critical stance regarding mainstream notions of stakeholder engagement and resilience building.

Discussion

After the presentation of the papers, the contributors opened the floor to questions and comments:

- Marja Spierenburg started the discussion by agreeing with Harry Wels’ statement in the conclusion of his presentation: it is difficult to suddenly be disconnected with the people that you were doing research with for a considerable amount of time because your study is complete. The researcher starts to get to know these people on a more personal level and then, when the research is over, the academic goes back to their country of origin and visiting those people again becomes challenging (for safety reasons, monetary constraints, political instability in the area, etc.).
- Beatriz Alves, one of the audience members, asked Harry Wels if his initial goal for his PhD thesis was to be politically involved with the people he was going to work with. Harry Wels stated that he had never viewed himself as a political activist. However, when a researcher is immersed in his fieldwork, especially for a long period of time, they become automatically invested in it. And that is where questions of integrity come into play. What is integrity? Do social justice matters have a place in Academia?
- Erik van der Zanden, one of the audience members, intervened by stating that academics should be both observant but also active in their research.
- Harry Wels posed the question: is Academia the appropriate place for political activism? Some suggest yes because, based on more grounded evidence collected during fieldwork, one can have a more informed political position; and some suggest the contrary, since some academics find the barriers in Academia too strict to venture into activism.
- Ton Dietz, former director of the African Studies Centre Leiden and one of the audience members, recommended a book and an article for those who would like to know more about action research:
 - Johnstone L. (2019), *The Politics of Conducting Research in Africa: Ethical and Emotional Challenges in the Field*. 1st edition. Springer International Publishing; Palgrave Macmillan
 - Amzat J. (2020), “Beyond Wishful Thinking: The Promise of Science Engagement at the Community Level in Africa”. *Journal of Developing Societies* 36(2), 206-228
- Tony Dietz emphasized the importance of professors educating their students in active researching. Using classifications of people without considering what they think about them always leads to marginalization. Making people visible and heard is already action research. Asking questions or selecting certain people to answer your questions is already an act in

itself. In practice, there is a lot of unknown that happens after the research is over. A researcher is often not there to be part of 'solutions' or 'negotiations'. There is also the dilemma that local researchers do not have the same access to resources than foreign researchers. For foreigners, if things go wrong they can go back to their country of origin. Local researchers, on the other hand, are more exposed to danger.

- Abeer Abazeed, one of the audience members, questioned Marja Spierenburg if she had challenged her interviewees that clearly had a more dominant role in the discussion.
- Marja Spierenburg answered by explaining that, firstly, it is important to let the people in the interview freely speak. Secondly, the researcher can challenge the interviewee with other questions to see if they contradict themselves. During fieldwork, it is also a matter of integrity to make the researcher's position about the discussion known.
- Fernanda Marques, one of the audience members, mentioned that, in her point of view, social policy is only done on a scientific basis. The boundaries of action research with politics are tenuous or do not exist and it would be better if they were not partisan in the selection of their informations purely because of their political inclinations.