

A HALF CENTURY OF ABSTRACTING AT THE AFRICAN STUDIES CENTRE LEIDEN¹

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Since 1968 the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden, The Netherlands, has published an abstracts journal, first under the title *Documentatieblad* (1968-1993), subsequently renamed *African Studies Abstracts*. In 2003 *African Studies Abstracts* went online.² Renamed *African Studies Abstracts Online*, it also appeared in a limited print edition, principally for distribution in Africa where Internet connectivity was often problematic. However as the ICT infrastructure in African countries developed, the print edition was increasingly seen as having outlived its usefulness. The last paper copy of *African Studies Abstracts Online*, number 37, appeared in February 2012.

In the years since 1968 the abstracts journal has undergone a number of changes, not only in name and appearance, but also in frequency of publication and coverage, number of abstracts and types of indexes, and price. More fundamental changes are expected in the near future. It seems an appropriate moment to look back on the past history of the journal, its distribution and coverage, and the ASC Library, Documentation and Information Department's (LDI) abstracting policy and practice which underpin the journal's existence.

Why abstracts?

A key aim of LDI is to promote the dissemination of information on Africa. Facilitating access to such information is a crucial component and in this abstracts play a vital role. Abstracts can be a quick and easy way to gain an overview of a new research topic and can save a researcher many weeks' work. Abstracts serve as a selection 'filter' and help the user to decide what is most relevant, especially when a title alone does not give a clear indication of what a publication is about. Where abstracts are included in an online catalogue, as is the case at the ASC library, searching on words in an abstract can prove a valuable additional way of finding information. And as ever more publications become electronically available full text, abstracts have become even more important as a selection 'filter', or even as a surrogate for full text when full text cannot be downloaded for free.³ This is evidenced by the growing number of journals which include abstracts. It is also worth noting that to be selected for inclusion in Thomson Reuters Web of Science a journal must follow international editorial conventions, which include author abstracts.⁴

Abstracting has been a constant feature of documentation work at the ASC, providing in-depth access to the library collection. Optimising the retrievability of information held by a library enhances the value of its collection. After all, there is no point in having something if it cannot be found. From its beginnings in the early 1950s the ASC catalogue therefore included not only entries for books and journals, but also for journal articles and chapters in edited works,⁵ and most entries were accompanied by brief annotations or abstracts. The value of abstracts notwithstanding, the usefulness to library users and scholars of maintaining a catalogue containing abstracts, given the cost of the operation, has not always gone unquestioned.

Abstracting at the ASC predates the abstracts journal. The card catalogue with abstracts could be consulted only in the library. The ASC Board of Directors felt that the library's documentation work should also be available to a wider public and decided that the abstracts should be published. In 1968 a journal containing abstracts of book chapters and journal articles appeared. It was called simply *Documentatieblad*, which in Dutch means documentation journal or magazine.

The ASC abstracts journal

Documentatieblad was an in-house publication and most of the subscribers were in the Netherlands. To improve marketing and distribution the journal was relaunched in 1994 as *African Studies Abstracts (ASA)*. Publication was taken over by Hans Zell Publishers, subsequently by Bowker-Saur (1999-2000) and K.G. Saur Munich (2001-2002). The move to a commercial publisher was a radical break with the past. It came at a time when there was growing pressure on libraries to earn income, yet trading conditions for serials publications were difficult. Inevitably the annual subscription increased sharply. While the number of institutional subscriptions outside the Netherlands increased, from 59 in 1993 to 76 in 1994, the total number of paid-up subscriptions declined, from 174 at the end of 1993 to 115 at the end of 1994. On the upside, the new arrangement enabled *ASA* to be distributed more widely in Africa. The money which the ASC saved on production costs was used to pay for subscriptions for some 100 academic libraries and organisations in Africa under what was a largely recipient-request led scheme. A questionnaire survey in 1998 among the African recipients elicited an almost 60 percent response and indicated that *African Studies Abstracts* was greatly appreciated and much used for research.

With the growth of e-publishing, doubts arose as to the viability of a printed abstracts journal.⁶ This, together with the restrictions which *ASA* production deadlines placed on the flexibility of the documentation staff, led the ASC to terminate its contract with K.G. Saur in 2002. *African Studies Abstracts* reverted to an in-house publication and re-emerged in March 2003 as an electronic

journal under the name *African Studies Abstracts Online*. Currently the website page of *ASA Online* consistently scores in the top ten of most visited pages on the ASC website. The number of subscribers to the *ASA Online* mailing list has increased from 472 in 2004 to 1,681 at the end of 2012. By contrast, the number of subscribers to the printed abstracts journal never exceeded 350.

Following recommendations from a survey among subscribers to the *ASA Online* mailing list in 2008/09, the navigation and search facilities of the journal were improved and links were included to the full text of an article or publication if available. Descriptors from the ASC African Studies Thesaurus were also included and these link directly to the ASC library's online catalogue.

Characteristics of ASC Leiden abstracts

Abstracting at the ASC has always been collection based. From *Documentatieblad* to *African Studies Abstracts Online*, the abstracts journal is a selection of titles from the library catalogue, repackaged in the form of a journal. All the titles are available in the African Studies Centre library. The library collection is a broad-based one in the field of the social sciences and the humanities. It covers the entire African continent and the Indian and Atlantic Ocean islands. Key themes are socioeconomic and political developments, government, law and constitutional development, history, religion, anthropology, women's studies, education, and literature. Publications are in a Western language.

ASC Leiden abstracts are in the language of the original publication. This may be English, French, German, Dutch, or Afrikaans. Articles in Portuguese, Spanish and Italian are selected only if a journal abstract is available. My teacher at library school likened an abstract to a bikini, brief but covers the essentials. Brief at the ASC means a maximum of 150 to 200 words. Initially this was determined by the space available on a library catalogue card and, following automation, by the number of positions allocated in the database. The essentials include subject and purpose, disciplinary approach, and nature of the research and source materials (fieldwork, archives, oral traditions, etc.). Where applicable there is an indication of the time period, specific geographical information, such as names of towns, villages or districts, and the names of persons, languages and ethnic groups. In the early years, abstracts of books often also included a list of reviews.

All abstracting and indexing is quality reviewed to ensure consistency and conceptual accuracy and limit grammatical errors and typos. Word use in abstracts, standardisation of spelling and the use of acronyms received extra attention as the ASC library's online catalogue became more sophisticated and it became possible to search for topics using words in the abstract.

Abstracting coverage and selection criteria

The actual and potential users of African Studies documentation are a broad and diffuse group, with diverse interests, information needs and disciplinary backgrounds, and lacking an organised demand. This makes it extremely difficult to select materials for abstracting on the basis of express user wishes with respect to country, topic, or type of material, for example.

Initially the ASC library aimed at the comprehensive documentation of its collection. Abstracts were made of virtually all publications held by the library. This included books, chapters in edited works and journal articles. Over time this proved far too ambitious. In 1990, in the face of the ever increasing number of publications on Africa, the acquisitions budget was increased. With the annual growth in acquisitions, abstracting and indexing backlogs also grew. In 2000 internal organisational changes in the library considerably reduced the time available for abstracting, further exacerbating the situation. Ways had to be found to stay abreast of incoming publications and keep as up-to-date as possible.

Increasing the number of abstracts produced was one option, for example by consistently making shorter abstracts. Unfortunately, however, this does not do away with the need to analyse the contents of a publication, which is what takes the most time and effort. A more feasible way of raising the production of abstracts was to make use of the abstracts which more and more journals were starting to contain as they went online. This involved looking into issues of copyright, monitoring which journals consistently contained abstracts in all issues and for all articles, and assessing whether the abstracts met ASC abstracting criteria (length, language, adequate representation of an article's contents). Of the 250 journals the ASC covered in 1998, about 80 had 'ready-made' abstracts, as we called them. In 42 cases the abstracts could be partly used. In only 10 cases could virtually all the abstracts be used. Since 1998 the number of journals with abstracts has grown and the overall quality of the abstracts has improved.

Another option was to be more selective in choosing which materials to abstract and since the mid-1990s the sharpening of abstracting criteria has been an ongoing process. In (de)selecting materials for abstracting, a primary consideration is collection development policy and the nature of the library collection. Moreover, for the period that the ASC was under contract to a commercial publisher, the commitment to produce an abstracts journal meant that a minimum of some 1,800 abstracts of journal articles and chapters of edited works had to be made each year.

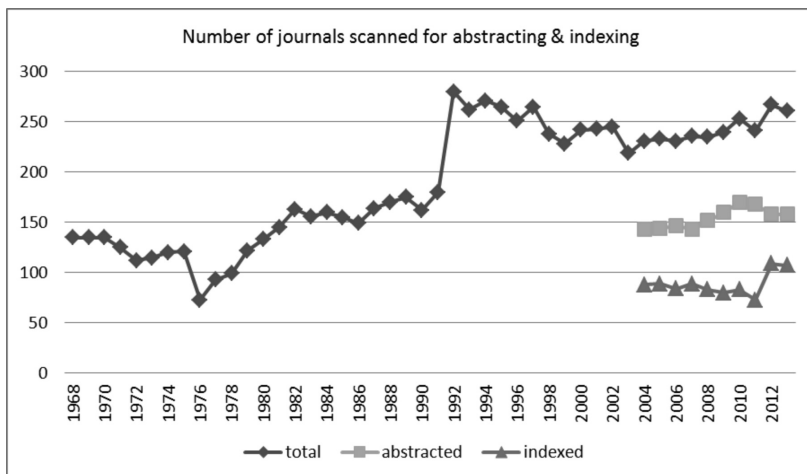
For a long time all edited volumes were catalogued and abstracted at chapter level. The content of edited works is often very diverse and without an abstract or table of contents a great deal of information remains hidden and virtually inaccessible.⁷ However, from the mid-1980s onwards the number of

edited volumes acquired by the library increased dramatically, more than quadrupling in a little over ten years, from an estimated 50 in 1992 to some 225 in 2004. Chapter-level coverage of edited works became less comprehensive and by 1995 only those edited volumes which dealt with several different themes and diverse countries were being selected for chapter-level coverage. Subject access to the specific contents of this type of edited work stands to lose most if it is covered at monograph level only. In 2004 chapter-level coverage of edited works was discontinued. To this day (2013), however, edited works continue to be abstracted at monograph level.

Over time the abstracting of books also became increasingly selective. In April 1997 it was decided to no longer abstract monographs whose “title covers contents”,⁸ in practice about half the number of books acquired by the library each year, books on North Africa,⁹ which is a marginal area in the library collection, and books dealing with developing countries in general. In 2000 the abstracting of books stopped altogether, with the exception of edited volumes and ASC publications.

Ultimately journals are the mainstay of ASC documentation. The aim is to ensure a constant annual production of abstracts in order to cover a substantial part of the journal collection. Journals selected for abstracting and indexing must be scholarly and the library must have a subscription, either print or electronic. Newspapers and weeklies, popular magazines and current affairs bulletins, statistical digests, directories, annual reports and newsletters have never been covered. Obviously the titles on the master list of journals systematically scanned for documentation are continually changing, as journals cease publication or subscriptions to new titles are taken out. Timeliness of publication as such has never been a primary selection criterion and journals published in Africa have always been given a great deal of leeway in this respect. By contrast, for Thomson Reuters timeliness is a *sine qua non* for inclusion in Web of Science,¹⁰ which perhaps partially explains the underrepresentation of journals published in Africa.

As with books and edited volumes, the selection criteria for journals have also had to be sharpened over the years. Of the 250 or so journals to which the library subscribed in 1968, 135 were systematically scanned for abstracting and indexing. As the number of journals to which the library subscribed increased, so did the number of journals abstracted, peaking at 280 in 1992 and subsequently gradually dropping to some 240 by 2000. While the number of journals systematically scanned has remained more or less constant, since November 2004 abstracting has concentrated on journals published in Africa and leading Africanist journals published elsewhere. Journals with good quality abstracts requiring virtually no editing are also covered, this on purely pragmatic grounds. Of the 260 journals systematically scanned in 2013 some 160 were selected for abstracting. Articles in the remaining 100 are indexed.



Once a journal is selected for abstracting and indexing it is covered from cover to cover, with the exception of articles on linguistics, articles in the field of literature dealing with only one work, review articles and book reviews. A purely descriptive article on current political events or economic developments, which may quickly become outdated, is selected only if it deals with a country about which very little is otherwise published. Formal selection criteria include the length of an article (minimum of 4 pages), the presence of an author or authors (i.e. not anonymous) and the presence of references, notes or a bibliography, indicating the sources on which the article is based.

Cooperation in African Studies documentation

Most abstracting services are discipline-based. Some are concerned with all developing countries and their approach is generally thematic. The abstracting work of the African Studies Centre Leiden is unique in that it is the only A&I service focusing specifically on African studies.¹¹ The ASC abstracts journal has outlived comparable publications, such as *African abstracts : a quarterly review of ethnographic, social, and linguistic studies appearing in current periodicals* (1950-1972), published by the International African Institute in London, and the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa's *Bibliographie ethnographique de l'Afrique sud-saharienne*, (1960-1977) and its successor *Bibliographie de l'Afrique sud-saharienne - Sciences humaines et sociales* (1978-1989). CODESRIA's *Index of Social Science Periodical Articles* spanned just 3 volumes (1989-1990/91) and although it reappeared in 2008 as *Current Contents*,¹² the focus is no longer exclusively on Africa and not all entries have

an abstract. Other bibliographical services in the field of African Studies, notably *Africa Bibliography* (International African Institute/Cambridge University Press) and *International African Bibliography* (De Gruyter), do not include abstracts.

There have been various initiatives over the past twenty or so years to further cooperation in documenting African Studies materials. The CODESRIA Indexation Project, aimed at establishing a reference system to list, index, describe and evaluate African publications in the social sciences and the humanities, unfortunately never progressed beyond a consultative meeting of African and European information professionals and researchers held in Dakar in May 2008.¹³ Talks between the ASC and IBISCUS in France before it was dissolved in 2001, the International African Institute in London and the Institut für Afrikakunde in Hamburg, amongst others, all failed to lead to concrete results. Extensive discussions in 1998-1999 between the ASC and the Africana Librarians Council (ALC) in the United States on the possibility of creating an African Database Connection involving the cooperative management of electronic databases and indexing of African information, starting with the catalogue of the ASC library and the Quarterly Index of African Periodical Literature (QIAPL),¹⁴ also came to nothing.

The very first aggregation of independently compiled databases in the field of African Studies was the initiative of a commercial publisher, NISC, National Inquiry Services Centre, based in Grahamstown, South Africa. Developed in the mid-1990s, NISC's African Studies database later merged with NISC's South African Studies and African HealthLine databases to become Africa-Wide: NiPAD, subsequently renamed Africa-Wide Information. Africa-Wide Information now comprises 50 databases and is available on EBSCOhost. Most of the contributing bibliographic services are still very much alive.

The first freely available aggregation of African Studies databases originated more than ten years later, in 2008, when the AfricaBib Africana Periodical Literature database¹⁵ compiled by Davis Bullwinkle from 1974 to 2008 was merged with articles and abstracts from the ASC library catalogue. QIAPL was integrated with AfricaBib in 2013. At the end of 2013 Africana Periodical Literature contained the metadata of almost 170,000 articles on Africa from over 750 journals. For the period 1991-2008 it is arguably the single most comprehensive bibliographic resource for journal articles on Africa available, with metadata from Bullwinkle's AfricaBib, QIAPL and the ASC library catalogue, which were then all functioning independently. It is ironic that the data they produced could be merged only after two of them had stopped and the continuing maintenance and accessibility of their databases was under threat. New input for the AfricaBib Africana Periodical Literature database now comes from the ASC.

The internet portal *ilissAfrica*¹⁶ exemplifies another form of cooperation, that of shared and integrated access to different Africanist resource bases.

ilissAfrica includes the library catalogue of five members of ELIAS, European Librarians in African Studies, an informal network for all information professionals in Europe working with materials from and about Africa founded in 2007.

Conclusion

With the growing number of publications on Africa, both print and electronic, and the declining number of specifically Africa-focused A&I services, it is tempting to hope that developments in ICT may help overcome the traditions and vested interests that have frustrated past attempts to cooperate in providing access to African Studies resources. At the ASC over the past fifty years there has been a long process of gradual reductions in the number of publications abstracted, stabilising at the current level. This has been offset by an increase in the number of publications indexed and the production of bibliographic tools such as web dossiers and the occasional bibliography. Moreover, the development of an African Studies Thesaurus has made it possible to replace the user unfriendly UDC codes once used in the catalogue with English-language descriptors or indexing terms. The ASC library is now also working on redesigning African Studies Abstracts Online in line with the changing environment of information management and scholarly communication. But that is a whole new story which will be for someone else to tell now that I have retired.

Notes

¹ My thanks go to Katrien Polman, for her critical reading and valuable comments, and to Jos Damen, for providing additional information.

² <http://www.ascleiden.nl/?q=content/asa-online>

³ Lancaster, F.W. (2003) 'Do indexing and abstracting have a future?', *Anales de Documentacion*, 6, pp. 137-144.

⁴ http://thomsonreuters.com/products_services/science/free/essays/journal_selection_process (accessed 04.12.2013)

⁵ A monograph containing chapters written by different authors and usually with one or more editors, often but not always the result of a conference.

⁶ Incidentally, these doubts were not shared by the publisher.

⁷ For an excellent overview of the many issues involved in information retrieval in the field of African Studies, see Walsh, G. (2004) "'Can we get there from here?'" Negotiating the washouts, cave-ins, dead-ends, and other hazards on the road to research on Africa', *The Reference Librarian*, 42 (87/88), pp. 5-96.

⁸ A book's "title covers contents" if it clearly indicates the subject matter and contains some form of the name of a country or region, or the name of a place, person or organisation well known in a country or region.

⁹ Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Western Sahara

¹⁰ See note 4

¹¹ McIlwaine, J. (1999) '*Plus ça change: four decades of African studies bibliography*', *Africa Bibliography*, pp. vii-xix, provides a comprehensive overview of African bibliography from the 1960s to 2000; Limb, P. (2005) '*African studies bibliography: a state-of-the-art review*', *Africa Bibliography*, pp. vii-xv, discusses bibliographic coverage of Africa in the digital age.

¹² <http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?rubrique103&lang=en>

¹³ Eijkman, E. (2008) '*CODESRIA African Indexation Project: report on a consultative meeting in Dakar, Senegal*', *African Research & Documentation*, 106, pp. 101.

¹⁴ QIAPL was created in 1991 and maintained by the Overseas Office of the American Library of Congress in Nairobi. It stopped in 2011.

¹⁵ <http://www.africabib.org/perio.htm>

¹⁶ <http://www.ilissafrica.de/en/>, the internet library Subsaharan Africa; Bergenthum, H. & Siebold, T. (2010) '*African Studies - striving for integrated information services: recent developments in Germany and Europe*', *Africa Spectrum*, 45 (2), pp. 109-121.

