

# Challenging Traditional Ways of Constructing Local/Regional History Research in South Africa: Some Global Learning and Sharing

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Formal regional/local history research practice in South Africa is very nearly 50 years old. In many ways, its development was closely associated with trends in Europe and elsewhere. This research was intuitively, or perhaps intentionally, produced under the umbrella of a variety of rural and urban developments, themes and phenomena; and some of these international influences on historians and other academics that surfaced in the humanities and social sciences in South Africa are analysed in this article. However, well-organised integrative research in a regional environment may be the only way to progress towards inclusive regional histories. In this regard, historians dealing with regional history can frame their research contribution more “historically” in the spirit of regional research, rather than “thematic-politically”, with geographies that either appears to be accentuated or peripheral. Historians in this field have also been accused of operating without a philosophical base and a sound epistemology. These challenges should be given some renewed critical thought by regional historians all over the world. In this article, ideas for rethinking this field of history are put forward in an effort to progress this debate. The article also informs this process through the historiography of local/regional history in South Africa, but within a global context. Some new thinking on place and people in regional history, with regard to research methodologies, unified as “historical regionalism”, is also offered for further debate.

**KEYWORDS** regional history, local history, research methodology, historiography, integrative multidisciplinary, humanities, social sciences, history from below, HSRC Regional History Division, Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Historical research on places and peoples in South Africa (later known as local history or regional history studies) was formalised by the mid-1970s as regional

history, with an open agenda and no particular defined framework. At this time, different schools of thought engaged in research on ordinary people in urban and rural areas.<sup>1</sup> These events coincided with decades in which South Africa's legal apartheid between races led to political turmoil<sup>2</sup> and this process implicitly or explicitly impacted on the historiographical landscape of recording regional histories of South Africa. Though the context of the time may have influenced the ways intellectuals (especially historians) have documented local/regional history in South Africa, the focus of this discussion mainly aims at sharing some historiographical trends in approaching this comprehensive field, and the impact of global influences. Rethinking ways of understanding and approaching regional history research is offered in the second part of the discussion and refreshed methodological frameworks are offered for consideration. It is hoped that this long-overdue debate will be continued in an effort to make epistemological progress in this field of historical research. Furthermore, to understand frameworks for considering and undertaking regional/local history (and this concept is deliberately combined because of its still undefined use in South Africa and a prevailing greyness elsewhere), some historiographical pointers are considered – pointers that have stimulated interesting debates in the past five to six decades.

In Europe, British local history research and teaching gained momentum from 1947 through the “Leicester School”, typified by the rural research studies of Finberg and Skipp.<sup>3</sup> Both – from 1952 – shared their ideas on the definition of particularly local history. The use of the word “region” as part of local, or as a synonym in debating local history, by Finberg and Skipp, is rare. Using the well-known approach of Arnold Toynbee towards research on civilisations, Finberg defined local history thus:

The business of the local historian then, as I see it, is to re-enact in his own mind, and to portray for his readers, the Origin, Growth, Decline and Fall of a local community.<sup>4</sup>

This local community to Finberg was further defined as inclusive of a study of local communities in the context of the national history. Two decades earlier than Finberg, the geographer and educator, James Fairgrieve,<sup>5</sup> suggested a conceptual understanding of local regional studies:<sup>6</sup>

Local studies form the basis of the whole structure of geographical knowledge (both historical and civic knowledge). For no systematic geographical (historical or civic) account of any area, whether it be a “natural” region or one defined by political boundaries or a whole, can be taken until the writer (learner) has at his disposal a multitude of facts and the chief source of these facts is in local regional studies.

It is especially the last remark of Fairgrieve that embraces a regional history perspective: constructive and narrowly focused studies are required to ensure a more comprehensive account of a region within a defined context. Fairgrieve's thinking appears to have made a pivotal impact on some educators in the field of history in the 1960s in South Africa.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, conceptual appreciations of regional history in the United States have been understood more geographically. Historical writing also has been organised mainly around periods or thematic fields, “rather than regions”.<sup>8</sup> Regional and local history was thus more clearly differentiated.

At the turn of the twenty-first century Armitage observed that:

Regional history has been enjoying a resurgence lately. In western history the combined forces of environmental history and ethnic history have produced the perspective we call The New Western History. Environmental history directs attention to areas that share similar physical geographies, ... the presence of large racial ethnic populations in specific locations...<sup>9</sup>

This particular trend is currently appearing in South Africa, through research in indigenous knowledge systems,<sup>10</sup> oral histories, and the environmental status of, for example, industrialised areas.

On the other hand, Armitage's critique on the vagueness of "regional" definitions, together with shortcomings in the historiographical approach towards regional history in the past, are still present:

Even when it is possible to agree on regional boundaries, further problems arise with the term. Historians owe the particular usage of the term regionalism to Frederick Jackson Turner and, like Turner's more famous theory, the frontier thesis, the legacy is ambiguous. Following Turner's commanding lead, subsequent historians used the concept of region both confidently and sloppily, assuming that some thing or things in the region bound people together in ways that superseded cultural and racial boundaries. This assumption of general regional commonalities, while recognizing differences between regions, ignored conflicts and differences within regions. In effect, then, regional historians wrote only the history of the dominant cultural group and not that of subordinate ones, ignoring class, race, gender, and other differences.<sup>11</sup>

Some of these shortcomings as outlined by Armitage were given specific attention by researchers of especially social, urban, and rural-related histories in South Africa from the 1970s. However, research in fields and themes, or phenomena, with the intention to create a (or contribute to the) broader understanding of a region<sup>12</sup> remained relatively fallow. Limitations in the field of regional/local history in South Africa include the proper recording of regional and township settlement of Africans all over South Africa since the twentieth century. This is indicative of wider trends. In a 2007 publication, edited by Bill Lancaster, Diana Newton, and Natasha Vall, *An agenda for regional history*, these authors favoured the concept "regional" rather than "local", but regions are referred to as either geographical and socio-cultural or economic. Riukulehto adds that administrative and discursive phenomena may also lead to an entirely different map of regions that makes the structure or form of a region simple or complex.<sup>13</sup>

In the South African context, as elsewhere, the concept of referring to nearby or geographically outlined histories as regional/local has never been extensively disputed. Following the foundation of the Institute for Historical Research (IHR) in 1969 at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria, the IHR established a division for the study of regional history in 1975. The IHR defined any history on places and its peoples as being regional, with no particular understanding attached to its research protocol. The IHR's founding of the Regional History Division followed from international examples,<sup>14</sup> as this field was blossoming elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

However, as far as historical writing on the tip of Africa is concerned, it is sufficient to say that – up to the time of writing – no uniformity exists with regard to the concepts “local” and “regional” and that it is the “sloppy” nature<sup>16</sup> of these concepts that has inspired a rethinking of its conceptual understanding and utilisation through newly-modelled frameworks. One possible way forward to define the concept of regional history,<sup>17</sup> is to see it as research that relates to the uncovering or exposing of a particular area or space, debating a particular phenomenon within this area or space, and describing these features of an area’s development within a very specific time frame. Contemporary historical studies consist of many different fields, including those that focus on certain regions and those that focus on certain topical or thematic elements of historical investigation. Peter Stearns<sup>18</sup>, for example, divides social history into sections: namely demographic history; black history; history of education; ethnic history; family history; labour history; rural history; and urban history. In reality, all spaces within particularly defined places do in fact host all these so-called “areas of study” in regional history – including social history – as pointed out by Stearns.<sup>19</sup>

In many ways the choice of research topics by historians seldom is/or has been decided on in a structured way, with the intention of providing an all-inclusive view of a particular theme’s representativeness in, for example a specific country, region, or a very particular narrowly defined space. The impression is rather that space, place, and even its peoples become peripheral, and that a research theme/phenomenon is decided on or determined by trends of the day or a political or controversial issue.<sup>20</sup>

Some recent debates on regional history suggest that historians in this field should assess their epistemological position by, for example, expanding on the Finberg and Skipp model<sup>21</sup> or by considering some newly revised integrative multidisciplinary models, when engaging in regional history.<sup>22</sup> Historians should also consider and acknowledge the value of ultimately structuring all narrowly focused research in regional history studies to serve a broader collective identity, perhaps embedded in a unifying concept<sup>23</sup> such as “historical regionalism”. In this regard, the environmental perspective of Donald Worster<sup>24</sup> on regional history is significant:

What the regional historian should first want to know is how a people or peoples acquired a place and, then, how they perceived and tried to make use of it.

Contemporary requirements (like land debates, environmental studies issues regarding service delivery in communities, and the well-being of humans in communities) could certainly benefit from inclusive regional history. An historiographical reflection on South Africa regarding regional history, especially in the years up to 1992, can provide additional context and understanding for supporting a rethinking of ways of undertaking regional history. While the practice of regional history after 1992 continued, though not in a well-articulated epistemology, with reference to “regional history” *per se*, there were no overwhelming trends in regional history. Obviously, no trend in the general historiography of any country is immune to outside influences. This also applies to regional history research in South Africa after 1994, even though it was – due to

changes in South Africa and coupled with uncertain times for practitioners of history<sup>25</sup> – in the doldrums.<sup>26</sup> Though historians undertook extensive research in most regions in South Africa, their work was theme- or phenomenon-focused and not necessarily written with a view to explicitly complementing regional history studies.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, new forms of historical practice surfaced, for instance environmental history, water history and, sometimes, in combination with broad reflections on the history of regions in southern Africa, new developments within particular geographical spaces.<sup>28</sup>

## **An Historiographical Consideration of Organising, Researching, and Teaching Regional History in South Africa**

Historiographical pointers to the practice of regional/local history in South Africa are present in trends that are particularly evident in ideas drawn from the French *Annales* school, some British historians (such as Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, and Gareth Stedman Jones), the British “History Workshop Model”, which concentrates on the lives of ordinary people, the American “New Left” group, and the German “Alltagsgeschichte” (everyday history in the Marxian school of “history from below”). Some of these international trends in historical thinking are discernible in the thoughts, research methodologies and teaching of the so-called Afrikaner nationalists and the liberal, radical and revisionist historians in South Africa.<sup>29</sup> However, for some researchers in the HSRC’s regional division, the thoughts of the British historians Finberg and Skipp on local history<sup>30</sup> have continued to be a methodological pointer in engaging with regional history.<sup>31</sup>

Some historians observed that the then emerging fields of social history<sup>32</sup> and local history<sup>33</sup> in South Africa, for example, paved the way for history researchers to become more aware of regional social trends.<sup>34</sup> An icon of South African history practice, F.A. van Jaarsveld,<sup>35</sup> supported cooperation between history and other disciplines in the 1970s, as an addition to the development of history’s expanding focus and fields of research. These trends, and more expressive present-day research connections with communities and community knowledge gradually paved ways for closer interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and teaching opportunities.<sup>36</sup>

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, interdisciplinary regional history research by the HSRC<sup>37</sup> developed alongside the ideas of the equally interdisciplinary-focused History Workshop Group of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), defined as “history from below”.<sup>38</sup> In 2010, the founders of the History Workshop described their intellectual agenda of the time as “more broadly a consciously political enterprise”, very much “preoccupied with class”, and externally inspired by Marxism.<sup>39</sup> So, while a section of mainly English-speaking historians in the 1970s and 1980s were especially engaged in giving a voice to the “ordinary oppressed” South Africans, “silenced by white and bourgeois domination” in the apartheid years,<sup>40</sup> a mainly Afrikaans-speaking group of historians were absorbed in regional history research as inspired by the HSRC.<sup>41</sup> In the HSRC’s research approach, bottom-up history, complemented by

the value of oral and social history research, was paramount, while not ignoring top-down activities and trends as part and parcel of progressing towards an inclusive multi-perspective understanding of the histories of regions.<sup>42</sup>

Undergraduate and postgraduate courses for teaching regional history in South Africa, at the zenith of research in this field, were not developed and implemented.<sup>43</sup> The perceived absence of constructive accommodation of regional history teaching and research in History programmes in the country contributed to a phase characterised by a dearth of epistemological commitment in the field. The first (and last) informative and critical comment on regional historical studies in the country came from Christopher Saunders in 1990, while he was reviewing a publication titled “The angry divide” under the editorial guidance of Wilmot James and Mary Simons. His publication covered local and regional histories of the Western Cape in South Africa. As did Van Jaarsveld,<sup>44</sup> Saunders stated that the country was lacking in substantial contributions towards regional history when compared to smaller states internationally. Saunders criticised the intentions of revisionist historians in the 1970s (particularly the Wits History Workshop Group) for their focusing on the social history of the Witwatersrand and its gold-mining industry, rather than any concern for writing a regional history. Saunders<sup>45</sup> affirmed:

For all their brilliance, Charles van Onselen’s studies in the social economic history on the Witwatersrand were also limited in range, as “studies” implies, and did not address, issues of regionalism. The same is true of the papers in the three volumes in the Wits History Workshop series, despite the claim made by Belinda Bozzoli, after she pointed out the focus of the second workshop had moved from the townships on the Rand to town and countryside... Bozzoli’s reminder of the importance of the specific regional dimensions of, say, capital accumulation, resistance or culture, was a useful one but it was not followed up...

Saunders also applauded, for example, the contributions of A.H. Brookes, C. de B Webb, A. Duminy, and B. Guest, on their versions of the history of the former Natal province (now KwaZulu-Natal), and criticised the other provinces of the time in South Africa for falling short in this regard.<sup>46</sup> Apart from his critique of the History Workshop, Saunders also criticised the HSRC’s regional history research division (and their newly founded journal *Contree*) for being “parochial and narrow in focus”:<sup>47</sup>

The Division for Regional History of the Human Sciences Research Council has divided the country into as many as twenty-eight regional [areas], but *Contree* has not significantly furthered the study of the history of those regions as such.

In actual fact, the Division of Regional History of the HSRC did advance regional research in, for example, the Northern Cape and the Free State,<sup>48</sup> despite a limited capacity with regard to researchers. The Division also supported research elsewhere before finally halting after more than a decade of pioneering such research. Inevitably, the HSRC’s regional division had to pass the responsibility for the journal *Contree* to historians in tertiary academia in 1992. An active and visible way of doing and publishing research as regional history in South Africa

from this decade onwards declined, whereas the History Workshop Group still thrived due to its financial support. Their approach, however, occasionally attracted severe criticism, and they themselves perceived that a clear focus had been lost by the late 1990s. The change in South Africa's political landscape after 1994 partly contributed to this loss of direction and to a dormant History Workshop Group up to 1998.<sup>49</sup>

Also, in little to none of the regional research (and discussions on the research methodology or its historiography) that was undertaken by South African historians in the heyday of the HSRC's regional division did there appear to be ways of dealing with postgraduate historical research studies. At this stage, the History Workshop Group experienced an active decade of engaging with the demands of non-governmental organisations and government officials on themes such as land restitution, urban governance, labour movements, and HIV/Aids. A proactive, self-initiated research focus within the History Workshop Group was absent by 2005. To remedy this "deficiency", the Group was given Centre of Excellence status by the South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF), and in 2006 the "Local Histories and Present Realities" programme was born through NRF funding.<sup>50</sup> This provided the History Workshop Group with an opportunity to "link more systematically its attempts to serve community needs with a wider research project". According to Bonner, these needs necessitated more research in social, urban, and local history.<sup>51</sup>

Oral history and oral testimonies formed the heart of the History Workshop's activities since its founding, although the broader utility of these oral archives has not yet been unlocked.<sup>52</sup> The same scenario applied to the local/regional histories that were developed and/or inspired by the HSRC's regional initiative. Little or none of this research has so far been efficiently utilised or assessed to complement a broader regional historical understanding, nor to systematically progress towards producing a synthesis of, for example, the research theories and methodologies that may be applied to this process.<sup>53</sup>

Present-day local and environmental management needs throughout South Africa have played a role in the recent awareness of the value of regional histories, if systematically approached and researched.<sup>54</sup> Viewed from a global angle, this trend is not new,<sup>55</sup> equally so the utilising of disciplinary integrative research techniques to contribute to inclusive insights in research on regions. Regional history studies can benefit from these multidisciplinary projects that breach the fields of the humanities and the social sciences.<sup>56</sup> It is in this paradigm that some past research methodologies in international regional history can be scrutinised, with the intention of offering additional insights on how to think about regional history studies and progressing towards broader regional histories.

### **Experimenting with a Regional History Research Framework Taken from a Global Context**

Though several schools of thought have impacted on research projects dealing with regional history, the harvesting from research experience on the methodological "how" has been limited. Some early practitioners from the United Kingdom

engaged in some methodological thinking.<sup>57</sup> At the University College of Leicester, some historians – in particular Finberg and Skipp and subsequently Hoskins – made the following remark about the research methodology that applied to older histories:<sup>58</sup>

The reasons why so many of the older local histories fail to satisfy us are now clear. The writers were content to heap up all the facts they could discover, without order, art or methodology, and with no criterion for distinguishing the trivial from the significant...

Old-style or traditional local history was exemplified by dull, parochial chronicles featuring an elitist conservative approach. Explicitly concerning the old-style local history methodology, Sheeran and Sheeran further add:

Methodologically, they [Finberg and Hoskins on old-style local history] objected to the antiquarian, fact-collecting tradition, the lack of order and method, and the overdependence on documentary sources. Philosophically, they criticized the lack of a “central unifying theme” which would serve to distinguish local history as a discipline...<sup>59</sup>

The above-mentioned points of still apply to some regional history contributions in South Africa. A basic research framework for local history was developed by Victor Skipp in the early 1980s.<sup>60</sup> This structure with no particular “unifying theme” or phenomenon (and adapted versions of it) has been followed by some postgraduate history scholars in South Africa.

According to older models, the regional historian had to follow a narrative and descriptive approach that should include a strict analytical methodology, not forgetting to be comparative as well. The Skipp model suggests that the historical development of all fields locally, namely the political, the economical, the cultural, etc., could be studied simultaneously in a single research project. The variety of fields/phenomena could also be studied separately and independently.<sup>61</sup> Skipp did not provide any extensive description or suggestion(s) of how to approach each of the locally identified fields of research, if these were to be researched and discussed as a separate entity, but they would then obviously have to be studied in more depth.

Some South African historians interpreted this model (see Table 1) as research from the top down and bottom up within a particular community. Moreover, this framework as a methodology, which was also indirectly acknowledged by the HSRC’s regional division in the 1970s and 1980s, was not regarded as a practice that would necessarily serve as a means to progress towards developing a logically inclusive or broader regional history. Since research in regional histories was a developing field in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, some South African historians followed their own intuition as far as a methodological framework was concerned, while mainly relying on standard historical methods to guide them. Others preferred to engage with specific local themes that also served a practical purpose during the apartheid years in South Africa.<sup>62</sup> To address a specific theme or phenomenon in a regional history as suggested in the Skipp framework



TABLE 1

A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL HISTORY PROPOSED BY VICTOR SKIPP IN 1981,  
AND VISUALLY TABLED BY E. S. VAN EEDEN

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**THEMES IN LOCAL HISTORY RESEARCH**

Topographical background

Archaeological information (earliest inhabitants prior to township development), regional/district borders, land settlement, and demography)

Township settlement and management

Political development

Law, order, and military activities

Economic development

Educational development

Health and social welfare services

Religious practices

Communication services: visibility, availability, and value

Social activities (recreational and cultural)

**SUGGESTED METHODOLOGY(IES)**

Follow an all-inclusive chronological approach covering all themes or a thematic-chronological approach to each theme with its own focus (covering, amongst others, documentary and oral sources).

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(Table 1), the outline in Table 2 could serve as a guideline, also having Turner's broader thoughts on regional trends in mind.<sup>63</sup>

### **Suggestions for a Research Framework in a Theme-Specific Discourse on Regional Histories**

In the History Workshop's "history from below" research framework,<sup>64</sup> themes or phenomena like race, gender, class, capitalism, poverty, and industry's impact on the environment, featured much more than was the case in studies<sup>65</sup> in which the research framework and ideas of Finberg and Skipp were accommodated. The German *Alltagsgeschichte* as a paradigm of the time consciously and unconsciously attracted more attention in the History Workshop circle.<sup>66</sup> The conceptual variety in a "history from below" research methodology can be seen as part of the framework that was offered by the German *Alltagsgeschichte* historian, Alf Lüdtke:

At the centre ... are the lives and the sufferings of those who are frequently labelled, suggestively but imprecisely, as the "small people" ... It involves their work and non-work ..., housing and homeless, clothing and nakedness, eating and hunger, love and hate. Beyond this, certain thematic emphases have emerged, such as the history of work, of gender relations, of the family, and especially of popular cultures. Thus attention is no longer focused on the deeds (and misdeeds) and pageantry of the great, the masters of church and state.<sup>67</sup>

Oral history recordings of ordinary people in such communities (as a people's history) were a dominant aspect of the research methodology followed, which was

not always regarded as the foremost way of doing research on local history. Subjectivity, simplicity, and politicising of the past were often alleged to feature too predominantly in the Wits Workshop Group's methodology.<sup>68</sup> In addition to these observations, one could add that the predominant emphasis on a thematic phenomenon (as in "history from below") did not necessarily serve a broader framework of contributing to or progressing towards regional history.<sup>69</sup> Aside from not ever having been sufficiently regionally focused, the "history from below" methodology was assessed by Eloff of the former Regional Research Division of the HSRC as follows (translated from Afrikaans):

With regard to methodological "innovation", the "history from below" approach has been influential: previously neglected dimensions of the historical science came into their own. For example, the collection and use of oral information, participatory activities to provide a "customary colour" to history, supporting multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research, focusing on a total all-inclusive approach towards the past...<sup>70</sup>

Within this scope of recording and discussing possible research methodologies in regional histories in South Africa, it is important to realise that Eloff's impression of the research framework in "history from below" *per se* also fits the methodological model of regional history research as undertaken according to the Skipp model.<sup>71</sup>

The "everyday experiences" of "ordinary" people according to the many varieties of the "history from below" approach cannot be regarded as the ultimate perspective and the ideal methodological framework for local history studies. However, it could and certainly should be considered as complementary to regional history studies in which the "ordinary people" concept is also acknowledged but is supposed to be approached from the top down as well as from the bottom up. Moreover, any study of a region's history would be inadequate if it were conducted without including interviews with the local inhabitants about their experiences, the leadership (the "top down" approach), and neglecting to consult all the available local archival sources. If the interviews are not set within a broader contextual setting – with acknowledged standards and/or recognised secondary sources to confirm and expand on regional trends – the historiographical value of regional history is inevitably dubious.<sup>72</sup>

## Thinking Anew in the Practice of Regional History Research

Based on all the earlier discussions, the following can serve as a summary of the most important criteria required to progress towards a regional history that supports an inclusive thinking on themes and particular phenomena, especially for postgraduate students undertaking research on places and their peoples:

- All narrowly-focused histories in a geographic region should sufficiently cover all aspects of developments of a particular theme or phenomenon in a local environment/area (e.g. as the Skipp model);
- All narrowly-focused histories in a defined geographic region (for the purpose of a study) must be representative of all the communities that form part of a particular theme or phenomenon in a local environment/area;

- The research approach and methodology should cover history from top down and bottom up angles to encapsulate local developments in all fields, as well as the experiences of a random but representative selection of local inhabitants;
- In the research approach and methodology regarding a particular local/regional theme, research information from all disciplinary angles should be considered. It could be done indirectly through existing research data/reports, but preferably with the consent and input of other disciplinary expertise;
- Although a narrowly-focused history on its own serves the purpose of, among other things, recording and disseminating knowledge on places and its peoples, its optimal epistemological value (to be considered in broader regional histories) probably lies in combining it with a particular theme or themes with the intention of reflecting its local, regional, national, and international impact(s) or status.

In many ways, the above-mentioned proposed criteria represent an approach to develop research frameworks that lean more towards creating informative regional history studies that can be structured and that are responsible and meaningful. Furthermore, this approach to regional history research is based on elements of the thinking of Turner, Fairgrieve, and Young, Finberg and Skipp as well as Lüdtke and others. The approach equally considers the more structured integrative multidisciplinary research ideas (inter- and trans-disciplinary) of the past four decades.<sup>73</sup> These contributions, because of their multidisciplinary inclusivity<sup>74</sup> and insights into regional themes, provide opportunities for an advanced understanding of communities and environments, which could be of use to a wider audience than just regional historians.

In 2005, the South African historian Bill Freund stated, for example, that a new approach to research in urban areas in South Africa should be considered as the old methods (prior to 1994 in the heyday of “history from below”) were no longer sensible:

Probably the obvious point at which to start is to take up the present problems of the South African city and the discourses relating to those problems in policy circles. The decline of the city centre, the relationship of the private sector to the public sector, the arguments in favour of urban densification, the city and the changing nature of global capitalism, urban environmental issues: these are all important touchstones which could cause us to go back to the drawing boards and rediscover historical problems and themes. Obviously race would not disappear nor would apartheid, but they would be differently configured ... Policy issues might also point us in the direction of situating South African urban history within a comparative context ... many American universities offer multidisciplinary and intellectually committed programmes in Urban Studies, something entirely lacking in South Africa...<sup>75</sup>

The views and suggestions by Freund could certainly be digested within a broader regional history research framework. The aspects of integrative forms of multidisciplinary as mentioned earlier by Eloff and also in this context by Freund should not be overlooked from a contemporary perspective. Given the present environmental complexities of each human-defined area and/or region, it

has become a requirement for disciplines to apply their research strengths to understanding and analysing the state and requirements of a local area with the comprehensive engagement and support of communities. From this integrative effort, the regional historian could record or be part of the recording of an all-inclusive regional history (of an area, district, or region). It is not possible for

TABLE 2

AN EXTENDED FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH IDEAS FOR PROGRESSING FROM MICRO/NARROWLY-FOCUSED VARIETIES OF REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH TO A MORE COLLECTIVE REGIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF PLACES AND THEIR PEOPLES

| Some fields of study    | Some themes of study             | Considerations in theme(s) of study(ies)                         | Some outcomes of studies for the region/local area  | Research methodology possibilities during the research process |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <u>Regional history</u> | Settlement patterns              | Growth, decline, and change                                      | Analysing growth, decline and change  | Recording knowledge systems                                    |
| Local                   | Local                            | Indigenous knowledge   | Recording the physical experience   | Philosophical  |
| Rural                   | governance & management          | Indigenous knowledge   | Recording the physical experience   | Archaeological   |
| Urban                   | patterns/issues                  | systems  | Reflecting on the psychological experience of people (e.g. sense of space & place and/or impact by space and place due to human activity) | Social   |
| Townships               | Urbanisation                     | Race (all-inclusive and/or specific)                             | Practising the integrative multidisciplinary experience towards all-inclusive knowledge/ways of science communication                     | Multidisciplinary  |
| Family                  | Social                           | Class (all-inclusive and/or specific)                            | Identity  | Perspectives from the bottom up and top down                   |
| Community               | structures and cultural patterns | Class (all-inclusive and/or specific)                            | Relations (e.g. colonial; public versus private sector)   | Mixed methods...   |
| People                  | Political trends                 | Gender (all-inclusive and/or specific)                           | Policy issues   |  |
| Public                  | Demographic patterns             | Identity   | Poverty   |  |
| Environment             | Political trends                 | Environmental destruction and/or remediation and/or other issues | Environmental destruction and/or remediation and/or other issues  |  |
| Place                   | Demographic patterns             | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
| Space                   | Infrastructural features         | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
| Area                    | Infrastructural features         | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
| Heritage                | Industrialisation                | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
| Development...          | Economic trends                  | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Agricultural patterns            | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Ecohealth patterns               | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Human well-being                 | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Education development            | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Communication patterns           | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Heritage and tourism development | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Spiritual practices              | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Law, order, and military impacts | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Land                             | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Environmental crises             | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |
|                         | Conservation...                  | Regionalisation  | Globalisation...  |  |

\* The ... at the bottom of each column indicates the openness of possibilities that can be added to the current list.

one individual to provide a comprehensive meaning to a regional historical study because of the wide thematic field that must be covered to produce all-inclusive research of a richer value.

As an example of the comprehensive nature of places and its peoples in a region, Table 2 serves as an extended draft outline of Table 1, one which should be contemplated to avoid approaching regional histories in “sloppy” ways (to use Armitage’s remark).

Along with these ideas for exploring more structured ways of thinking about research frameworks in regional historical studies, also arises the need for developing programmes in training to properly accommodate theories and research methodologies in this field in the tertiary educational sector.<sup>76</sup>

Theory and methodology can be the connections that bind regional historians to research and discussions in a global context.

By 1998, pioneers in local history in the UK were debating the shortcomings and positive features of local history:

A philosophical base for local history, which would fulfil our desire to engage in “real” history might, it could be argued, be found in the new realism which has emerged in both the sciences and social sciences ... at a popular level, the subject is one of the largest growth areas of historical endeavour ... it is perhaps this very popularity and groundswell of success that has led to the lack of critical and unproblematised approach to the subject...<sup>77</sup>

Whether these shortcomings, more than 15 years later, still appear to be stumbling blocks in the thinking and doing of regional history is a challenge that historians should rethink globally and address critically. Part of the reason for this weakness could be that historians at tertiary institutions mostly operate as solitary subject groups, further strengthened by a locked-in approach to regional/local foci. What is important is that debates on regional history theory and method are necessary to avoid the comfort area of not having been exposed to a process of self-examination. In South Africa, this lack of debate in essence started and ended with the critical remarks of Christopher Saunders in 1990. Other historians, like Bill Freund and Pieter de Klerk, contributed to the discussion in 2005 and 2011 respectively by referring to some very selective shortcomings of regional historical studies in the country at the time.<sup>78</sup> Renewed ideas for rethinking ways of doing research in regional history are here suggested with the intention of engaging in some critical rethinking on how to think about and offer suggestions for continuous debate in this field.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E.S. van Eeden, “Regional, local, urban and rural history as nearby spaces and places: Historiographical and methodological reflections towards modern day practice”, *New Contree* 63 (2012), 1-8.

<sup>2</sup> F. Pretorius, ed., *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika. Van voortye tot vandag* (Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 2012); H. Giliomee and B. Mbenga, *New history of South Africa* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2007).

- <sup>3</sup> G. Sheeran and Y. Sheeran, "Discourses in local history", *Rethinking History* 2:1 (1998), 67.
- <sup>4</sup> H.P.R. Finberg and V.H.T. Skipp, *Local history, Objective and pursuit* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1967), 18.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Fairgrieve and E. Young, *Real geography: Visiting South America, Australia and New Zealand* (London: George Philip and Son, 1948).
- <sup>6</sup> S.P. Olivier, "Die onderrig van plaaslike geskiedenis", *Historia* 13:4 (1968), 240-1.
- <sup>7</sup> Van Eeden, "Regional, local, urban and rural history".
- <sup>8</sup> C. Abbott, "United States regional history as an instructional field: The practice of college and university history departments", *The Western Historical Quarterly* 21:2 (1990), 197-203.
- <sup>9</sup> S.H. Armitage, "From the inside out: Rewriting regional history", *Frontiers - A Journal of Women's Studies* 22:3 (2001), 32.
- <sup>10</sup> S. McGovern, *Education, modern development and Indigenous Knowledge. An analysis of academic knowledge production* (London: Routledge, 2013); C.A. Odora Hoppers, *Indigenous Knowledge and the integration of Knowledge Systems. Towards a Philosophy of Articulation* (Claremont, South Africa: New Africa Books, 2002), 6-51. In essence Indigenous Knowledge Systems is conceptualised as local knowledge attached to a particular or unique community, culture, or society.
- <sup>11</sup> Armitage, "From the inside out", 32-47.
- <sup>12</sup> Compare Fairgrieve and Young, *Real geography*.
- <sup>13</sup> S. Riukulehto, "The concept of region in regional history" (paper presented at the Regional Studies Association annual International Conference, Pecs, Hungary, May 2010).
- <sup>14</sup> Compare E.S. van Eeden, "Pioneering regional history studies in South Africa: Reflections within the former Section for Regional History at the HSRC", *Historia* 59:1 (2014); E.S. van Eeden, "Debating some past and present research frameworks and methodologies in history on places and their peoples in South Africa", *African Historical Review* 45:2 (2013), 113-41.
- <sup>15</sup> C. Saunders, "What of regional history? Towards a history of the Western Cape", *South African Historical Journal* 22:1 (1990), 131-40; C. C. Eloff, "Editorial", *Contree*, 20 (1986), 1; J. S. Bergh, "Historiese verenigings en tydskrifte in Suid-Afrika: Verlede, hede en toekoms", *Historia* 38:2 (1993), 44; P. Bonner, "Keynote Address to the 'Life after thirty' colloquium", *African Studies* 9:1 (2010), 3-27.
- <sup>16</sup> Compare Armitage, "From the inside out"; Sheeran and Sheeran, "Discourses in local history".
- <sup>17</sup> C.W. Close, "Regional history and the comparative turn in the study of early modern German cities", *German History* 32:1 (2014), 112-29.
- <sup>18</sup> P.N. Sterns, *Meaning over memory: Recasting the teaching of culture and History* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1994).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> South Africa's Wits History Workshop in the 1970s and 1980s followed this route, rather than exclusively focussing on inclusive ways of researching regional histories.
- <sup>21</sup> Sheeran and Sheeran, "Discourses in local history".
- <sup>22</sup> E.S. van Eeden, "A practical exploration of the feasibility of Integrative Multidisciplinary research from a broad ecohealth perspective in South Africa", *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 7:2 (2011), 23-50.
- <sup>23</sup> Sheeran and Sheeran, "Discourses in local history".
- <sup>24</sup> D. Worster, *Under western skies: Nature and history in the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- <sup>25</sup> See E.S. van Eeden, "Studying History in South Africa: Reflections of yesterday to face, map and bridge diversity today and tomorrow", in *History Education International. History Teacher Education. Global Interrelations*, eds E. Erdmann and W. Hasberg (Germany, Wochen Schau Geschichte, 2014), 225-58.
- <sup>26</sup> See for example the discussion on the future of social history as another conceptual reflection of regional research; A. Cobley, "Does social history have a future? The ending of apartheid and recent trends in South African historiography", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27:3 (2001), 613-25.
- <sup>27</sup> See for example S. Parnell and A. Mabin, "Rethinking urban South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21:1 (1995), 39-61; G. Baines, "The politics of public history in post-apartheid South Africa", [http://suno25.sun.ac.za/portal/page/portal/Arts/Departemente1/geskiedenis/docs/baines\\_g.pdf](http://suno25.sun.ac.za/portal/page/portal/Arts/Departemente1/geskiedenis/docs/baines_g.pdf), accessed January 2014; J.B. Peires, "The implosion of Transkei and Ciskei", *African Affairs* 91:364 (1992), 365-87; Van Eeden, "Regional, local, urban and rural history".
- <sup>28</sup> See for example W. Beinart and P. Coates, *Environment and history: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2002), 136.

- <sup>29</sup> R. Samuel, ed., *People's history and socialist theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 141; T.R.H. Davenport, "History in South Africa in the 1980's: Why bother about it?", *South Africa International* 19:2 (1988), 102; K. Smith, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing* (Johannesburg: Southern Publishers, 1998), 164-70; C. Saunders, *The making of the South African past: Major historians on race and class* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1988), 169-70, 184; R. Samuel, "Local history and oral history", *History Workshop* 1 (1976), 199-204; P. Bonner, I. Hofmeyr, D. James, and T. Lodge, eds, *Holding their ground: Class, locality and culture in nineteenth and twentieth century South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989), 318.
- <sup>30</sup> Finberg and Skipp, *Local history*, 130.
- <sup>31</sup> Compare A. Wessels, 1986. "Contree Die eerste tien jaar", *Contree* 21 (1986), 26.
- <sup>32</sup> F.A. Van Jaarsveld, "Oor die opleiding van geskiedkundiges Deel 1", *Historia* 16:2 (1971), 74-88; "Oor die opleiding van geskiedkundiges, Deel 2", *Historia* 16:3 (1971), 146-60; D. J. Van Zyl, "Geskiedenis as vak en wetenskap: Nuwe uitdagings", *South African Historical Journal* 19:1 (1987), 1-5; A. Grundlingh, "Herhistorisering en herposisionering: perspektiewe op aspekte van geskiedsbeoefening in hedendaagse Suid-Afrika", *Historia* 46:2 (2001), 315-8.
- <sup>33</sup> Van Jaarsveld, "Oor die onderrig".
- <sup>34</sup> C.C. Eloff, "History from below...", Paper, 13th SAHA Conference, Unisa, 22-5 January 1991, 12.
- <sup>35</sup> Jaarsveld, "Geskiedenis en relevansie", 14-8; F.A. Van Jaarsveld, "South Africa as an industrial society", *Historia* 34:1 (1989), 95-9.
- <sup>36</sup> E.S. van Eeden, *Impressions on conducting and reporting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary environmental research in South Africa – a historian's perspective* (Inaugural lecture 07/2010, Vaal Triangle, Platinum Press, NWU Campus), March 2010, 1-44; E.S. van Eeden, "Considering environmental history within the transdisciplinary methodology as research focus for today and tomorrow", *Interdisciplinary Science Review* 36:4 (2011), 314-29.
- <sup>37</sup> The recording of the history and value of the HSRC's Institute for Historical Studies, and very specifically the contribution of the regional History Studies division, has up to now been understated and underplayed. For a broader discussion on this division's history see E.S. van Eeden, "Pioneering regional history studies in South Africa".
- <sup>38</sup> Eloff, "History from below...", 12; B. Bozzolli, ed., *Town and countryside in the Transvaal* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983).
- <sup>39</sup> P. Bonner, "Keynote Address to the 'Life after thirty' colloquium", *African Studies* 9:1 (2010), 14-5.
- <sup>40</sup> Bonner, "Keynote Address", 22.
- <sup>41</sup> Van Eeden, "Regional, local, urban and rural history", 1-34; C.F. Bakkes, "Editorial", *Contree* 1 (1977), 2.
- <sup>42</sup> E.S. van Eeden, "Using a transdisciplinary approach for environmental crisis research in History", *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 6:1 (2010), 191-208; E.S. van Eeden, "Exploring local histories in the use and appreciation of Heritage and History in history curricula", *Yesterday & Today* 5 (2010), 23-50; C.C. Eloff, "History from below: 'n Oorsig", *Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal* 25:1 (1991), 50-1; E.S. van Eeden, "Pioneering regional history studies".
- <sup>43</sup> Compare P. Maylam, "Reminiscences – Herinneringe. A hundred years of History at Rhodes university: Some reflections on the department's centenary colloquium", *Historia* 57:1 (2012), 165-71.
- <sup>44</sup> F.A. Van Jaarsveld, "Demokratisering in die geskiedwetenskap: Van 'n elitegeskiedenis van bo tot 'n alledaagse geskiedenis van onderaf", *Historia* 32:1 (1987), 34-42.
- <sup>45</sup> C. Saunders, "What of regional history?"
- <sup>46</sup> Saunders, "What of regional history?", 133; T. Strauss and C. Saunders, *Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula post 1806: A working bibliography* (Cape Town: Centre for African Studies University of Cape Town, 1989), 141.
- <sup>47</sup> Saunders, "What of regional history?", 134.
- <sup>48</sup> Compare P.H.R. Snyman, "Ontstaan en groei van Postmasburg", *Contree* 13 (1983), 4-26; "Daniëlskuil – Die tronk mite", *Contree*, 17 (1985), 21-4; "Die Langeberg-rebellie en die totstandkoming van Olifantshoek", *Contree* 19 (1986), 16-26; "Die rol van sendelinge, die owerheid en ekonomiese faktore in die ontstaan van Kuruman, 1886-1913", *Contree*, 22 (1987), 5-14.
- <sup>49</sup> Bonner, "Keynote Address", 20-2.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, 24.
- <sup>51</sup> D. Posel, "Social history and the Wits History Workshop", *African studies* 69:1 (2010), 29-40; N. Nieftagodien, "The place of 'The local' in History Workshop's Local History", *African Studies* 69:1 (2010), 41-58; Bonner, "Keynote Address", 24.
- <sup>52</sup> Bonner, "Keynote Address", 25.

- <sup>53</sup> Compare Van Eeden, "Exploring local histories in the use and appreciation of Heritage and History".
- <sup>54</sup> Van Eeden, "Impressions on conducting and reporting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary environmental research in South Africa"; Van Eeden, "A practical exploration of the feasibility of Integrative Multidisciplinary research"; Van Eeden, "Regional, local, urban and rural history".
- <sup>55</sup> Armitage, "From the inside", 32.
- <sup>56</sup> Compare G.H. Hirsch Hadorn, H. Hoffmann-Riem, S. Biber-Klemm, W. Grossenbacher-Mansuy, D. Joye, C. Pohl, U. Wiesmann, E. Zemp, eds, *Handbook of transdisciplinary research* (Austria, Springer, 2008); J.T. Klein, W. Grossenbacher-Mansuy, R. Häberli, A. Bill, R.W. Scholz, M. Welti, eds, *Transdisciplinarity: Joint problem solving among science, technology and society. An effective way of managing complexity* (Birkhäuser Verlag: Basel, 2001).
- <sup>57</sup> K. Tiller, "Review of local history since 1945", *The Local Historian* 36.1 (2006), 64-6; E. Lord, "Review article: What is regional history?", *The Local Historian* 39.1 (2009), 69-72; L. Munby, D. Huw Owen, and J. Scannel, *Local history since 1945: England, Wales and Ireland* (London: Socialist History Society, 2005).
- <sup>58</sup> Finberg and Skipp, *Local history*, 19; W.G. Hoskins, *Local history in England* (London: Longman, 1958).
- <sup>59</sup> Sheeran and Sheeran, "Discourses in local history", 67.
- <sup>60</sup> V.H.T. Skipp, "Local history: A new definition and its implications", *Local Historian* 14 (1981), 325-9.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid, 329.
- <sup>62</sup> Van Eeden, "Regional, local, urban and rural history".
- <sup>63</sup> Armitage, "From the inside out".
- <sup>64</sup> C. C. Eloff, "History from below: 'n Oorsig", 38-60.
- <sup>65</sup> F.A. Van Jaarsveld, "Demokratiesing in die geskiedwetenskap: Van 'n elitegeskiedenis van bo tot 'n alledaagse geskiedenis van onderaf", *Historia* 32.1 (1987), 42; Eloff, "History from below: n' Oorsig", 39-41.
- <sup>66</sup> Compare C. Saunders, "What of regional history?", 131-40.
- <sup>67</sup> A. Lüdtke, ed., *The history of everyday life. Reconstructing historical experiences and ways of life* (transl. W. Temper), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- <sup>68</sup> L. Callinicos, "Popularising history in a changing South Africa", *South African Historical Journal* 25.1 (1991), 22-37; C.C. Eloff, "History from below: 'n Oorsig", 38-60; C. Saunders, "What of regional history?".
- <sup>69</sup> See the visual structures for progressing towards regional history as suggested in van Eeden, "Pioneering regional history studies in South Africa".
- <sup>70</sup> Eloff, "History from below", 54-5.
- <sup>71</sup> Eloff, "History from below", 54-60.
- <sup>72</sup> E.S. van Eeden, "Whose environment? Whose nature? – a trans-disciplinary discussion on some inhumane actions in the destruction and construction in nature – case study, the Merafong municipal region", *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 2 (2006), 409-30; Van Eeden, *Impressions on conducting and reporting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary environmental research in South Africa*, 23-50.
- <sup>73</sup> As embedded in contributions of K. Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (Motilal: Delhi, 2002); J.T.W. Klein, R. Grossenbacher-Mansuy, A. Häberli, R.W. Bill, M. Scholz, Welti, eds, *Transdisciplinarity: Joint problem solving among science, technology and society. An effective way of managing complexity* (Birkhäuser Verlag: Basel, 2001); B. Nicolescu, "Transdisciplinarity as methodological framework for going beyond the science-religion debate", *The Global Spiral* 8.3 (PA, Metanexus Institute, 2005); and G.H. Hirsch Hadorn, H. Hoffmann-Riem, S. Biber-Klemm, W. Grossenbacher-Mansuy, D. Joye, C. Pohl, U. Wiesmann, E. Zemp, eds, *Handbook of transdisciplinary research* (Austria: Springer, 2008).
- <sup>74</sup> E.S. van Eeden, "Considering environmental history within the transdisciplinary methodology as research focus for today and tomorrow", *Interdisciplinary Science Review* 36.4 (2011), 314-29; Van Eeden, "A practical exploration of the feasibility of Integrative Multidisciplinary research"; E.S. van Eeden, "Using a transdisciplinary approach for environmental crisis research in History", *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 6.1 (2010), 191-208.
- <sup>75</sup> B. Freund, "Urban history in South Africa", *South African Historical Journal* 52.1 (2005), 27.
- <sup>76</sup> Compare T. Bender, P.M. Katz and M.C. Palmer, *The education of historians for the Twenty-first Century* (USA: American Historical Association, 2004), 1-222; J.E. De Steiguer, *The origins of modern environmental thought* (Tucson USA: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 202; C. Pyne,



- “Environmental history without historians”, *Environmental history* 10·1 (2005), 72-4.
- <sup>77</sup> Sheeran and Sheeran, “Discourses in local history”, 82-3.
- <sup>78</sup> P. de Klerk, “Streeksgeskiedskrywing en koloniale verhoudinge: Die Wes-Kaapse platteland en die Karoo”, *New Contree* 58 (2009), 1-35.

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