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Word of welcome

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Word of welcome

Speaker: Marleen Dekker
Director



Dear all, welcome! Here in Leiden, and online. It is wonderful to see so many familiar faces. Thank you for joining us today to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the African Studies Centre Leiden.

In the first minutes of this day, I would like to begin with why we are here, with whom we are here, and what today's programme will bring us. To start with:

why are we here? Of course, it is 75 years ago that the ASCL was established, and that is quite an occasion, worthy of celebration, of taking the time with all of you to share our history, and to showcase what is happening today.

How it all started

While some continuities can certainly be observed, many things have changed over the past 75 years. The world is clearly a different place and at times, rapid change seems to be the only constant. How we as academics, information specialists, Africanists, global citizens, understand and relate to and with Africa, African countries, and our colleagues and students in Africa, has changed as well, and this has of course changed our work.

But first, back to how it all started: The Centre was founded on 12 August 1947 in Leiden, as the academic division of the *Afrika Instituut*. This *Afrika Instituut* had a twin section, devoted to trade with Africa, in Rotterdam, that later became the Netherlands-African Business Council.

The focus of the academic division was on research, information and documentation. To date, we stay true to this academic origin, and emphasise the importance of undertaking independent research and documentation to promote a better understanding of historical, current, and future societal transformations and developments on the continent.

What is particularly relevant here, is that this academic research is multi-disciplinary, empirical, and based on field research. It is well informed by what is going on in societies, in people's lives. And it is often research conducted over a long period, building longstanding collaborations with in-country researchers.

Similarly, we acquire books and documentation material in Africa, emphasising that to understand African societies it is important to study what is published *in* Africa, and not just *on* Africa.

This empirical, long-term academic engagement with observing societal transformations is at the core of what we do and feeds into our academic publications, our teaching, and our societal engagements.

Diverse realities

Again and again, the ASCL's research, collecting and teaching activities have demonstrated there are many African realities, diverse narratives, and diverse images. This is also reflected in the images that we present here on the welcome slide.



A rural market along Lake Kivu in Rwanda, a street view with the skyline of Kigali, capital of Rwanda, and the launch of a satellite by Ethiopia in 2019. These are just three examples of diverse images, diverse narratives, and diverse realities on the same continent, and this diversity can often be observed even in the same country. At the ASCL, we study, document, and promote a better, or more nuanced understanding of this diversity.

Allow me to add another dimension to diversity, by asking *who* is here today. This may be a bit unusual, but I feel it is important to recognise who is here, as to me, this provides a perspective of who we are as the African Studies Centre, and how we are connected in Leiden, in the Netherlands, and in Africa. So, this is also a ceremonial welcome.

Welcome first and foremost to the ASCL colleagues, our support staff, library and documentation staff, PhD students, teachers, and researchers: without you there would not be an ASCL as it is today. A special welcome to Angela Robson from the library who is celebrating not only our anniversary but also her own birthday.

Welcome also to the Board of the African Studies Centre Leiden: the Deans of the Faculties of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Law; the University leadership; the current and former members of our Scientific Advisory Board and the Foundation African Studies Centre (with representatives of Dutch universities and societal partners respectively). Welcome to members of LeidenASA (Leiden African Studies Assembly), LeidenGlobal and other colleagues from Leiden University. Welcome to our alumni: PhD, master, research master, and Leiden-Delft-Erasmus minor students, and to the students who have very recently started. Welcome to representatives from the media, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Netherlands-African Business Council; and of course, last but not least, welcome to our former colleagues. It is good to have you here and celebrate.

I would also like to acknowledge those who cannot be with us today, either because they have passed away, or because they are visited by the Corona virus, or because they are teaching, or are finally able to travel for fieldwork or research fellowships.

I would like to especially acknowledge our immediate former director Jan-Bart Gewald, who is currently enjoying a fellowship at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, and take the opportunity to publicly thank him for his committed leadership of the ASCL from 2017 to 2021.

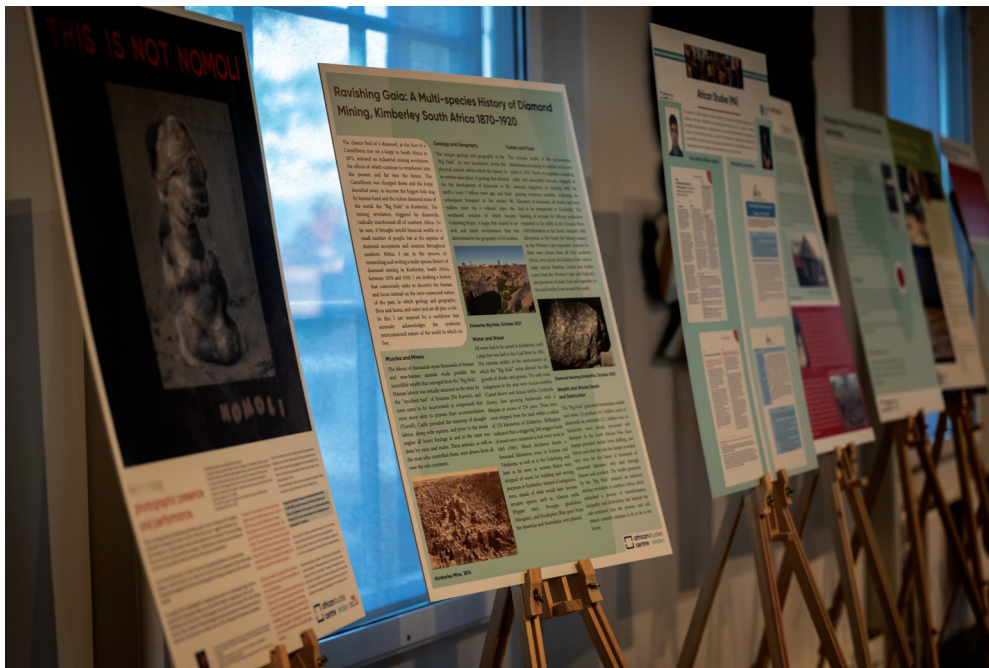
Today's programme

That brings me to *what* we will be doing today.

Let me start by saying that one day is far too short to celebrate what we have achieved over the past 75 years. Today's programme offers a few highlights and aims to strike a balance between deep academic work and festivities.

We will kick off the day from the perspective of the University leadership on academic collaboration in Africa and the relevance of the Centre. Next we will focus on academic research, with presentations on the origins of African Studies, and how the ASCL's research developed over the past 75 years - in dialogue with our research library - from very modest beginnings to the solid, field research-based and multidisciplinary 'knowledge enterprise' that we are today. This is followed by a panel with societal partners reflecting on these developments and sharing their perspectives on the importance of independent research in Africa. I am sure these morning sessions will provide sufficient food for thought to be discussed over lunch. In the afternoon we continue with a presentation by the library on how the practice of collecting and our collection as such have developed over the years. The importance of documenting and collecting will be further highlighted in a presentation by a researcher working with photographic material. This will be followed by the Africa Thesis Award ceremony, and a panel with ASCL alumni, former students who enjoyed their MA or PhD education at our institute. We will close with a short exchange with the Chief Science Officer of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the importance of academic research on Africa and the future of African Studies, followed by drinks and music.

As I said before, this programme does not fully do justice to the work that my colleagues and I do and that we are so passionate about. So we have also prepared a visual programme for you, a number of posters on our work, to elaborate on and for you to take in at your own pace.



There are five posters on research:

- A multi-species history of diamond mining in Kimberley, South Africa
- Language endangerment and linguistic documentation in Ethiopia
- Knowledge Platform INCLUDE
- Pedagogies of Peace and Conflict in the Great Lakes Region
- Sorghum Value Chain in Nigeria

Three posters on our academic teaching:

- African Studies (MA)
- LDE minors coordinated by the ASCL
- Serious Game - Uhuru: The Wicked Game

And three posters on the library and documentation work:

- Collection Development at the ASCL Library
- The ASCL photo collection on Wikimedia Commons
- Reframing: photographic presence and performing

But there is more!

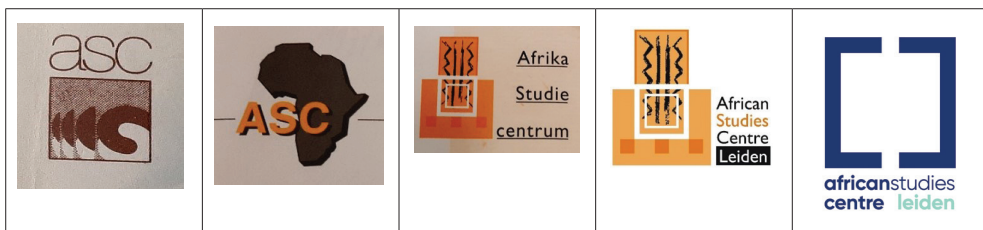
Library gems

As you can see on the colourful pillows in this room, the library staff has selected 25 items from our collection.¹ These are not necessarily representative of the collection at large, but each item reflects different aspects of our collection, telling a story of how collecting has changed over the years. The items are diverse in form and content, starting from the colonial perspectives *on* Africa to, increasingly, acquired items that were produced *in* Africa. The items on display here are accompanied by an explanatory text.

Let me share with you the first item, actually the first item in the ASCL Library collection, published in 1947, entitled ‘The Colonial administration by European powers: a series of papers read at King’s College’. This booklet contains lectures read in 1946 by ‘authoritative’ representatives of France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal and Great Britain, on the evolution of the colonial policy of their respective countries. The Foreword states that the principle of self-determination was an unexpected consequence of World War I. And just after World War II, the ‘concept of progress towards self-government’ accelerated a movement for ‘interracial adjustments’. And ‘the major colonial powers of Western Europe are being called upon to adjust and redefine their relations with overseas dependencies.’

Depicting the ASCL

As we will be reflecting on 75 years of work on, with, and in Africa, it is fascinating to observe the changes in the work we do, how we do it, with whom we do it, and how we represent Africa. Similarly, it is important to reflect on how we present ourselves. This clearly is an ongoing process that requires constant debate and thinking. We realise that our former colleagues here in the room and broader network members may be wondering what happened to the orange image that came with the ASCL for many, many years.



¹ See page 77.

Here you see the historical development of our logo. From today's perspectives, many would agree that the former logo may evoke a rather traditional image of Africa. Many of us no longer felt at ease with this image, recognising our diverse knowledges and experiences with the continent and its population.

Our new logo depicts a frame through which the ASCL observes, researches and aims to understand these diverse African realities. It is a window to contemporary, past and future developments, shedding light on the societal, religious, political, economic, demographic, cultural, and linguistic questions that are at the core of the ASCL's work. It is a window to new insights, the frame is not closed, but has openings: research continues to provide new and diverse insights into the continent.

Equally important, the colours we use in the logo represent our position as an integral part of Leiden University. We deliberately use the Leiden blue, with aqua and red colour accents. On an interesting side note: yesterday, one of our new master's students shared that in Indonesia, the colour blue signals wisdom and knowledge. Very fitting, and that comes with a responsibility as well.

Before I close and give the word to Annetje Ottow, the president of the Board of Leiden University, for the official opening remarks, I would like to thank the brains and hands behind today's programme, notably Elvire Eijkman, Rik Jongenelen and Jan Abbink being part of the committee preparing this day, as well as Trudi Blomsma and Fenneken Veldkamp who kept us on our toes! And of course to all colleagues contributing to today's programme and exhibition!

I look forward to today's exchanges. Thank you!