

Changing partnerships in African studies:

The example of the African Studies Centre in Leiden, the Netherlands

Mirjam de Bruijn & Leo de Haan

19 May 2008

Introduction

Variations in partnerships or collaboration between European and African Social Science research institutes can be situated within the general history of African studies and Euro-African partnerships. An important debate dominates the history of African studies and the partnerships developed, namely that of the hegemony of knowledge production about Africa. The Netherlands provides an interesting example of these developments. In this chapter we examine the history of the collaboration policies of one of the major African Studies institutes in Europe, the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden, the Netherlands. In this chapter the history of partnerships at the ASC is outlined with the help of evaluations as available in the archives and in the memories of senior colleagues at the ASC; and we discuss extensively the partnership with CODESRIA that was established in 2005.

Dutch interest in Africa already arose in the 17th century with the colonization of the East and West Indies and the subsequent incorporation of Africa in this endeavour as a naval base and supplier of slaves. Archives in the Netherlands hold numerous, interesting accounts from this period of Dutch merchants and explores. Due to its declining economic and political importance and its preoccupation with the East Indies, The Netherlands did not take part in the late-colonial European expansion in Africa. Therefore, 'African Studies' has become a field of study in The Netherlands (like in some other European countries and the USA) only very recently: after the Second World War, when the interest in Africa became more prominent in the changing international relations. The world was opening up and more openness in a largely euro-centered academia became a necessity (Guyer 1996). Interests in Africa were without doubt commercial, from where it also developed into a field of knowledge production that boosted in the period when development cooperation

became an important element of the production of knowledge in the 1970ies and thereafter. Especially in European countries like The Netherlands without a late-colonial relationship with Africa, 'development' of the young independent states led to the urge for more knowledge about Africa. The felt need to 'develop' a continent, to support young states reflects a position within the field of knowledge production about and with Africa. This was clearly not an equal affair. Knowledge production was embedded in the political context of the time. We will see that also the thinking about and the content of partnerships have shifted with these political relations.

At this point it is useful to consider particularly cooperation in the field of research. The research institutions in Africa in collaboration with research centres outside Africa have an intrinsic interest in promoting a new vision of Africa free of stereotypes. The discussion about knowledge production in and about Africa is largely dominated by the discourse about the hegemony of the West. Western hegemony that would be expressed in the production of knowledge that mainly followed western models, and that is expressed in the unequal division of wealth and thus funding of education and research institutes/universities. Indeed the history of the development of various forms of knowledge production, especially the production of 'useful' knowledge is dominated throughout the 20th century history by the 'West'. The imprints of the colonial period are present in the curricula of all African universities, for instance the fact that history students from Africa often know the European history better than students from Europe.

In recent discussions this 'inequality' stereotype has again come to the fore with respect to African Studies. African Studies have come under the spotlight as a result of conjectural pressure emanating from the increasingly marginal role of Africa in the new global geo-political constellation since the Cold war. A second source of pressure on African Studies and social science in general is the anxiety about the academic foundations of the discipline, i.e. the failure of theoretical approaches in social science to deal with African realities, the impact of theoretical currents like post-modernism and post-structuralism leading to a 'crisis' in social science, and the question of who to speak for Africa, and on what terms. Africanists have to continue what surely must be at the heart of any study of African societies, namely careful empirical research carried out in collaboration with African and international colleagues, while being

mindful of Africa's situation in the world. Collaboration of the ASC with its partners in Africa reflect these discussions from its starting date, with the culmination in today's forms of partnership in which stereotypes are tried to be avoided.

For this chapter we discerned different periods in which knowledge production in the field of African studies had different relevance for the Dutch academia. In each of these periods the quest for partnerships took a different form. The first period started shortly after WW II, when commercial interests dominated the interest of the Dutch in Africa. The second period started in the 1960s when the newly independent African states were created and support for these states constituted part of the dynamics of the Cold War. The 1970ies brought a new epoch stressing the need to contribute development, and the urge for relevant societal knowledge production. The 1980ies continue in this realm. In the 1990ies we enter a new era in which Africa is considered by the Europeans as a continent where more responsibilities should be delegated (Africa in the driver's seat). Dutch aid is given directly to African governments. In the Netherlands this results in the beginning of 2000 in a debate on partnerships. Africa is no longer the dependent continent but a partner in business, etc. The partnerships of the ASC with African institutes are influenced by these shifts in context. These periods also witnessed a shift in the attitude of African institutes themselves, which became according to an internal ASC note in 1977, became increasingly active in the establishment of relations with the West from the 1970ies onwards. This shift has been influenced by the changing international under globalisation: Africa became increasingly present in Europe and USA, meaning that African societies can be studied everywhere on the globe; but also that the African voice is heard everywhere and has become a significant part of the creation of knowledge about Africa (Zezeza 2006).

The contemporary history of collaboration with Africa presented in this chapter is a history of one institute, as it is reflected in the ideas, experiences and remembering of researchers working at the institute, and as they are reflected in the archive of the centre (de Bok 2000). A reflection on this history shows on the one hand how the ASC has been part of the Dutch societal context and took part in the creation of an image of Africa that at the same time informed the specific construction of relationships with African partners. On the other hand, it also shows that the

practicalities of the moment were probably more important than the ideologies formulated in policy documents or around the meeting tables. The history of partnerships of the ASC reflects the periods that we discussed above: from Africa as an object for research, to African researchers as a partner in research.

1946- 1963: the creation of an Africa institute, Africa as an object for study

In December 1946 the Afrika Instituut in Rotterdam was created by the African Netherlands Business Council. It was also the year that the first professor in the Anthropology of Africa, professor Hofstra, was nominated in Leiden. The interest for Africa gained momentum in the Netherlands when in this after WWII the relations with the Dutch Indies changed profoundly. In 1950 there were no more officials from Holland allowed in Indonesia which in fact meant the end of the study Indologie that was based at the Universities of Utrecht and Leiden. This created room for more interest in and attention for Africa. This first period was also directed to the development of trade relations with Africa. The scientific part of the Afrika Instituut was in those first years of its existence mainly a documentation centre.

The policy of the Afrika Instituut was summarised as follows: to provide general and commercial documentation about Africa; to give economic and commercial advice; to do market research; to give information about trade and to stimulate the Dutch trade with African Countries. It also aimed at the establishment of a separate scientific institute at Leiden University, which was realised with the establishment of the Africa Studies Centre as a research institute in 1958. In the founding statutes the main aims of the Africa Studies Centre were formulated as: to stimulate the scientific study of Africa; and to stimulate the spread of knowledge of scientific and cultural questions concerning the African continent.

With these aims the institute was meant to provide a scientific service to Africa. One of the means to come to these goals was 'by the stimulation and maintenance of international scientific relations within the field of African Studies'. One of the reasons for the existence of the centre was formulated as follows: '... the export of scientific experts to Africa, who are able to deal with actualities'; and '... to play a role in the development of the new states in Africa' (see Akte 1958: 20)

Although the Netherlands had no colonial relationship with African countries in the formulation of this 'akte' we recognise the attitude of the West who will help to develop those underdeveloped countries. There is no word on the establishment of collaborative relationships. Africa is an object of research.

1963- 1977: changing attitude of Africa?

Professor Holleman who directed the centre from 1963 to 1969 changed the centre from a documentation centre into a social science research centre. During his period empirical research gradually became of central concern and fieldwork part of the practice of research in the centre. Research was formulated and organised from Leiden, without much consultation or interference of African colleagues. The attitude toward Africa as was formulated in the Statutes of 1958 did not change fundamentally. However, a discussion was started about the intention of research: should it be problem oriented or theory driven; a discussion that would return many times in the following decades. The discussion that came up in this period would take a more definitive form in the 1970ies when the relationship Europe-Africa would increasingly be dominated by the urge to develop. The ASC had to inform policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation in The Hague. Increasingly also the social relevance of research was to be demonstrated. Research at the ASC in the 1970ies showed this move in an orientation towards empirical research and increasingly a tendency to do research in teams. Teams operated in Tanzania (1968), Sierra Leone (1971) and Senegal (1973). The relationships with African institutes were in accordance with the time spirit, still very much dictated from the ASC. Despite the move towards social relevance the position of the ASC was still formulated in scientific terms in an internal policy note of 1977, and partnerships were still considered to be mainly directed from the Netherlands (Discussie nota 1977). The opening towards a more collaborative style is however present, of which the most important sign is the extension of the aims of the centre with with an article stating that 'research developed at the ASC should serve the African societies (Discussie nota 1977).

1980-1990: towards partnerships

This extension was clearly an overture for the reforms of the ASC in the beginning of the 1980ies, when the ASC was evaluated and especially the research department was criticised. The outcome of this evaluation was that the Research department was divided in two: one more development oriented and the other more scientifically oriented. Furthermore it was proposed to develop more intensive relations with African institutes. In an internal policy note the then director Grootenhuis wrote 'In the present situation contacts with Africa stem from personal contacts with institutes that have all their own specific requirements for research. This leads to a relative big number of contacts with institutes spread all over Africa and leads to the question if a limitation of the number of contacts is not preferable'. '... the directorate expects the following promises of a fixed and structural collaboration with a limited number of African institutes: involvement of the African counterparts in the research programmes, exchange in teaching; empowerment of local research capacity; direction of the invitation of guest fellows (Nota 1981).

Despite the numerous objections to these ideas from individual researchers promoting their individual partners and interests, this form of collaboration was realised in the period 1981 to 1986 and extended to 1990. It is clear that this also had to do with the changes in ideas and wishes of African institutes. In the report it is formulated as follows: '...this research was executed in collaboration with local institutes. These institutes have become gradually less passive in their attitude towards our activities than was the case before. They have developed their own research policy and have their own objectives, wishes and demands to the plans of others. In relation to this development we also used the reorganisation to change our collaboration into fixed relationships with a limited number of institutes in Africa. Without the contribution of the African side in plans and priorities for research in Africa, formulated in the Netherlands, research would remain a continuation of the historical situation of scientific inequality. When collaboration is on an equal basis research that comes from outside can contribute to the realisation of the goals of scientific work as they are formulated within the African countries.'

This formulation clearly shows that the debates on the hegemony of western science and the inequality had reached the Dutch policy of science in the 1980ies. Another important discussion in this period was that research should be socially relevant, i.e

meaningful for societal development; even specified in such a way that research should contribute to the solution of urgent, societal problems in Africa (Beleidsnotitie, 1983: 24).

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As a result of these deliberations at the ASC policy indeed changed fundamentally. Research was organised in two departments and each of these concentrated research in one country. Research therefore was explicitly meant to be a team effort. The group that was more development oriented developed a research programme for Kenya and collaborated with the Ministry of Economic planning and Development, Nairobi, Kenya. The other research department concentrated activities in Cameroon and on December 7 1983, the ASC signed a ‘Protocole d’Accord de Coopération en Matière Scientifique’ with the General Delegation for Scientific and Technical Research in Yaounde, Cameroon. In practice research collaboration would go via the *Institut des Sciences Humaines*. In both collaborations the trainings aspect was defined as crucial. (Nota 1981, page 21-23).

Piet Konings who was member of the group of researchers working in Cameroon in the 1980ies looks back at this period with a positive reflection. He writes that the partnership with the Cameroonian Institutes has led to good quality research, several PhD students from Cameroon were able to get their degree and a large number of publications were realised. It has put Cameroon on the map as an important research country both for Dutch researchers as for the production of research by Cameroonians themselves. Piet Konings has worked in Cameroon until his retirement in 2007.

The structural collaboration in Kenya took a different form. It explicitly included policy oriented research and thus the collaborative institutes were not only scientifically oriented. In the second phase (mid 1980ies) research was supposed to be demand driven, i.e. formulated by the Kenyan institutes. This collaboration was structured around the research programme FNSP (Food & Nutrition Studies Programme, financed by the Dutch ministry of Foreign affairs). Collaboration was officialised between the ASC and three academic institutes: Institute for Development Studies and the Applied Nutrition Programme of the University of Nairobi and a department of Egerton University; and with policy oriented institutes: Food & Nutrition Planning Unit of the Ministry of Planning & National Development.

Especially in the second phase the Kenyan researchers played a prominent role. Nevertheless Dick Foeken who then became part of the programme and is a senior researcher at the ASC concludes that the demand driven character of the programme was mainly stimulated by the ASC in Leiden. It led to a series of research projects with young Kenyan researchers. The ASC had a role in supervision but also shared with Kenyan colleagues from the Universities and from the ministry. In terms of capacity building this project was a success. Dick Foeken evaluates the programme as a serious endeavour to make research more demand driven, to bring research and policy together and to train young researchers and policymakers. Problems encountered were mainly in the realm of leadership between Kenya and the ASC. The results of this programme in terms of capacity building and relation between policy and research were quite satisfactory. The programme was finalized mid 1990.

1990ies: return to diversification of partnerships

Within the ASC these structural collaboration programmes, meaning long-term collaboration, with specific countries and institutes, covering a broad range of activities from research to capacity building, came under serious discussion. The proposal to create a similar relation in Southern Africa was an attempt to create a better balance in the representation of ASC in Africa. Moreover, the beginning of the 1990ies brought a new élan in the ASC with the new director Stephen Ellis whose opinion (and with him other staff members) was that a research institute like the ASC could not limit itself to two countries but should be present in the whole of Africa. This was also a change in policy of the ASC with regard to the possibilities to get external funding. This trend in thinking about collaboration was echoed in an evaluation carried out by Thoden van Velzen in the early 1990s, that urged the ASC to develop a broader research programme. The recommendations in this report were mainly taken up by the Gerti Hesseling, being appointed as director in 1996.

The debates at and reorganisation of the ASC in the first years of the 1990ies resulted in a new structure of the research of the centre where it was proposed to organise in 3 to 4 research groups that would change every four years. These were implemented in 1998.

This period also invited a reorientation in the necessary partnerships with Africa. Interestingly, an internal policy note in 1996 (Samenwerkings verbanden 1996) gives for the first time explicit attention to the partnerships of the Library and documentation centre of the ASC, i.e. it proposed an exchange relations between the library and documentation centre and those in Africa (Samenwerkings verbanden 1996: 11). The latter has resulted in a long list of exchange relations between African documentation and library centres and the ASC. This exchange consists mainly of exchange of publications and continues until today.

With respect to the research collaboration this internal policy note found the “structural partnerships” too risky, because it created too much dependence on a limited number of institutes, and too little diversity in terms of spread of research. The model of the 1980ies was judged as no longer appropriate. The policy note explicitly noted the need to look beyond research institutes and universities for partnerships and also focus on NGOs and networks. It also defined as an explicit goal of the ASC that it should function as a platform for promising young African scholars (Samenwerkings verbanden: 10), which could only be developed in partnership. Although this policy note contained some very interesting suggestions the final result for research collaboration has not resulted in a new élan. Instead the period from 1995 to 2005 has been dominated by relations based on individual research projects, also in the former concentration countries. Interestingly enough the 1990ies also showed a new development from the African side: many African institutes asked for collaborative relations with the ASC. These demands for collaboration varied from exchange of publications to the exploration of collaborative research projects. The list of demands for collaboration is extensive and impressive, but only a few could be realised because of constraints in manpower and budget

In 2005 when Leo de Haan took up the office of director at the ASC, the debate on partnerships with African institutes was reopened. This was also stimulated by changes in the context in which the ASC operates, such as the realities of funding of research which increasingly can only be realised when African partner institutes have equal roles. A first choice was to collaborate with a strong research partner, with proven capability to develop an independent African research agenda and voice that could serve as a point of reference and scientific feedback to the ASC, i.e.

CODESRIA. In fact in these new developments the various discussions of the past decades come together. To understand the present day position of the ASC towards partnership with African institutes to explain in detail how this partnership with CODESRIA has taken form.

A Strategic Partnership between the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the African Studies Centre (ASC Leiden)

“In May 2005 CODESRIA and ASC entered into a strategic partnership in order to promote understanding and goodwill among scholars in general and within the African Studies in particular, and as part of a desire to strengthen scientific ties, as well as to broaden faculty, student and policy-makers’ experiences and horizons.

Although organizations of a different nature, CODESRIA being a network for the advancement of research and the ASC a research and information centre, their missions show considerable similarities and invite so to speak both organizations to collaborate. CODESRIA formulated as its mission to promote the development of social research in Africa; to defend the academic freedom of African scholars; to overcome all barriers to knowledge generation and dissemination; to strengthen the institutional basis of knowledge production in Africa; to advance the frontiers of multidisciplinary in social research; and to increase the representation of African scholarship outside Africa. ASC Leiden’s mission (anno 2005) is to: be a scientific institute that generates and collects scientific knowledge about Africa through fundamental and policy-relevant multi-disciplinary research on socio-cultural, economic and political phenomena; to contribute by its dissemination to better insights into historical, contemporary and future societal processes in Africa; to promote the global advancement of African studies and play an active and inspiring role in the national and global network of Africanists, with special attention to collaboration with and capacity-building of African institutes and researchers; and to exchange insights on societal processes in Africa with policy-makers in particular and the general public at large.

CODESRIA and ASC intend to deepen their existing relations in the sphere of scholarly co-operation in African Studies and to develop new relations on the

principle of mutual benefit and full reciprocity, in particular with respect to research and documentation. Both parties will promote joint research and training projects, including as appropriate an exchange of staff; the development of relationships between their libraries and documentation centres, including through ICT, and to establish a regular exchange of their publications; to organize joint annual awards for MA and PhD theses in African Studies; to mutually support their publication series and will consider the editing of joint publications; and will consider the possibility of jointly organising conferences, symposia, seminars and workshops. It was agreed that both organizations would undertake joint activities to raise funds for the activities planned.

Obviously the ASC maintains institutional ties with many other organizations in the Netherlands, in Africa, in Europe and elsewhere. The various institutional ties differ in content and character. Some are only directed towards specific research or library activities, others are broader. Some are more strategically oriented, i.e. at the level of the institute, directly linked to the core of its mission and initiated for a longer period. Others have more limited operational objectives; for example, all members of the research staff carry out their activities in Africa in close cooperation with colleagues from local universities or research institutes and sometimes with staff of non-governmental organizations and national or local government officials. These operational activities are often embedded in institutional agreements between the ASC and the organizations concerned.

At present, a number of institutional cooperation agreements with individual research institutes and universities in Africa are in effect, providing the framework for the collaboration of ASC staff and their colleagues in Africa in research and training, often with an element of research capacity building. Moreover, the ASC supports the development of book collections of a number of African libraries through the exchange and yearly shipments of publications. The strategic partnership with CODESRIA creates a long-term and comprehensive framework for the ASC for research and library cooperation in Africa that provides a more solid input on its strategic agenda and stronger feedback on its activities than the common individual and operational types of cooperation - which are considered useful in their own right and will of course also be continued.

CODESRIA and ASC agree to discuss and share their visions on African Studies to promote intellectual development and the generation of new knowledge with respect to Africa. Both organizations aspire to determine a limited number of research themes, which have the potential to shift the terms of the scientific debate. Such research programmes will start with stocktaking exercises using the wealth of available information and will then try to push scientific frontiers ahead. One such research programme could be on alternative statehoods or alternative systems of political organization. Another potentially pioneering theme could be the revision of Africa's position in the world economy. A format is in development for mutual research agenda setting, through participation in agenda setting meetings, seminars or conferences. From this/these agenda setting exercise(s) common research programmes or projects will be defined. These could function within the existing structures of CODESRIA and ASC but could also mean the establishment of new CODESRIA transnational working groups and ASC's participation in those groups. CODESRIA and ASC agree on the importance of empirically based studies, with a scientific and policy relevance; research should be open for collaboration between African and non-African researchers, i.e. the research programmes of both institutions under the terms of the cooperation are open to all researchers, and will aim at intellectual exchange, the renewal of the scientific debate and redefinition of concepts and theories to explain and analyse new developments in Africa.

Reciprocity constitutes the important underlying principle of the strategic partnership between CODESRIA and ASC and its contribution to African Studies. Reciprocity - working together and learning from each other - is in a nutshell how we will put into practice our cooperation.” (De Haan 2005).

Conclusion

The development of research collaboration policy with African institutes as we described for the African Studies Centre followed the tide of the discussions as they were felt on a world scale. The reformulation of the policies in the 1980ies show that the ASC went with the tide of societal relevance of research; that the independent states of Africa for whom they developed their research as was formulated in the early

years, were no longer only at the receiving end but were increasingly partners in development of strategies etc. This is a complex discussion that is also complicated by the fact that the ASC has to deal simultaneously with the scientific fundamental research questions and with societal relevance. Research in Africa can hardly avoid questions that are linked to societal relevance. However, the definition of this relevance is clearly central in debates within the centre, between the centre and African colleagues, etc. and the spirit in partnerships is also fed in these discussions. The balance between scientific and societal relevance, and the balance in hegemonic projects (today also increasingly from Africa) is a continuous struggle and related to the reopening of similar debates throughout the history of the ASC.

The debate on partnerships continued in the 21st century and led the ASC in a two-track policy: institutional relationships with those organisations who cover networks and larger parts of Africa and relations that are more specific for individuals and research clusters and have in general a limited duration. In fact when we look back to the history of the ASC this balance has been the practice of research collaboration from the 1980ies. Next to institutional relations there has always been room for relationships between researchers from the ASC and institutes in the countries in which they worked.

The so-called structural relationships of the ASC with partners in Africa, meaning long-term collaboration, with specific countries and institutes, covering a broad range of activities from research to capacity building, became a too narrow focus for the ASC. It led to the neglect of many other interesting research themes, countries and partners and did not fit well the ambition of the ASC to be a leading, global research center in African Studies. So the scope was broadened, but the drive and inspiration to engage in true research partnership with colleagues in Africa remained.

With the tides of thinking about partnerships in the academia and in policy circles also the ASC perception of partnerships changed into an endeavour of reciprocity, where agenda's of collaboration are determined by interaction with African defined research interests.

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