

Prenotandum; This report on the AASR Conference at Cape Town University in 2014 was published in *AASR Bulletin* 41 (November 2014): 23-29

Jan G. Platvoet

Cape Town 2014

In full view of Table Mountain

The 6th AASR Conference in Africa, on 'Religion, Ecology and the Environment in Africa and the African Diaspora', was held from Wednesday July 30 to Saturday August 2, 2014, in a magnificent setting: Breakwater Lodge Protea Hotel on the Cape Town harbour, quite close to the main tourist area of Cape Town, the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, with its malls, shops, restaurants, hotels, all in full view of Cape Town's three major landmarks: Devil's Peak, Table Mountain, and Signal Hill.¹



The conference was held in a historical setting: Breakwater Lodge (BWL). It is the former Breakwater Prison (BWP), built in 1859 on Cape Town harbour in the style of a colonial fortress: a square with a tower at each corner for defence from external attack, but especially for watching the convicts in the court-yard within. The prison part of modern BWL still has another



¹ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victoria_%26_Alfred_Waterfront

stark reminder of its past as a penitentiary in the iron staircases inside the four towers and the iron ramps over-looking the corridors.

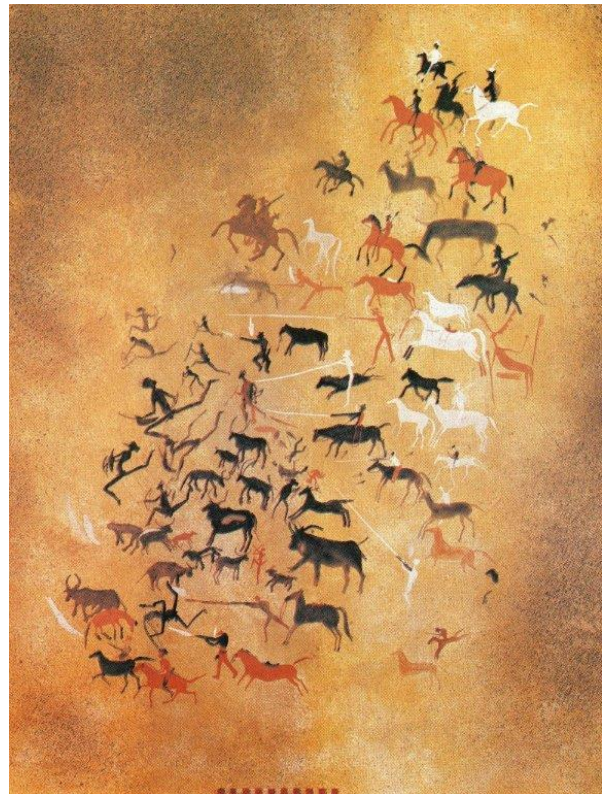
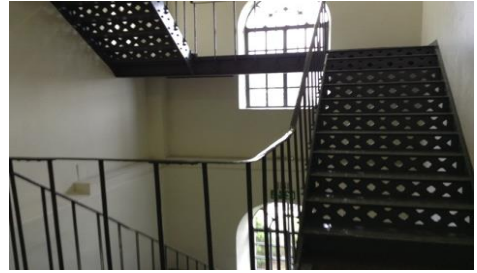
BWP was named *Breakwater* Prison, because its thousands of black inmates served their long



term hard la-

bour sentences in building the breakwaters of Cape Town harbour between 1859 and 1905.² By a penal legislation criminalizing the traditional indigenous modes of San and Khoi subsistence – San hunting and gathering³, and Khoi pastoral-

ism – the Cape Colony could make use of a large cheap labour force of black convicts for its Public Works program. Traditional modes of livelihood were made offences under laws prohibiting trespassing, vagrancy, poaching, looting and stock theft upon the land on which San had hunted and gathered since time immemorial, and on which Khoikhoi had grazed their cattle for several centuries but which the Colony had allocated to Boer farmers and British settlers. Even San and Khoi presence on them thereby became an offence unless they had been registered and possessed a pass, let alone their livelihood activities. When as a result of such legal (and even greater extra-legal) oppression and coercion, San resorted to cattle theft, they were hunted down by Boer commandos, as documented in San rock art.⁴



² Cf. Deacon 1989

³ On San, their history, rock art and religion, cf. Platvoet 1999

⁴ For this copy by Patricia Vinnicombe of the famous San battle rock painting from Underberg in KwaZulu-Natal, visit:

Those not killed but caught alive were sentenced to long terms of hard labour. At that time, the dreaded BWP was the Cape Colony's largest long term convict station.⁵ BWP was also the place from where lepers, lunatics and political prisoners were shipped off to nearby Robben Island.⁶ Malay political prisoners from the Dutch East Indies in the Dutch era, 1652-1795/1806; African in the 19th century; and ANC in the 20th century.⁷

Ironically, the former prison part of BWL serves now also as the campus of the UCT Graduate School of Business,⁸ young upper middle class students with a bright future taking the place of the downtrodden of the past.

That campus is also the splendid UCT conference center. The AASR conference was held in three of its session halls: the Exhibition Hall, the Faculty Hall, and the Executive Hall. Some of the participants had their rooms in the campus/'prison' part of BWL. I was one of them. Others in one of its two other (reception and restaurant) blocks. And others again in different (cheaper) places in Cape Town.

The conference opening

The conference drew 109 registrations, with a few registering for two days or for one day, and one unregistered participant: the keynote speaker, Bron Taylor. Six of these participants could not attend: four from Nigeria due to visa problems, and two for personal reasons. Forty-eight papers were actually presented, in addition to the three plenary lectures, the contributions to three other plenary workshop type sessions, and the AASR Business Meeting.⁹

<https://www.facebook.com/147651048620494/photos/pb.147651048620494.-2207520000.1409060165./154729564579309/?type=1&theater;>

For the original rock art scene, visit:

<https://www.facebook.com/147651048620494/photos/pb.147651048620494.-2207520000.1409060165./154735644578701/?type=1&theater;>

Cf. also Vinicombe 1976: 24-28; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1992: 56-57; Lewis-Williams 2003: 117-120, fig. 75. Vinicombe dated this rock painting to 'the period 1836-1845'.

⁵ Cf. Deacon 1989

⁶ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robben_Island

⁷ Cf. Deacon 1997

⁸ Cf. <http://www.gsb.uct.ac.za/>

⁹ I am grateful to Naboway Kafaar, Prof Tayob's efficient research assistant, for providing me with some of these figures in her e-mail *dd.* 8/26/2014

The conference set off in the afternoon of Wednesday 30 July with the registration formalities in the Foyer of the UCT Business School between 2 and 6 PM, and the Welcoming Dinner in Beijing Orchid Restaurant in the V&A Waterfront from



6 to 9 PM. It was attended not only by some 65 participants in the conference, but also by seven members, some with partners, of the IAHR Executive which had held its annual meeting earlier that week at BWL. They were Prof. Rosalind Hackett (University of Tennessee, USA), President (and conference participant); Prof. Tim Jensen (University of Southern Denmark), General Secretary (with partner); Prof. Abdulkader Tayob (UCT),¹⁰ Vice President and Conference Organizer (with partner); Prof. Brian Bocking (University College Cork, Ireland), Treasurer; Prof. Morny Joy (University of Calgary, Canada), Publications Officer (with partner); Prof. Abraham H. Khan (Trinity College,

University of Toronto, Canada), Membership Secretary; Prof. Satoko Fujiwara (University of Tokyo, Japan), Member without Portfolio; and Prof. Amarjiva Lochan (Shivaji College, University of Delhi, India), Member without Portfolio.¹¹

When all were seated, the eloquent Master of Ceremonies of this Welcoming Dinner, Prof. Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) (UNISA), co-organizer of the conference, invited Prof. Sakhela Buhlungu, Dean of the UCT Faculty of Humanities, to welcome the conference members to UCT. And Councillor Matthew Kempton,



Chair of the Portfolio Committee on Energy and Climate Change of Cape Town,

¹⁰ Abdulkader Tayob addressing his guests at the welcoming dinner

¹¹ For further details on the IAHR Executive, present and absent, visit <http://www.iahr.dk/committee.php>

to outline the ambitions of the Cape Town City Council in respect of the environment.



Jamie B. Ashton, a member of the six member Student Committee ably assisting the organizers in the smooth running of the conference, took many photographs of this lively dinner.¹²

The three plenary lectures



The first plenary lecture, and key note address, was delivered on Thursday 31 July, at 11 to 12 AM, by Prof. Bron Taylor (University of Florida),¹³ founder and past President of the *International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (ISSRNC),¹⁴ which sponsored his

participation in this conference. Taylor is also the editor of the two volume *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (New York/London: Continuum International, 2005), and of the ISSRNC *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*,¹⁵ which began publishing in 2007.¹⁶

In his lecture, 'Religion, Nature and Environmental Action from Africa to Avatar and Back', Taylor examined 'what sorts of affective, spiritual, and religious

¹² They may be viewed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.669811209779074.1073741830.629509560475906&type=1>

¹³ Cf. <http://www.brontaylor.com/>

¹⁴ Cf. <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/>

¹⁵ Formerly *Ecotheology* which ran from 1996 to 2006; cf.

<http://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/JSRNC/issue/archive?issuesPage=2#issues>

¹⁶ Cf. <http://www.religionandnature.com/journal/>. JSRNC 8,2 (2014) is on Ecstatic Naturalism and Deep Pantheism (<http://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/JSRNC/issue/view/1867>).

JSRNC 2, 3 (2008): 285-407 is a special issue devoted to African Sacred Ecologies. The journal has a five more articles of interest to scholars of the religions of Africa and its Diaspora: JSRCN 1, 3 (2007):

perceptions tend to foster dramatic environmental action'. He argued that there is reason to believe that 'in a globalizing world new forms of religious production [are] emerging that promote reverence for nature'. But he also called for scholarly caution and interdisciplinary research.

The two other plenary lectures were by Professor Victor Molobi (UNISA) on 'Tracing the Myths behind Trees and Shrubs in the Bushveld Area of South Africa: The Intersection of Religion and Environmental Care', on Thursday 30 July, 6 to 7 PM; and by Professor Ernst Conradie (University of the Western Cape, South Africa) on 'Penultimate Reflections on the Root Causes of Environmental Destruction in Africa', on Saturday, 2 August, 11 to 12 AM. Prof. Esther Acolatse (Duke University) responded to Molobi's lecture, as did Dr. Nina Hoël (University of KwaZulu/Natal) to that of Conradie.

The three workshop sessions

In addition to the three plenary lectures, there were three plenary sessions of a panel type, and of a more pragmatic character, with three contributors each. One was by three members of *South African Faith Communities' Environment Institute* (SAFCEI), Kate Davies, Geoff Davies and Juanita Greyvestein, on Thursday 31 July, 16.30 to 17.30, on 'Stories of Eco-Justice Praxis from Southern Africa'. They presented stories of eco-justice action in order to develop best practice in a world facing ecological crisis.

A second plenary session, on Friday 1 August, 11 to 12.30, was a panel on 'Research Methods & Research Methodology for the Study of Religion', by Afe Adogame (University of Edinburgh), Rosalind Hackett (University of Tennessee), and Gabrielle Capai (University of Marburg, Germany). They highlighted the significance of research methods and research methodologies in the study of religion for doctoral students in order to assist them to make their methodological perceptions open to reflective, reflexive and critical reflection. For such reflection is a prerequisite for good research on religions, particularly in view of the interdisciplinary character of modern social-scientific research on religions. Topics covered were: how to produce a research proposal; key elements and processes of research design;

351-370; 6, 3 (2012): 319-343; 6, 4 (2012): 421-446; 501-522; 8, 1 (2014): 44-63; and three reviews: JSRNC 4, 1 (2010): 243-245; 5, 1 (2011): 101-103; 6, 4 (2012): 525-526.

the politics and ethics of research; the use of qualitative and quantitative data sets; the theory and practice of an ethnographic approach; and how to develop research interviews.

The third plenary panel type session, on Saturday 2 August, 12 to 13.30, was an excellent sequel on the second one. It was on 'Publish or Perish: The Politics of Academic Publishing, Grant Writing and Job Market Realities'. These topics were reviewed from a North American perspective by Robert Baum (Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, USA); from the European perspective by Gerrie ter Haar (Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands); and from the African perspective by Oyeronke Olademo (Ilorin University, Ilorin, Nigeria).¹⁷

The paper sessions on religion and the environment

The paper sessions were in the early morning, from 8.30 to 10.30, and after (the excellent) lunch, from 14.00 to 16.00 hrs, and either in two or three parallel sessions, as a result of which one could listen in to less than half of the papers presented and had to make difficult choices, which to attend and which to forego.

Session 1, on 'Religious Rituals and the Environment' on Thursday July 31 had papers by Anne Kubai (Uppsala University), Serawit Bekele Debele (Bayreuth University), Colis Machoko (University of Sudburt, Ontario, Canada), and Olatomide Babalola (College of Education, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria).

At the same time ran session 2, on 'Religious Texts and Emerging Ecotheologies', with papers by Gerald West (University of KwaZulu/Natal), Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) (UNISA), Herman Kroesbergen (University of Pretoria), and Elias Bongmba (Rice University, USA); and session 3, on 'Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives on Religion & the Environment', with papers by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria), Papa Sow (University of Bonn, Germany), and Gabrielle Cappai (Bayreuth University, Germany).

Three parallel sessions ran also in the afternoon, two of which were on 'religion and the environment'. One was on 'Ecological Readings of the Old Testament in

¹⁷ The introduction to this panel by the convenor, Afe Adogame, and the contributions to it by ter Haar and Olademo may be read below in this *AASR Bulletin* 41 (November 2014): 31-37. The pictures of the lectures, panels and paper sessions, taken by Jamie Ashton and Pieter Christian Naude may be viewed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.672195902873938.1073741831.629509560475906&type=1>

African Contexts', with papers by Willie van Heerden (UNISA), Peet van Dyk (UNISA), Jonathan Kavusa (UNISA), Hennie Viviers (University of Johannesburg) and Izak Spangenberg (UNISA). The other was on 'Teaching Religion and Ecology: Engaging Teaching Methodologies and Practices for Embodied Learning', with a paper by three UCT students: Jamie Ashton, Yazmine Horowitz and Gilad Levanon, and another paper by Tammy Wilks (UCT).

In the morning of Friday, August 1, there two parallel sessions. One was on 'Religious Institutions, Development and management of the Environment', with papers by Richard Shadreck Mposa (Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe), Diana Quiroz & Tinde van Andel (Naturalis Biodiversity Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands), Allen Ottaro (Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa, Nairobi), and Mickie Mwanzia Koster (University of Texas).

The other was a special panel, convened by Andrea Brigaglia (UCT), "'If all the trees on earth were pens' (Qur. 31: 27): Intersection between Botanic Knowledge and Writing Practices in West African Islam', with papers by Mukhtar Umas Bunza (Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria), Michelle Biddle (Wesleyan University, USA), Murray Last (University College, London), and Abdoelkadri Idrissa Maiga (Ahmad Baba Institute Library, Timbuctu, Mali).

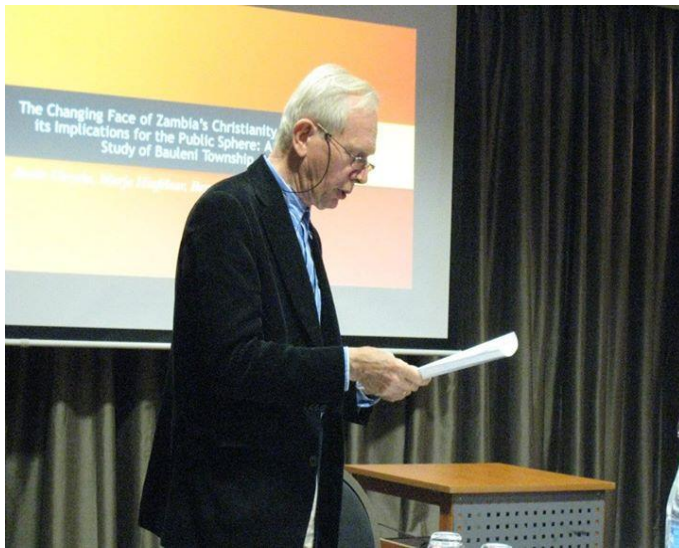
In the afternoon, another two parallel sessions ran. One was on 'Wilderness in/as Sacred Space' with papers by Magnus Echtler (Bayreuth University), Ziva Koecka (University of Bayreuth), Michael Hauhs (University of Bayreuth), and Georg Klute (University of Bayreuth).

The other discussed 'Nature, Religion, Colonial and Postcolonial Modernity in Africa', with papers by Dale Wallace (University of KwaZulu/Natal), Dianna Bell (Vanderbilt University, USA), Isabel Mukonyora (Western Kentucky University, USA), Retief Muller (University of Stellenbosch) and Adeline Masquelier (Tulane University, USA).

In the morning of Saturday 2 August, one session discussed 'Food, Agriculture and Religion' through papers by Robert Baum (Dartmouth College, USA), Elisha Mutigwe (Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe), Dela Quampah, Pentecost University College Ghana, Kaneshie, Accra, Ghana).

In the afternoon, two session were devoted to 'religion and the environment'. One was on 'Women Religious Scholars and Activists in Dialogue on Southern

African Women's Ecological Wisdom' had papers by Annalet van Schalkwijk (UNISA), Nobuntu Mazeka (Sustainable Pondoland Forum Eastern Cape), Sophie



Chirongoma (Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe), Lydia Mogano (Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute), and Siwila Lilian Cheelo (University of Kwa-Zulu/Natal).

The other was on 'God, Gods, the Ancestors and the Environment' with papers by Platvoet,¹⁸ and Abel Ugba.

Pannels on other topics

Cas Wepener (University of Pretoria) convened a panel on 'Religious Ritual and Social Capital Formation in South Africa'. It met on Thursday 31 July in the afternoon to discuss papers by Cas Wepener, Henry Mbaya (University of Stellenbosch), Gerrie ter Haar (Erasmus University, Rotterdam), and Abamfo Ofori Atiemo (University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana).

A panel on 'Politics, Education and Religion in Africa', convened by Marja Hinfelaar (SAIPAR, Lusaka, Zambia), met on Saturday morning 2 August to discuss papers by Hinfelaar, Ngozi-Ugo Emeka-Nwobi (Ebonyi State University, Nigeria), and Omoyele Francis Falako (University of Lagos, Nigeria).

Lastly, Adriaan van Klinken (University of Leeds, UK) and Ezra Chitando (University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe) convened a panel on Saturday afternoon August 2 to discuss 'Public Religion and Issues of Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa' with papers by Nathanael Homewood (Rice University, USA),

¹⁸ My paper was entitled 'Gods in Nature, Gods at Home: Domesticating the Divine in Akan late 19th century religion'. It has at long last been published in *Utambuzi: AASR e-Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa & its Diaspora* 9, 1 (2026): 1-19. Cf. also: <https://jangplatvoet.nl/content/uploads/2026/07/GodsInNature-GodsAtHome.pdf>

Sibanda Fortune (Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe), and Danoye Oguntula-Laguda (Lagos State University, Nigeria).

In conclusion

This was a very rich conference, academically and socially, in a beautiful and historical setting, and very well organised by the three conference organizers, Abdulkader Tayob, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Elias Bongmba, and Nabowayah Kafaar, Tayob's Research Assistant, as well as the six UCT students. Opening the conference by the welcoming dinner on Wednesday night 30 July was great.

One thing was missing only: a collective tour to Robben Island, to commemorate Nelson Mandela and ponder South Africa's history of legalized racial violence, epitomized in the hotel and conference centre in which we met, former Breakwater Prison, now Breakwater Lodge.

References

- Deacon, Harriet Jane, 1989, *A History of the Breakwater Prison from 1859 to 1905; submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Town, in partial fulfilment of the requirements of an Honours Degree in African Studies (Social Anthropology)*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 282 pp.; PDF at; https://www.academia.edu/376644/A_History_of_the_Breakwater_Prison_From_1859_to_1905 [this online edition has no page numbers]
- Deacon, Harriet Jane, 1996, 'Madness, Race and Moral Treatment: Robben Island Lunatic Asylum, Cape Colony, 1846-1890', in *History of Psychiatry* 7: 287-297
- Lewis-Williams, David, 2003, *Images of Mystery: Rock Art of the Drakensberg*. Cape Town: Double Storey Books
- Patvoet, Jan G., 1999, 'At War with God: Ju/'hoan Curing Dances', in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, 1: 2-61; also at <https://jangplatvoet.nl/content/uploads/2016/03/Kung-curing-dances.2016.pdf>
- Platvoet, Jan G., 2026, 'Gods in Nature, Gods at Home: Domesticating the Divine in Akan late 19th century religion', in *Utambuzi: AASR e-Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa & its Diaspora* 9, 1 (2026): 1-19. Also at: <https://jangplatvoet.nl/content/uploads/2026/07/GodsInNature-GodsAtHome.pdf>

Vinnicombe, Patricia, 1976, *People of the Eland: Rock Painting of the Drakensbergen as a Reflection of their Life and Thought*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press