

Exploring precolonial agriculture and intensification: the case of Bokoni, South Africa

The complex terraced and stonewalled sites at Bokoni in Mpumalanga Province in South Africa comprise the most detailed built footprint of pre-colonial society in southern Africa. The evidence of precolonial intensive agriculture there, furthermore, forms part of a wider pattern of "islands" of intensive agriculture in Africa, which are in stark contrast to many established ideas of precolonial African agriculture as backward and based mainly on extensive and shifting cultivation. The case of Bokoni also potentially offers important evidence of a locally developed farming knowledge within South Africa, a knowledge which has been lost or made invisible during the late 19th and the 20th centuries. By bringing together South African scholars, historians and archaeologists, engaged in the recent NRF-funded Five Hundred Year Initiative and Swedish historical and physical geographers, with experience from researching similar islands of intensive agriculture in eastern Africa, this project aims at a concerted interdisciplinary effort to 1) Establish the character of the agricultural system of Bokoni in the early 19th century 2) Explore the political and economic context leading up to this intensification. 3) Contribute to the wider debate on the factors behind agricultural intensification and investments in soil and water conservation in Africa's past and present agricultural landscapes.