

A welcome addition to South Africa's rural and regional historiography

Teresa Connor, *Conserved Spaces, Ancestral Places: Conservation, History and Identity among Farm Labourers in the Sundays River Valley, South Africa*

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This book is a welcome addition to South Africa's rural and regional historiography. The author, however, is not an historian, but an anthropologist with wide interests and an active engagement with the issues she writes about in *Conserved Spaces*. Teresa Connor is senior researcher at the Fort Hare Institute for Social and Economic Research and she holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from Rhodes. While she lists some of her publications in the source references, she does not list her doctoral thesis and it is not clear whether the contents of *Conserved Spaces* is based on her research for that degree, or whether it is the consequence, and perhaps amalgamation, of the three items she has authored about the Sundays River Valley. In 2001 as a consultant she wrote the *Social and Environmental Impact Assessment for the Greater Addo Elephant National Park*; in 2007/2008 (with D. Zimmerman) she was involved in the *Socio-Economic Survey of the Addo Elephant National Park and Surrounds* for SANParks;¹ and in 2011 she published an article on "The Frontier Revisited: Displacement, Land and Identity among Farm Labourers in the Sundays River Valley".² On page 28 of *Conserved Spaces*, Connor outlines the numerous research initiatives in the area in which she has played an active role. Her long familiarity with, and expertise in, the locality is thus evident, but she has also investigated other contested rural areas in South Africa. Her M.A. dissertation (Rand Afrikaans University) in 1998 dealt with a settlement in Sekhukhuneland and she is also familiar with a border zone in Pafuri, in the Gaza Province of Mozambique.³

As Connor points out, contestation over the Sundays River Valley has been ongoing for centuries. In pre-colonial times it was utilised by different Xhosa communities; an open and then a closed frontier and active conflict zone with the arrival of white settlers; a modernising space with the irrigation scheme and farmlands of the 1920s; and further complicated by the intrusion in the 1930s of one of South Africa's smaller national parks, the Addo Elephant National Park - state-owned land that as a protected area had an unusual conception - a story told here as well as elsewhere.⁴

¹ See M.C. Rose, "A Critical Analysis of the Socioeconomic Impact Assessments of the Addo Elephant National Park", M. Comm., Rhodes University, 2010.

² *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 30, 2, 2011, pp 181-203.

³ *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 21, 1, 2003, pp 93-120.

⁴ M.T. Hoffman, "Major P.J. Pretorius and the Decimation of the Addo Elephant Herd in 1919-1920: Important Reassessments", *Koedoe*, 36, 2, 1993, pp 23-44.

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Connor's narrative deals with the present legacies of the extremely complex relationships of many communities in this largely agricultural region of South Africa. Her research interest was sparked by the proposed expansion of the Addo Elephant National Park after 1994, a formal initiative with international funding that had as its aim the revitalisation of the farming sector in what had become a depressed region of the Eastern Cape by capitalising on the rise of eco-tourism in the service industry. Part of the rationale behind the scheme to enlarge the national park, which aimed to be an inclusive type of protected area, was the promotion of appropriate regional development plans and, because of the unusual biome in which the national park was situated, enabling South Africa to meet its international conservation obligations under, for example, the Convention on Biological Diversity that it signed in 1995.

However, as Connor explains so well in this book, land and landscape is not only "space" to be traded: it is "place". Place is space that is imbued with meaning, with memory - often tied to identity and to symbolism as much as it is to work and economic welfare. People love the land and feel for it, particularly the places they call home (however construed) and do not regard it as a commodity easily traded. Very seldom, no matter who they are - whatever community, whatever period - do people merely inhabit it or move lightly across it. The land claims process in South Africa bears ample testimony to this. The chapters in *Conserved Spaces* chart these various emotions and meanings among the farm labourers in the Sundays River Valley. There have been many removals in the area that add to the complex tapestry of meaning. Of these apartheid was of course, the most major. In this regard, Connor treats the example of Kirkwood in some detail. Despite apartheid, farm workers were sometimes able to remain on the land they occupied, but they were then subjected to the personal vagaries of land-owners. The current economic hardship at a time when the agricultural sector continues to shrink as a percentage of GDP has exacerbated long established and deeply held tensions, while the fate of farm-workers in particular (an understudied community in South Africa as Connor notes) has not been resolved through normalising the countryside through land reform (as opposed to land restitution) as was the intention in 1994. The grand plan of the expanded national park - a further intervention by the state in people's lives - adds but a new dimension to what Connor charts as an intractable contest for land and livelihood.

Chapter one provides an introduction to the topic, while chapter two introduces the reader to the issues related to the expansion of the Addo Elephant National Park. Chapter 3 reverses the timeframe to locate the Sundays River Valley in the context of the Zuurveld frontier and the many wars of the nineteenth century. Working as an anthropologist, Connor has relied heavily on interviews and these form the basis of chapters four and five. While she does not provide a list of interviewees (informants), many of their personal stories are provided in the text. How wages are determined and paid, how much stock a farm worker and his/her family might own and range on their employer's property, the importance of particular work and skills (termed "work ethics" here), even the stratification between workers, are all fascinating and important windows into the lives and concerns of farm workers.

A thread that runs through the majority of Connor's interviews is the transitory nature of farm work under these circumstances, the insecurity of employment and tenure (and thus a house), and the loss of the sense of place. This, Connor equates with the ongoing emphasis on custom and ritual that she describes in detail in chapter six. Not all of these accounts, in fact, only a very few of them, tie up with the ideas described in the previous chapters. There is a long and passionately expressed section on water rituals, rainmaking and circumcision rites which Connor herself witnessed. The explanation for this return to tradition - although not directly stated by Connor - may be the desire of rural South Africans to reposition themselves within the growing political power of traditional leadership, as well as the search for identity or to retain alive the memory of better times. There is little here about the impact of Christianity on the people interviewed or the conflicts between modernity and tradition that are so evident in other areas of South Africa. In this regard, the work of Natasha Erlank, among others, is important.⁵ An appendix lists some 18 land claims registered in Port Elizabeth in 2000: it is highly likely that this number has increased considerably in the many years since then.

Although this book has much to offer as a micro-history and social anthropology of a part of the Eastern Cape, the author does not make it clear exactly how this book takes us further. For this reason, it is a pity that it does not resonate with the fast-growing literature on biocultural conservation. Strongly linked to the nexus between biological diversity and cultural diversity and the focus of the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy, this is a fascinating and burgeoning field. The international community has realised that biodiversity conservation will not occur unless cultural diversity and vitality are interrelated with it. I would suggest that initiatives such as *Conserved Spaces* would speak strongly to this field of study and policy direction.⁶

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⁵ For example, Natasha Erlank's paper entitled "Well, Coming Straight to Business, Immediate Marriage is Absolutely Impossible: Love, Sex and Consequence in the Eastern Cape, c. 1930", WiSER seminar, 15 September 2014.

⁶ See, for example, L. Maffi, and E. Woodley, *Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook* (Earthscan, London and Washington: DC, 2008); or G. Pungetti, G. Oviedo and D. Hooke (eds), *Sacred Species and Sites: Advances in Biocultural Conservation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012).