

African Trajectories: Past Dependencies and New Directions

2025-2029 ASCL Research Programme

Introduction

The African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL) is an interfaculty institute of Leiden University with a mandate to carry out research and disseminate knowledge related to Africa, and to maintain a library, documentation and information service on Africa. As the only multidisciplinary academic knowledge institute in the Netherlands devoted entirely to the study of Africa, it has an essential role in furthering insights from, and about Africa, both nationally and internationally, and to shed light on historical, current and future societal transformations and developments in Africa, including their wider significance. This mandate and role strengthens Leiden's position as a leading national teaching and research university on geo-politics, peace and justice in the world, inequality and resilient societies, and humans in the world.

The academic research, documentation and information generated at the ASCL informs teaching about Africa and is relevant for society at large: including government¹ and policy makers, media, private sector, civil society, cultural institutions, creatives, and the general public. The ASCL, through its central position in the Leiden Africa Platform (LAP), the Netherlands Association for African Studies (NVAS) and the African Studies in Europe Group (AEGIS), plays a key role in African Studies in Leiden, the Netherlands, Europe and the world.

This document outlines the thematic orientation of our 2025-2029 research programme, the research structures and collaborations involved as well as the societal embedding and impact of our work.

1. African Trajectories: Past Dependencies and New Directions

The ASCL 2025-2029 research programme '*African Trajectories: Past Dependencies and New Directions*' extends the recognition of the prominent role of the African continent in world affairs advanced in *Strident Africa (2021-2025)*. Over the years, this role has only become more visible and pronounced. The COVID-19 pandemic first of all once more showed how interconnected the world has become, but, secondly, also laid bare persistent layered structures of inequality that contributed to large parts of the African population being hit unevenly hard by the globally rolled out measures. Though Africa has not been enormously affected in terms of the incidence and prevalence rates of the COVID-19, the pandemic had significant negative impact on various sectors of African economy notably aviation, tourism, education and health which consequently brought a serious setback in the overall growth and development in the region.

On the other hand, the consistently growing assertiveness of African leaders on the world stage has helped to create awareness of how the agency of African actors is co-shaping global interconnections – by taking position on the Russia-Ukraine and Israël-Gaza wars and in climate change mitigation, for instance, and by dismantling and reformulating connections with former

¹ Providing strategic knowledge for the Africa Strategy of the Netherlands 2023-2032.

colonial powers and the West more in general, while intensifying linkages with China, Russia, and Turkey among others.

Africa's pronounced importance stretches beyond geopolitics. Being the continent with the most youthful and fastest growing population, it is also of central demographic relevance to the world and its future course – not only by its sheer numbers, but also in terms of labour force, creativity, the number of adherents to world religions, consumer markets, etcetera. In the domain of climate change and mitigation, many African countries are among the most vulnerable to the potentially devastating effects of climate change that is predominantly the result of factors outside the continent. At the same time, Africa appears in a favourable position for leapfrogging decarbonization with the many possibilities for renewable energy. Its holding of large deposits of critical mineral resources are crucial for the global energy transition in the 21st century, yet also comes with increased risks of resource conflicts and resource grabbing. While in the Global North, official development aid budgets are shrinking, African citizens and diasporas increasingly question colonial continuities in global and national governance structures, including the international finance architecture, and push for a seat at the table and political change, both in their host and home societies.

These developments are of significance and the ASCL tasks itself to take a historical and geographically sensitive analytical and critical approach to understanding these contemporary phenomena. Such an approach brings to the fore how Africa's, African countries' and actors' current position in the world is partly shaped by history, with important interdependencies and path dependencies and variations at play. At the same time, there are also new directions to be observed, co-created by choices of African leaders, governments and populations, including diverse categories such as civil society, entrepreneurs, academia², artists and youth. Past dependencies, new directions, how these manifest themselves across localities, scale, and time; and how these are being shaped by various actors, processes and structures, all inform the future of Africa(ns) and the world at large. Taking this as the point of departure, the ASCL research programme is built around four themes that serve as the concrete sites of inquiry:

- 1) Global Reconfigurations,
- 2) Peace, Conflict and Security,
- 3) Care,
- 4) Resources and Future Economies.

² The ongoing global reconfigurations also influence on the ways in which African Studies is being taught, understood and problematized. The ASCL adopts a critical approach to (the politics of) global knowledge production, furthering the debate on decolonization.

Global Reconfigurations

We are currently witnessing important global reconfigurations that have their manifestations and effects in the political, economic, social and cultural domain. Building on a longer tradition of research within the ASCL, these reconfigurations are being studied from an Africa-based historicizing perspective, and with an emphasis on how Africans are co-shaping these developments.

Research and activities will focus on geo-political, geo-economic and geo-cultural shifts in Africa and beyond and how these are informed by local, national, and transnational dynamics, including past dependencies and connections. The question on how the current reconfigurations have been and continue to be forged by flows of people, material resources, and ideas is crucial in these enquiries. Research will among others focus on ties forged and facilitated by education and migration, transnational businesses in agriculture, infrastructure and (green) energy, cultural expressions, new communication technologies and AI, and analyses how they influence inequalities, connections and disconnections, and thus help shape the current multipolar world *from Africa*.

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Peace, Conflict and Security

Africa's global connections and the youthfulness of Africa's population come together in research on conflict on the African continent. Africa's rich endowments of natural resources have historically attracted many international parties resulting in high political and economic competition. While the accompanying opportunities raised promises of prosperity and hopes for a better future among African youth, frustrated aspirations for social mobility, access to education, the impact of natural disasters and global geo-political dynamics have fueled tensions and conflict. Political narratives and (media) expressions have contributed to these in diverse ways. More in general, religious and political motives and movements are frequently mobilised and instrumentalised in struggles over power, recognition, and resources.

Changes in conflict dynamics often have multilevel dimensions: local, national and transnational. While many conflicts have deep roots and leave deep wounds, and as such mean continuity of the past, the continuous shifts in actors, alliances, technologies and narratives and ideologies also instigate new directions of conflict. Simultaneously, the changes force us to explore how they may open new pathways towards resilience, peace and security. Looking into these questions from a perspective grounded in the varied local, national, and regional lived realities in Africa, offers opportunities to contribute to these explorations in significant ways.

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Care

This field of inquiry emphasizes practices, politics, and cultures of care and taking responsibility in the domains of cultural heritage, health and the environment.

Preservation of existing and creation of new heritage in language, literature, local culturally embedded knowledge and architecture is an important practice of care linking the past to the future. Research activities in this field of inquiry include archival research, ethnography of intangible (i.e. oral traditions), tangible (vernacular texts) and ephemeral forms (i.e. pamphlets) of knowledge production in 20th century Africa as well as the historical, linguistic and educational perspectives on African (sign) languages.

The care for the health of people is another important domain of inquiry – that includes the use of new technologies in the provision of health care, care in contexts of conflict and precarity as well as epidemiological developments including local drug abuse. Research in this field advances a focus on global health beyond the bio-medical, including justice, fairness, and inclusion. The [Leiden University Network on Global Health in Africa \(LUNHA\)](#) for example advances this agenda by making visible dilemmas of living with toxic substances and sustaining livelihoods in landscapes altered by (large-scale) agricultural or mining interventions, the ‘just transition’ towards a sustainable and equitable future with Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) and exploring how global knowledge, discourses and expertise on climate change and (planetary) health ‘travel’ to Africa.

Such care for the environment also extends to the study of the use diverse forms of heritage (such as local ecological knowledge), more than human perspectives, humanitarianism and climate change as well as environmental activism– with clear links to Africa’s global reconfigurations as well as ideology, conflict, and resilience.

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Resources and Future Economies

Africa's natural resources and opportunities for economic development are at the core of current global developments. Resource extraction and (regional) market development are both rooted in past dependencies and potentially offer new directions and pathways to the future. In the years to come, population growth and climate change will contribute to an increasing pressure on land, water and mineral resources, including those needed for the green transition.

This raises important questions on the long term environmental, social and economic impact of mining and the future dynamics in resource extraction, including (air) pollution and toxicity in African mining sites and cities, as well as the interdisciplinary methodologies to understand these. Research in this field of inquiry will also study sustainable pathways to food security and the challenges and opportunities for employment through value chain development, green technology and private sector engagement, for example in transport and innovation.

The theme links back to the other lines of inquiry in its relation to questions of geo-economic and geo-political struggles and conflicts over resources, the role of youth, the (potential) role of local knowledge, among others.

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2. Research collaboration and collection development

Research under the programme is conducted in individual (externally funded) research projects, by [professorial Chairs](#), and within [ASCL Collaborative Research Groups](#) (CRGs). The CRGs are open to all ASCL staff, including PhD students³, Library and Documentation staff as well as support staff and promote strategic linkages to scholars outside ASCL. Here we make a committed effort to further collaboration with colleagues in Leiden.

Our work aligns and contributes to the Leiden University Strategic plan with its focus on strengthening connections between academic fields (interdisciplinarity), between the university and society (see next section) and within the university community in their collaboration with Africa. The ASCL hosts the Leiden University Network on Global Health in Africa (LUNHA), as part of the transversal themes of the Sectorplans, contributes to several profiling themes in Leiden University and promotes the interdisciplinary and international collaboration agenda in the Leiden Africa Platform, the Leiden University network of 200+ scholars working in and with Africa that has developed from ASCL's Leiden African Studies Association.

ASCL collaborates with the Netherlands Institute in Morocco (NIMAR) and is a co-founder and constituent partner of the LDE International Centre for Frugal Innovation (ICFI), which is part of the strategic alliance between Leiden University, Delft University of Technology and Erasmus University Rotterdam. In this context a strong collaborative relationship has been developed with [Nuvoni Innovation Research in Kenya](#).

In addition, the ASCL is a founding member and treasurer of AEGIS (Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies). The ASCL has long-term bilateral research relations with the Centre for African Studies at the University of Edinburgh and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana in Legon. In the Legon Leiden Edinburgh Academic Partnership (LLEAP) the three institutions work together on research and education.

In addition, individual ASCL staff often have longstanding links and collaboration with colleagues and institutes in Europe, Africa, and beyond.

Collection development

The Past dependencies referred to in the research programme are also reflected in the collection development that in itself narrates the history of the development of African Studies. This not only is a time lens, but provides a (re)source for the critical and reflective study of the discipline itself. It captures ways of seeing and being that now serve as valuable historic time capsules, that can be employed in both research and teaching, shaping New Directions.

Past dependencies can equally be detected in the knowledge extraction and epistemic injustices that parachute(d) many of the science and academic endeavors and discourses in the past, and even to this day.

³ Apart from the PhD research mentioned under the research themes, the ASCL hosts a diverse community of PhD candidates under the umbrella of the [Graduate Programme African Studies \(GPAS\)](#). These PhD candidates work on a wide range of topics, at times directly aligned with or in the broader context of the thematic of the ASCL research programme. These PhD students are part of the ASCL research community and contribute to its thriving and knowledge production, they work together with, and under close supervision of their ASCL supervisors, participate in the GPAS programme and often also in other ASCL activities such as seminars and CRGs.

New Directions lay in reversing this course and making way for multiple African perspectives and (local and indigenous) solutions to address pressing issues such as climate change and the green energy transition. New Directions are propelled by flows of information and centers of knowledge production that are no longer eurocentric, but increasingly multipolar. Much of the knowledge and knowledge produced is, therefore, increasingly sourced from within the African Continent. Often selected and co-created with people from host and home countries. This is the growing awareness of African agency where it's shaping its own narratives on its own terms. Such global reconfigurations should be supported by collection development, documentation and information that is reimagining both itself and its place in these narratives.

New directions can also be seen in how information and documentation are valued, viewed and assessed. In a time where mis- and disinformation are part of everyday life across the globe, information literacy and information contextualization, as well as securitization of valuable information, are becoming key strengths and assets to manage and treasure. The library is a key player in this critical (research) ecosystem.

New Directions also call for (re)new(ed) collection and valorisation of primary sources, such as archival materials, oral materials, vernacular texts and grey literature (e.g. photographs, posters, postcards and pamphlets) that were indigenously produced.

New Directions, moreover, calls for a digital and multi-medial approach in collection development and documentation: through film, social media, music (youth rap), or a hybrid combination of both, for example, film and primary (archival) sources.

3. Relevance for society

The mission of the ASCL implies close connections between quality academic research and documentation and societal engagement. Much of our work involves collaboration with non-academic stakeholders in Africa and beyond, in the conceptualisation, operationalisation, as well as the dissemination of research. Additionally, a broader set of societal stakeholders and the general public is targeted in a range of activities of the support staff and in the African library.

The ASCL distinguishes five dimensions of societal relevance:

- Agenda setting: The ASCL aims to be agenda-setting in the four core identified themes of inquiry, more generally, it considers it as one of its important tasks to advocate for more recognition of, and a more prominent and larger role for African partners and African knowledge in academic, political, and other societal contexts: this includes amongst others the promotion of equal partnerships in teaching and research collaborations, the advancement of certain research themes and the easing of administrative hurdles towards participation of African students in Leiden, including language tests etc.
- Through its contributions to teaching programmes⁴ in African Studies at Leiden University the ASCL is also actively involving in educating the next generation of Africanists. The four themes of inquiry inform the content of the curricula and educational modules in which the ASCL is involved. These reflect both historical and contemporary developments on the African continent, broader shifts in global scholarship as well as global challenges (climate change, energy demands, food security, migration, etc.), decolonization discourses and a growing recognition of Africa's agency in shaping its own narratives. In this, adopting an interdisciplinary lens continues to be indispensable for understanding the continent in its full complexity, moving beyond monolithic depictions to a more nuanced, intersectional analysis. And last but not least, technology and teaching innovation increasingly plays a role in reshaping African Studies education at Leiden University and the ASCL. This includes online platforms, digitized archives, virtual collaborations, student conferences, student research projects, and (the development of) field schools (Ghana, Morocco) and a thesis lab (Kenya). Digital humanities is empowering students and scholars on the continent and in the diaspora to participate in knowledge production more equitably. The ASCL will continue and widen its efforts to introduce and make use of technologies that allow its educational contributions to become more inclusive and equitable. This will progressively enable students to get informed and learn about diverse knowledges being produced on the four fields of inquiry, both inside and outside the ASCL.
- Information science and knowledge dissemination: The ASCL makes knowledge on and from Africa available to different target groups and the wider public. The main aim is to create awareness, add nuance and rectify common misunderstandings. We equip policy makers, fellow academics, NGOs, the private sector, thinktanks, and other interested stakeholders in Africa, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, through knowledge sharing.

⁴ In undergraduate, master and graduate as well as professional training programmes.

- Through our cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in training, and initiatives such as INCLUDE (the Knowledge Platform on Inclusive Development Policies), we actively strive to make 'knowledge 'work' for policy-makers and practitioners'.
 - The African Library is well-placed to play a key role in the African Knowledge Network. In addition, it enhances community-building and community outreach to societal stakeholders through engaging programs and events.
 - For example through workshops, seminars, expert contributions in the media and panel discussions, websites, etc.,
- Collaboration. The ASCL collaborates with many kinds of societal partners to develop knowledge and output that is relevant for society.
 - such as Voice 4 Thought, Foundation Max van der Stoep, Graduate Research On Worldwide Challenges (GROW), Clingendael, Leidenglobal, Rijksdienst voor ondernemend Nederland (RVO), Parlement en Wetenschap, Challenge Fund for Youth employment, IDRC and ILO
 - African embassies in the Netherlands and Netherlands embassies in selected African countries
 - Advisory services
 - Universities in Africa: University of Ghana in Legon, University of Nairobi in Kenya,
- Networking and connecting: The ASCL brings people and institutions together to promote societal value.
 - The ASCL Visiting fellow programme hosts nine fellows per year. Fellows spend 3 months at the ASCL, have dedicated time for research and writing, have access to our academic resources, fully participate in and contribute to ASCLs academic and social life. Fellows give seminars at the ASCL and elsewhere, may be involved in teaching and other forms of societal engagement.
 - The collaborative research groups organize regular meetings, both internally for peer review purposes as well as externally to exchange with fellow academic colleagues as well as representatives from the diaspora, media, private sector, politics and policy.
 - The ASCL promotes the ASCL Community, a network of specialists from academia, the media, the arts, NGOs, business and/or policy making with a focus on or interest in Africa. Members are invited to participate actively, by collaborating in a research project, attending our events, informing us about new publications, helping to organize events, and sharing their expertise.