

ON DOCUMENTING AFRICA IN THE NETHERLANDS

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1. INTRODUCTION

2. DUTCH AFRICA COLLECTIONS

2.1. Library collections

- Royal Tropical Institute, KIT
- Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa, NiZA
- South Africa House

2.2. Mission and museum collections

- Afrika Centrum Cadier en Keer
- Afrika Museum Berg en Dal

3. AFRIKA-STUDIECENTRUM

3.1. Origins and objectives

3.2. Research programme

3.3. Library, Documentation and Information Department

4. ACCESS TO AFRICAN STUDIES RESOURCES

4.1. ASC OPAC

4.2. Partnership with commercial publishers

4.3. Cooperation

5. THE PHYSICAL AND THE VIRTUAL

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost ten years ago to the day I gave a talk at SCOLMA's 1992 annual general meeting on African documentation in the Netherlands, and possibilities for European cooperation. My talk focused on the Afrika-Studiecentrum (ASC) in Leiden and the work of the Library and Documentation Department. This talk, too, will focus on the Afrika-Studiecentrum. As the only research and documentation centre in the Netherlands devoted exclusively to Africa, the Afrika-Studiecentrum plays a pivotal role in Dutch African Studies and, as in 1992, I happen to work there, so it is what I know best. I would like to tell you something about the Afrika Studiecentrum's origins and objectives, its research programme and the work of the Library, Documentation and Information Department. I will say a bit about the library collection and acquisitions policy and go into somewhat more detail on a number of the activities we have undertaken over the past years to facilitate national and international access to African Studies resources, through the development of the ASC OPAC, through partnerships with commercial publishers, and through cooperation with other Africana libraries and documentation services. However, before moving on to talk about the ASC, I would first briefly like to describe a few of the other collections on Africa which exist in the Netherlands. This is no more than a quick bird's-eye view and is no way meant to be comprehensive.

2. DUTCH AFRICA COLLECTIONS

The library of the KIT, the [Royal Tropical Institute](#) in Amsterdam, with some 250,000 books and 4,500 current journals, focuses on diverse subjects in the field of international cooperation and development. It covers all developing countries, not just those in Africa. The library has UN depository status. KIT Library and Information Services produce special information products, such as CD-ROMs, databases, and resource books, on a number of themes – Sexual and Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS, Gender and Women, and Agriculture and the Environment. An explicit aim is to contribute to the capacity building and institutional development of information services in developing countries.

NiZA, [Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa](#), also in Amsterdam, was formed in 1997 when three anti-apartheid organisations, the Holland Committee on Southern Africa, the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Eduardo Mondlane Foundation, merged. This activist background is reflected in the library's collection, which includes press cuttings, grey literature and posters. The library provides a basis for NiZA's activities to promote democracy in southern Africa, but is also open to the general public.

The library at [South Africa House](#) in Amsterdam has a collection of 37,000 books, of which some 10,000 were published before 1945. Focus points are South African language and literature, history, politics, art, theology and economy. The collection of South African literature is the largest in Europe, and is complemented by a collection of cuttings of literary reviews from South African newspapers. The library is open to all, but borrowing is restricted to members of the Dutch South African Association.

These collections are probably among the most important Africa collections in the Netherlands and reflect Dutch involvement in development cooperation and in South Africa and the historical links with that country. There are also a number of mission and museum collections, such as the [Afrika Centrum](#) in Cadier en Keer, founded by the Society of African Missions, and the [Afrika Museum](#) in Berg en Dal, with its large outdoor area.

3. AFRIKA-STUDIECENTRUM

3.1. Origins and objectives

The [Afrika-Studiecentrum](#) began as the Leiden branch of the Afrika-Instituut, a commercially-oriented institute established in Rotterdam in 1946 with the aim of promoting Dutch trade with Africa. In 1957 it split from its parent institution and became an independent foundation. From its beginnings as a small documentation centre with a staff barely exceeding 10, it has now grown into a relatively large interuniversity institute with a staff of around 40. There are some 20 research workers and 13 library and documentation staff, in the equivalent of just over 9 full-time posts.

The objectives of the ASC are to promote and undertake scientific research on Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular in the field of the social sciences and the humanities, to function as a national centre in the field of African Studies and contribute to education and teaching in these fields, and to promote the dissemination of knowledge and an understanding of African societies in the wider public sphere.

The ASC strives to achieve its objectives through its research programme and the activities of the Library, Documentation and Information Department. It has an active visiting fellow programme, with priority given to scholars from African universities, and regularly organizes seminars and conferences. Its publications include an ASC research series, ASC research reports, working papers, and a yearbook.

The two pillars of the Afrika-Studiecentrum are research and documentation.

3.2. Research programme

Research at the Centre is organised in theme groups. Every four or five years the Centre's research programme is reviewed and new theme groups are formed. A new research programme for the period 2002-2006 was launched in May 2002, together with three new theme groups: Culture, Politics and Inequality, focusing on the political, economic and social dynamics which lead to new formations of political power and identity; Economy, Ecology and Exclusion, focusing on economic and ecological dynamics in relation to processes of exclusion and poverty; and Agency in Africa, focusing on local actors' perceptions, ideas and emotions in understanding sociocultural transformation in time and space. In addition to the three theme groups, there are two working groups, one focusing on networks of uncertainty and the dynamics of conflict and violence, the other on the dynamics of urban areas.

Dutch social science research on Africa also takes place in a number of graduate schools and institutions for higher education for development. In general it is closely linked to a wide array of policy and development issues and is mainly rural in orientation. The four most important themes are natural resource management, agriculture, sustainable development and livelihood strategies. Other themes include politics, religion and history, social differentiation and transformation processes, as they relate to gender, health care, and culture. Emerging themes include population mobility, conflict, climate change, and the impact of HIV/AIDS.¹ It is possible to get an idea of Dutch Africa research by looking at [Africanists in the Netherlands](#), a database of some 500 academics in the Netherlands with expertise on Africa. The database can be searched by African country, Dutch institute, thematically or alphabetically. It is a joint project of the Afrika-Studiecentrum, the Netherlands African Studies Association, NiZA, and NUFFIC, Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education-CIRAN, Centre for International Research and Advisory Networks.

3.3. Library, Documentation and Information Department

The ASC library aims to be both a repository of and a ‘gateway’ to information on Africa, in whatever form. It is the only Dutch library devoted exclusively to Africa and has a depository function for Africana material.

In contrast to ASC research, which covers only Sub-Saharan Africa, the ASC collection covers the entire continent and associated islands. It is a general collection in the field of the social sciences and the humanities. Focal points are socio-economic and political developments, government, law and constitutional development, history, religion, anthropology, women’s studies, education, and literature. Most of the material in the collection has been published since 1945. Roughly half, maybe a little more, is in English, about a third is in French, and most of the remainder is divided between Dutch and German. There is also a limited amount of material available in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Afrikaans.



¹ Dorinde Brands, *Trends in Africanist (Academic) Research in the Netherlands*, Leiden, Afrika-Studiecentrum, 2001. See also: J. Abbink, African Studies in the Netherlands. In: *African Research and Documentation*, no. 87 (2001), p. 3-10, based on a paper originally published in ‘Africa Forum’ on H-Africa, 13 March 2001.

Current holdings total approximately 60,000 books and brochures and 2,000 periodical titles, of which just under 500 are current subscriptions. Roughly 40 percent of the periodicals are published in Africa. There are also some 25,000 microfiches of development plans and national newspapers, and 300 videos.

Some 2,000 new books are added to the collection each year. Acquisitions policy is aimed at maintaining and further expanding the present collection along the lines of a broad-based general Africa collection. It is largely independent and is influenced by the priorities of the research groups only to the extent that suggestions made by the ASC research staff for new acquisitions are usually met.

In recent years there have been some slight shifts in emphasis. More attention has been paid to the acquisition of materials for the general public, for example travel guides. Audiovisual materials have formed a new focal point and the active acquisition of new videos was resumed last year. Videos come mainly from Europe and Africa, mostly Zimbabwe (Media for Development Trust) and South Africa. The criteria for acquisitions policy in general apply equally to videos. There is a preference for documentaries.

Serials subscriptions have been under review, especially since the percentage of the budget spent on serials has risen from around 40 percent to 50-60 percent, and a number of development related journals in particular have been discontinued. Selection is based on criteria such as the Africa contents of a journal, availability in other libraries in the Netherlands, online availability of tables of contents, and price, as well as discussions on the coordination of serials collection development with the Royal Tropical Institute and NiZA. We try to subscribe to as many journals published in Africa as possible, although it is not always easy to obtain them. We have also noted an increasing imbalance in the number of English compared with French-language journals and this is something we would like to check.

Our policy on electronic resources is still in the early stages and many complicated issues related to questions of linking, user interface and finance still have to be tackled. At the moment, the ASC website contains a list of free online journals specifically relevant for Africa. The ASC library is also fortunate in having direct online access to more than [1,000 electronic journals](#) from Elsevier's Science Direct database which Leiden University Library has under license.

4. ACCESS TO AFRICAN STUDIES RESOURCES

I would now like to say something about activities which have been undertaken to facilitate national and international access to African Studies resources, through the development of access to the ASC library collection, through partnerships with commercial publishers, and through cooperation with other Africana libraries and documentation services.

4.1. ASC OPAC

Subject access to all the library's materials, books, journals and videos is through the [OPAC](#), which runs under OCLC Pica. Since the physical arrangement of books in the stacks is sequential, more or less according to date of acquisition, the OPAC also provides for subject browsing. The OPAC has been internationally available through the Internet since 1997, initially via Telnet, since 1999 in a web version. Since the conversion of the card catalogue into electronic form in 1999-2000 the OPAC now provides access to the entire ASC collection.

The ASC OPAC is rather special in that it contains not only entries for books, journals and, since recently, videos, but also for journal articles and chapters in edited works. Of the total of approximately 126,000 entries, just over half are articles. The ASC OPAC is more of an African Studies database than a catalogue, with the added advantage that everything is available in the library itself. A further distinguishing feature is the inclusion of abstracts. For a long time almost all entries were accompanied by an in-depth informative abstract in the language of the original. Since the mid-1990s, however, abstracting has become increasingly selective. Since 1998 articles on North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Western Sahara) are still catalogued and indexed but no longer abstracted. Since 2000 books are no longer abstracted, with the exception of edited works and ASC publications.

A complex of factors has meant that selection criteria for abstracting have had to be sharpened. Backlogs throughout the 1990s as a result of increasing numbers of publications and a structural increase in the budget for acquisitions in 1990; internal organisational changes as the head of the department has become increasingly involved in management and a number of tasks have devolved to the documentalists, most recently responsibility for acquisitions policy and collection development; the documentalists' involvement in a number of projects to promote electronic access, such as the retroconversion of the card catalogue and the continuing development of the ASC web site and the ASC OPAC; and a diversification of the documentalists' activities to include the monitoring of electronic resources and the development of new bibliographical tools, such as [Web dossiers](#) and, on a more incidental basis, thematic bibliographies, such as that produced in collaboration with a member of the ASC research staff on the problems of dry areas in the Sahel.²

In an effort to reduce the documentalists' workload we have explored the possibility of using or reproducing abstracts included in journals or available in TOCs. Of the 250 journals we documented in 1998, 80 contained abstracts. In ten cases abstracts were consistently included and met the criteria we have with regard to language, length and contents. In 40 cases abstracts could be partly used. Unfortunately, however, in many cases publishers have refused our requests for permission to reproduce abstracts. Moreover, the majority of journals we abstract and index still do not include abstracts. Selection criteria for abstracting may have to be further sharpened and future abstracting policy is currently under discussion.

² *Bibliographie sur la gestion de l'environnement et le développement dans le Sahel ouest-africain = Bibliography on the Management of the Environment and Development in the West-African Sahel, 1985-1999*, also published as vol. 8 of the [Electronic Journal of Africana Bibliography](#).

Another OPAC-related project which we hope will facilitate access to ASC resources and which is currently in progress involves the construction of an African studies thesaurus and the conversion of the library's UDC codes into descriptors to provide a word-based and more user-friendly subject indexing system. This project is proving to be just as complex and difficult as we had envisaged but hopefully it will be completed and implemented in the course of next year.

4.2. Partnership with commercial publishers

Since 1968, the abstracts of book and journal articles documented for inclusion in the catalogue have been published so that they would be available not just to library users but also to a wider public, and as a tool for current awareness. *Documentatieblad* – which is simply the Dutch word for documentation journal or magazine – was an in-house publication. Most of the subscribers were in the Netherlands. In order to improve marketing and distribution it was relaunched in 1994 as *African Studies Abstracts* and publication was taken over by Hans Zell Publishers, subsequently by Bowker-Saur and currently by K.G. Saur in Munich.



The move to a commercial publisher was a radical break with the past. Inevitably there was a sharp increase in price. An annual subscription which had previously cost roughly £11 now costs £40 for individuals and £80 for institutions. Moreover, this came at a time when trading conditions for serials publications were already difficult. It is perhaps hardly surprising that there was a drop in the total number of paid-up subscriptions, a drop that was especially noticeable among subscribers in the Netherlands and among individual subscribers (a partially overlapping group). At the same time, there was also a modest pattern of new subscriptions. In particular there was an increase in the number of institutional subscriptions outside the Netherlands. Most importantly, however, the new arrangement made it possible to improve the distribution of ASA in Africa. Under what is a largely recipient-request led scheme, the African Studies Centre currently takes out subscriptions for some 100 academic libraries and organisations in Africa, excluding South Africa. These subscriptions are made available by the publisher at a 50 percent discount. A questionnaire survey in 1998 among the African recipients, to which there was an almost 60 percent response, indicated that *African Studies Abstracts* was greatly appreciated and much used for research.

We have benefited from publishers' expertise in marketing and distribution and the money previously used to cover the journal's costs of production is now used to pay for subscriptions for African libraries and organisations. At the same time we have not had to compromise free access to the ASC OPAC. Obviously we are also aware of the problems created by annual subscription rate increases and the limitations of library acquisitions budgets. When ASA went commercial, we were criticised by some for playing into the hands of commercial publishers interested only in making a profit. And in at least one case we were told in no uncertain terms that it was not up to libraries in the West to subsidise the distribution of publications in Africa.



Following on our first experience with commercial publishing, in 1998 agreement was reached with [NISC](#), National Inquiry Services Centre, in South Africa, to include the ASC library database in NISC African Studies, on CD-ROM and online as Biblioline. NISC African Studies is an anthology of 17 different sources, including the library catalogue of SOAS, the IBISCUS database of titles on development in francophone Africa, factual information on Business and Industry, and a database of Swiss theses and dissertations. According to Margaret Crampton of NISC, 6.6 percent are duplicate records.

While our experience with commercial publishers has been mostly positive, it should be noted that the interests of publishers and providers of bibliographical services need not always run parallel. Thus, for example, from the point of view of the Africanist community there is a good case to be made for merging existing bibliographical services. In 1998 Mette Shayne, at the time francophonic African bibliographer at Northwestern University Library, compared the coverage of some [1800 journals](#) by five African Studies indexing services – *Africa Bibliography* (International African Institute), *International African Bibliography* (compiled and edited by David Hall), *African Studies Abstracts* (ASC), *Quarterly Index to Periodical Literature, Eastern and Southern Africa* (Library of Congress Office Nairobi) and *Index of African Social Science Periodical Articles* (Codesria). Her comparison indicated that only 296 journals, that is under 20 percent, were indexed by more than one service. Almost one third of these (85) were indexed by at least three services. This suggests a concentration of indexing effort on a fairly limited number of journals, mostly core Africanist and development studies journals, and that a merger of even two services

would considerably increase the extent of coverage. From a publisher's point of view, however, merging separate Africanist bibliographical services is interesting only if the total number of subscribers to the new service is at least the same as the total number of subscribers to the individual services combined, assuming that doubling or tripling subscription rates is not an option.

4.3. Cooperation

This example suggests that cooperation among bibliographical services in African Studies would have the potential to improve access by extending coverage, further minimizing overlap and reducing the workload of those involved in indexing and abstracting. Such cooperation could involve the exchange of titles/abstracts, agreements on who covers what type of materials or which journals, or the development of a combined bibliographical service, for example through a joint production or through linking databases. With these possibilities in mind there have been discussions over the past four or five years with the Africana Librarians Council in the United States in conjunction with the Library of Congress Nairobi office, IBISCUS in France, before it was dissolved last year, and the International African Institute in London.

In spite of a considerable amount of time and effort and the best of intentions on all sides, there have unfortunately been few concrete results as yet. Perhaps the best way forward lies in further exploration of the possibilities of developing shared access to different Africanist resource bases, with everyone retaining control over their own product, and then in time moving on from shared access towards shared responsibilities.

5. THE PHYSICAL AND THE VIRTUAL

Looking back over the past ten years, developments in information and communication technology and the exponential growth of the Internet, especially the World Wide Web, have brought with them radical changes to the world of library and documentation in general. The emphasis is increasingly not so much on actual physical collections, as on (remote) access and user information needs.

In this context I would briefly like to mention the [Africaserver](#), an Internet platform for communication with Africa which took off in Amsterdam in November 1997. It presents information from and about Africa, as well as information on Africa-related activities in the Netherlands, and is meant for a broad audience. There are modules on Virtual Exhibitions, Music & Dance, Institutions in the Netherlands, Arts and Culture, to mention a few. The module on [Africans in Holland](#) lists 800 Africans and African organisations in the Netherlands. It can be searched by African region or country, by Dutch city, thematically or alphabetically.

In the ASC library the website is increasingly seen as the platform for providing services and access to information, from lists of periodicals and acquisitions lists, to bibliographies, literature lists, electronic resources and documents. The question arises as to the future of bibliographical products in print. Can print and electronic

versions coexist? Opinions differ. The African Studies Centre decided early this year not to wait for a definitive answer but to discontinue *African Studies Abstracts* in print form. This year will be the last volume. Some form of printed information service may still be produced specifically for distribution in Africa, but what and how are still under discussion.

In 1999 the ASC Library and Documentation Department changed its name to Library, Documentation and Information, reflecting a changing emphasis in policy priorities and the aim to develop the library into the leading centre of information on Africa in the Netherlands. Last year the library was refurbished. From predominantly grey it has become a warm russet red and it is now a much more pleasant place to be. Dominating the current discussion is the end user, customer, client, reader, whatever you like to call him or her. The key question is what does s/he want?



A user survey conducted in the ASC library in 1996 indicated that users want free, immediate and easy access to information. They are reluctant to pay and want to be able to have the material they are looking for in hand straight away, even suggesting that the library should purchase several copies of publications for which there is a heavy demand so that at least one is always immediately available. Remote access to the OPAC and a user-friendly OPAC interface are important. The retroconversion of the ASC card catalogue met an express wish on the part of users for electronic access to the entire collection. In the context of ICT developments, 24-hour per day access to information is increasingly expected. We are faced with difficult and challenging choices as we wonder how best to meet the many and varied information needs of the Africanist scientific community with its diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and those of non-academics, journalists, lawyers and members of the general public interested in Africa.

I welcome your views.

Comments, questions, suggestions, ideas, can all be sent to Marlene van Doorn doorn@fsw.leidenuniv.nl