



A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY SOUTHERN AFRICA

Anthropology in southern Africa emerged in the Darwinian and colonial context of the 19th century around a fascination with human and cultural origins among officials, missionaries and other interested persons. An early linguistic anthropologist from a missionary background was Theophilus Hahn who submitted his doctoral thesis on Khoi languages at the University of Halle in Germany in 1870 and published ethnological articles. From the early 20th century anthropology developed into a fully-fledged academic field, focused on the social and cultural experience of contemporary people, and moving away from speculative and descriptive generalizations towards more empirical, analytical and comparative interpretations.

The first major ethnography appeared in 1912 when the Swiss missionary, Henri Alexandre Junod, published *The Life of a South African Tribe* (on Tsonga-speakers of the South African and Mozambican Lowveld). In 1921 the first chair in social anthropology was established at the University of Cape Town with the appointment of Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown who in later years became the leading theorist of structural functionalism in the United Kingdom. Ethnology was established as a teaching subject at Witwatersrand University in 1923, with the appointment of Winifred Hoernlé (an influential teacher and early ethnographer), followed by the emergence of anthropology departments at most of the other universities in the country in the following decades. Although a separate association for anthropology was only to emerge many decades later, the South African Association for the Advancement of Science (that held annual conferences from 1903) had an Anthropological Section where archaeologists and anthropologists read papers, and they often published articles in the association's journal, the *South African Journal of Science*.

In 1926 Werner Eiselen was appointed at Stellenbosch as the first anthropologist at an Afrikaans medium university, where he developed the Afrikaner version of anthropology, known as *volkekunde*. He later became a senior government official and one of the architects of apartheid. Emerging ideological differences about the nature of South African society (was it one society or a set of racially and ethnically differentiated peoples?) were broadly associated with the distinction between the English liberal (social anthropology), and the Afrikaans nationalist (*volkekunde*) academic contexts. Despite the politically contrasting views, in the early decades of South African anthropology the few anthropologists in the country cooperated

in the Inter-University Committee for African Studies and published in Bantu Studies, the first journal dedicated to anthropology and African languages (founded in 1921 and renamed African Studies in 1942).

Many of the country's social anthropologists had strong links with British universities (initially studying with either Radcliffe-Brown or Bronislaw Malinowski) and several moved to the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia where some became leading social anthropologists (Meyer Fortes, Max Gluckman, Hilda Kuper, Isaac Schapera in an older generation and Peter Carstens, John and Jeanne Comaroff, Brian du Toit, Rob Gordon, Adam Kuper, Colin Murray, John Perry and Graeme Watson, amongst others, in a younger one). Several black social anthropologists left South Africa due to the oppressive political and educational system (among them Archie Mafeje, Bernard Magubane, Joseph Manyoni and Absolom Vilakazi) and some of them became early radical critics of liberal social science in southern Africa and elsewhere.

Research in South Africa by social anthropologists had an initial focus on kinship and diverse traditional practices, but this was interwoven from early on with concerns about urbanization of African people which implied the study of migration – though the focus was on the way that traditional culture was being undermined in urban settings. Meanwhile the volkekundiges drew inspiration from German and, later, American cultural anthropology and had their focus on racial and cultural difference, anchored in the pre-colonial past. Volkekunde became associated with the policy of separate development and apartheid, and contributed to the training of government officials and the armed forces. The most orthodox volkekundige school of thought developed at the University of Pretoria, while the Stellenbosch volkekundige, J. P. Bruwer, was associated with a more liberal interpretation of separate development. A dissident volkekundige, Brian du Toit, emigrated and made a contribution to cultural anthropology in the United States. Some of the students he taught at Stellenbosch University would move away from volkekunde in the 1980s.

In 1967 what was called an 'interuniversity continuation committee of anthropologists' (advocated by John Blacking, J. P. Bruwer, Aubrey Myburgh and Berthold Pauw) managed to draw many South African anthropologists, though with some important exceptions on both sides, into an informal network that met annually at Unisa for academic conferences. Monica

Wilson (University of Cape Town) and David Hammond-Tooke (Witwatersrand University) were reluctant social anthropologists in that network, while Pieter Coertze (the leading volkekundige at the University of Pretoria) was opposed to cooperation with social anthropologists. In the context of escalating political polarization and the radicalization of ideological differences, a formal unitary organization was unthinkable at that time. When black anthropologists began attending the conferences, many of the volkekundiges withdrew and formed a separate, formal organization, the Vereniging van Afrikaanse Volkekundiges (VAV) (Association of Afrikaans Anthropologists) in 1977. VAV organized its own annual conferences and published a journal: Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Etnologie / South African Journal for Ethnology (in post-apartheid times continued as Anthropology Southern Africa). As Afrikaner nationalists, the volkekundiges invested strongly in publishing in Afrikaans in their journal and insisted on using Afrikaans exclusively in their theses and conferences.

The ideological differences between the two traditions of anthropology in the country became increasingly apparent in the way that South African society was seen as either, following Radcliffe-Brown and Gluckman, one social system or, from the perspective of volkekunde, as a collection of incompatible racial and cultural entities (described through what was known as ethnos theory). Furthermore, while participant observation and a need for social closeness was a normal part of social anthropological methodology in the field, this was politically problematic in volkekunde and personalized social relationships were therefore kept to a minimum during fieldwork.

The informal, mainly English-medium conferences continued with very little participation by volkekundiges. However, in 1987 the Association for Anthropology in Southern Africa (AASA) was established in order to unite and professionalize anthropology by means of an open and democratic association, with the support of some of the younger members of VAV who had broken ties with that organization. AASA expressly rejected apartheid ideology and all discrimination, including sexism, in the preamble to its constitution. It also accepted a set of ethical guidelines that emphasized the unacceptability of undercover work. By that stage South Africa had entered what turned out to be the final phase of the liberation struggle and the political polarization between the two professional associations was high. By then an academic boycott of all academic institutions in South Africa had been instituted, and it isolated

the discipline from what might have been its international network. This was also the time, in 1989, that Witwatersrand University social anthropologist, David Webster, was assassinated by the state's security forces, apparently for his human rights activism. Much of the work in social anthropology in the decades before the democratization of the country was part of the exposé tradition in which the damaging effects of apartheid, especially in rural areas, were studied through a neo-Marxist theoretical lens.

With the transition to democracy in 1994, a new phase in organized anthropology began, with the impact of the dramatic political change clearly showing in the demise of volkekunde. This was triggered by the need for transformation in curricula, university administration and power relations in higher education. Volkekunde departments, once superior in their numbers of staff and students, were increasingly under threat and a paradigm shift occurred, away from ethnos theory, especially amongst younger academics. This shift was, for instance, expressed in the name change of VAV to the South African Association of Cultural Anthropologists (SAACA). At a 1996 conference of AASA at Unisa, in combination with the Pan African Association of Anthropologists (PAAA), several SAACA members participated, although an important part of the academic leadership of the organization kept its distance. Finally, in 2001, the two associations merged to become the current Anthropology Southern Africa (ASnA). The journal of SAACA was inherited by the new association and renamed Anthropology Southern Africa. After many decades of disengaged competition and dissent, anthropologists in South Africa united into one disciplinary association and a further phase of growth could begin.

Useful historical overviews of southern African anthropology

- Dickson, J. L. and Spiegel, A. D. 2014. South African Anthropology in Conversation: An Intergenerational Interview on the History and Future of Social Anthropology in South Africa. Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG.
- Gordon, R. J. and Spiegel, A. D. 1993 Southern Africa Revisited. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22:83-105.
- Hammond-Tooke, W. D. 1997. *Imperfect Interpreters: South Africa's Anthropologists 1920-1990*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Pauw, B. A. 1980. Recent South African Anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 9:315-338.



ANTHROPOLOGY SOUTHERN AFRICA TODAY

The ASnA association of professional anthropologists and students of anthropology in southern Africa has grown into an important forum for regional networking as well as the key actor in the promotion of the discipline and the profession. Membership in 2015 stands at 155 of which 50% are student members. Student participation has increased over the years and is important for a vibrant and sustainable association. The Monica Wilson prize, for the best student paper at each conference, and the publication of student papers in the ASnA journal are indications of the drive to increase the presence of students in the association's activities. Furthermore, the ASnA constitution provides for the membership of one student on its eight member Council – the governing body. The association primarily functions through its annual conferences where broad participation and rigorous intellectual debate are stimulated. The conferences are hosted by a different university department each year.

The association's academic journal, *Anthropology Southern Africa*, is a strong regional journal in the field of anthropology with contributions from local researchers as well as from Africanists from across the continent and the rest of the world. The journal is a peer-reviewed and accredited publication with the South African Department of Higher Education and Training. From 2014 the journal is published by the international Taylor and Francis publishing house. The Council of ASnA appoints an editorial committee that is assisted by an editorial board, broadly representative of local and international professional anthropologists.

One of the present challenges of the association is to improve its global connections to professional bodies of anthropologists. ASnA is a member of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) as well as the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). ASnA also has close ties with the Pan-African Anthropological Association (PAAA) and has held two conferences in combination with the PAAA (1996 and 2006, the latter also co-hosted by the IUAES) in South Africa.

Other challenges that the association is addressing are the following:

- Promoting ongoing research networking by organizing regional workshops in areas where there are clusters of universities, e.g. Gauteng, Western Cape and Eastern Cape.



- Promoting transformation by stimulating interest in the subject amongst young black academics and students.
- Promoting engaged citizenship through public anthropology, including participation in policy development and activism.