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From periphery to centre: the development of the ASCL research agenda over seven decades

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Dear distinguished guests,

This is a memorable day: 75 years ASCL and we are still going strong. As suddenly the oldest ASCL member still in service (and therefore perhaps kind of uniquely qualified to do this...), I will give a bird's eye view of the development of the research agendas at the Centre over the past decades. Admittedly, that is an

appropriate but an impossible task in 20 minutes, and I will not have much to say here on other issues, like our great library, although it is very well integrated with our research activities.

The written documentation on the ASCL⁵ - produced by the Centre itself and by others, such as external Evaluation Committees since 1998 - is enormous and can only be digested selectively.

The very first founding document, the '*Notariële Acte*' of 12 August 1947, gives as the first aim (among three) of the 'Study Centre of the Africa Institute': 'the scientific study of Africa.' This aim was repeated in the renewed ASC legal statute of 28 August 1958, in which the Centre was described as specifically devoted to *research* rather than to business networking and reporting. But

⁵ The label 'ASCL' (African Studies Centre Leiden) became the name only after its integration into Leiden University as an interfaculty institute as of 1 January 2016.

until ca. 1963, the aim remained peripheral, and little if any (field) research was done.

Today I would like to make just two main points: a) since its early years the ASCL has seen incredible ‘professionalisation’, and b) it has shown remarkable ‘organic academic growth’. Perhaps predictably, the ASCL has gone through a notable process of professionalising *all* its activities, from research to library to support staff work and to teaching. With ‘organic academic growth’ I mean that the scientific work⁶ has continued to show cumulative trends over the years, in terms of quantity and quality, especially since the late 1980s. It originated from the research staff’s intrinsic intellectual curiosity and (multi-)disciplinary ambitions. Notably, this did not come easily and happened despite the challenging conditions, such as phases of organisational turmoil, lack of clear research plans in the early phase, and financial dips that the Centre has seen.⁷ In itself that is not so surprising, but it shows that the Centre, so to speak, developed great survival skills and despite certain weaknesses in its research output has shown real ‘value for money’ over the years. The professionalisation is the result of a) active exploration and development of research ideas and agendas (that were basically absent in the first approximately 25 years of research), and b) good directors’ choices and a balanced policy of appointing new researchers in the past three decades. These two trends were *not inevitable*, because the ASC might also have succumbed to outside pressures. The annual reports of the first two decades make this clear.⁸

Business interests in Africa

In 1947 the ASC⁹ had its origins in the emerging business interests in Africa as focus area for alternative markets and trading partners (replacing Indonesia, which became independent and antagonistic to the Netherlands), and also in a commitment among its founders, Karel Paul van der Mandele and Prof. Petrus Johannes Idenburg, to the post-WWII European agenda of

6 Incl. field research, publications, conference organising, networking, guest lecturing in so many places, and the Visiting Fellowship Programme.

7 I say this based on my reading of the dozens of annual reports since 1948 and especially since 1958 showing this process. The ‘scientific history’ of the ASC(L) will be the subject of a longer paper in the near future, based on this Introduction.

8 The challenging conditions that I just mentioned and to which the Centre responded over the years were scientific, budgetary, institutional, and in relation to the global ‘knowledge economy’. Here the changes over the past decades have been tremendous.

9 As part of the ‘Afrika-Instituut’.

development and ‘furthering world peace’ through economic connections and trade. In the first two decades of its existence this focus on economic issues dominated the ASC’s agenda as well as its networking and advisory reports. But not much happened in terms of research before 1963.¹⁰

This impulse for the empirical research and in general the academic restart in the mid-1960s came from Prof. Hans Holleman, an accomplished Africanist researcher and ASC director from 1963 to 1969. He was the key figure in the early history of the Centre and the first to outline a sort of research agenda. This August 1963 agenda proposed four research themes: agricultural development; political developments; urbanisation & migration; and cultural development. Holleman kicked the researchers out of their offices into the field in Africa. He attracted new researchers and also gave a big impulse to the Library and Documentation section. After Holleman’s departure in 1969, however, insecurity about the organisation of the ASC’s research remained. Good relations with the various funding Ministries perhaps saved it over the years - as the Centre was seen to do interesting and useful research.

Since 1971 the ASC received its own specific core-funded research budget, and in the late 1970s up to 1990, more political and contemporary-historical research interests were developed, in line with the spirit of the times. New research staff addressed political, sociological, and historical issues, and with more academic ambition. This new approach gradually led to more publications in refereed outlets in and outside the Netherlands, especially after ca. 1990. As said, emerging political-historical research in the 1980s and 1990s did *not* exclude the continuity and focus among research staff on the ‘sociology of development’ in the broader sense - witness the FNSP.¹¹ This focus never disappeared, and it built on the experience with work on food economies and comparative nutrition research.

Research agenda: from brief notes to thematic groups

A full-fledged ‘research programme’ at the ASC was indeed slow in developing. Practice preceded planning in research in the years up to 1987, when Gerrit Grootenhuis still was the ‘general secretary’, *not* the scientific director, of the

10 There was no empirical/field research, only documentation and report-writing based on documentary sources and secondary literature. Even here, its ‘economic information’ mission was not very prominent.

11 The Food and Nutrition Studies Programme, since 1983.

ASC, and only brief notes on research plans were ever published.¹² They are not readily traceable in the archives. Researchers via their networks, e.g. with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation and with collegial links elsewhere, largely set the research agenda.

The first documents outlining a research strategy were the 1987 programmes of the two new Departments of Political-Historical Studies and of Social-Economic Studies, for 1987-1991. They led to steady growth of and overall continuity in the empirical research agenda.

Five years later, in 1992, after the adoption of a new ASC administrative statute in May and the nomination of a new director, Prof. Stephen Ellis in July 1991 (in office for three years), two new agenda-setting five-year programmes for 1992-1996 were written, again by the two Departmental Chairs, then Robert Buijtenhuijs and Prof. Jan Hoorweg. This was the decisive turn towards opening up the until then rather closed, or let's say 'not so visible,' research culture of the ASC.

The Political-Historical group's programme - recognising the simultaneous movements in Africa towards both 'democratisation' and 'weakening of the African state,' tuned in with policy concerns existing also at the Dutch ministerial level. It tackled three themes: a) the major political and social changes in African political systems; b) the specific political and economic organisation of states in Africa; and c) identity and ethnicity, which showed a big resurgence and were expressed through innovative forms of ethno-religious practices, language policies, and emerging urban cultures.

The Socio-Economic Department outlined a programme addressing prevailing socio-economic trends in Africa and the need, as they saw it, to produce 'policy-relevant' data and insights. From a general focus in the preceding years, on rural development, the programme continued a concern with a) 'food and nutrition issues' (with ministerial funding and local African partnerships), b) 'household resources and rural poverty'¹³ and c) 'agricultural marketing and food policy in Africa.' Compared with the Political-Historical Department,¹⁴ the Socio-Economic Department continued with work done in the previous 15 years, but innovatively built on its experience.

12 There was, however, an important 'Self-evaluation' report prepared by the Centre (in 1987), sent to the Ministry of Education, in response to the then notorious 1986 'Uhlenbeck Report'.

13 Incl. on household patterns of employment and income or wage earning.

14 Which also had less personnel.

The publication of these two Departmental programmes was a big step towards broadening and professionalising the research agenda and also towards increasing the 'output' of the Centre. It also initiated a *cycle* of drafting a new ASC research programme every five to six years. Research and publications took off, but growing tensions emerged between the two Departments, e.g. about funding and staff.

The specific advantage of the ASC, as a space for *independent academic research* with core funding without its own heavy teaching programme, was much emphasised and stimulated by director Stephen Ellis in the early 1990s. It allowed researchers to try out and experiment on perhaps more risky topics, like revolt and resistance, religion and politics, class formation, political experiments in Africa, urban cultures, or environmental conflict. But eventually, the dual Department structure collapsed and a kind of crisis ensued.

In June 1996, a new director, Prof. Gerti Hesseling, and Board came in, and a new, non-dualist and less antagonistic structure of 'thematic research groups' ('*Themagroepen*') was proposed, as advised by an external '*Structuur-Commissie*'. It became effective in 1997, another turning point year. On 22 September 1997 the new ASC approach was launched: four 'theme groups' with their own research programmes: 'Conflict, Conciliation & Control in Africa', 'Society & Resources in Africa', 'Globalisation & Socio-cultural Transformation in Africa', and 'De-Agrarianisation in Africa: Labour, Locality & Identity in Transformation'. All were fieldwork-oriented and became quite productive in research and publications. Equally successful was the revamped Visiting Fellowship Programme.

We may say that all this inaugurated or continued a fruitful period of reorientation and renewed scientific energy at the ASC, much due to Gerti Hesseling's approach of broad, external networking, notably in Africa, and stimulating and respecting new, independent research projects among staff. She also gave new impulses to the ASC's Library and Documentation section.

Positive external evaluations

In 1998 the first External Evaluation, a new fashion in academia, was conducted (and also mentioned as obligatory in the new ASC statute). It reported positively on the ASC and the Centre went full steam ahead.

In 2002 the first cycle of the new Theme Group activities came to an end and on the basis of a new five-year Research Plan for 2002-2006 (counting 91 pages!), three new TGs were designed. Inevitably with recognisable continuity in terms of research staff, built-up expertise and research emphasis. The new TGs were: 'Culture, Politics and Inequality in Africa' (CPI), 'Economy, Ecology & Exclusion' (EEE), and 'Agency in Africa' (AiA), so a tripartite structure was effective as of 2002.

In 2004 Gerti Hesselting resigned after a successful eight years, and was succeeded by Leo de Haan, who would later become director of the ISS. Leo de Haan did a commendable job of solidifying the ASC, attracting new (research) staff, and extending some cooperative networks to Africa and the outside world. Under his tenure the ASC also, in 2007, hosted the 2nd European Conference of African Studies (ECAS), and later two externally funded research programmes were also brought in: the important comparative 'Tracking Development' programme¹⁵, comparing Asian and African development paths, and the more complex Consortium for Development Partnerships, with CODESRIA, Northwestern University (USA) and some other institutions.

In 2004 a second External Evaluation¹⁶ of the ASC was carried out - also positive. The recommendations were used in the preparations for the research programme for 2006- 2011.

In 2007 the new five-year research programme was launched, with three new research theme groups: 'Social Movements & Political Culture'; 'Economics, Environment & Exploitation' and 'Connections & Transformations in Africa'. On this renewed basis, the research groups and the Centre in general performed quite well in the first years, initiating various new research lines and a good number of projects by individual researchers.

In 2011, the regime of external evaluations was again set in motion, with another major exercise assessing the years 2004-2010. This was the third one since 1998. Its report coincided with the appointment of Prof. Ton Dietz in 2010 as the new director.

Based on the Evaluation Report recommendations there was a kind of overhaul, entitled 'ASC New Style', energetically led by Ton Dietz, with a

15 Funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation.

16 Under KNAW auspices, like the first one in 1997-98.

new, fortunately only 8-page, research programme for 2012-2016, called 'Africa and Global Restructuring'. The ASC was restructuring as well. The emphasis came to lie on four domains of research: 'Resources and well-being'; 'Constellations of governance'; 'Identification and belonging in a media age'; and 'Africa's global connections'. As usual, these research themes and their motivation were formulated in close consultation with research staff, but also more geared to the Netherlands' Development Cooperation agenda, with its then newly proposed four focus themes and fifteen focus countries. In 2012 the ASC's research was also reorganised in, up to seven, 'Collaborative Research Groups' *within* these four domains.¹⁷

Under Ton Dietz's tenure, the ASC reconnected with the Netherlands-African Business Council, our old twin of 1947. This was a probably inevitable, and certainly a positive, development, adding new elements to the research agenda.

Integration into Leiden University leading to synergy

The ASC's integration into Leiden University per 1 January 2016 led to 'LeidenASA' ('Leiden African Studies Assembly'), a new network of Africanist researchers of various backgrounds drawn from Leiden University. This enhanced synergy in research efforts and knowledge dissemination. The shifting emphasis to more economic and developmental issues occurred next to a flexible continuation of research on classic but enduring themes of security, political developments and innovations, cultural complexity, contemporary history, international relations, and resistance movements, among other subjects.

Today, such themes are still in the forefront of the ASCL's research, showing sometimes remarkable continuity with those of the 1970s and 1980s but much more geared to global academic discussions, and with quite original takes. While the focus of activities of NABC and ASCL remains different, this fact is mutually respected, and the collaboration and division of tasks seems to work well.

A lot more of the ASCL's publications are now appearing in global, peer-reviewed outlets, although the mixed and broad agenda of research activities,

17 Which have a common thematic aim for several common publications, and change in composition or theme every 3-4 years.

including advisory work and policy-geared background reports, also necessitates other publication formats.

In addition, the ASCL has been and is quite present in the (inter)national news media with interviews and quotes of researchers and also library staff, and thus has an impact on news reporting¹⁸, although, as I noted, the media - like the 'policy circles' - certainly don't always listen to us (nor do they always have to).

The professionalisation and academic growth of the ASCL were amply demonstrated in the five respective External Evaluations, by committees of experts. The last one was in 2017, so we can expect another one soon. The important thing is that all Evaluations were *very favourable*. Both research and the library especially, scored always well above average. They confirm that the ASCL's 75-year history has shown the emergence of a solid and globally respected African Studies research institute. The Centre is now an important hub of African Studies - based on its production of a huge body of empirical data and of invaluable insights, as seen in the many products and publications. They were food for thought not only in academia but also in policy circles. We disseminate our work in many forums.

In this 75 years' venture we also must acknowledge the hard work, inventiveness, and resilience of those who preceded us - including colleagues who passed away in recent years, for instance after 2000, Rob Buijtenhuijs, Vernie February, Gerti Hesseling, Stephen Ellis, Marcel Rutten, and recently Jan Hoorweg, and several others. They were instrumental in shaping the ASCL to what it is now, and we build on their work.

Publication culture and societal impact

As I noted, the Centre's intellectual dynamics, activities and positioning today are different from those in the 1960s, and even from those in the 1990s. Its research initiatives showed variety and adaptability, although respecting the necessary continuity. The publication culture and standards as well as societal impact in the field of African Studies now are much improved and held in regard by many scholars, policymakers, NGOs, etc. To refer back to my two core statements: I think that 'professionalisation' and 'organic academic growth' were achieved.

18 Staff are a 'source of knowledge' and a counterweight to often superficial reporting – even if the media quite selectively appropriate our views and statements.

One proof of this is the strongly increased citation scores of our researchers - although these should not become a fetish - and the flourishing publication series, notably with Brill Publishers. A lot of really interesting and very readable articles, books and reports were produced.

Another is the continued close link with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/ Development Cooperation, e.g. in programmes like INCLUDE, several other research projects, courses, and advice.

A third one is the always crowded Visiting Fellowship Programme, although recently reduced due to COVID-19 and budget cuts, and the number of 'self-financed scholars'. And not to forget, the seminar programme, with a good number of distinguished foreign guest speakers.

A fourth one is the fruitful link we forged with education: new research initiatives and projects have emerged from the students of our Research Master African Studies, started in 2006, Master African Studies, and Graduate Programme African Studies, who were and are educated here.

Lastly, what we also have done is collaborate more intensively with African scholars based in Africa - who will be more and more in the forefront of original research. I see this collaborative research as a growth point for the future work of the ASCL.

Perhaps these achievements were set in motion due to the shake-up of the Centre with director Stephen Ellis in 1991-93, and the subsequent guidance of the four directors¹⁹ which we have had since then, Gerti Hesseling, Leo de Haan, Ton Dietz and Jan-Bart Gewald, and that are continued by current director Marleen Dekker. They have also been crucial in maintaining and negotiating the ASCL's links to the relevant institutions in the Netherlands and abroad.

To conclude. In emphasising the ASCL's process of professionalisation and organic academic growth here, it was not my intention to present a teleological story of an institute that started from amateurish beginnings to an inevitable apotheosis of scientific perfection. Each era, each phase, had its own limitations and opportunities. There were, and are, always challenges to overcome, e.g. as to external funding, institutional embedding

19 Not counting the two interim, 'care-taker' ones: Prof. A. Trouwborst and Ir. A. van Deursen (1994-96).

and positioning, and intellectual-theoretical ambitions. The latter are still to be improved upon. Some people also critically note that the ASCL, while being always open to wider audiences, should not become a 'beehive' of entertainment activities peripheral to academic research.

But - what the ASCL has done in the past decades of research is very noteworthy: building an impressive corpus of empirical data and interpretive-comparative studies on African society, politics, history, economies, and the environment. It became an indispensable resource of in-depth information and of 'running commentary' on Africa and its global relations. The work has greatly informed and inspired other scientists, policymakers, and the general public. The Centre thereby has shown flexibility and inventiveness. It could be said that historically the 'organic academic growth', as I mentioned above, driven by our independent research agenda, has in itself decisively contributed to that high level of professionalisation of the ASCL.

Today our research is in full swing under the 'Strident Africa' research programme, drawn up under previous director Prof. Jan-Bart Gewald, with as its four main themes: 'politics and security', 'economy', 'historical context', and 'society and culture.' Context-sensitive study of such themes is needed more than ever in view of Africa's problems and challenges.

The ASCL hopes to continue its research and other work within the fruitful institutional environment of Leiden University, and by keeping up its standards. A link with the University's new Strategic Plan has been made. We aim to insert ourselves even more in the societal, the policy-relevant, *and* the intellectual-scholarly discussions that affect our world and shape our relations with Africa, the fascinating and rapidly changing continent that, let's not forget, is our closest neighbour.