



The African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific

Habari kwa ufupi
Newsletter No. 100 – April/May 2020

Message from AFSAAP President



Dear Members and Friends of AFSAAP,

Welcome to the 100th edition of the AFSAAP newsletter. I'd also like to welcome some new officers to their positions and to welcome back some returning officers. Our new AFSAAP Secretary, Margaret O'Callaghan, is no stranger to African Studies having worked for the United Nations and AusAid for twenty years. Her area of expertise is Southern Africa in general and Zambia in particular, with a focus on mining impacts. Helen Ware takes up position as Vice-President and is also no stranger to AFSAAP. A Professor of Peace Studies at UNE, Helen has, to use her words: "been a human rights advocate, an aid bureaucrat and a diplomat (High Commissioner to Zambia and Malawi, Ambassador to Angola)." James Dhizaala continues in the role of Treasurer and Geoffrey Hawker in the role of Editor of ARAS. Thanks to both of them for their continuing commitment to AFSAAP.

Post-graduate reps this year are Shanil Samarakoon (UNSW), whose work is featured below. Returning are reps are Leighann Spencer (CSU) and Necia Billingham (UniSA). As for myself, many of you already know me, but my work has mostly been in Sudan and East Africa, with recent work on charcoal and deforestation initiatives in Kenya and Uganda. Please don't hesitate to contact me on anything AFSAAP related a.bartlett@unsw.edu.au.

As we enter 2020, the COVID-19 virus has changed the world as we know it. Africa hasn't escaped the situation by any means, with significant outbreaks in Egypt, South Africa, Morocco and Algeria. These developments have come hard on the heels of a plague of locusts cross East Africa at the start of 2020

and more recently floods and landslides, which for some, lead to biblical comparisons! At this time, we are hoping for the best for the continent and sending our best wishes to African colleagues and their families as they battle, as we do, to flatten the curve!

Despite the challenges we face, work continues apace at AFSAAP. A new website is now ready which will allow members to join online and pay conference fees. Part of the website will also be devoted to members' expertise, so please complete and return the short bio form at the end of this bulletin to secretary@afsaap.org.au. In addition, we will have a blog where we can post up to date information about members and their exploits as well as continuing discussions about all matters Africa related! As I write, our postgraduate reps are forming chapters at universities across Australia, so if you'd like to start a chapter, please contact Leighann Spencer at leighannspencer.27@gmail.com.

For now, stay healthy everyone and don't forget to send your newsletter items to secretary@afsaap.org.au. We'd love to hear from you!

Opportunities

Taylor and Francis are seeking contributors to the next book volume of *Africa South of the Sahara*. They are after country specific essays on politics and economics. This is an excellent opportunity for both emerging and established academics. Email Iain at iain.frame@informa.com for more details.

The Journal for the Academic Study of Religion, is planning a special issue on "Religion, Spirituality and the New African Diaspora". <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/JASR/announcement> Abstract of up to 300 words and a brief biography by 31 July 2020

Cherry Gertzel Scholarship: <http://cherrygertzel.net/postgraduate-scholarship/> Please note that conditions for applying have been slightly updated.

Events & Offerings

Events are likely to be disrupted or postponed this year due to the pandemic. Where we know new dates, they have been entered, but also check for updates.

The Institute of African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow has postponed its conference "Destinies of Africa in the Modern World" conference until June 2021. More information can be found here: <https://www.inafran.ru/en/>

The AFSAAP Annual conference will be held at UNE, Armidale from the 3rd to the 4th December, 2020. It will be preceded by a postgraduate day on Wednesday 2nd December. Watch out for the call for papers and for further information. We will provide updates as soon as we know how this event is likely to be impacted by current events.

Borders Literature [interviewed](#) Justin Cox of the African Books Collective. He talks about how he got into the business all the way from New Zealand, gives details on publishing and distribution, and discusses decolonisation of libraries. The Collective has recently and generously offered free access to many books as a contribution to people's reading during this difficult period. <https://africanetwork.weblogs.anu.edu.au/2020/03/29/african-books-collective-free-access/>

ANU has been almost bereft of African studies courses for some decades, so it is cheering to see that a new course has been introduced by Dr Richard Frank, School of Politics and International Relations, at ANU. Entitled 'Conflict and Change in SSA' (POLS3040) it covers the issues, ideas and trends which shape the politics of the continent. <https://programsandcourses.anu.edu.au/2020/course/POLS3040>

Looking out for African Students

The current evolving situation with COVID-19 is challenging for everyone, but especially so for people who are not in their home country and may be facing financial or other hardships. Please reach out to any African students at your institution that may be in need of help. At this time, we all need to help each other. If anyone knows of resources that may be of assistance, please do let us know!

Reports

ANU Environment School Embraces Africa (for one day at least)

On the 4th March the Fenner School of Environment & Society at ANU held an all-day symposium called “Africa & it’s People – Interdisciplinary Lessons from ANU Research” to share and discuss their research in various African countries, including Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Central Africa and South Africa and the continent more generally. Through a series of presentations and round table discussions, the event facilitated interdisciplinary discussion and collaboration, bringing different perspectives together to develop new research opportunities. There were about thirty participants present, included those from other Schools ‘across the Creek’, including Anthropology and Public Policy.

The event opened with a particularly moving ‘Acknowledgment of Country’ i.e. sitting in a ‘yarn circle’ on the floor and led by Sam Provost, a Yuin Man and Fenner School PhD Student who encouraged participants to think about the importance of the need to decolonize research, including by getting to understand indigenous culture and knowledge and to explore the interconnections.

The first half of the day was focussed on Ecology: people and wildlife. Dr Rosie Cooney, formerly of the IUCN, and who has had a strong focus in recent years on supporting the inclusion of indigenous and community voices and perspectives in conservation deliberations and debates addressed sustainable use of wildlife in offsetting conflict and incentivizing conservation. Her talk was followed by very experienced Africanist Associate Professor Nick Abel who discussed the interaction of conservation ecology and politics. He noted the lack of protection of land rights for groups such as hunters and pastoralists by political elites and the role of ‘magical’ illogical thinking in decision making. PhD student Rachael Lowe, one of the organizers, concluded the session by amusingly asking if ‘Climate Change was Irrelephant’ and exploring the very serious impact of climate change on elephants, especially regarding the availability of water, and the use of GIS to illustrate the issues and guide coping techniques as access to water and land is reduced.

The second part of the day focused on Food, Water and Climate in Africa. Professor Jamie Pittock provided an overview of an irrigation project being trialled in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi, noting that there had been many failures in the past, with much expensive infrastructure abandoned or under-performing. The importance of recognizing the complexity of situations and the need for complimentary inputs was stressed, as was the development of simple technical tools to help farmers to learn how to manage water inputs and the addressing of institutional issues. He described a very simple moisture level tool which had been developed and was being successfully used by farmers with a resulting decrease in water usage and an increase in crop growth.

Other presenters included Yandisa Ngqangashe from the School of Regulation and Global Governance (REGNET) who spoke about Regulatory Governance of Food Environment Policies, Jonathan Chikankheni, a Malwaian PhD student, who provided more information about the irrigation research project discussed by Prof. Pittock, Kirsty Wissing spoke about the significance of human control over water, Adegboyega Adeniran also from the Fenner School and one of the event organisers, spoke about the extraordinarily ambitious proposed TransAqua Interbasin water transfer project.

Bruce Doran, Senior Lecturer in Geographical Information Systems at Fenner, spoke about their use in the irrigation focussed Farmer Livelihoods project in Zimbabwe, while Tingbao Xu a senior researcher at the Fenner School and Climate Change Institute, wrapped up the speaker sessions by emphasising the importance of training people in data collection techniques to enable better understanding and address Climate Change.

The role of inter-disciplinary understanding was crucial in all of these projects, where science needed to be tempered and informed with socio/cultural/political understanding for interventions to be effective in addressing the impact of Climate Change.

The symposium concluded with a brief information session in order to inform participants about 'things-African' at ANU: Ibrahim Abraham of the Humanities Research Centre informed the participants about the current DFAT-funded research project to increase awareness of the study of Africa in Canberra and the ANU, advising on the viability of what ANU refers to as a "virtual institute" for the study of Africa. Dr Abraham and the project Research Officer Rocco Weglarz will be interviewing staff and postgraduate students about their current and future research.

David Lucas informed the participants about the newly formed ANU Africa-Middle East Strategy Group which intends to hold a 'Town Hall' style meeting in the near future and also about the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific which has been in existence for some 40 years. The Association holds annual conferences rotating about the states and NZ and also produces a bi-annual journal (Australasian Review of African Studies) and a quarterly newsletter. The 2020 conference will be held in Armadale at the University of New England in early December.

AFSAAP would like to congratulate the Fenner School on this initiative.

Spotlight on AFSAAP Research

Shanil Samarakoon

I'm thrilled to be one of AFSAAP's postgraduate representatives this year! I am a PhD candidate at UNSW's School of Humanities and Languages and my research is grounded in the interdisciplinary field of energy justice. The scholarship on energy justice is a response to discourse about energy long being dominated by technical fields such as science, engineering and econometrics. Energy justice seeks to give focus to the ground realities of how people experience energy systems. How are the



benefits and harms of energy distributed across populations? Whose voices are heard and influence decisions about energy systems? To what extent are decision making processes about energy systems inclusive and democratic? These are some of the critical questions that the field turns its attention to in order to further the development of energy systems that are more just and sustainable.

My current research focuses on issues of energy justice in Malawi's off-grid solar market. Off-grid solar technologies such as solar household systems and solar lanterns are increasingly seen as a vital part of addressing widespread energy poverty across sub Saharan Africa. Since 2010, it is estimated that over 180 million of these devices have been sold across the Global South, the majority in East Africa. This growing adoption has been driven by precipitous falls in the prices of solar panels and batteries, the advent of "pay as you go" financing, social impact finance, and generous tax concessions. In the absence

of grid infrastructure, the energy poor are being encouraged to purchase solar technologies in order to gain access to crucial energy services such as lighting and the ability to power small appliances. My exploratory research examines the justice implications of this approach to addressing energy poverty in a Malawian setting.

It is estimated that only 11% of Malawi's 17 million population have access to electricity through the national grid. Even those who do have "access", experience an expensive and unreliable supply. "Blackouts" due to load-shedding are part and parcel of daily life in Malawi and most households rely on charcoal or firewood for cooking, and battery-powered torches for lighting. Against this backdrop, solar technologies are playing an important role in addressing energy poverty, but there are several issues with the current model of adoption that needs urgent attention. In this article I'd like to share a brief overview of three interrelated issues of justice that I have been examining through my PhD research in Malawi.

Fake and Substandard Solar Products

Over the last decade, market- friendly energy policies have led to an influx of cheap solar products that can be found in the most remote parts of the country. Yet there are serious questions being raised about the quality of products that are entering the Malawian market. Given the very limited financial capacity of Malawi's energy poor, manufacturers and importers tend to focus on supplying a steady stream of low quality- low cost solar products. Amongst these sub-standard offerings are products that make dubious claims about being "Made in Germany", and those that feature patterned stickers in place of actual solar cells. These issues of quality and deception are so rampant that even officials from the *Malawi Energy Regulatory Authority* concede that the market is flooded with counterfeit products. While a local quality certification regime exists, ineffective regulation of the market has created a veritable jungle of products that consumers must navigate with no support. This is further complicated by weak consumer protections. My fieldwork across 2019 suggests that the legislated minimum of a 12-month warranty on solar products is seldom offered in practice. Thus, households have little recourse if they are purchase a fake or poor-quality product.

Solar Literacy

While my research is ongoing, the evidence would suggest that household capacity to make well-informed decisions about solar products is very poor. Households tend to base their decisions on word-of-mouth notions of quality and set about DIY installations of these systems instead of using certified installers. While there's a basic understanding of how solar panels work, there is often very little knowledge of the various components that are required for a well-functioning system. These local understandings of solar products, which tend to fixate on physical factors such as colour, size, weight or patterns, suggest that households are highly vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous traders and manufacturers. Yet, [civic education programs to raise solar literacy](#) have been few and far between.

Solar E-Waste

Solar technologies are often thought of as being "clean" as they produce emission-free electricity. Yet this tends to obscure the realities of mass production in China, and the fate of off-grid solar technologies once they reach the end of their productive life. In Malawi, the combination of poor-quality products and poor solar literacy also contribute to the growing issue of electronic waste (e-waste). Like most countries across sub Saharan Africa, there is no national infrastructure in place to collect and recycle electronic waste. Substandard products, or those rendered inoperable through misuse, tend to languish in homes or be disposed of in surrounding areas. This can pose serious health and safety risks as components may be flammable or leach toxic chemicals into soil and water bodies. Therefore, while there are concerted efforts to drive rates of off-grid solar adoption among the energy poor, the question of what happens to the associated e-waste looms large.

Through the case of Malawi, we can see that there is more to the off-grid solar market than the celebratory narratives of clean energy liberating the energy poor. Through the lens of energy justice, we can see that while off-grid solar technologies can provide access to vital energy services, a deep reliance on markets can have negative consequences for the very populations they are meant to benefit. It is through understanding these consequences that we can inform energy policy responses that are more just and sustainable.

If you'd like to get in touch, you can reach me at s.samarakoon@unsw.edu.au

Recommended Readings from the Executive:

From the Secretary, Margaret O'Callaghan: 'Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa'. Johannes Fabian, 2000. Uni. of California. I can't do better than by quoting James Ferguson: "This remarkable book explodes all the old myths about European explorers in Africa while at the same time advancing a subtle and far reaching critique of conventional ideas of scientific rationality... and conditions of ethnographic understanding'. I am anticipating that it will inform my next project which will be a synthesis and analysis of pre WW11 Cape to Cairo journeys, on what was Cecil Rhodes 'red ribbon' railway linking the south to the north under the British flag.

From Committee Member (Postgraduates) Leighann Spencer: Oil Wealth and Insurgency in Nigeria. O. Adunbi, 2015. Indiana University Press. Looking not only at oil extraction and government/company practices, Adunbi examines local discourses surrounding oil and how this has created an 'oil citizenship' in the Niger Delta. From this comes a deeper understanding of the ways that NGOs, militants, security groups and other community members act to defend or contest land and wealth. Particularly interesting is the use of concepts such as governmentality and imagined communities - a fantastic read!

Join AFSAAP Today!

Please RENEW your AFSAAP Membership Today if you haven't already done so. The Association is in its 40th Year and looks forward to your ongoing membership and subscription. AFSAAP publishes its journal the Australasian Review of African Studies in June and December each year and sends out a monthly newsletter with relevant information to those interested in African Studies generally. AFSAAP has 40 years' worth of conference proceedings, now archived. AFSAAP also hosts an annual conference. Please see the latest AFSAAP news at www.afsaap.org.au and you can also follow on Twitter @AFSAAP and Facebook.

AFSAAP is a Not For Profit Association and depends upon your memberships to achieve this. Please RENEW your AFSAAP Membership Today. Membership fees are very modest. You might like to also review the Opportunities for AFSAAP Members.

Next Newsletter

If you would like your research to feature in the "Spotlight on AFSAAP research section", please do send your name and details to us and we'll be in contact.

Members' Expertise

Name:

Contact e-mail:

Geographical focus: (max 1 line)

Areas of interest: (max 2 lines)