

LeidenASA-Africa 2020

Two day Workshop: From The Ashes Reborn. Reconsidering the “Time of Troubles” in Southern Africa in the Context of Global History

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In Southern African history the Mfecane “Time of Troubles”, is seen as a cataclysmic event that entailed a series of inter-related wars that originated from a single source, Shaka Zulu (founder of the Zulu Kingdom), and raged throughout Southern Africa all the way to Lake Victoria in Tanzania. Above all, the Mfecane explained and justified contemporary ethnic identity and land distribution.

However recent work on societal collapse indicates that societies do not collapse due to single causes, history is far more complex and messy. This insight, coupled with a greater appreciation for Africa in the world, allows us to reconsider the Mfecane in the context of:

- Population growth brought about by the introduction of New World Crops.
- Climate change and resulting crop failures brought about by the volcanoes Laki in Iceland (1784) and Tambora in Indonesia (1815).
- Mass-migration brought about by famine.
- The transition of the Cape in the context of the Global Napoleonic wars.
- Rapidly industrializing Great Britain, in which massive population growth, mass-migration and professional standing armies were the norm.
- Mass-migration of Boer settlers from the Cape in the Groot Trek of 1836.

We assert that the “Time of Troubles”/Mfecane is more complex in origin and consequences than the activities of a single man, Shaka Zulu, or a single ethnicity. We believe that a far more complex history that places South Africa within the context of the world has to be examined and described.