



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

**From 100 to 100.000 books and a digital library in 75 years:
the library of the African Studies Centre in Leiden,
1947-2022**

Damen, J.C.M.; Veldkamp, F.; Seuren, G.

Citation

Damen, J. C. M. (2024). From 100 to 100.000 books and a digital library in 75 years: the library of the African Studies Centre in Leiden, 1947-2022. In F. Veldkamp & G. Seuren (Eds.), *ASCL occasional publications* (pp. 43-46). Leiden: African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4177660>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4177660>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

5

From 100 to 100.000 books and a digital library in 75 years: the library of the African Studies Centre in Leiden, 1947-2022

Speaker: Jos Damen

Head of the ASCL Library



The library of the African Studies Centre, like the Afrika-Instituut as a whole, dates back to 1947. It started as the Instituut's Leiden branch, a scientific documentation centre with three employees, and originally focused on trade and legal matters. The library grew from 2,400 books in 1957 to more than 100,000 books, films, journals, photographic material, e-docs and a large

digital library in 2022.

Abstracts and web dossiers

Unlocking information has always been a key element of the library of the African Studies Centre. In the first decades (right from the start, as can be read in the first annual reports) this was done by making abstracts, thereby opening up scientific journal articles and books, and alerting researchers on certain new topics of interest. This was professionalised by indexing books and articles, and making an African Studies Thesaurus. This thesaurus was built in Leiden and today comprises more than 13,000 English terms covering the field of African Studies. Another famous service was *African Studies Abstracts*, an abstracts journal covering academic articles. It was published from 1968 until 2017, first in print, from 2003 onwards as *ASA Online*. The

library also creates other tools for exploring Africa information: the highly popular web dossiers (on a multitude of subjects, ranging from politics to art and from crime to feminism). Library Alerts are used to notify people of newly acquired publications, and the Library Weekly is built using Wikidata.

Going digital - open access

The library adopted an online catalogue relatively late (1989), but was quick in providing online open access and building repositories and databases. The ASCL Library was in fact the first Leiden partner who supplied academic publications to be included in the projects of SURE, the organisation for IT in Dutch education and research. Nowadays, online publications of academic books are taken for granted and Open Access is seen as a must-have, but the pioneering days took place only a few decades ago. The ASCL Library was one of the forerunners of this movement in the Netherlands. The ASCL also provided online information databases such as Connecting-Africa and AfricaBib. Even as part of an interfaculty institute of Leiden University, since 2016, the ASCL Library is still open to the general public. Any visitor can wander between the shelves - though a substantial part of the collection is currently housed in the stacks of the Leiden University Library.

Staff

Collecting books and making information about Africa available were central tasks of the African Studies Centre right from the start. At first, former colonial administrator Lucien Adam executed some of these tasks. Mrs. E.C. Nix led the library from the 1950s up to 1974, when Ph.A. Emanuel took over. Koos van der Meulen headed the library from 1977 up to 1996, and after him Elli de Rijk, Titia van der Werf and Jos Damen were in charge. The staff was evenly divided between administrative staff (acquisition, cataloguing, lending and visitor information) and information specialists (thesaurus, indexing, collection development, abstracts and web services).



The library in the early seventies. From left to right: A.J.C. Lach de Bère (documentation), S.M.S. Phillipse (documentation), Baroness A.M.C. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (library employee), E.C. Nix (head of the library), K. van der Meulen (head of the library from 1977-1996).

Buildings

The African Studies Centre has had various addresses in Leiden over the years - Rapenburg 45, known as the Telders' house, where Queen Beatrix lived when she was a student at Leiden University, Rapenburg 8 and Stationsplein 10 - and the ASCL has been housed at Wassenaarseweg 52 since 1989. A move to new premises at the Witte Singel in Leiden is planned for 2024.

Future strategy

The Policy Plan of the library of the African Studies Centre for the period 2022-2026 focuses on four strategic goals: 1. A distinctive collection, with more books from Africa via targeted acquisition trips and a more open language profile, e.g. books in Swahili. 2. An attractive presentation of the collection, with changing physical displays and thematic digital presentations. 3. Targeting specific user groups, and an enhanced role of the library in education. 4. Expanding Open Access.

New directions

The collection of the library of the African Studies Centre has over the years developed into a library of about 100,000 paper books, thousands of journals, over 2,000 films and a large digital library, including scholarly material and digital newspapers. Sometimes collections lead to publications: 750 photographs by well-known medical doctor Roel Coutinho made in Guinea-Bissau in 1973 were published by the ASCL on Wikimedia Commons, and were recently used in a book²⁰ about a colonial war as seen through Coutinho's camera lens.

The library continues to stimulate access to information from and about Africa by actively buying books in Africa, by making publications available in Open Access and by developing all kinds of tools, such as alert services, web dossiers, library highlights, and Wiki applications built on Wikidata and Wikimedia Commons. The ASCL Library plans to continue doing this in the coming 75 years.

20 Coutinho, R. (2022) *De vrijheidsstrijd van Guinee-Bissau door de ogen van een jonge dokter, Roel Coutinho*. Leiden: African Studies Centre Leiden. Available at <https://www.ascleiden.nl/news/de-vrijheidsstrijd-van-guinee-bissau-door-de-ogen-van-een-jonge-dokter-roel-coutinho>