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# AFRICAN STUDIES IN THE NETHERLANDS: A BRIEF SURVEY

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In the Netherlands there is an active community of Africanist scholars, numbering about 200 to 250. They work mainly in universities and other research institutes, but also in increasing numbers for government ministries (notably of Foreign Affairs and Development Co-operation), NGOs, and other aid organisations.<sup>1</sup> Fields in which Africanists are strong are history, anthropology and geography, and to a lesser extent development sociology, medical science, law, comparative politics and religious studies. The following survey is necessarily a selective one.

African Studies in the Netherlands can pride itself on a long history only if we include the many travellers, traders and missionaries active in African regions before the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The scholarly study of the continent seriously started a few decades later than in other European countries: after the Second World War, when an Africa Institute was founded (in 1946, see below) and the first special professorial chair in African ethnology was instituted at Leiden University. As the late Peter Kloos has argued (1992: 49), the post-war shift of Dutch research from (ex-) colonial areas to other regions like Africa is closely related to the changing international relations, including, of course, the independence of Indonesia, proclaimed in 1945, which led to tensions and discouraged Dutch citizens from doing research.

The Dutch interest in Africa started in the wake of the sixteenth century mercantile colonial expansion of the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> It led to contacts with the empires in the Congo region and on the West Coast of Africa. There was, however, no meaningful settlement of Dutch in Africa, except in the Cape Colony. This colony gave rise to long-standing contacts between the Netherlands and what later became South Africa. The Dutch 'possessions' on the continent, in West Africa (ports and forts on the Gold Coast, Guinea, Dahomey) and South Africa, were lost or given up in the nineteenth century. The last was the Guinea (Gold Coast) area in 1872, transferred to Britain. The Dutch instead concentrated on their colonial interests in South America (Surinam), the Caribbean (Antilles) and especially Asia (the Dutch Indies), and were further concerned with transworld trade and transport (Japan, China, Ceylon). Historical aspects of Dutch (and Western) colonisation of and

contacts with Africa were studied by historians at the University of Leiden (e.g., H.L. Wesseling, and P.C. Emmer on the transatlantic slave trade), and at the Centre for the History of European Expansion at the same university. Another focus of African studies (although strictly speaking belonging to Oriental studies) at Leiden was the long-established and reputed Department of Egyptology. Also, if Islamic North Africa is counted as part of Africa, then the study of Africa has much deeper roots in the Netherlands (in departments of oriental studies and languages).

The Netherlands also hosts important and virtually unexplored historical archives, containing a lot of information on West Africa and the former Dutch colonies and spheres of influence there. Especially the Algemeen Rijksarchief (Royal Archives) in The Hague should be mentioned here (with archives of the 'West Indische Compagnie' or WIC, active on the Guinea Coast, and of the 'Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie' or VOC, for South Africa). However, this has not given rise to a well-established tradition of Africanist historical scholarship, except perhaps historian A. van Dantzig (d. 2000), who wrote pioneering work on the Dutch in West Africa and on the political history of the area, and a few others.

Apart from the commercial contacts that led to some measure of interest in Africa, the role of missionaries is evident. In line with western notions of Africa as the 'dark continent' (emerging notably in the nineteenth century), a major missionary enterprise led by various Catholic and Protestant denominations took off in the later part of the 1800s. Missionaries usually did not write up in ethnographic fashion their experiences and observations on the people where they worked. But they contributed a huge number of African art objects and artefacts to the Dutch colonial museums, and some did leave archives or written memoirs. To this day there are missionaries working in many African countries, but they have mostly turned into development workers or linguists. Some research on the role and impact of Dutch missionaries in Africa was done, but has not been as prominent as it should be.

Despite the interesting though limited corpus of travel writing, colonial ethnography, and missionary testimony in Dutch, the scholarly study of Africa really took off only in the post-1945 period. Several chairs in African studies/anthropology were established at some universities, and a growing interest in field research in Africa emerged,<sup>4</sup> especially when the former discipline of 'Indology' (for the education of higher civil servants for the Dutch Indies) was dissolved due to the 'loss of the colony'.

One relatively independent, and perhaps characteristically Dutch, strand of scholarship was the concern with South Africa especially in the fields of theology (e.g. at the School of Theology in Kampen), law (at Leiden) and history (G.J. Schutte, Free University). However, the number of contemporary Africanists except in circles of law and theology that would like to place themselves in this tradition is declining. The University of Utrecht also had

long-standing relations with South Africa, and recently founded an 'expertise centre' on this country.

Interestingly, after World War Two a group of business people founded the *Africa Institute* in Rotterdam in 1946 to explore economic opportunities and making contacts in Africa, an area of expected new markets. In fact, this institute had two legs. One was the business institute, the other a documentation centre, established in Leiden. This grew into a full-fledged inter-university research institute in 1963 (see also below).

In 1947 the British trained sociologist S. Hofstra was appointed 'extraordinary' professor in African Ethnology at Leiden. He was succeeded by Kenneth Busia (1960-62). From 1963 to 1979 J.F. Holleman, also British-trained and with a long field research experience in Africa, held this chair and restructured the African Studies Centre, emphasising the need for broader, interdisciplinary research projects. Subsequently, the Leiden chair became a full-time one and was occupied by John Beattie and later Adam Kuper (until 1988). In the 1950s also, anthropology Ph.D. students started with fieldwork in Africa (in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania, and Kenya). At other university departments the study of Africa also gradually expanded.

At present, there are major cores of African Studies, with courses in Africa and a regular flow of Ph.D. dissertations in most universities. At the University of Amsterdam, Professors J. Fabian and S. van der Geest are well-known anthropologists specialising in Africa. At the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society (at the University of Amsterdam) there is also a strong research interest in African subjects, as in the Department of Human Geography at the same university. At the Free University of Amsterdam's anthropology department, the now retired specialist on African religions M. Schoffeleers held a position (later going to Utrecht as a full professor), and two of its present staff are Africanists with research experience in Senegal and Morocco. This university since 1990 also has a special chair in African ethnic studies (first occupied by W. van Binsbergen). At Leiden University, the professorial chair in African anthropology is now held by P. Geschiere, and four other staff members in the same department specialise in African studies. Various noted Africanist scholars work in other universities, in Wageningen, Nijmegen, Tilburg, Maastricht, and especially Utrecht (Van Beek, De Wolf).

Leiden is still the major centre for African studies in the Netherlands. Apart from the chair in African anthropology, the University has the only Department of African Linguistics in the Netherlands, an inter-departmental section (mainly for teaching) of 'Africanist Studies' (the historian R. Ross), and a professorial chair in comparative African literature (M. Schipper de Leeuw). Incidentally, the future of these three smaller departments or sections is precarious, due to the opportunistic and unpredictable university and ministerial policies on academic disciplines that draw small numbers of

students<sup>5</sup>, and to resulting personnel developments (some very qualified people leaving or forced to leave the Netherlands for other positions).

At Leiden University also, the Research School CNWS (Centre for Non-Western Studies, a graduate school) has two Africanist research clusters ('African Linguistics' and 'Culture and Development in Africa') under which Dutch and foreign students can apply for a PhD scholarship. Master classes on African Studies subjects are a regular feature of its programme.

The hub of Africanist research in the Netherlands is probably the *African Studies Centre* (ASC) in Leiden, the inter-university academic institute under the umbrella of Leiden University but independent as to funding and research policy.<sup>6</sup> It has its origins in the above-mentioned Africa Institute. The ASC currently has about twenty-two researchers, of various disciplinary backgrounds (anthropology, geography, history, law, and economics). The ASC library and documentation section is one of the finest in Europe. Its staff (some twelve people) produces, among others, the review journal *African Studies Abstracts*. The ASC's chief role is to be a centre of advanced social research on Africa. It also has an important public function as a centre for disseminating knowledge and fulfils a crucial advisory role for civic associations, NGOs, the immigration service, lawyers, mass media, and the general public. In addition to this, the staff occasionally do consultancy work (e.g., for the World Bank, NGOs and Ministries). The Centre does not have its own teaching programme but contributes to courses and guest lecturing at various universities and does MA and PhD student supervision. The ASC also has four professors appointed to special university chairs. In addition, the ASC has a highly appreciated visiting scholarship-programme for researchers from African academic institutions (on average eight scholars per year), and organises many seminars and lectures on Africanist topics, often with foreign guest speakers. In the last four years the ASC has greatly increased its visibility and public impact. Another Dutch institution where African studies are practised is the *Institute of Social Studies* in The Hague.<sup>7</sup> It offers courses on African issues and MA and PhD scholarships for students from developing countries, among them many from Africa, affiliated to governmental and other institutions. A considerable number of the ISS staff have done and still do research in Africa.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, ISS staff and students produced an important number of publications and PhD theses on economics, public policy and politics of Africa.

There are also major ethnology museums in the Netherlands with large Africa collections, built up from donations by travellers, traders, diplomats, and especially missionaries. Examples are the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, the Museum of the Tropics in Amsterdam and the Ethnological Museum in Rotterdam (now called 'World Museum'). Smaller ones are the Africa Museums in the towns of Berg en Dal and Cadier en Keer. The museums always had a limited research staff, although there is some growth

here. Indeed, those which used to be called ethnological museums are going through a remarkable phase of revival, now being more geared to wider and more numerous audiences, experimenting with new formulae of exhibiting cultural diversity and knowledge on non-Western societies, and trying to re-establish research as an integrated part of their activities.

A major role in stimulating research on and in Africa by Dutch scholars in the last thirty years was played by the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research in the Tropics (WOTRO), which has funded path breaking research projects, and has a mandate to primarily support academic research, not policy research. Given the virtually stagnant budgets at universities this organisation is essential for Dutch Africanist research. It also has a programme for MA, PhD and post-doctoral researchers from Africa. This contributes not only to fundamental social science on Africa to 'capacity building' for African countries and also forges co-operative relations between Dutch and African scholars and institutions. However, WOTRO and other institutions funding academic research are occasionally subject to political pressure and seen as still not matching their funding opportunities with demand. Indeed, relatively speaking, the share of African subjects in the honoured research applications seems to be decreasing. This in turn might lead to a decline of interest by students, endangering the continuity of African Studies, and would signify a loss of the important position that Dutch African Studies have acquired internationally. In the near future, it is likely that more efforts will be needed to make European Union funding available for Africanist research, both of the fundamental and 'development'-related kind, although inventive individual projects (often funded by WOTRO) would have less chance to be honoured there.

Dutch Africanists have been organised since 1978 into an African Studies Association, which, however, is not as important as its British, American or German counterparts. The number of Dutch Africanists is small, and their disciplinary backgrounds and research commitments to Africa very diverse. Some scholars would prefer to be billed with their disciplinary identity, like history or anthropology, rather than with the label 'African studies', although of course the two can go together. But there is perhaps no real 'corporate identity', as in the countries just mentioned, also because many graduates and PhD holders find jobs outside the academic world proper.

The thematic interests of contemporary Dutch African Studies – dominated by anthropology, history, geography and development studies – are wide, combining fundamental and more 'problem-oriented' research. Some dominant themes are: (colonial) history, ethnicity and ethnic relations, violence and conflict, international relations and law, civil society and the state, democratisation and political change, the politics of culture, gender studies, agro-pastoralism, the challenges of 'globalisation', ecology and environmental problems, and religious life and new religious movements. The

study of African linguistics (chiefly at Leiden) has yielded a steady series of interesting works in recent years, e.g. on Fulfulde, Kana, Ewe, the Nguni languages, Mundang, and Maale. Also a recent taxonomic-linguistic study of plantain in Africa (by G. Rossel, 1998) has drawn wide attention. Relatively new topics in Dutch African Studies are: Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, ethno-systems and indigenous knowledge, popular culture (including the use of new media), the crisis of African youth, refugee problems, ICT in Africa, the impact of AIDS, and tourism. Art and material culture are getting more attention in the museums and among students. Also African migrant communities in the Netherlands are coming into focus as a research topic.

Outside scholarly circles, Africa has attracted a lot of attention in the past decades because of apartheid in South Africa. From the 1970s onwards, there emerged a strong anti-apartheid movement in the Netherlands that engaged a large portion of public opinion. But the interest in South Africa in this respect was also a concern with 'Europe' (or with the descendants of the Dutch) in South Africa, because of the white, 'European' minority government that was heading such a shameful system. One cannot be so sure about the public and activists having a serious interest in the history, society and cultural traditions of the Africans in their own right. Here the South African case again shows that it is somewhat different from the rest of Africa and long remained outside the purview of Dutch Africanist social research. Since 1994, however, research in South Africa has picked up, e.g. in law, anthropology, and history.

In the Dutch public domain there seems at present to be a growing interest in Africa (e.g., as an area for cultural exchange, development efforts, and as a tourist destination). There is for instance a steady flow of travel stories and personal memoirs on Africa by Dutch development workers, travellers, journalists, and researchers. Also translations of foreign language titles on Africa are fairly popular (especially travel and biographical accounts). But African issues do have to struggle to retain the attention of the wider population and of politics and foreign policy makers. First, as is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in other wealthy countries, the news about the continent is often bad, at least what reaches most of the Dutch newspapers and television programmes: violent conflicts, corruption, AIDS, environmental destruction, callous and dictatorial leaders. Even if many of Africa's problems are closely and causally connected to the policies and the political and economic interests of the developed world, and even if the reporting and the background programmes are of a relatively high quality (as compared to, e.g., average American news coverage), the 'image of Africa' is, predictably, not a very positive one. Second, the declared interest in deeper knowledge and understanding of (the problems of) African societies and in ways to enhance effective development by the Dutch government and other institutions does not always translate into proper support and funding of research, which is – and must be – dependent chiefly on government resources.

In the last ten to fifteen years, African Studies in the Netherlands has expanded and diversified notably. The rate of publications has markedly increased. Articles, most of them in English, appear chiefly in international journals. There is also a growing public demand for knowledge and scholarly advice on Africa from various ministries and public agencies, often in a very instrumental, instant way. The need for maintaining, let alone expanding, the study of Africa – the continent nearest to Western Europe and supplying a large number of immigrants to the Netherlands – is evident, both as a scholarly interest in itself and as a vital source for expertise, knowledge, and understanding of this continent.

Current problems of African Studies in the Netherlands are: the shaky funding structure, changing academic and political fashions, which tend to urge scholarship sometimes into superficiality and short-term concerns, ongoing debate on the 'identity' of African studies as a regional specialisation, and the lack of job opportunities in academia for fresh PhD holders. Despite this, however, African Studies in the Netherlands has been consolidating itself, both within the various disciplines as well as across them. The field has quite a number of leading figures, a good record of PhD research, shows productivity, an improving public profile, and is rapidly integrating into international Africanist discourse.

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#### Notes

1. See the web site of Africanists in the Netherlands: <http://www.nuffic.nl/africanists>.
2. For the pre-1870 material, see P.J. Veth and C.M. Kan 1876, containing 832 Dutch references to Africa. My thanks to Han F. Vermeulen (Leiden Univ.) for mentioning this title to me. I am also grateful to Ineke van Kessel (ASC) for critical comments.
3. Early published accounts of O. Dapper (1676) on North Africa and the West African coast, W. Bosman on Guinea and the Gold Coast (1704), J. Elet on Dahomey (1733), and in the 1870s and 1880s J.M. Schuver on the Southern Sudan-Ethiopia border area. In the nineteenth century, books on Dutch-

African contacts in West Africa were published by J. Gramberg, C.M. Kan and J.A. de Marre (see Veth & Kan 1876 in note 1). Indonesia, however, has yielded more travel and missionary accounts.

4 A survey of aspects of Africanist scholarship in the Netherlands until 1992 is given in Van Binsbergen 1993.

5 The institutional position of many of these (among them also the old Oriental languages and philology) is difficult because of the Dutch state policy of funding being based primarily on student numbers instead of factors like the intellectual and comparative importance of the subject, the built-up expertise at hand, and the offering of an all-round, real academic curriculum. This has led to an erosion of past achievements and reputations. For instance, Leiden University recently even revoked its earlier agreement with the Ministry of Education to protect such smaller disciplines, giving it space to reduce its own budget deficit.

6 Its web site is: <http://asc.leidenuniv.nl>

7 See: <http://www.iss.nl>

8 In the Netherlands there are many other (non-academic) organisations concerned with Africa (e.g. the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa, with its own documentation centre), and many voluntary groups working on specific countries. Some of them organise musical performances, lectures, exhibitions, and other cultural gatherings.