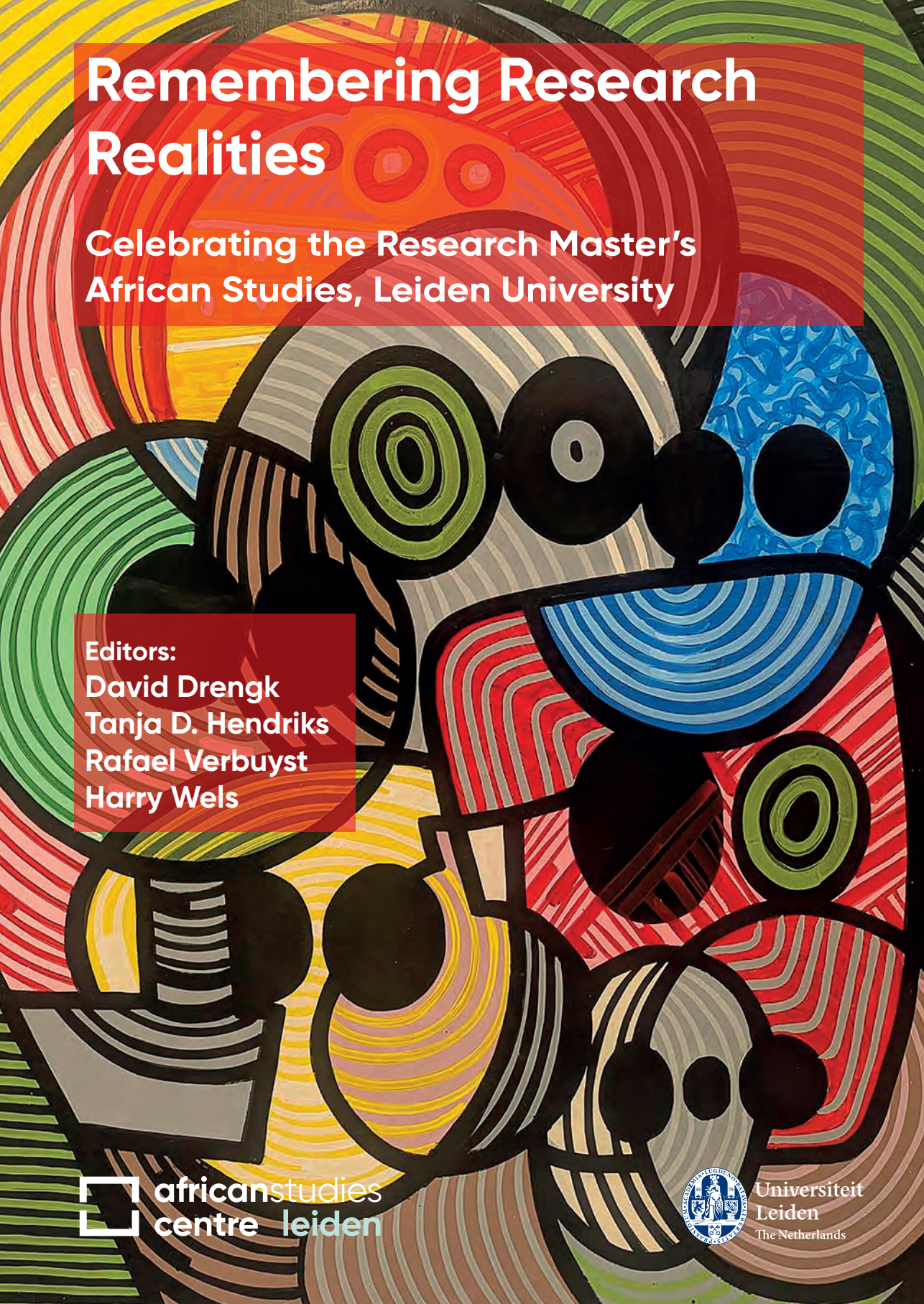

Remembering Research Realities

Celebrating the Research Master's African Studies, Leiden University

Editors:
David Drengk
Tanja D. Hendriks
Rafael Verbuyst
Harry Wels

africanstudies centre leiden

Universiteit Leiden
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African Studies Centre Leiden
African Studies Collection, vol. 86

African Studies Centre Leiden
P.O. Box 9515
2300 RA Leiden
The Netherlands
asc@asc.leidenuniv.nl
www.ascleiden.nl

Cover design: Akimoto | Gijsbert Raadgever
Interior design: Sjoukje Rienks
Cover image: Ver Ikeseh

ISSN: 1876-018x
ISBN: 978-90-5448-208-6

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Introduction: Celebrating the Research Master's African Studies, Leiden University

David Drengk, Tanja D. Hendriks, Rafael Verbuyst & Harry Wels[1]

In this edited volume, we pay tribute to the two-year Research Master's African Studies (ResMAAS) at the African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL), Leiden University, the Netherlands, a unique program that will be scrapped from September 2026 onwards. When the plans for the general budget cuts of the Faculty of Humanities were first made public in October 2024 in *Mare*, Leiden University's weekly magazine, the reasons provided were that students finished fewer course credits, that there were fewer PhDs, and that labour costs were increasing. As the title of the article suggested ('Fewer, Fewer, Fewer Humanities'), the budget cuts were considered rather draconian (Van Loosbroek, 2024). In January 2025, the initial plans were modified and softened. Among other things, African Studies and Latin American Studies were to be continued, but the research master's in these sub-disciplines would be terminated. Defending these cuts, the dean of the Faculty of Humanities described the research master's in *Mare* as '*very small* programs with *very low* student enrolments and its societal effects are *extremely limited*' (Van der Eb, 2025).[2] To us, this rationale for scrapping the ResMAAS resonates with contemporary political trends of populism, self-serving nationalism, and more extreme right-wing agendas in the Occident that are curtailing the future of knowledge production and academia, particularly in the humanities and social sciences.[3]

As ResMAAS alumni and lecturers, we deeply regret the decision to discontinue the program. We strongly oppose the characterization of the ResMAAS as insignificant. Limited enrolment rates do not necessarily result in 'extremely limited societal effects' or a negligible intellectual footprint. By way of protest, we there-

1 Authors are listed alphabetically.

2 Original quote in Dutch: 'Dat zijn *hele kleine* opleidingen met een *heel lage* instroom, waarvan het maatschappelijk effect *uitermate beperkt* is' (our emphases).

3 See, for example, how this dynamic is playing out in the USA at the time of writing (Pilkington, 2025; Santos, 2025).

fore use this edited volume to highlight the ResMAAS' academic rigour, intellectual strengths, and valuable contributions to science and society, that will be withheld from future generations. We reached out to fellow alumni, who were equally saddened by the news and wanted to join our effort. They have contributed nine individual chapters, representing the variety of high-quality ResMAAS theses over the years. With their help, we therefore aim for this book to be three things at once: a protest against, an obituary of, and a homage to the intellectual depth of the ResMAAS that has brought so many insights, and so much inspiration and joy.

We begin this introduction by providing some more background on the ResMAAS. We then reflect on our own experiences of having gone through the programme to tease out some of its core characteristics. Wels is and has been mainly involved in the ResMAAS as a lecturer, primarily on the topic of research methodologies in Africanist research. In that capacity, he had the pleasure to get to know the other editors as 'Rafael, Tanja, and David' during their ResMAAS years and followed how they fared in their PhD trajectories afterwards. Drawing on the unique strengths of the ResMAAS, we showcase not just the importance of African Studies but also the specific analytical and methodological approach to academic education that the programme embraced against a climate of neoliberal academia. Grounded in strong empirical foundations, we believe that it represents a form of knowledge production and doing science that is increasingly under threat in our contemporary world. Highlighting the contributions that the ResMAAS has produced, we end by presenting the individual chapters and their authors. As such, we aim for this collection to arouse a spirit of indignation, genuine academic interest, and perhaps a hint of nostalgia in those who read it.

The ResMAAS: A Brief Overview

The 'Research Master's African Studies' was founded in 2006 following a committed and hugely energetic effort from several staff members of the African Studies Centre (ASC), still without its current 'L', which was only added in 2016 (see below).[4] The ResMAAS started off as a very ambitious educational program in the Faculty of Humanities.[5] The enthusiasm and hopes for the program among the ASC staff were high. The ambition of the program was that it would prepare 'their' students for independent Africanist research, both theoretically and empirically, to swiftly continue with PhDs wherever they were available around the

4 This section is based on various (internal midterm) review documents of the ResMAAS between the years 2010-2021.

5 See, for example, the edited volume that was published after the first cohort graduated (De Bruijn & Merolla, 2010).

world. This includes learning how to formulate research questions, review literature, and write research proposals – necessary skills in the current neoliberal academic climate – and the teaching itself was profoundly research-led by the academic staff of the ASC.

The curriculum was intense and challenging in its pace and sheer body of work in terms of academic reading, writing essays, and presentations and discussions in class (see below). During the first year, the curriculum offered a broad spectrum of topics relating to historical, economic, social, religious, and political aspects of Africa, always based on and fully supported by ASC's broadly acknowledged, worldclass library and documentation centre. In line with the ResMAAS' primarily ethnographic orientation, the second year was devoted to six months of fieldwork, followed by writing the thesis based on that fieldwork. The Africanists at the ASC, together with members of the Centre's broader Africanist network, all shared their expert knowledge with the students in class in the first year and their research projects and fieldwork in the second year – embodying the strong connections between teaching and research that exist within the ASC. The ResMAAS is unique in continental Europe for the interdisciplinary range of subjects offered and its incorporation of long-term fieldwork in Africa as part of its programme.[6] In part, this led to the official accreditation of the ResMAAS in 2010 by the NVAO (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie), official CROHO[7] code '#4270'. And indeed, many ResMAAS students continued with PhD trajectories after graduation.

At the time, the ASC was still an independent research institute with a so-called 'ODA-label' ('Official Development Aid') (see also Uche, 2025). But as the popular and political support for ODA waned over the years, it was decided to turn the ASC into an interfaculty institute, with, next to the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, and the Faculty of Law adding to the interdisciplinary flavour of the ResMAAS. In 2016, the ASC and its ResMAAS became part of Leiden University and added the 'L' to its name and acronym, now officially being the 'ASCL'. The ResMAAS went along with this transition and basically kept the same structure with an intensely 'theoretical' first year and a strongly 'empirical' second year, focused on 'fieldwork'. It seems there was consensus about the ResMAAS' winning formula. Indeed, it is worth taking stock of comforting language about the ResMAAS' future just four years ago by citing

6 https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/education/study-programmes/master/african-studies-research, accessed 26 May 2025.

7 CROHO stood for 'Centraal Register Opleidingen Hoger Onderwijs', now RIO, 'Registratie Instellingen en Opleidingen'.

the 'Considerations' of the ResMAAS review by the QANU ('Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities') in 2021:

> The quality of the theses confirms that the graduates have the ability to design and implement independent research of *very good academic quality*. The theses were *innovative, relevant and original*. They embodied all elements of the research cycle: from the formulation of a research question to the output of an adequately written report that offers sufficient grounds for publication upon reworking into a suitable format. In this way, the intended learning outcomes are convincingly met, including the criteria of the additional framework for research master's programmes. The panel also concluded that the graduates *do well in the job market*, securing positions in academia and beyond. This is enhanced by the networks they have access to through the ASCL. As a result, they are well positioned in terms of their achieved skills and knowledge to continue their further career within academic research and/or the professional field (p. 23; our emphases)

According to data provided on the ASCL website, the career prospects of ResMAAS graduates are indeed not as bleak as proponents of its abolishment would like us to believe: 57% of the ResMAAS-students found a job within two months after graduation and 86% did so in academia (Universiteit Leiden, n.d.). All three ResMAAS alumni co-editing this book, are examples of the latter category, as are many of the contributing authors.[8] Others have found fitting employment outside academia, often related to the African continent in many significant ways, for example in the development industry and private sector. For all of them, the ResMAAS in Leiden remains a lasting memory and formative period in their lives, and this book is also a testimony to that.

As noted previously, for these reasons, this volume is indeed a mixture of intellect and nostalgia, reason and emotion, anger and sadness. This edited volume is personal; it is passionate and combative. Maybe this multifaceted approach seems against all odds and ideologically driven, but we suggest this is as much an intellectual endeavour. In his book *What are Universities for?* Stefan Colini (2012) challenges the neoliberal logic that undergirds utility and societal relevance narratives of academic work. Focusing specifically on the humanities and social sciences, he reminds us that it is often difficult to tell what results research will yield and since no one knows the future, even deciding what is useful can't be done convincingly ahead of time. In fact, throughout history, it is science that has pushed beyond the boundaries of what was assumed, believed, or aspired

8 Please note that we are not talking about permanent appointments here, which seem increasingly elusive as we write this text.

to in particular periods of time, by showcasing other possibilities, potentialities, and perspectives. Following Colini, we therefore argue that there are many good academic but also societal reasons to remain passionate and combative about the ResMAAS and African Studies as a discipline! If we were to list the many reasons why the geopolitical world cannot do without knowledge of the African continent and taking this seriously, we would quickly run out of space, but allow us to quote sociologist Elisio Macamo (2018, p. 8, *author's own emphasis*):

> Most of all, African Studies implies an ethical commitment. It does not imply an ethical commitment towards the poor and the wretched of the earth, to use Frantz Fanon's poignant words. It implies an ethical commitment towards knowledge, because knowledge is responsibility. *Africa is not what it is because of what it is like. Africa is what it is because of what the world is like, and vice versa.* So we study Africa to understand the world.

As we write this introduction, the world is in turmoil, from ethnic cleansing in Gaza and renewed settler-colonial intensions in Greenland, Taiwan, and Ukraine, to climate change and right-wing populists scoring electoral victories across the globe. Africa might turn out to be the nemesis of the political leaders driving these developments. It would certainly not be the first time that Africa is teaching the world important lessons (see e.g., Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). With a touch of drama, we believe that understanding Africa in the world is more important today than ever. The ResMAAS offered one such way of 'understanding'. However, how precisely do alumni recall the pursuit, creation, and implications of this understanding?

The ResMAAS relived: Our experiences as alumni

To flesh out exactly what we value in the ResMAAS, each of us alumni on the editorial team wrote a one-pager to commit our thoughts and feelings to paper. In this section, we draw out some shared themes.[9]

Looking back at what attracted us to the ResMAAS program in the first place, what stood out for all of us was the ability to conduct an extended period of fieldwork on the African continent. In an era increasingly dominated by neoliberal logics of knowledge production, programs like the ResMAAS that champion a different 'rhythm' of study and resist the standardization of 'quick-turnaround' academic outputs are becoming rare. The ResMAAS acknowledged and

9 This section includes quotes from Oumaima Derfoufi, who initially joined the editorial team but unfortunately had to step down along the way for personal reasons.

embraced uncertainty as integral to the learning process, as well as fostering a sense of responsibility for knowledge production rooted in curiosity and care – and what could in a sense be more 'uncertain' or 'risky' than fieldwork (Verbuyst & Galazka, 2023)? The program prioritized open-ended inquiry, an approach to knowledge that recognizes that meaningful understanding often emerges from taking the time to ask the right questions rather than finding immediate answers. It is for this reason that the theses produced by the program were internationally recognized as being of such high quality, and in turn, why alumni went to explore pioneering topics in the field, as the contributions to this volume evidence.

Through its hand-on and fieldwork-centred approach, the ResMAAS enabled many of us, especially those currently working in academia, to reimagine what knowledge can do, but most importantly who it can serve. Indeed, we all considered this time abroad to be one of the most formative periods of our lives. With the help of great supervisors, we learned how to 'swim' in the field and carry out our research independently. At the same time, we were never left entirely to our own devices. The ResMAAS struck the right balance. Having roughly six months' time to pursue our research in such an immersive manner is rare for a master's program, especially in the African continent, a region of the world that has historically often been ignored, misrepresented, or declared as a 'no go area'. Drengk, for example, who also completed a BA in African Studies at Leiden University, will tell you that only a fraction of history professors in Germany focus on non-European history. This is simply out of step with our age of increased global interconnectedness.

It was therefore so refreshing for him (and for us) to immerse ourselves in an environment where the study of Africa in all its diversity was at the core. For Derfoufi, the ResMAAS prompted her to question assumptions and challenge the obvious. It allowed her to grapple with her identity as Moroccan *and* African, as well as the complexities of studying African studies in Europe: 'I entered the program as an African curious about her identity and left as an Africanist proud of it.' The personal and the academic are indeed mutually constitutive. For Drengk, the discontinuation of the program feels as if his 'roots' are being taken away. We regret that others will be deprived of such foundational experiences. And here we are not just talking about intellectual exchanges, exciting and rewarding as these were, whether in the classroom or during one of the many seminars which the department organized. We are also talking about friendships. Referencing the fact that the ResMAAS cohorts often comprised of a modest number of students, Hendriks likes to speak of 'a close-knit family'. In Verbuyst's case, the ResMAAS program meant meeting the future mother of his daughter: 'where else could two

shy nerds like us have met and flirted, but in the wonderfully stuffy corridors of the ASCL library?'

The ResMAAS indeed provided a rare opportunity for people and teachers with a shared interest in Africa and from various corners of the world to meet and build long-lasting connections. This made it stand out as a pedagogical space, as well. The small-scale nature of the program was essential to this vision. With most cohorts consisting of 5 to 10 students, the ResMAAS fostered an intimate, safe learning environment that pushed everyone in the room – students and lecturers alike – to think critically. The discontinuation of the program feels more than the end of a curriculum; for many of us it is the loss of that very safe space that shaped how we came to think, to question, to listen. Wels, who was extensively involved in the teaching component, recalls many wonderfully 'heated' discussions. These were intellectually enriching as the goal of these discussions was never to 'convince' or 'compete with' one another, but to learn from each other, as well as to learn to disagree.

Ultimately then, whether through fieldwork, classroom debates, romantic dates at the ASCL library, weekly seminars, dinner table discussions, or even debates over the best Ethiopian restaurant in town, the ResMAAS became a space where we could bring together who we were both as people and as researchers. To discontinue it would mean shutting down a space that has shaped so many of us, that has challenged and expanded our perspectives in ways few other programs could. As Hendriks points out, the scrapping of the program is not just a loss for the ASCL but also for Leiden University and the global Africanist academic community.

With this edited volume, we extended an invitation to the contributors to add their own blend of nostalgia and mourning, reflecting both on what made the ResMAAS a truly unique environment and on what it has meant for their research and careers, whether in academia or elsewhere.

The Contributions: A Trip Down Memory-lane

This edited volume features nine contributions from ResMAAS alumni for whom the programme was, in one way or another, an inspiring and formative stage in their (academic) careers.

The book opens with two chapters illuminating the study of identity and positionality through the lenses of a diasporic researcher in African Studies and young women in contemporary Senegal. Rachel Dubale examines her own positionality as a

diasporic researcher within the context of African Studies, and the experience of going through the ResMAAS more specifically. Dubale situates her experiences within the broader framework of decolonizing African Studies in the West. She reflects on the trajectory of her own identity, challenging the binaries of 'insider' and 'outsider' that often continue to dominate research and identity discussions. Loes Oudenhuijsen analyses how young women navigate their same-sex intimacies in various ways across different social spaces. Oudenhuijsen clearly shows that gender is performed in relation to others and that, as ideas of masculinity and femininity evolve, gender constructs frequently become ambiguous and fluid.

Two chapters explicitly address ocean-related research in Kenya and South Africa, highlighting how the ResMAAS promotes innovative approaches and underexamined topics in African Studies. Indy Koster examines the intricate relationship between a coastal community in Shimoni, Kenya, and its surrounding reef. Developing a creative and sometimes challenging methodological approach, Koster literally takes the reader underwater, analysing the connection between people and the sea. Although he also addresses an ocean-related research topic, David Drengk mostly remains above water, exploring the history of surfing on South Africa's Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape Province from the 1960s to 1994. Using ideas of 'soul surfing' he sheds light on an underrepresented segment of South African surfing history. Drengk investigates the surfing aspirations of a young generation of adventurous surfing pioneers and examines their surf explorations along the Wild Coast against the backdrop of South Africa's segregationist apartheid past.

Tikam Liese Sall examines the history and geography high school curriculum in Senegal, posing intriguing questions about what kind of modernity is concealed within such curricula and the intentions they carry. A Eurocentric worldview, which is uncritical of Western hegemony in education, presents a significant challenge in liberating high school curricula in Senegal from its colonial past.

Felix Kram and Maurice Hutton share their insights into a specific biographical labour history of Sierra Leone in the nineteenth century and the evolving debate about political legitimacy in postcolonial Malawi after 1964, respectively. Kram traces the development of trade unions and presents a labour history of Sierra Leone through the lens of trade union organisation in Freetown, using the examples of two central figures within the labour movement at the time: S.H.A. Case and J.T. Ojukutu-Macauley. Kram argues that the lives of Case and Ojukutu-Macauley illustrate how labour organisation intertwined with artisans' aspirations to join the colony's white-collar elite. In doing so, his research problematizes class consciousness and provides insights into the social relationships formed by artisan labour organisers in the early colonial period. Maurice Hutton analyses how

political legitimacy was constructed in Malawi's urban public sphere after the country overcame thirty years of one-party rule under the leadership of Kamuzu Banda. Engaging with newspaper articles, radio shows, social media discourse, and interviews, Hutton highlights the most influential voices in the urban public sphere and the ideas about political legitimacy that these voices have created in Malawi after 1994.

The last two contributions provide reflections regarding the perception of Africa in the world and offer a redefinition of the boundaries of African Studies as a discipline. Bert van Pinxteren takes a more quantitative approach to African Studies. His chapter starts by critiquing, based on a de-colonial perspective, the idea that 'the West' could present Africa with a cultural model of how to develop economically. Van Pinxteren argues, based on analysing two extensive quantitative datasets, the World Value Survey and Geert Hofstede's worldwide cultural dimensions, that it is actually this cultural example that the West suggests for Africa that restricts its economic development, as it creates and leaves a lack of cultural and economic self-determination.

Tycho van der Hoog reflects on his experiences in the ResMAAS program, illustrating how it fostered the conditions for serendipity through extended fieldwork and slow research. As Van der Hoog explores, serendipity – an unexpected fortunate finding – is a crucial part of knowledge production, which cannot be seen as a straightforward process. He emphasises the creation of innovative scholarship within the program, which ultimately helped redefine the boundaries of African Studies.

The book concludes with a postscript by Emeritus Professor Lungisile Ntsebeza from Cape Town, who illuminates the far-reaching challenges within interdisciplinary fields like African Studies and underscores the appeal of study programs such as the ResMAAS in Leiden. Drawing from his extensive experiences as a professor and director at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, Ntsebeza collaborates with the book's editors and contributors, all of whom convey their disbelief and frustration over the termination of the ResMAAS, alongside their admiration for a program that has deeply influenced their individual journeys.

We wish to conclude our introduction with a few words about the cover. Not only did the ResMAAS encompass a diverse range of disciplines traditionally associated with the humanities but, as previously mentioned, its students also came from various academic backgrounds. As editors, we felt it was only fitting to involve our former fellow student, Ver Ikeseh, in this book project. He is a Nigerian-born

visual artist and researcher currently based in the US, whose practice engages with issues of identity, belonging, and cultural memory. In 2016, he pursued his MA in Leiden, where he researched Tiv child arts. He is currently continuing his studies in the United States and is an MFA candidate at James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA. His interdisciplinary practice combines painting, collage, and installation. His art reflects personal and communal histories, frequently exploring the intricacies of migration and transnational experiences. With his 920 Project, he has painted over 150 public murals across various continents, about 20 of which are in the US. In this edited volume, Ver contributes by creating the artwork for the cover image under the title 'Another Family' (2023). Rooted in the theme of belonging, this work presents abstract human figures that appear fused into one another, with bold lines and saturated colours reinforcing their unity. Created as part of a series exploring kinship and identity, the piece becomes an allegory for the ASCL ResMAAS cohorts: individuals from different backgrounds forming an academic and emotional family. It highlights the communal bonds fostered by the program and what is lost with its dissolution.

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2

‘On My Otherness’

Rachel Dubale

Introduction

Leiden, the Netherlands, 2021.

In a small room on the ground floor of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, five women gather for a brainstorming session.

As students of the Research Master’s in African Studies, they are tasked with choosing a topic for a group assignment in their Reflexivity and Methodologies in Africanist Research course, which is already in its fourth week, or so I recall.
One of them speaks first. ‘I would be interested in delving into something like religion,’ she asserts.

‘I wouldn’t mind,’ another agrees, while a third one writes down religion dynamics on the whiteboard. ‘What about gender and womanhood? Perhaps we could link them.’

Minutes pass as the discussion unfolds, revealing how difficult it is to settle on a single theme given the range of interests they share. ‘To avoid losing time over finding a shared topic,’ another interjects, ‘can we at least agree that we’re interested in identity, in some way?’

The room buzzes with affirmations, until the last member – who has remained silent until now – finally speaks.

‘I am not interested in identity.’

Lingering in my memory, this brief exchange encapsulates the very tensions this chapter seeks to explore: the ways in which identity intersect in postcolonial studies, particularly in African Studies, and how knowledge about and in Africa – the

latter referring to fieldwork – increasingly interacts with what I call the modern subaltern identity.

Founded in 1575 as a direct response to the Dutch Revolt against Spanish rule (Bremmer, 2005, p. 75), Leiden University is one of Europe's oldest institutions of higher learning, renowned for its area studies programs, which include European, North American, and Middle Eastern Studies, as well as a highly specialized Institute for Asian Studies. The university also houses world-class library collections, along with the African Studies Centre (ASC), which was initially established between 1945 and 1958 to support Dutch commercial interests in Africa. With the initial official objective of strengthening economic and cultural ties, and the mandate to serve the country's foreign policy while simultaneously promoting the scientific study of Africa (Uche, 2024), the ASC has, over the decades, transformed into the 'only multidisciplinary knowledge institute in the Netherlands devoted entirely to the study of Africa,' whose research library remains open-access (African Studies Centre Leiden, 2025). Expanding on this expertise, the university also has a bachelor's, a one-year master's, and the two-year Research Master's program in African Studies, which aim to provide students with 'in-depth knowledge about different aspects of the African continent and its peoples, while being challenged to go beyond the boundary constraints of more traditional disciplines' (Leiden University, 2025). A defining feature of the Research Master's is the mandatory six-month fieldwork in Africa or an 'African-related' setting elsewhere, a requirement that immerses students in the very contexts they study.

It was within this academic environment that my own identity, both personal and intellectual, really began to take shape. As an alumna of the Research Master's in African Studies, I now look back with some irony at the moment I met the eyes of my four peers in that small room of the faculty and confidently stated that I was *not* interested in identity – whatever significance it held for me at the time.

Now, as the Research Master's in African Studies faces cancellation due to the Dutch government's €1.2 billion education budget cuts over the next four years, I write this chapter as a tribute to the program, its staff, and the intellectual space that allowed me to interrogate and refine my understanding of identity and positionality.

The following chapter unfolds as follows: first, I lay out the conceptual framework, engaging with contemporary critiques of African Studies and postcolonial thought, with particular attention to positionality theory and the place of diaspora within it. I then trace my trajectory from student to researcher, using my fieldwork in Ethiopia as a case study. Finally, I reflect on these experiences and the way

they intersect with ongoing debates on the role of researchers both in and outside the field. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to illuminate the epistemic significance of African Studies and conducting fieldwork as a diasporic individual, one who continuously navigates the shifting terrain of insider and outsider status, while fostering further dialogue on these questions, particularly in light of the present political and global trends.

Conceptual Framework

African Studies as a discipline, particularly in the West, has been subject to ongoing scrutiny since the 1950s and 1960s, shaped by intellectual, political and social forces both within and beyond Africa (Abrahamsen, 2003; Zeleza, 2009, p.111). While a comprehensive account of these critiques would exceed the scope of this chapter, it is necessary to highlight key moments that have defined the field. In particular, this section traces its evolution from its origins in Western anthropology to contemporary debates on decoloniality, situating the question of researcher positionality within this broader historical trajectory. At the core of this discussion is the recognition that identity and knowledge production are not static but shaped by shifting global contexts, which, in turn, complicate fixed notions of 'insider' and 'outsider.'

Emerging as a province of anthropology, African Studies was initially shaped by a Eurocentric gaze that positioned Africa as an object of analysis rather than a site of knowledge production. As Trinh Minh-ha (1989) hauntingly captures, the academic discourse functioned as 'a conversation (…) of the white man with the white man about the primitive-nature men… in which "them" is silenced' (p. 65-66).

Throughout the 1960s, the field aligned itself with modernization theory, reflecting post-independence aspirations toward economic and political development (Zeleza, 2009). By the 1980s, however, modernization's linear and deterministic framework had lost credibility, giving way to counter hegemonic critiques. Notable scholars in Africa and abroad, with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) with his oeuvre *Decolonising the Mind* and Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1988) with his work *The Invention of Africa* were at the forefront in calling for an epistemological break with the past, raising what Zeleza (2009) termed the 'deconstructionist tradition' in the modern era, which drew on poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism to challenge dominant narratives (p. 127).

Postcolonial theory, particularly in its feminist iterations, further disrupted established modes of knowledge production by foregrounding the research-

er's positionality. Scholars in literature, anthropology and qualitative sociology questioned how power operates in the act of research itself, emphasizing the importance of social and geographic location in shaping both the production and reception of knowledge (Alcoff, 1991; Koinova, 2018; Njeri, 2021).

This shift led to greater scrutiny of the researcher's identity, often framed through the binary of 'insider' and 'outsider.' Insiders – those conducting research in a setting they are socially or culturally familiar with – are presumed to have privileged access to local knowledge but may also encounter resistance from research participants who expect them to share certain unspoken understandings (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Bridges, 2001). By the same token, outsiders may lack cultural familiarity but can benefit from being perceived as neutral or non-threatening, particularly in research on 'sensitive' topics and spaces (Adebayo & Njoku, 2023; Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Collet, 2008; Holmes, 2020).

As African Studies evolved, the increasing presence of African scholars and diaspora within the field disrupted its traditional subject-object dichotomy in the West. The discipline, once dominated by external interpretations of Africa, became increasingly shaped by voices from the continent and, aligned with globalization trends, its diaspora. This is when the 'them', always silenced, 'only admitted among "us" – the discussing subjects – when accompanied or introduced by "us"' (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 65-67), became the author of their own story in the West. A growing number of researchers occupy diasporic positions, often negotiating multiple cultural, national, and intellectual identities (Koinova, 2018; Vlavonou, 2023). Whether first-generation Africans born abroad or those who migrated later in life, these scholars disrupt conventional notions of academic belonging rooted in outdated Western models, as Mudimbe (1988) critically highlights, while contributing to what Zeleza (2009) describes as 'globalizing African history' while simultaneously 'contesting European appropriations of global history' (p. 132).

Yet their affiliation, whether as 'European' or 'African,' and their status as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' within these academic debates, remains unclear. The very notion of diaspora is itself contested (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007; Brubaker, 2005); popular critique revolves around the tension between Africans born abroad and first-generation Africans who return to the continent. The continuous influence of human geography on this group thus complicates the notion of diaspora, with migration flows from and to Africa, especially among first-generation individuals living in countries other than those of their parents (Koinova, 2018; Selasi, 2013). To navigate these tensions, I adopt Adamson and Demetriou's (2007) definition of diaspora as 'a social collectivity that exists across state borders and has sustained ties with a real or imagined homeland over time' (p. 497), which aligns

with broader perspectives that view diasporic identity as inherently fluid, shaped by both geographic dispersal and enduring ties to a homeland (Brubaker, 2005). The figure of the Afropolitan, as described by Selasi (2013), further encapsulates this hybridity 'belonging to no single geography, but feeling at home in many' (p. 528). However, rather than fully embracing the celebratory framing of Afropolitanism as a cultural advantage, I hereby argue that the diasporic researcher risks remaining entangled in the power structures that shape knowledge production, unless reflections like those in this chapter are meaningfully incorporated into the broader epistemic frameworks that govern it.

As diasporic scholars take on a more prominent role in African Studies, they increasingly challenge the insider/outsider binary through reflections, highlighting its limitations as a conceptual framework. Recent scholarship emphasizes that social location is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing negotiation, shaped by both the researcher and research participants (Adebayo & Njoku, 2023; Bilgen & Fábos, 2024; Vlavonou, 2023). This recognition is particularly relevant to my own positionality – both as a former African Studies student in a Western institution and as a researcher conducting fieldwork in Ethiopia. My experience underscores the ways in which diasporic scholars continuously move across epistemic, cultural, and social boundaries, neither fully 'insider' nor 'outsider,' but occupying a space of in-betweenness. In an era where calls to decolonize African Studies are gaining momentum, these positional complexities must be recognized not as obstacles, but as assets that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the field.

Research Context

The Research Master's in African Studies

Before delving into my experiences as a student and researcher in African Studies, I will first outline my research context and positionality, offering initial reflections on how identity is fragmented, specific and fluid, and how these elements shape my understanding of the field. While identity is inherently complex and multi-layered, I will not specifically delve into the issue of 'gender' here, though I recognize here that this part of my identity, being a woman, may have interacted with other social constructs.

Fieldwork, too, has undergone considerable critical revision. No longer confined to distant, bounded geographies, the field is increasingly understood as a constructed and relational space, shaped as much by institutional settings and epistemic encounters as by location (Bilgen & Fábos, 2024). In this light, one could argue that my fieldwork began well before I set foot in Ethiopia; that it took shape

within the very academic spaces where knowledge about Africa is framed, and, at times, contested.

This chapter follows my trajectory as Research Master's student in African Studies at Leiden University, where I was enrolled from September 2021 to August 2023, with Ethiopia serving as the core fieldwork site for this chapter, yet the boundaries of the field remain open, stretching from classrooms and seminar rooms in Europe to interviews and observations in Addis Ababa and beyond.

The 2021-2023 cohort of Research Master's students at Leiden was small, consisting of only five students. However, it is precisely this small size that the program takes pride in as it 'ensures that you have plenty of direct contact with your lecturers and a high level of guidance and support throughout your studies' (Leiden University, 2025). The cohort included individuals identifying as White and Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), with diverse national backgrounds – Dutch, German/Guinea-Bissauan, Scottish – along with myself, Italian/Ethiopian.

To understand the research context of this chapter – the 'fieldwork' – it is important to elaborate on the latter aspect of my identity. I was born and raised part of my life in Italy to Ethiopian parents who maintained strong and enduring connections to their homeland, particularly Addis Ababa; most of my immediate family (uncles, aunts, cousins) still reside there, and the close ties my parents kept with Ethiopia were passed down to me and, as I have grown older, have become an essential part of my identity that I cherish and want to nurture. I spent many summer months in Ethiopia with my extended family, traveling there regularly since I was one year old, and this continuous exposure to Ethiopian culture, besides my mother's devotion to teaching me about the culture, enabled me to develop several formal ties to the country, including a fairly good command of Amharic.

Ethiopia

Throughout my academic journey, I have had the opportunity to live and study in various parts of the world – Argentina, France, the Netherlands – and, as part of the Research Master's program, Ethiopia.

As outlined in the Introduction, part of the Research Master's program involves students spending time in Africa or an 'African-related' setting to conduct an independent research project. As part of this requirement, I seized the opportunity to spend six months conducting fieldwork in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from September 2022 to March 2023. My research thesis focused on the de- and re-construction of low-income people's social capital amid urban changes in the capital

– a topic directly influenced by my paternal family's experience of house demolition and evictions in 2010 due to large-scale development in Ethiopia's capital, which per se provoked broader reflections on belonging, identity, and 'homeplace' in my research project.

While Jemo One Condominium, the relocation site for low-income residents, served as the micro-level research context in my project, I use Ethiopia here as one of the 'rooted place' of my identity and thus the broader research context to explore diasporic positionality. This does not exclude Jemo One from the case studies in this chapter, but framing my positionality as connected to belonging at the 'macro' level – Italy, Ethiopia – helps avoid fragmenting the analysis at the micro-level. Because neighbourhoods carry social and economic meanings – reflecting differences in wealth, access to resources, infrastructure and class dynamics – a detailed comparison between my neighbourhood in Bologna and my paternal family's former location in Kirkos, Addis Ababa, would risk overcomplicating this chapter and distracting from its broader focus on identity. While such comparisons raise important questions about belonging and place, they are better suited for a more in-depth study, such as my thesis, which specifically examines meaning and the (built) environment.

In the broader framing of my research context, it is important to note that by the time I was living in Ethiopia, the country was still embroiled in an intra-ethnic conflict, initially concentrated in the Tigray region but soon spreading to other parts of the country, resulting in significant loss of life. While Addis Ababa itself was not considered a conflict zone – classified as 'yellow' by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time – everyday tensions, whether significant or minor, permeated the city, though not always directly linked to the Tigray war. During my time in Addis Ababa, I frequently witnessed tensions, with some major episodes related to a perceived coup attempt to overthrow the Holy Synod (February 2023) and disputes related to the Victory of Adwa celebration (2 March 2023), including recurrent police roadblocks and demonstrations that disrupted traffic. These incidents highlight two interconnected aspects of my research context: the complexity of doing fieldwork in a conflict area (Goodhand, 2000) and how intra-ethnic issues are deeply rooted in Ethiopia's history and present; aspects of Ethiopia that had significant implications for my identity and positionality long before I began fieldwork.

As a matter of fact, I was deeply invested in exploring a topic closely tied to my own identity during the research proposal phase, focusing on the impact of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941) on the construction of ethnic divides within the country. However, given the outbreak of the Tigray conflict in 2020,

discussing such a topic was considered problematic by several professors, who advised caution. Rather than being hesitant about the sensitivity of discussing the Italian occupation itself – an issue I will expand on later - they feared the charged nature of ethnic identity discussions in Ethiopia, which, I would argue, is much more intense in its magnitude and nature than other discussions, as aligned with Wamai's (2014) experience of doing fieldwork in Kenya where internal ethnic and political divides are deeply entrenched. As a Kenyan national from the Kikuyu ethnic group and a diasporic researcher, she faced significant challenges being perceived as partisan due to her ethnic background.

Thus, my research focus shifted, but the underlying issue of identity remains central to the narrative of this chapter and my research project as I eventually realized that moving beyond it would not be possible. A clear example of this can be found in the title of my research proposal. While living in the Netherlands and searching for an Ethiopian co-supervisor based in Ethiopia to guide me during and after my fieldwork, I had titled my research project *"Ke ennat guya wede jibochi af"* – in English 'From the armpit of a mother to the hyenas' mouth.' The title aimed to bring attention to the social, economic, and political challenges faced by those who are evicted and resettled in new areas, and the 'hyenas' mouth' was to metaphorically represent the hurdles of these relocation sites, which were often barren and uninhabited by anyone but hyenas, with a fragmented social fabric that made it difficult for low-income residents to thrive.

However, I faced considerable difficulty in identifying an Ethiopian co-supervisor. At first, I could not fully understand why this was the case, until a professor subtly suggested that my original title might be seen as politically charged. Eventually, this feedback led me to change the title to *Leaving and Moving: How to Maintain and Develop the Social Fabric in Addis Ababa's Growing Network of Neighbourhoods*.

The details of this transition are important for understanding the layered nature of my experience in defining and negotiating my identity throughout my student and researcher trajectory as they underscore the ways in which personal background, academic choices, and the political landscape intersected.

The data presented in this chapter is derived from multiple sources: my classroom experiences, fieldwork, and reflections following my fieldwork. Thus, it draws on my memory and the direct testimonies of my experiences, including field notes – marked in italics throughout the text – that I originally kept for personal purposes, and later became a valuable source of data for both my thesis and this chapter.

The Classroom

Leiden, the Netherlands, 2021.

Another session of Reflexivity and Methodologies in Africanist Research. By this point we are well into the academic year.

That day, a visiting professor – one of the many guest lecturers invited to our reflexivity and methodology classes – began discussing the challenges she faced in navigating decolonizing African Studies.

'You really don't understand,' she stated, pausing for emphasis. 'How hard it is for me to stay silent on topics I'm deeply passionate about in African Studies just because I'm White.'

Before she could elaborate, my classmate – one of the only other POC in the room – immediately interjected. 'Oh, YOU don't understand?' she asked, her laughter ringing sharp and incredulous. A few seconds passed before she added, 'You know what? I'm not engaging in this conversation.'

She turned to me, her gaze pressing for something – agreement, intervention, solidarity. At least, that's how I felt. But no words came out of my mouth.

The question of who gets to speak about Africa, and under what conditions, was a recurring theme in our program. Much ink has been spilled on the decolonization of African Studies and the academic institutions that frame it, particularly in the wake of the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement, which erupted in 2015 when South African students demanded the removal of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town (Mbembe, 2015). At Leiden, these discussions surfaced frequently, often circling around the idea of legitimate authority – who holds the epistemic right to narrate, interpret, and claim knowledge of Africa?

Yet, despite their frequency, I found myself struggling to articulate my place within them – not out of disinterest, as I affirmed in my introduction's memories, but because I was caught in a space where words failed me. Was it that these debates felt distant from my social world up until that point? Was it fear of saying the wrong thing? Or was it something else entirely?

I had never been one to shy away from difficult discussions. My decision to pursue a Master's in African Studies, shaped in no small part by my own background, and later to conduct fieldwork in Ethiopia, already suggested an engagement with

questions of identity and belonging. And yet, at moments like these, I felt neither equipped nor entitled to take a definitive stance.

To argue about who should or should not speak about Africa required a certainty that my classmates seemed to wield with ease, while I, in contrast, struggled to locate my position. At the time, I thought of myself simply as Italo-Ethiopian – Italian in my inner world, with my love for *tortellini* and my outgoing nature, Ethiopian in the way I was seen by others and my love for *kolo*. Perhaps it would have been easier to leave it at that.

> That evening, I tried to put my thoughts into words, drafting an email to the professor. I wanted to explain what I knew so far about the topic, that calls for decoloniality in African Studies were not about silencing, but about redressing long-standing epistemic imbalances. I wanted to convey why her discomfort was not the real issue, why centring her struggle risked obscuring the histories that had made these conversations necessary in the first place.
>
> I began with the words: 'If you feel badly not being able to talk about Africa, imagine how badly our (African) ancestors felt, not being able to speak about their own continent'.

I never sent it.

Ethiopia

Attempting to neatly summarize what Ethiopia, as my field site, meant for my identity is nearly impossible. However, in this section, I aim to give the reader a sense of how 'insider' and 'outsider' statuses are constantly negotiated within the diasporic experience – both as felt by the diasporic person themselves and as perceived by other researchers.

A striking example of this negotiation occurred immediately upon my arrival in Addis, one that revealed how little I truly knew about Ethiopia despite my background.

> Exhausted from the nearly day-long journey, I was lying on my parents' bed, watching TV and letting the familiarity of my new house settle in. On the screen, three people were playing a guessing game – one of those 'who am I?' games where a player must deduce the word stuck to their forehead. The guesser, a young girl, had a sticker with the word *aia* – 'donkey' in English – while she fired off questions to figure it out. At one point, she asked, 'Do I live inside the house or outside?' The other girl confidently responded, 'Inside the house.'

> I laughed. 'What the hell?' I blurted out instinctively, perplexed. How could a donkey possibly live inside a house? But within seconds, the realization struck me. This was not Europe. This was Addis. A donkey is not merely an animal but a valuable resource, and what do you do with something valuable? You keep it safe – inside your home compound.

This moment, though small, encapsulated a deeper reality: yes, I was born to Ethiopian parents; yes, I had relatives living there. But no, I had never lived in Ethiopia long enough to intuitively grasp such nuances: a donkey belongs within the house or compound because its worth dictates that it should be protected.

This experience reaffirmed what many scholars (Adebayo & Njoku, 2023; Bilgen & Fábos, 2024; Vlavonou, 2023) have pointed out: the rigid categorization of 'insider' and 'outsider' leaves little room for those, like myself, whose identities straddle multiple worlds. More importantly, I argue that such experiences are far more characteristic of diasporic researchers than of academic 'homecomers' – those who return to conduct research in a place they once called home. It is this distinction that underscores the need to assess the specificity of the diasporic lived experience during fieldwork, recognizing the complex ways in which familiarity and estrangement coexist.

Ethiopian friends in the capital would at times reaffirm their perception of my positionality, offering moments that crystallized the complexities of my in-betweenness. One such instance occurred during a walk with my friend Hermiyas.

> As we strolled through the streets, Hermiyas told me about a close friend who had been relocated from the central neighbourhood of Kazanchis to Gergi. 'Le lemat,' he said – for development projects. Then, with a wry smile, he added, 'In your neighbourhood in Italy there is no such thing as being displaced for development, is there? In the end, you live inside development.'

His remark did not deny my ability – or even my right – to speak about the topic (Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 2023). Yet, in the subtle demarcation he imposed between *us,* the Ethiopia-based people*,* and *your neighbourhood in Italy*, two things became clear to me. First, I saw Alcoff's (1991) distinction at play: I was speaking *about* others, not *for* them, positioned as an observer rather than someone who had lived Ethiopia's rapid urbanization firsthand. Second – this also marked the beginning of my reflections on fieldwork and my positionality – that while Hermiyas positioned me outside of this experience, I felt like his statement did not fully account for the layered realities of my in-betweenness. True, I had not lived this displacement on my own skin. But was it not also written into the skin of my

grandmother, my aunts and uncles, my cousins? Was it not, in that sense, deeply personal?

Bridges' (2001) haunting assertion that the insider researcher will always remain something of an outsider by virtue of becoming a researcher further resonates here. In the Ethiopian context, this paradox is compounded for diasporic researchers, those of us who return with an intimate yet estranged familiarity, navigating spaces where belonging is both assumed and contested. My exchange with Hermiyas is but one example of how the boundaries of 'insider' and 'outsider' are not fixed, but rather negotiated through daily encounters, shaped by the perceptions of others as much as by one's own sense of self. And, again, hauntingly, as Bridges (2001) mentions, perhaps a researcher takes a first, self-defining step simply by accepting the task of becoming one.

In hindsight, I recognize that during my Research Master's program – where I presented myself as an Italo-Ethiopian with strong ties to Ethiopia and was largely received as such by colleagues and professors – I insisted on positioning myself as an 'insider.' However, as Njeri (2021) argues, a researcher's positionality should also be assessed from the perspective of the research subjects.

At first glance, my positionality might easily be categorized as 'insider': I look Ethiopian, I speak Amharic, albeit with an Italian accent, suggesting that establishing networks and conducting fieldwork would be easier for me. Yet, beyond my personal connections, was I truly an insider to the communities I was researching?

Bilgen and Fábos (2024) note that researchers are often met with suspicion due to their institutional affiliations and backgrounds, which was certainly true in my case. However, they further assert that researchers may also evoke distrust because their behaviour or presence reminds participants of the historical and colonial legacies embedded in their countries (Bilgen & Fábos, 2024, p. 69).

To an extent, yes. Speaking Amharic certainly facilitated initial interactions, but as my research context indicates, simply 'looking or sounding Ethiopian' offered no real advantage in a setting where ethnic divisions were deeply entrenched.

Relocated people often felt intimidated by my presence and looking Ethiopian in a context where no one truly knew each other and where ethnicity and ethnic divide played a significant role, especially in the midst of conflict, did little to help me connect with my first respondents. Overall, my experience suggests that, in

certain contexts, appearing to be an insider does not necessarily translate into greater access.

In this regard, my Italian identity was often dismissed through humour – Ethiopians frequently joked about Italy's swift defeat at Adwa. 'We only had sticks, Italians had guns, yet we sent them back home weeping,' a friend once remarked; thus, it is safe to state here that it was my Ethiopianness that posed the greatest challenge.

> 'Who are you, really? And what do you want from me?'

Paradoxically, my experience in the field suggests that looking like an outsider was often more convenient – especially considering that being a student from the West carries connotations of status and power in the Ethiopian context. Other forms of familiarity – being recognized by the local community, chopping onions with the old ladies, playing marbles with the children – ultimately fostered greater acceptance than merely *looking* Ethiopian.

The question then arises: is this kind of intimacy truly reserved for those with Ethiopian roots, or could an external researcher, an 'outsider' gain similar access? Speculation might suggest the former, reinforcing the argument that being an insider has distinct advantages. After all, practices such as speaking Amharic with the women, knowing how to prepare *berbere*, and understanding the subtle cues embedded in tone and festivities were practices transmitted to me by my mother and parents and are arguably difficult for an outsider to acquire in a short span of time. Yet, my experience challenges the rigidity of the insider/outsider dichotomy, suggesting that positionality is constantly renegotiated in the field.

Reflecting on my own experience, I would describe my identity as a continuous oscillation between insider and outsider positions. Carter and Fenton (2010) argue that reifying any one of these identities can obscure critical insights into the dynamics of racial stratification. Looking back, I believe I had an implicit awareness of this and, without fully realizing it, sought to navigate this tension, avoiding being fixed within a singular identity.

I recall a conversation with my friend Meron, who expressed the challenges she faced in Ethiopian society, a society that is deeply community-oriented and often quick to pass judgment.

> Looking for a house in Addis, I asked for suggestions from a long-time Ethiopian friend, Meron. Meron has lived in Lideta [Addis Ababa neighbourhood] for more than three years now, and she explains to me that the good thing about her neighbourhood is that it feels like a small family, but the bad thing is that…well, it feels like a small family. A little frustrated, she explained to me that to avoid people thinking badly of her, she had to set certain limits to her actions such as not inviting too many friends home, coming home early in the evening, not going out with random guys and so on. According to her, doing the contrary would give her peers and the neighbourhood in general the reputation of a neighbour with a troublesome crowd.
>
> Meron: 'You know how it is, Ethiopian society is very community oriented…'
>
> Me: '..and getting out of the community comes at an uncomfortable price.'

The societal expectation from Meron was clear, and to deviate from these norms came at an uncomfortable price. If she ignored this judgment, the consequences were tangible – she might find herself unable to ask for a food loan during a time of financial need, or without anyone to help her when something in her home broke, or even without assistance in fetching water.

In many ways, I understood Meron's sentiments because, to some extent, I had experienced a similar pressure in my Ethiopian neighbourhood. However, the key difference was that I knew my struggle would cease the moment I boarded a plane back to Italy. Returning to my quiet, relatively judgment-free neighbourhood in Europe, I could engage with anyone I pleased, free from the watchful eyes of a tight-knit community.

Final Reflections

There were times when the people I met during my research, particularly in Jemo One Condominium, would express a profound sense of homelessness and detachment, particularly when reflecting on their move to the West. One interviewee, mistaking me for an academic homecomer, once said,

> You know the people who move abroad, to the West, and find themselves alone? That's kind of what happened to us when we came to live here in Jemo. Even the lifestyle seems like that of people living abroad: you eat for yourself; you live for yourself.

While I could relate to the experience of living abroad, that sense of loneliness he described? I could not truly understand it – not in the way he meant.

It was only after fieldwork, during the process of reflection, that I was able to untangle the deeper complexities of what I was feeling at the time. There was a certain awareness of 'privilege' that I carried with me – of having much to be grateful for, a feeling that grew even stronger in February 2023, when my thesis rooted in this research project was honoured with the Africa Thesis Award.

While I felt grateful for this privilege, I was also mindful that it did not feel entirely 'earned' in the conventional sense; it was not solely the result of personal merit but rather shaped by circumstances, perhaps even luck. There was no rational reason why I deserved to have been raised in the West, just as there is no inherent reason why others, like my relatives, should live in relocation sites or in slums. This is not to imply that one lifestyle is better than the other. As my respondents' descriptions suggested, while some viewed the West as a place of privilege, others felt it trapped them in a cycle of loneliness – a loneliness that I, too, sometimes felt.

The reason I bring this sense of unearned privilege here is to highlight yet another layer of my positionality that I had to navigate during and after my fieldwork. It serves as a reminder that identity, much like research, is not static; it is constantly shifting with the world around us.

It is safe to say that the very privilege that at times I felt burdensome was, paradoxically, the same privilege that facilitated my access to research subjects. This tension – between privilege and otherness, between insider and outsider – became central to my experience as a diasporic researcher in Ethiopia, shaping not only how I was perceived but also how I engaged with the people and the spaces I sought to understand. It forced me to confront the complexities of being both part of the story and removed from it, of being an insider in some ways, but still, fundamentally, an outsider in others.

Now, more than two years after my fieldwork in Ethiopia and over a year since earning my Research Master's in African Studies, a few realizations come to mind. First, had I been again in that classroom when we were brainstorming research topics, I would have spoken loudly about my interest in identity and engaged deeply with the discussion. Second, reflecting on the professor who expressed discomfort about, essentially, the dilemma of decolonizing African studies, I would now articulate what might be a responsible approach: one grounded in positionality theory. To speak for others is not inherently wrong – but it must

be done with self-awareness, acknowledging one's own power and privilege, and with a critical recognition of the ways in which representation can unintentionally silence or overwrite the voices of those being spoken for, as Spivak (2023) warns in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

If we are serious about decolonizing African Studies, we must move beyond mere gestures of representation or the illusion of inclusion (Mbembe, 2015). The question is not simply who speaks, but how and with what awareness. I wonder if beginning our reflections on positionality with these acknowledgments could foster a more meaningful conversation about African Studies.

Rather than seeking to justify the rationale for conducting research in this field – which, in many ways, emerged from a colonial history where knowledge production was never neutral – we might start by confronting the complexities of our own subjectivities. African Studies in the West was never the result of a detached or purely academic pursuit of knowledge; its origins are deeply embedded in colonial legacies, a history that cannot be ignored (Abrahamsen, 2003; Mbembe, 2015; Zeleza, 2009).

Had the Research Master's in African Studies not faced budget cuts, my most immediate recommendation would have been the creation of a course on positionality, one that does not simply instruct students on the ethics of representation but would position them within the very structures they seek to critique, demanding an awareness of how knowledge is shaped by their own subjectivities; it would offer a rare space where students and professors engage as interlocutors rather than as hierarchically positioned actors, a space where identity is neither an academic exercise nor a personal burden, but a site of negotiation. Yet, as the program has been reduced, this vision remains aspirational.

Still, if African Studies is to reckon with its past while charting a more equitable future, such interventions cannot remain optional. It is not only time to shift the conversation but also to push it forward. When I embarked on my Research Master's and fieldwork, questions about the purpose and legitimacy of African Studies loomed large, but they also forced me to turn inward, reflecting on my own positionality as a diasporic researcher.

As Zeleza (2009, p. 133) suggests, 'If the days when one country, one centre – or one paradigm, for that matter – dominated African studies are long gone', then surely the same must be said for how we categorize identities. In striving to account for the singularity of each person's experience, we must embrace the need for a 'modern subaltern' – an 'other' who is not merely a token or a symbol of

marginality, but a fully realized and complex subject who cannot be reduced to simplistic categories. Because this is the only *'I'* I can, thus far, potentially resonate with.

Conclusion

In examining my positionality as a diasporic researcher within the context of African Studies, this chapter seeks to challenge the binaries of 'insider' and 'outsider' that often dominate discourses on research and identity. By situating my experiences within the broader framework of decolonizing African Studies in the West and reflecting on the trajectory of my own identity, a few key insights emerge. First, I have demonstrated how my initial confusion and limited sense of self evolved over time – from being reticent to advocating for a more inclusive vision of who holds legitimate authority in the study of African Studies, to proposing a clearer understanding of my own place within the discipline. Particularly, my fieldwork in Ethiopia, where I simultaneously felt like both an outsider and an insider – at times imposed by others, at times by myself – revealed the tension of my 'otherness' and how this constant flux ultimately helped me navigate my research. In this shifting of positionalities, I believe, essentially, that we are not obliged to choose one.

Much like research itself, I then turn to the broader question of studying African Studies, which echoes what other scholars have posited – that African Studies is not a fixed or static construct, but an ongoing negotiation that constantly shifts in relation to the world around us. While the Eurocentric paradigms that once dominated African Studies in the West are no longer tenable, I argue that if we are serious about truly 'decolonizing' or 'reshaping' it, we must rethink its foundational structures. Thus, in this chapter, I propose several recommendations that hold relevance for everyone, laying on the conceptual need to create space for those whose positionalities are fluid, contradictory, and constantly shifting. At the same time, 'in the classroom' and other academic spaces, there must be opportunities for everyone to critically engage with their own positionalities. A key takeaway from this work is the need for a course on positionality, which explores the uncomfortable truths of privilege, identity, and power, while acknowledging the role of the researcher in shaping the narratives of Africa. Given the current political climate and the ongoing austerity measures affecting educational institutions both in the Netherlands and globally, what is left to ask is whether there will ever be a time when the institutional need to engage with such critical transformations will truly materialize.

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3

Young Women and the Navigation of Same-sex Intimacies in Urban Senegal: Reflections on Ethnographic Research and the Value of the Research Master's African Studies

Loes Oudenhuijsen

My first one-on-one meeting with Fama was a slightly awkward one: she was not who I thought she was. About two weeks earlier, I had been to a party for *lesbiennes*[10] with Bintou, who had introduced me to her girlfriend as we hung out on the beach before the party. She had only introduced her girlfriend as 'my wife', so I did not know her name. But because she had used my phone to call her that night, I had her number. I had only exchanged a few words with her on the beach, but I was eager to get to know her better because she was *sexy* (feminine-presenting), as opposed to all the *jump* (masculine-presenting) women I had thus far met.[11] About a week and a half later, I called her to ask if we could meet again. When I went to her place that afternoon, however, I did not recognise her. I doubted myself, because I had only seen her briefly at the party, and it had been dark. Thinking of ways to find out whether she, who was called Fama I had found out, was Bintou's girlfriend, I asked her whether she would be going to the party again with Bintou coming Friday. She said that she would not be going with her, but that she did expect to see Bintou and Khadija there. Aha, she was not Bintou's girlfriend, that was Khadija! The relief I felt for having resolved this matter soon turned into unease: who was she then, and how was I going to spend the afternoon with her? She was Khadija's friend, and they may have been at the party together, but I had not seen her there. To my distress, Fama said she hardly spoke French. So here I was with a woman

10 This was the term that interlocutors used to describe their experiences and expressions of sexuality. I italicise *lesbienne* to indicate how my interlocutors' use of the word differs from the globally circulating, Euro-American connotation of the term lesbian. *Lesbienne* refers to practices rather than to identity, and women often added "*je vis ça*" (English: I live that) when they referred to themselves as *lesbienne*.

11 *Jump* refers to a self-identification of young women who embody a certain masculinity. This masculinity is expressed through way of dress, behaviour, and social roles in relationships. This masculinity is relational, and the counterpart of *jump* are *sexy*, feminine women who similarly express their femininity through ways of dress, behaviour, and distinct social roles in relationships. Relationships are usually formed between one *jump* and one *sexy*.

whom I did not know and whom I might not be able to communicate with. I slightly panicked, wondering how I was going to make it through this afternoon. I tried anyhow, and explained to her the reason why I was in Senegal, and why I had wanted to meet with Khadija. She responded, in French, with 'I don't live the *lesbienne* life'. For a moment I was upset by this, but I soon realised that it was interesting to discuss my research with her anyway, given that she had been at the party with *lesbienne*s. She said she was a regular visitor of the party, 'but I don't live it, I don't live as a *lesbienne*. Not here in Senegal, it is too risky. Maybe if one day I leave Senegal, I could live it. But never here, never…sometimes, because of the way I dress, girls approach me and tell me that they like me. But I always tell them that I don't live it. We can be friends; I have no problem with that. I hang out with *lesbienne*s a lot.' Later that afternoon, as we sat on her bed, she walked up to her window and looked at the woman who had appeared in front of her window. 'She is pretty, really pretty…dark skinned…really pretty.'

When I met her again a couple of weeks later, we spent an afternoon with her friend Ibrahima. As he was chatting with his boyfriend in Spain, Fama turned to me and said '*kaay, fóon ma*' (English: come, kiss me). Although I knew what that meant, I pretended not to understand her, and I asked her what it meant. 'I don't know how to say it in French. It means nothing, just, you know…you can lie down on the bed and…' and she showed how she caressed her own arms. Ibrahima decided to leave us with our apparent language barrier, and started to prepare something to eat.

When I met Fama again a week later, I found her in bed, naked, with another woman. 'It's my (girl)friend.'[12] When her friend returned from the bathroom, she said something in Wolof to Fama. 'She said that you're my girlfriend', Fama said to me. 'I thought you were girlfriends?' I responded. 'No, we are two *jump*, we cannot date…I don't feel attracted to other *jump*, I prefer girls who are *sexy*.'

This is a vignette from my master's thesis that I wrote in 2018 as I concluded the Research Master's in African Studies (Oudenhuijsen, 2018). The scene is set in Dakar, Senegal, where I had travelled to for ethnographic research on young (20-35 years old) same-sex desiring women. I wanted to understand how women carved out spaces for their same-sex intimacies while they navigated a heteronormative context.

The vignette describes an encounter that I had with Fama, about three months into my fieldwork in November 2017. Fama was twenty-three years old at the

12 She said *copine* in French, which is used both to signify female friend and girlfriend. I had understood it as girlfriend at first, because of the way I found them in bed.

time, and I had met her somewhat serendipitously, as the vignette shows. The way Fama shifted from telling me that she 'did not live the *lesbienne* life' the first time we met, to asking me to kiss her on a second occasion a few weeks later, reveals three things about the way in which same-sex sexualities are understood and disclosed and that I addressed in my thesis and will address in this chapter. First, the way in which Fama initially distanced herself from same-sex practices shows the discretion with which same-sex sexualities are dealt with in Senegal. Second, the vignette shows how the research methods that we adopt inform the knowledge that we construct in and with the field. Third, from observing Fama at home with her friends, I learned how she understood the role of gender within same-sex relationships.

The objective of this chapter, then, is twofold. First, it provides an overview of the most important findings of my MA research. Second, it reflects on the lessons I learned during this research and the research master in African Studies that it was part of. I conclude with a call for the necessity of maintaining research master's programmes like African studies in Leiden as they allow students to develop skills in a wide range of research methods including ethnography. Particularly in view of current global political developments that shrink the space for civil society and higher education, and in which gender and diversity in particular are under attack, such skills and perspectives on research are very necessary.

A Senegalese Sexual Imaginary

To understand how Senegalese women negotiate space for same-sex intimacies, it is important to understand how sexuality is constructed in Senegal. In the West, sexuality has become a prime marker of one's social identity (Foucault, 1990 [1976]), but in many other parts of the world, including in Africa, sexuality is often understood as something one does rather than what one is (Spronk, 2017; Wekker, 2006). In Senegal, a mix of Islam and cultural values have shaped perceptions about gender and sexuality, and they can be understood as what Gueye (2011) termed an 'Islamised gender ideology' (p. 69). This thinking about gender and sexuality 'naturalises, sacralises and consequently institutionalises heterosexuality and its concomitant understandings of gender and gender roles as "just the way it is"' (Gilbert, 2017, p. 24). Although gender and sexual norms in Senegal shape an unmistakably patriarchal, heteronormative society, they are in no way monolithic or unchangeable, and my interlocutors negotiate and interpret their sexual relations in ways to uphold their status as *jigéen yu baax* (English: 'good women').

The Senegalese sexual imaginary prescribes discretion with regards to discussions about sexuality, particularly for unmarried women (Gilbert, 2017). Discretion is captured in the Wolof value of *sutura,* which connotes 'discretion, modesty, privacy, protection, and the happiness that the previous terms are said to ensure' (Mills 2011, pp. 2-3). *Sutura* is a central value in Senegalese Wolof culture that promotes feminine honour in particular through chastity, silence concerning sexuality in relation to elders, and the absence of articulating same-sex desires. As a gendered virtue, there is more at stake when *sutura* is violated by a woman. *Sutura* is often seen as limiting the space for non-normative sexualities, but it is a form of silence that does not render impossible any expression or discussion of same-sex sexualities. On the contrary, *sutura* may be employed to create possibilities and spaces for same-sex intimacies (Oudenhuijsen, 2021) and other transgressive practices, as my subsequent PhD research on gender dissident women demonstrates (Oudenhuijsen, 2025). To understand how same-sex intimacies can take shape precisely through norms, it is important to take the role of *sutura* in guiding women's lives into account.

In spite of (same-sex) sexuality being a domain of control, as the criminalisation of 'unnatural acts' in the Senegalese Penal Code demonstrates, a focus on laws and public discourse may obscure us from seeing how people give meaning to their own lives. In recent years, a number of anthropological enquiries have shed light on this. The criminalisation of same-sex sexuality in many African states notwithstanding, and the absence of public visibility or an enabling public discourse surrounding same-sex sexuality, same-sex desires are fervently acted upon in informal networks (Dankwa, 2009). Often, this contradiction is understood to confirm a 'culture of silence' that seems to surround non-normative sexualities, or sexuality in general, in Africa (Arnfred, 2004). This 'culture of silence' carries a negative connotation of oppressive silence. Signe Arnfred (2004) argues that this is just one form of silence and that we should rather see how 'different types of silences' co-exist (p. 73).[13] In addition to oppressive silence, it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of discretion as a culturally relevant form of silence, to understand that it is too simple to suggest that there are no possibilities for the expression of (non-normative) sexualities. Various scholars have recently pointed to this significance of discretion for understanding sexualities in Africa. In her exploration of female same-sex intimacy in Ghana, Dankwa (2009; 2021) confirms the centrality of discretion and indirection in issues surrounding sexuality. She argues that the fact that these principles relegated (non-normative) sexuality to the unspoken domain has allowed for relatively relaxed attitudes towards same-

13 See, for example, Dankwa (2009; 2011; 2021) on Ghana, Gaudio (2009) on Nigeria, and Hendriks (2016) on the Democratic Republic of Congo.

sex practices in Ghana. In Senegal, a similar principle applies. *Sutura* signifies both an attribute you have and something you do: you can give someone else *sutura* by hiding their misbehaviour, and you can show your *sutura* by avoiding certain practices, such as discussing sexuality with elders, or discussing homosexual practices in general (Gilbert, 2017).

My master's thesis drew together the accounts of young women in urban Senegal who challenge the Senegalese sexual imaginary by engaging in same-sex intimacies. Through a tactical use of *sutura,* women demonstrate their ability to skilfully navigate same-sex intimacies. Women commonly refer to their same-sex intimacies as '*cette vie*' (English: this life). In a similar manner, when talking about their own or their friends' same-sex intimacies, they often refer to it as 'ça' (English: that), leaving unspoken what 'that' entails. The non-naming of same-sex intimacies is crucial for their discreet navigation, as '[i]t is only when this intimacy enters the discourse of sexuality, and hence the binary of "to know"/"to not know", that homophobia, as a way of policing female homosociality, enters the picture' (Gunkel, 2009, p. 218).

Methodology and Theory

How can we do research on something that remains largely unspoken in the research context? As a result of the Senegalese sexual imaginary, the cultural importance of discretion captured in the Wolof value of *sutura*, the illegality of homosexuality in the country, and the many public anti-queer expressions that have characterised the Senegalese public debate since 2008 (Coly, 2019), an aura of secrecy surrounds same-sex intimacies. Consequently, research on same-sex intimacies needs to focus on the behavioural rather than the discursive level if we wish to understand the subtleties and tacit knowledge of the diversity of sexual expressions and practices (Dankwa, 2009). This posed an epistemological challenge of identifying same-sex desires in the absence of a discursive practice of disclosing one's (same-sex) intimacies (ibid.). Ethnography provided the means to overcome some of these discursive limits.

A particularly careful, qualitative approach was thus necessary to conduct this research. Drawing upon the expertise of my supervisors – Rijk van Dijk and Rachel Spronk – with ethnographic research, and the particular biographical method for research on sexualities that Rachel Spronk had developed over the years as she conducted numerous studies on sexualities in Kenya and Ghana – I crafted an ethnographic approach. I relied on participant observation for acquainting myself with the field, for building rapport with women, and for understanding women's lived realities and experiences of same-sex intimacies beyond discourse.

The value of such a research methodology, or the feasibility of me conducting this research as a master's student was, however, not recognised by everyone. I had submitted my research proposal for a fieldwork grant with LUF, the Leiden University Fund. I received a positive response to my research proposal, and I was invited to further explain my research in an interview. I went in well prepared and remember feeling quite positive after the interview. A few days later, however, I received an e-mail stating: 'Although the committee fully recognised the importance of the study, it had serious doubts about its feasibility and these doubts were decisive for the committee's decision not to support the study with a grant'. While they may have come to this conclusion after their inquiry into my (in)capabilities to conduct this research, I suspect that the reason was the nature of the research itself.

To be fair, it is not a research topic that invites difficult questions to be fired at people straight away – nor does research on other sensitive topics however. Yet, the importance of the research is precisely the fact that it concerns sexuality that is invisible or unrecognisable to many. The (relative) invisibility of these forms and expressions of sexuality, which are carefully constructed and culturally specific, does not mean that such research is unfeasible. Ethnographic research allows us to transcend public debates and to focus instead on the lived, embodied realities of same-sex intimacies. Henrietta Moore argued for the importance of ethnographies to understand the dynamics between individual people's gendered practices and broader social arrangements, when she wrote that 'ethnographic accounts often give a very vivid sense of people's perceptions of their "lived anatomies", and of how understandings of bodies, gender identities and sexual differences are given substance through involvement in repetitive daily tasks and through the concrete nature of social relationships' (Moore, 1994, p. 25). And this is why my supervisors decided to respond to the grant refusal with a critical e-mail in which they warned for a bias with regards to the feasibility of the proposed study as a result of:

a A lacuna in sexuality studies with regards to same-sex sexualities as a result of a heterosexuality bias;
b A lacuna in the knowledge about female same-sex intimacies as a result of a bias towards men in studies of same-sex sexualities;
c An ethnocentric bias in studies of same-sex sexualities, as a result of which the majority of studies focus on LGBT+ sexualities, while ignoring other forms and understandings of same-sex sexualities that cannot be captured in this discursive and rights-based framework of sexualities.

Through a careful approach and respect for the (cultural) context in which same-sex intimacies take shape and are spoken about or not, and an ethnographic approach with a focus on participant observation and the collection of biographies, I would be more than capable of conducting this study, they argued. Unsurprisingly, the LUF did not change their decision. They did respond to the email, which gave us the hope that they will take these arguments into account in future decision-making about grant applications.

The refusal of the LUF to grant me the fieldwork subsidy did not prevent me from doing my research, and I was lucky to benefit from financial support through the Research Master's itself. The LUF was perhaps not entirely wrong to signal the challenge to conduct such a study, but the academic freedom to pursue research on unconventional or challenging topics is a great good. And the particular methodology of ethnographic research provided me with the tools to conduct such research.

I carried out six months of fieldwork in urban Senegal, predominantly Dakar, between August 2017 and January 2018. Through extensive participant observation with interlocutors, both in their homes as well as in a variety of (homo)social spaces that women frequented, I came to an understanding of how women navigated same-sex intimacies in their own different contexts. I entered the field, and first encountered young same-sex desiring women as I joined a Dakarois women's football team. After this initial encounter, I was subsequently introduced to other same-sex desiring women, and through this snowball sampling I found my way into other homosocial spaces and networks of *lesbiennes*. My own position as a close stranger both enabled and challenged the research. Being an outsider as a Westerner, and Dutch in particular, proved very helpful at times because, in the words of my interlocutor Hawa, 'nothing is strange for you'. Not being part of their families or social networks furthermore was helpful in building trust – it was not feared that I would take part in gossip. Although my proximity to my interlocutors in terms of age, gender (expressions), and sexuality have enhanced my access to the field and have given me insights into practices that I would not have observed had I not been such a close stranger, this proximity also came with its challenges. As much as I was welcomed into my interlocutors' lives, I had to get rid of some assumptions and preconceived ideas. At first, I thought that I not only understood their same-sex attraction but also how they made sense of this in discourse and in relation to other social arrangements. Yes, my interlocutors called themselves *lesbiennes*, but their use of the word cannot be simply equated to my use and understanding of it (hence my choice to italicise the word). Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I found myself in many situations where interlocutors tried to tilt our relationship towards a more personal and romantic one. The

simultaneous experience of proximity (as a young lesbian woman) and distance (being white, well-educated, and relatively wealthy) led to awkward situations regularly. I decided to take advantage of awkward situations and regard them as a source of information. 'Erotic subjectivity in the field', Don Kulick (1995) writes, 'is a potentially useful source of insight. This is because erotic subjectivity does things. It performs, or, rather, can be made to perform, work. And one of the many types of work it can perform is to draw attention to the conditions of its production' (p. 5).

Throughout my fieldwork, I spent time in various groups of women: in the football team, with women who went to and organised parties, and in sexual-rights organisations, as well as with women one-on-one, often meeting them at their homes where they stayed with family or (girl)friends. There appeared to be a network of same-sex desiring women throughout Dakar and even beyond, loosely connected through various spaces where they meet, as well as through WhatsApp groups and sexual-rights organisations. In total, I spoke to about 25 women aged between 20 and 33 years old, and two chairs of women's sexual-rights organisations, who were older. Ultimately, the aim of these various methods of data collection was to assemble biographical narratives about young women's lifeworlds.

Theoretically, this research builds predominantly on the concept of social navigation. Henrik Vigh, in collaboration with colleagues, has worked out the concept of social navigation in a number of works (Christiansen et al., 2006; Vigh, 2006; 2009). Ultimately, the objective of researching social navigation in the context of this research was to further our understanding of the social opportunities and aspirations of women and simultaneously take into account the (changing) social, political, and economic environment in which these women live. Social navigation as an analytical tool is useful to understand how young women in urban Senegal experience and manoeuvre same-sex intimacies in relation to societal expectations of proper womanhood, including marriage and parenthood. It is a useful concept to understand how personal aspirations become enacted in everyday practices through constant rethinking, negotiation, and adaptation to changing circumstances.

Where Vigh's conceptualisation of social navigation focuses on the navigation of existing – albeit changing – social spaces, this chapter shows that the creation of new social spaces is also crucial for young women as they navigate their same-sex intimacies. The football field, parties, and sexual-rights organisations are actively constructed social spaces whereby women enhance their space for manoeuvre. In addition to the concept of social navigation, Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) conceptual triad of social spaces was furthermore useful to understand the diverse tactics

that same-sex desiring women employed to navigate through a multiplicity of spaces. The 'spaces of representation' that he defined as the spaces that people seek to create through an appropriation of their environment, reflect the different spaces that my interlocutors transformed or constructed. I looked at the appropriation and creation of different social spaces and the tactics of navigation that enable same-sex intimacies to occur in such spaces. This neither occurs at the margins of Senegalese society, nor only in secret places.

Homosociality and Same-sex Intimacies

How do women make public spaces more private to conceal intimacies between women, and how do they turn supposedly more private spaces such as the home into more public spaces, as intimacies are being negotiated and alluded to? What 'tactics of concealment' (Hardon & Posel, 2012, p. S4) do same-sex desiring women employ, carefully choosing when (not) to say something? And to whom and how do they (not) say things? Secrecy with regards to same-sex intimacies does not only distinguish those who know from those who do not know, but 'a secret can bind together those who share it, and it can mask immoral conduct' (Pierce, 2007, p. 552). By being discreet enough about one's involvement in same-sex intimacies, women can uphold their status as good women. Lafia (23 years old in 2017) was known at home and by her friends for exclaiming 'private life!' with a big smile whenever someone asked her something about her love life. This response was always received by others with a smile and some sign of appreciation. Not being too vocal about your sexual life is highly valued in Senegalese society, particularly for women.

Homosociality is a characteristic of many social spaces in Senegal. The prevalence of homosocial spaces in Senegal is partly the result of the gendered structuring of society that classifies certain spaces as the domain of women, and others as the domain of men. Homosociality allows for female same-sex intimacies to occur fairly unpoliced, although it is argued that relationships such as 'mummy-baby' relationships in South Africa and *supi-supi* in Ghana are increasingly understood in terms of Western conceptions of (homo)sexuality (Dankwa, 2009; Gunkel, 2009) and hence are under homophobic scrutiny. Accusations of homosexuality often correspond with deviant gender expressions, such as supposedly too feminine clothes for men, or too masculine clothes for women. Normative distinctions between good moral conduct and deviant behaviour, however, can be maintained by secrecy and modesty, *sutura* in Wolof. Such secrecy is neither absolute nor restrictive, however, and allusions to romantic and sexual relationships in the private sphere with others present, displays intimacies to a (restricted) public.

Key to the social navigation of same-sex intimacies in homosocial settings is play, as it blurs boundaries between what is friendly and what is also erotic behaviour. With jokes, hints, and unspoken allusions to sexuality, women create space to enact same-sex desires. In fact, one can argue that there is a certain acknowledgement in context: same-sex intimacies in homosocial circles are tacitly allowed, as long as it remains play, a temporary game, and does not threaten the social and moral order of heteronormative marriage and procreation. However, navigating same-sex intimacies extends beyond play in existing homosocial (private) spaces, as women seek more space to discuss and enact same-sex desires, and because there are limits to what one can achieve with play in these spaces. In addition to various tactics of navigating same-sex intimacies in existing homosocial spaces, young women seek to create new (homosocial) spaces, both in the more private and the more public sphere where they get together among *lesbiennes*.

> Some girls just want to be…. you know… the buzz… they want to be known and popular in the scene. They can even go up to Penda and give her 2,000 FCFA so she will sing for you. Just to be known. Girls can spend all their money like this, and then they have to beg the others for money to get a taxi back home at the end of the night.[14]

Penda is a singer who organises a weekly *soirée* (English: night out) on Friday nights in a popular club in Dakar. The *soirée* is not just a space where sexual dissidence is tolerated or accepted by the owner of the club and its bartenders; it is also a place where other behaviour like drinking alcohol or smoking, which are normally disapproved of particularly for women, is accepted. *Le buzz*, uttered by Fama to describe women who want to be popular and known in their network of *lesbiennes*, attests to the fact that despite the fact that same-sex intimacies are navigated with discretion, there are spaces where same-sex intimacies are vibrantly enacted. Women at the *soirée* who spend all their money is a form of *gâter* (English: to spoil), and *faire le show* (English: to be showy) (Newell, 2012, pp. 106–109), whereby women reinforce their community of practice and differentiate themselves from others as the one who is able to spend money, thereby creating a hierarchy within the collective. The organisation of such parties is thus relevant for the consolidation of one's social network, as well as for securing and strengthening one's position within the social hierarchy. Understanding how homosociality, in various constellations, enables the tactical navigation of same-sex intimacies furthermore helps us to understand how women's football emerged as a space for gender and sexual dissidence.

14 Conversation with Fama, 13 January 2018.

Jump and Same-sex Intimacies on the Football Field

> At the end of that first practice, this girl asked me if I wanted to go out with her. I was not sure how she meant that, so I decided to ignore her. As we were walking to catch our bus to go home, she asked me if I had not heard her question. She wanted to date me. I was not aware of this life in the football environment, and I had never expected myself to be engaged in it one day. (Conversation with Zahia, September 2017)

Concurrent with her introduction to women's football in Senegal, Zahia (26 years old at the time) was introduced to the environment of same-sex intimacies. The football field provides a distinct social space for young women where gender dissidence and same-sex intimacies abound. The importance of football reaches far beyond the game itself, and the social network that emerges from the football field reveals that play forms an integral part of how young women navigate their same-sex intimacies on and off the football pitch.

The first women's football team, Gazelles, emerged in the 1970s (Savedraa, 2004). In 2000, the Senegalese Football Federation increased its commitment to the women's game by organising a national league with twelve teams (ibid.); in 2001-2002 a national women's team was established. Women's football in Senegal remains marginal, however, compared to men's football. In Senegal, several associations are currently actively promoting women's football as a game to be taken seriously, responding to the stigmatisation that women encounter when pursuing football careers. Occasional alarms in Senegalese media about the prevalence of lesbians in women's football go hand in hand with a much more tacit knowledge about the existence of same-sex intimacies in women's football teams. Particularly in West Africa, 'the female football arena amounts to a homosocial public space, a site for gender variance where young women's masculine styles and same-sex intimacies are tacitly tolerated' (Dankwa, 2011, pp. 236-237).

In Senegal, *jump* are very visible in the women's football milieu. When Hawa started playing football in 2005, 'it was rare to see girls dressed like boys' and whenever you did, 'you knew it was a footballer'. In fact, 'it's the identity card of footballers'. Hawa argued that the abundance of *jump* in the women's football environment is not a matter of expressing true selves or whatsoever, but rather 'a way to show other hidden lesbians, that there is another one here… one who plays football… it's a way to show others.' Communicating your same-sex desires to other women through clothing, without explicitly saying it, adheres neatly to the value of *sutura*.

Women's lexicon of *jump* (masculine-presenting) and *sexy* (feminine-presenting) with their distinct fashion styles and gender expressions are part of a 'spatial code' that emerges in this lived space. The origins of the word *jump* remain unknown to me, but we know that it gradually spread from the football scene to same-sex desiring women in different milieus. The English term reveals its appeal to a modern, globalised identification of youth, much like the way Ivorian *bluffeurs* express modernity and urbanity through their ways of dress that are in line with global representations of hip-hop culture (Newell, 2012, p. 11). In a similar fashion, the adoption of the term 'gay' demonstrates a knowledge of the global queer community (Reid, 2013). Manifestations of *jump* enable multiple interpretations of gender, and its relational status invites for play. The power of such manifestations of gender is, in the words of Newell (2010), 'to make real through appearance, if only temporarily, what was otherwise merely the reverie of desire' (p. 139). In other words, expressions of gender are a potentially transformative act: one transforms, or challenges, albeit unconsciously, relations of power and gender. The masculine role that a *jump* consolidates through her gender expressions legitimises her muscular body, her engagement in sport, her rejection of feminine aesthetics and of domestic roles – cooking is done by the *sexy* in a relationship.

Football served as an important activity for constructing personhood for one group of young women in this research. Among women footballers, their masculine styles were emphasized. Women somehow compete with each other for what a 'successful' *jump* is: bodies (muscle), brands, and relationships are showed off on and off the football field. Through distinct fashion styles, *jump* women compete with each other over the symbolic mastery of their gendered expressions in relation to other *jump* and *sexy* women. The construction and maintenance of social networks such as the one forged on the football field, are essential for women to assert their position in society. Another social space where some young same-sex desiring women gather to assert a position in society, is that of women's sexual rights organisations.

Sexual Rights Organising Balancing Visibility and *Sutura*

Sexual rights organising in Senegal is relatively young, and it emerged in response to the AIDS epidemic. Although Senegal is regarded as a success story in the prevention of HIV, with an infection rate of less than one percent among the total population (UNAIDS, 2008), the infection rate among men who have sex with men (MSM) was found to be as high as 21.5% (Wade et al., 2005). As a result, the Senegalese government saw the need to tolerate the emergence of sexual rights (often focused on MSM) organisations, because many of their core objectives revolved around the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS of the *populations clés*

(English: 'key populations'), including MSM (Elzas, 2017). The limited existence and visibility of women's sexual rights organisations is due to this connection between sexual rights organisations and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. This notwithstanding, many organisations do also work for sexual rights, embedding this work with often implicit language in health campaigns that are directed at the entire population (see Epprecht, 2012).

The work of sexual rights organisations in Senegal needs to be contextualised in relation to other ways of navigating same-sex intimacies. As homophobia is on the rise in Senegal (Coly, 2019; M'Baye, 2023), it is tempting to see the work of sexual rights organisations as a political struggle. However, it is too simplistic to state that sexual rights organisations fully comply with an international discourse of openness and visibility. In various ways, the two women's sexual rights organisations that I observed in Senegal, Nio Far and Yaakaare, are involved in the creation and appropriation of social spaces where women can express themselves without having to fear repercussions from those around them. Nafissatou Cissé created Nio Far in 2010 with a group of same-sex desiring friends, particularly for women who identify as such and who seek a space to meet. The organization Yaakaare is registered as an organisation for sex workers but works with same-sex desiring women as well. Both organisations offer a space for women to get together and discuss health issues, security issues, educational and occupational progress, and, perhaps most importantly, to discuss openly about the joys and sorrows of their romantic and sexual relationships.

In the approach of Nio Far and Yaakaare, *sutura* remains crucial. The organisations navigate through a challenging and demanding landscape. To receive funding from larger (international) organisations, and to demonstrate accountability, a certain visibility is required. Discretion is required in the Senegalese public sphere, however, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of members, and to allow work-like health interventions to be carried out. Within the organisations, gender expressions and respectability are the topic of discussion, as some (potential) members are put off by the ostensible publicness with which young *jump* communicate their same-sex desires. In a way, these organisations may find themselves in a conflict between an increasingly vocal and visible international network of sexual rights organisations, and a local reality in which *sutura* is of utmost importance. One of my interlocutors, Penda (24 years old in 2017), was in charge of Nio Far in a city outside of Dakar. When I visited Penda with my interlocutor, Lafia, the latter expressed her surprise to find that Penda, whom she had known for years, was engaged with Nio Far. Penda responded that 'I do not just tell everyone what I do. I try to be discreet, just like Lafia. I did not know that she was also in the *milieu*.'

Despite the discretion with which membership of these organisations is arranged, older women remain largely absent. Nafissatou explained the composition of her organisation as follows: 'Older women are reluctant to collaborate with young women, because they are afraid to be outed if they are associated with these young women. Young women today are not afraid to show who they are, and perhaps they even want to show others. Older generations are not accustomed to this visibility; this was not common back then when they were young. In addition, they have more responsibilities at home, looking after a family and such.' Young women, and *jump* in particular, attract a certain degree of attention through their appearance. For women from an older generation, this challenges the notion of *sutura*. The limited links between younger and the older generations of same-sex desiring women can be further explained by the way *sutura* is structured in Senegalese society: intergenerational communication about sexual matters is considered shameful for both sides (Bochow, 2008).

The work of these sexual rights organisations thus navigates between adopting a globalising sexual rights discourse and the sociopolitical work of increasing the space for same-sex intimacies, with work from a distinctly local background whereby social events and care are organised with respect for the value of *sutura*. For many young members, these organisations provide a social space where they find care and a listening ear, much more than a collective that takes to the barricades for sexual rights.

Tactics of Navigating Same-sex Intimacies

This research sought to fill a gap in the knowledge production of female same-sex intimacies in Senegal. In this chapter, I have shown how same-sex intimacies draw on a complex negotiation of gender and sexual normativity in Senegal, and how a diverse set of tactics is employed for the navigation of same-sex intimacies. These tactics, which include play, *sutura*, respectability, and the appropriation and construction of social spaces, are all ways to negotiate social worth, mutual support, and sexual pleasure. Above all, such tactics are the instruments as young women search for wellbeing.

By adopting a variety of strategies and acts, my interlocutors have shown the ability to simultaneously navigate same-sex intimacies in existing homosocial spaces and carve out new spaces for the enactment of their same-sex desires. In these social spaces, women form a loosely connected community of practice (O'Mara, 2013) that combines a specific lexicon (*jump* and *sexy*) with tacit understandings of same-sex erotic practices. Social navigation as an analytical concept has helped to rethink the place and space for same-sex intimacies in society, whereby, this re-

search acquires relevance for an overall consideration of the changing position(s) of youth and young women in urban Senegal and the wider world.

The diverse tactics that my interlocutors have demonstrated for the navigation of their same-sex intimacies demonstrates the discrepancy between ideologies of the Senegalese sexual imaginary and the lived realities of my interlocutors. But instead of viewing women's expressions of same-sex intimacies as reflections on a globalising discourse of sexual rights and a cultural convergence of Senegal to the West, we should take these realities of same-sex intimacies in Senegal seriously and rethink sexuality *from* Africa (Hendriks & Spronk, 2017). In addition to governments administering laws about sexuality, and (international) NGOs that vocalise a globalising sexual rights discourse, we should not underestimate the creative capacity of same-sex desiring youth to transform and create social spaces in their societies. My interlocutors relate differently to the debate about gendered and sexual behaviour than NGOs and governments – the former being discreet and the latter promoting a politics of disclosure – they take active part in negotiations on gender and sexuality in Senegalese society.

Ethnography and the Value of Time

What I hope that this reflection on my Research Master's has conveyed, is the value of a truly ethnographic approach to the study of sexuality. It has been only through the repeated extensive visits to interlocutors that I was able to witness some of the tacit knowledge and communication of desire to others. It is this tacit knowledge and communication that forms an integral part of the analysis of the tactics of navigation in this thesis. Play as a tactic of navigation, for example, is not something that can be easily grasped through another research method.

I owe the realisation that an ethnographic approach is indispensable for such research on sexualities, as well as the ability to conduct this research, fully to the Research Master's in African Studies. The Research Master's opened up our view to a wide variety of disciplines and research topics. From the start of the programme, the course *Theories and the empirical in African Studies* introduced us to a wealth of scholarship in African Studies. The course was given by Prof. Rijk van Dijk who had invited a wide array of guest lecturers from various universities in the Netherlands. One of the lectures was on the topic of studying sexualities in/from Africa, by Prof. Rachel Spronk from the University of Amsterdam. Her lecture, and our subsequent discussions on the value of studying sexualities in Africa, resulted in this master's thesis and, six years later, in a PhD dissertation on a similar topic, building on this MA research on same-sex sexualities to explore

how different groups of gender and sexually dissident women respond to stigmatisation and normativity (Oudenhuijsen, 2025).

The Research Master's African Studies taught me to conduct research on complex issues like (same-sex) sexualities in Senegal. By presenting students with a variety of research methods and giving them the freedom to develop their own research independently – in terms of the theme, disciplinary approaches, methodology, geographical focus – and by offering students the time to dedicate themselves to this research, I learned to approach the world from this research perspective. Being offered the time for long-term ethnographic fieldwork opened up my senses to other ways of experiencing sexuality and gender, beyond a Euro-American framework of discourse and identities. Given the current global political moment in which gender and diversity have become dirty words that need to be erased from laws, websites, institutional commitments, and even academic texts in some places, it is crucial that we push back as academics and continue to feed the political debate with other perspectives on gender and sexualities. The Research Master's African Studies has always provided students with the means to do so, but it is now losing its *raison d'être* due to financial considerations. Rather than seeing the value of taking the time for research, it has been considered too costly. It will cost us dearly in the future.

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4

Reef Relations and Rethinking the Field: A Personal Dive into African Studies

Indy Koster

In September 2020, I began the Research Master's in African Studies at the African Studies Centre Leiden. At that time, I had no idea that the program would take me 7,000 kilometres away from 'home' to the depths of the Kenyan ocean for my thesis research. My thesis focused on the relationship between coral reefs and the coastal community in Shimoni, Kenya. Despite their interconnectedness, human and coral reef ecosystems are often studied in isolation within both academic and conservation literature (Bradbury & Seymour, 2009). To address these disciplinary divides, and to challenge the deeper structural binary that separates people from coral reefs, my research adopted a transdisciplinary approach. I drew on multispecies theories that explore the entanglements between humans and their environments. Specifically, I aimed to recognize the coral reef as an autonomous agent and to bridge African Studies with environmental humanities (Ifeakor & Otteh, 2021).

Before commencing my Master's in African Studies, I had little familiarity with the field of multispecies perspectives and its associated theories. This changed rapidly at the start of the programme, particularly during the course *Reflexivity and Methodologies in Africanist Research*, taught by Dr Harry Wels. In this course, we were introduced to interdisciplinary research practices and encouraged to engage critically with our own epistemological positions. We explored a range of methodologies and methods, often brought together through mixed-method approaches, and discussed the challenges of translating research questions into practical, field-based inquiry. I still recall the first lecture, which focused on the tracking skills of the Khoisan of Southern Africa and how their practice has been described as 'the art of noticing' (Boonzaaier & Wels, 2022, p. 149). It stood out not only as a compelling ethnographic example but also as an invitation to reflect more broadly on how we engage with the world, to sense attentively, to see, to feel, to listen, helping us become more alert to the (natural) environment and to reconsider our perceptions beyond the human. It was through this process of theoretical and methodological engagement that I was first introduced to mul-

tispecies theories. In general, multispecies studies engage a range of academic disciplines sharing a mutual goal of moving beyond the human-centred perspectives, which is far from a straightforward transition as it demands a rethink of the relationship between humans and the world, along with the methods to examine it (Haraway, 2008; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). Multispecies scholars look into the complex interactions between humans, animals, plants, and microorganism and what they have in common is their focus on the fact that 'a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces' (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, p. 545).

Though initially outside my conceptual comfort zone, these perspectives increasingly resonated with my own interests. I began to recognize the relevance of this theoretical lens to my research focus on coral reefs, an area I had been drawn to through my long-standing interest in marine life and diving. Coral reefs, I realized, provide a particularly rich site for multispecies inquiry, offering layered, symbiotic entanglements that challenge anthropocentric modes of analysis. Coral reefs manifest themselves in multiple forms, functioning as polyps, symbiotic organisms, each with their distinct interdependent temporalities (Sheppard, 2021). Thus, coral reefs are not just a single unified entity, but are the ideal example of multispecies entities that serve as a haven for other multispecies populations, as the coral 'displays a dynamic relationship between geology and biology, the animal and the plant, life and death, society and community' (Ette, 2017, p. 116). The multiplicity and the complexity of coral reefs is beautifully expressed by Braveman (2018) and therefore legitimises this long quote:

> Corals confuse and destabilize our categories: they are a cross between animal, plant, rock, microbe, and ecosystem; we sentimentalize them because of their beauty, despite the fact that they don't have a face or a clear sex and so we can't easily anthropomorphize them; (…). Reef building corals are animals, yet they photosynthesize; they make massive stony structures that can be seen from space, but they are tiny and, some claim, fragile creatures; they are sessile, yet travel long distances in their larval stage; and each has a mysterious symbiotic relationship with a particular strain of algae – who, under certain conditions, disembark from the coral cells, leaving them bleached and depleted. Individual coral polyps in a colony may differ in morphology and genetics, and some may be fusions of two or more genotypes. For the most part, however, polyps who belong to one colony have the same genetic composition—what scientists refer to as "ramets." Coral colonies are interconnected by living tissue. (p. 11)

Following this line of thought, I did not focus on one specific species of coral, nor specific fish species that are present around the reef, but rather perceive the coral reef as an entangled web of life within this research.

It was truly an intellectual challenge, as it involved opening up the methodological field of underwater research. To understand the relationship between the reef and the community, both deserved equal attention. For the community aspect, I applied ethnography, an approach well known in African Studies; spending time with community members, participating in their daily lives, conducting interviews, developing a survey, and engaging in conversations about topics relevant to my research questions. Studying the reef, however, required much more methodological and conceptual creativity. I spent equal time with the reef by diving, exploring, and interacting with it in great detail, during the day and at night, at various depths, and by assisting in crucial coral restoration work. By incorporating the underwater world and the coral reef ecosystem as central components of my research, I sought to expand the definition of fieldwork beyond its land-based and human-centred assumptions. This broader understanding can offer valuable insights into how humans interact with and depend upon their environments, and how environments, in turn, shape both human and nonhuman life.

Looking back on my thesis project and my time in the Research Master's in African Studies, I realize how formative this journey has been, academically, professionally, and personally. Before I began the program, I would never have imagined that, for instance, scuba diving could serve as a legitimate research method for an academic thesis. I probably would have laughed at the idea, dismissing it as something too unconventional. Yet the Research Master's taught me to think outside the box and, more importantly, to have the courage to swim against the current when necessary. This was not always easy. I encountered moments of doubt and hesitation, both internal and external, particularly regarding the validity of my chosen methodology. However, the steadfast support and guidance of my supervisors, Dr Annachiara Raia and Dr Harry Wels, gave me the confidence to continue.

The African Studies Centre offered a space where I immediately felt at home. Before enrolling, I completed a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science with a specialization in International Relations and Organizations. While academically valuable, the large scale of that program often left little room for personal exploration. In contrast, the African Studies ResMA stood out for its small-scale structure, close contact with professors, and the intellectual freedom to shape my own research path. These qualities created a safe and stimulating environment where I could thrive, discover joy in academic writing, and embrace complexity, nuance,

and critical reflection. More than just a place of study, the Centre became a home, a place where I felt seen, supported, and challenged.

Beyond academic training, the Research Master's in African Studies encouraged me to take intellectual risks and follow my curiosity. In this supportive environment, I was invited to rethink what research could be and to explore approaches that might have felt unconventional elsewhere. This spirit of experimentation led me to question not only the questions I was asking but also the methods and sites of my research practice. It was through this process that I began to see how scuba diving, a long-held personal passion, could become an essential part of my research. In this chapter, I share how that exploration unfolded and how diving became central to my method. Let's dive in.

Beyond the Shore: Rethinking Fieldwork

Yet with this theoretical enthusiasm came a pressing methodological concern: how might one translate multispecies theory into practice? In other words, how could I, in concrete terms, *go about this in the field*? Expanding on these reflections, I began to reconsider what 'fieldwork' could mean within the context of my own research. Ethnographic fieldwork, as commonly understood today, emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when anthropologists began collecting data through extended immersion in the so-called 'field'. This shift toward firsthand, experiential research marked a significant transformation in anthropological practice. Figures like Bronislaw Malinowski, best known for his seminal work *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), are widely credited with laying the groundwork for this methodological turn. Even today, fieldwork is widely regarded as the cornerstone of rigorous research within the social sciences and humanities (Brown et al., 2020).

Yet the classic image of anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork has largely been grounded – both literally and figuratively – in land-based settings. It often implies a researcher standing with both feet firmly on the ground engaging with communities, conducting interviews, and observing cultural practices in terrestrial environments.

But what did 'fieldwork' mean in my study context? The Research Master's program offered me a space for open and intellectual exploration. As a result, my research drifted away from these conventional understandings: while still engaging with the everyday, my fieldwork unfolded in an aquatic environment. I navigated the uncharted territories of coral reefs, spaces typically overlooked in anthropological research. Immersion beneath the water's surface not only introduced

me to new species and multispecies interactions, but also invited a rethinking of what constitutes 'the field'. By incorporating the coral reef ecosystem as central component of my research, I sought to expand the scope of fieldwork beyond its traditionally land-based and human-centred frameworks. This broader approach highlights not only how humans interact with their environments, but also how environments, and nonhuman actors, actively shape human lives, knowledge practices, and ecological futures. These dynamics became especially tangible during my time in Kenya. To further explore these entanglements of ecology, community, and climate, I turn now to the coral reefs of coastal Kenya and a restoration initiative in which I was personally involved.

The Coral Reefs of Kenya

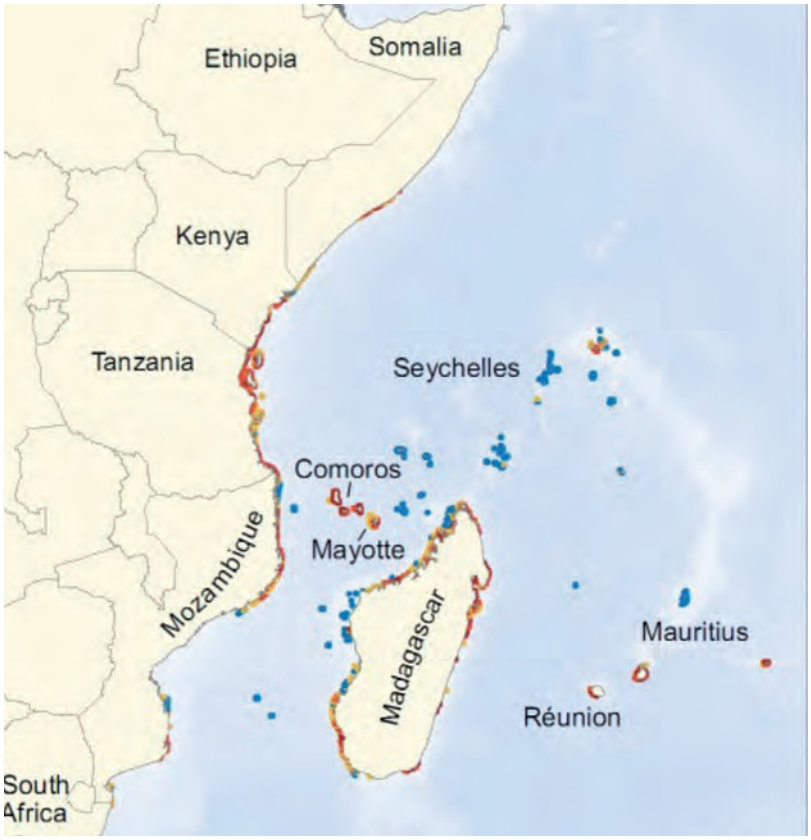

Figure 4.1
Maps of risk assessed for Western Indian Ocean coral reefs. Colour coding of risk for individual reefs is shown in the legend at low (blue), medium (orange), high (red)
Source: Burke et al., 2011, p. 51

In coastal Kenya, people are heavily dependent on coral reefs (Hoorweg & Muthiga, 2009). These reefs play a vital role in ensuring food security by supplying essential nutritional resources, supporting livelihoods through fishing and tourism and providing coastal protection (Cinner, 2013). The coral reefs of Kenya are part of the world's second-longest fringing reef, stretching from Somalia to Mozambique along the East African coast.

Thriving with an abundance of life, coral reefs nurture the highest biodiversity among all ecosystems on earth, which makes them one of the most biologically complex and ecologically valuable ecosystems of our planet. Coral reefs cover only less than 0.1% of our ocean floor, yet they are home to nearly one-third of the marine fish species (Rocha & Bowen, 2008) and even provide habitat for 25% of other marine life (Souter et al., 2021). Beyond these often-cited impressive biological features, the livelihoods of over 500 million people, spanning across the globe, are intimately intertwined with the existence of coral reefs, as they depend on these vital ecosystems for their sustenance and well-being (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2019).

In addition to their ecological and economic importance, coral reefs serve as material and symbolic sources for coastal and indigenous island communities, as they play a crucial role in shaping cultural identities and lifestyles (Cinner, 2014). Yet, because of their evident benefits, the coral reefs in Kenya are under threat, due to ever-rising global sea temperatures, but also local stressors such as overfishing and pollution are concerning issues (Obura et al., 2022). In recent decades, the phenomenon of increasing waves of mass coral death, known as 'bleaching events', has been escalating in both intensity and frequency (Sully et al., 2019). The year 2023 was the warmest on record, exacerbated by an *El Niño Southern Oscillation* (ENSO) event, which brought extreme sea surface temperatures to tropical regions. In March and April 2024, an unprecedented marine heatwave hit the Kenyan coast, causing widespread coral bleaching and led to mortality rates of 50-80 per cent of Kenya's coral reefs (CORDIO, 2024). On April 15th 2024, the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) has officially declared that we are facing the fourth worldwide mass coral bleaching event (Reimer et al., 2024). Bleaching is the breakdown of the coral-algal symbiosis, which is primarily caused by heat. By losing their symbiotic algae, the corals lose their main source of energy. Corals can only survive his bleached state for a limited period. Long periods of excessive heat can cause mass mortality of corals and hence, severe degradation of coral reefs (Spalding & Brown, 2015). If the coral reef ecosystem does not survive, the consequences would be devastating for both coastal communities and marine life (Pratchett et al., 2008).

To combat the ongoing loss of coral reefs in Kenya, Wageningen University and the REEFolution Foundation initiated a coral reef restoration project in the Shimoni-Vanga seascape, located in Shimoni, Southeast Kenya, in 2015.

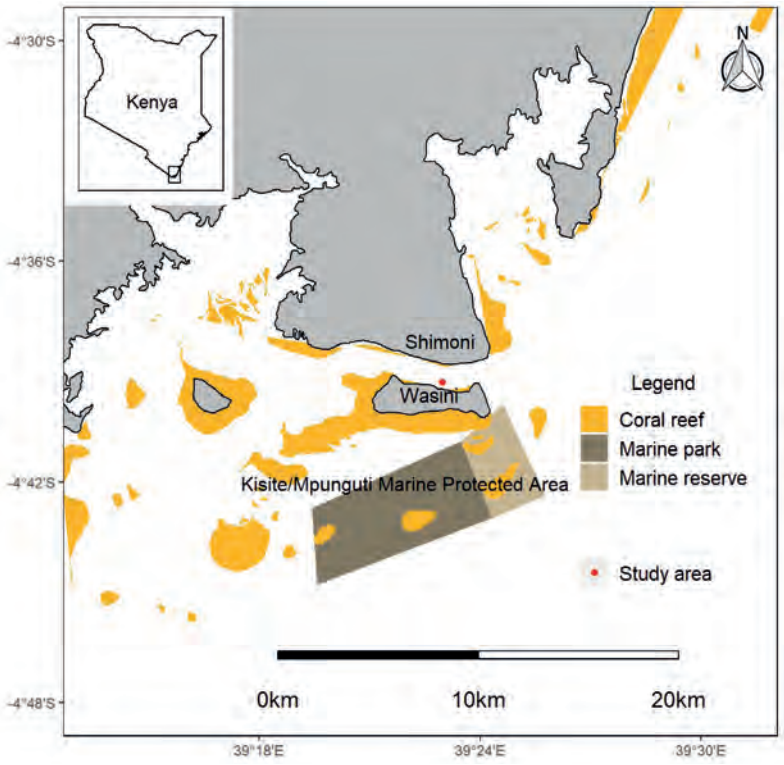

Figure 4.2

Map of Kenya showing study area and coral reefs (orange). The Mpunguti Marine Reserve Park (MMRP) where traditional fishing is allowed (shaded light brown) and Kisite Marine National Park (KMNP), (shaded dark grey), which is a no take zone

Map designed by H. Mwamlavya, 2019

Since then, REEFolution has been actively reversing the vicious cycle of reef degradation through a community-based restoration program. The organization aims for sustainable reef and ocean management, community empowerment, and livelihood improvement, using coral reef restoration as a key entry point. In collaboration with the local community organization Mkwiro Beach Management Unit (BMU), a community-managed protected marine area came into force in 2017. That same year, capacity-building efforts began, focusing on training and equipping local community members with the skills necessary for reef restoration. The approach is deeply rooted in science, backed by research partnerships with Kenyan and Dutch universities, and includes the cultivation of corals and

their transplantation onto artificial reefs. The increase in hard coral cover is anticipated to fast-track reef recovery by facilitating the recruitment of fish and more coral species (Knoester, 2023).

To anchor these efforts locally and ensure long-term sustainability, REEFolution Trust Ltd (RT) was established in 2022 as the Kenyan branch of the REEFolution Foundation. RT is an independent legal entity responsible for planning and executing reef restoration activities on the ground. It leads local operations, offers training to community members through the REEF Ranger program, and provides marine education programs in primary schools. This integrated and community-focused approach has proven to be highly effective. To date, 5,300 m^2 of new coral reef has been successfully restored. Local perceptions have shifted from scepticism to support, and a dedicated team of 25 Kenyan reef restoration practitioners has been trained.

REEFolution's operational footprint spans both Kenya and the Netherlands. In Kenya, the organization manages the Mkwiro Restoration Project at Mkwiro Village, which focuses on reviving coral ecosystems. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, REEFolution works closely with Wageningen University to support the scientific foundation of its work and also conducts fundraising, raises public awareness, and ensures strong organizational oversight. This unique combination of scientific research and hands-on community involvement ensures that REEFolution's projects are both locally impactful and scientifically sound. Despite these successes, the accelerating impacts of climate change pose an acute threat to the long-term viability of restored reefs. These alarming developments have prompted REEFolution to prioritize research and development efforts aimed at enhancing the climate resilience of coral reef restoration techniques.

Simple in colour and design, the REEFolution centre harmonizes with its environment. Located in a coastal forest, it is only a minute's walk from the ocean. As you approach the shore, follow the path along the dive base to the jetty, where you are greeted by the powerful sights and sounds of the ocean: Waves crashing, sunlight reflecting off the water, and the sea playing hide and seek as it appears and disappears with the changing tides. During my seven-month research period, this unique meeting point of land and sea served as the foundation for my thesis. From here, I went to the nearby villages of Shimoni, Mkwiro, and Wasini, to conduct interviews, while also visiting the coral reef for (restoration) dives. Gradually, this in-between space became not only the physical centre of my research but also a conceptual one: a point of departure for reimagining fieldwork as a relational, multispecies encounter. It was here that I first began to ask what it truly means to be *with* the coral reef, rather than simply to observe or study it.

Being *with* the Coral Reef

As I sought to redefine what fieldwork could mean underwater, I began to ask myself what it truly meant to be *with* a coral reef. Anthropologist Stefan Helmreich (2015) emphasizes the pressing need to employ diverse methods to enhance our understanding of coral reefs and to make them more legible: 'Coral is something to be read—for climate change, for potentially patentable genes, for representativeness' (Helmreich, 2015, p. 60). Schuster (2019) builds on this idea, arguing that 'the recent dire depictions of reefs across the planet indicate the need to make coral legible for coral's own sake as well as for the sake of human existence' (p. 87). He extends Helmreich's call by advocating for thinking *with* and *as* coral, an approach that emphasizes engagement over passive observation. As he writes, 'To "think with" involves approaching nonhuman lives with a sense that curiosity and care are not just epistemologically wise ways of knowing these lives, but also are the means by which to foster recuperative practices as collaborative among multispecies' (Schuster, 2019, p. 87).

Multispecies scholars such as Peter Wohlleben and similarly, Merlin Sheldrake, emphasize the importance of *being with* nonhuman entities. In *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016), Wohlleben invites readers to *think with* trees, recognizing their intelligence, communication, and interdependence as part of fostering a deeper connection with the forest ecosystem. Building on and expanding this relational thinking, Sheldrake's *Entangled Life* (2020) explores the concept of entanglement, highlighting how humans and nonhumans are deeply interconnected in ways that challenge individualistic perspectives. In a forest, one can walk through and physically engage with the environment, touching, listening, observing. But this raises a crucial question: how can one *be with* a coral reef, given its unique physical constraints? Unlike a forest, I cannot walk on or through the reef—first, because the ocean itself acts as a natural boundary, and second, because physically stepping on the reef would cause immense damage. Moreover, coral reefs cannot be fully understood through surface-level observations alone. Thus, engaging in ethnography with coral demands a rethinking of land-based, human-centric methods.

To address these challenges, I adopted a form of immersed participant observation through scuba diving. This method, adapted from anthropological practice, allowed me to be physically present in the coral reef ecosystem. As Sheppard and colleagues (2018, p. 10) note, '(t)he possibility of increased study arose with the development of scuba equipment, allowing scientists to observe reefs and their species up close.' As a certified scuba diver, I was able to immerse myself in the environment of the reef and engage *with* it not only visually but physically, attentively, and relationally. To observe non-human life forms such as coral reefs, I

applied the concept of *immersion,* a term closely tied to participant observation. Helmreich (2007, p. 631), explains immersion as:

> One way immersion functions as a rhetorical tool promising experiential 'truth' is by eliding the question of the organization of space, of medium, of milieu – whether of an ecosystem or a social order—positing a fluid osmosis of environment by an emplaced participant-observer–auditor.

Here, immersion is not only a physical act but also an epistemological stance: A way for researchers to blend with their surroundings, whether social or ecological. Similarly, Small and Calarco (2022) emphasize the importance of 'exposure', stating that it is 'the core precondition of good qualitative data' (p. 20). A key aspect of immersive participant observation is thus spending sustained time within the study context. In my case, this meant being physically present underwater. Immersion took on multiple meanings: I was metaphorically immersed in the field and literally submerged, surrounded by the marine environment as I observed and engaged *with* the coral reef.

Unlike most ethnographers who often rely solely on pen and paper, I brought my scuba diving equipment (including a buoyancy control device (BCD), regulator, mask, fins with boots, wetsuit, and diving computer), which became essential tools for my fieldwork. To further operationalize my observations, I incorporated visual methodologies (Marion & Crowder, 2013). Alongside written fieldnotes, I took visual fieldnotes in the form of underwater photographs and videos. By presenting the reef through visuals, a more multifaceted understanding of the reef was conveyed.

During my research stay in Kenya, I conducted 56 dives. According to my dive computer, I spent a total of 2 days, 12 hours, and 44 minutes underwater. My deepest dive reached 32.2 meters, while my longest dive lasted 2 hours and 33 minutes. On average, my maximum depth per dive was 8.8 meters. These dives covered a variety of activities and sites, including coral reef restoration dives, deep dives, and night dives. One key aspect of the restoration dives involved coral gardening, a widely used approach to reef restoration that focuses on establishing coral stocks prior to transplantation (Knoester, 2023). The coral gardening process encompasses two main phases: the intermediate nursery phase and the out-planting phase. The nursery phase is crucial, providing a safe environment for coral fragments to grow undisturbed. Small coral fragments are placed in nursery structures where they mature to a specific size while experiencing environmental conditions similar to their final destination. Once the nursery phase is complete, corals can either be

fragmented to continue growing in nurseries or transplanted to artificial reefs for restoration (Rinkevich, 2014; Boström-Einarsson et al., 2020).

Figure 4.3
Coral restoration dive
Photo taken by Ewout Knoester

Caring for the Reef: Engaging, Emotion, and Relationality

As I spent more time *with* the coral reefs, diving became not only a means of data collection but a way to engage with the environment. This engagement led me to reflect on a key question: What does it mean to care for a coral reef? This question connects the practices of restoration to a broader ethical and emotional framework that extends beyond the physical act of restoration. For me, caring for the reef became a complex, relational process, one rooted in both personal connection and broader ecological responsibility. The ultimate objective of coral reef restoration goes beyond improving livelihoods, as it touches upon what feminist scholars call an *ethics of care* (De La Bellacasa, 2012). Care, in this sense, is not only a feeling or an intention; it is 'inseparably a vital affective state, an ethical obligation and a practical labour' (De La Bellacasa, 2012, p. 197). Van Dooren (2015, para. 1) expands this view by describing care as threefold:

> As an affective state, caring is an embodied phenomenon, the product of intellectual and emotional competencies: to care is to be affected by another, to be emotionally at stake in them in some way. As an ethical obligation, to care is to be-

> come subject to another, to recognize an obligation to look after another. Finally, as a practical labour, caring requires more from us than abstract well wishing, it requires that we get involved in some concrete way, that we do something (wherever possible) to take care of another.

These dimensions of care are echoed in coral restoration practices. Baruch Rinkevich, a pioneer in coral restoration, advocated for cultivating corals in ocean nurseries and popularized 'gardening' as a metaphor for restoration (Rinkevich, 2005). As Braverman (2018) explains, gardening is a meaningful act in the face of ecological degradation, not as an isolated activity, but a method of care. This metaphor captures the way restoration work reflects deep emotional and ethical investment in the reef, namely caring for the environment of the coral reef and trying to improve its degraded status. A related image of care appears in Quigley's (2021) poetic idea of 'caring for colour', a fight against the chromatic disappearance of corals. He writes, 'Caring for the Reef may be… a caring for colour – a caring against chromatic disappearance and a caring toward chromatic repair' (Quigley, 2021, p. 83). When corals lose their colour, the ecosystem is already in crisis. In this sense, caring for the colours of coral is caring for the life of the reef itself.

This emotional and relational engagement with the reef echoes in local cultural expressions of connection to the sea. Mahmoud Mau, a poet from Lamu, an island off the northern coast of Kenya, articulates his bond with the sea *(bahari)*[15] not just as a source of livelihood or beauty, but as a site of memory, emotion, and origin (Raia, 2019). In one of his poems, he compares being in the sea to being in his mother's womb:

Bahari kwangu mimi mbali nakuwa naipenda kwa ajili ya mazowezi, lakini piya bahari inanipa utulivu wa moyo na mapumziko ya roho baharini nahisi raha ambayo haielezeki labda ni kwasababu kuwemo baharini inaikumbusha nafsi yangu wakati nilipokuwa tumboni kwa mama nilipokuwa nikiogeleya katika maji yaliyonizunguka hali ambayo akili haikumbuki wakati huo lakini bila shaka roho na moyo unakumbuka hiyo hali labda ndio sababu yakuhisi utulivu ninapo kuwa baharini[16]

For me, I love the sea because of the water, but the sea also gives me peace of mind and rest of the soul in the sea. I feel a pleasure that is indescribable, maybe because being in the sea reminds me of the time when I was in my mother's womb, when I was swimming in the water around me, a situation that the mind does not remember. At that time, but of course the soul and heart remember that situation, maybe that's the reason why I feel calm when I'm at sea.[17]

15 *Bahari* is the Swahili word for sea.

16 Raia, 2019, p. 237.

17 My translation in English of Mahmoud Mau's poem.

This metaphor suggests a profound relational bond, not just between mother and child, but between human beings and the ocean as a nurturing presence. The ocean, here, is not simply a resource but a relative, a caregiver. His words echo a broader call, such as the one made by Amitav Ghosh in *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2022), to recognize rivers, mountains, and oceans as kin, and to extend the domain of care beyond the human. Ghosh challenges us to rethink kinship: what happens when we consider nonhuman beings as our relatives? Can we expand our moral and emotional imagination to include the more-than-human world as part of our extended family?

I have often questioned whether I can perceive the coral reef, a non-human entity, as one of my relatives. This question resonates with broader theoretical reflections on how we relate to the non-human world. In the face of ecological crisis, Donna Haraway (2016) calls on us to 'make kin, not babies', an invitation to forge meaningful bonds beyond traditional family ties and to expand our notions of kinship to include nonhuman life. This idea urges us to build relationships based on shared care, responsibility, and accountability across species lines, encouraging us to recognize how deeply our lives are entangled with the more-than-human world. To be honest, I find this a difficult question, and I'm not sure I have a definitive answer yet. However, I can say that I feel a relational bond with the reef environment. My emotions toward the reef are a complex blend of wonder, admiration, and concern. The concern arises from the alarming state of coral reefs worldwide and the many threats they face (Hughes et al., 2017). The wonder and admiration stem from the reef's intricacy, its vibrant colours, diverse shapes, and teeming marine life have left a deep impression on me. Observing this biodiversity while immersing myself in the environment feels extraordinary. Underwater, I enter a world where other species seem unbothered by my presence. Unlike most animals on land, which tend to flee, the fish I encountered underwater often appeared indifferent or even curious (cf. Bozec et al., 2011; Rahimi, 2020).

Taking up Amitav Ghosh's invitation to expand the circle of kin beyond the human and Donna Haraway's emphasis on actively 'making kin' through shared care (Haraway, 2016; Ghosh, 2022), I began to imagine the reef as part of that extended family of relations. One thing that stands out is the repeated, physical act of visiting the reef and its inhabitants. In human relationships, visiting relatives is often considered a meaningful expression of care, while absence may signal distance or even neglect. Have all my dives expanded my circle of kin? The reef became a place I loved returning to. I cherished every dive, whether by day or by night. And just as I said goodbye to the people I met at camp and in the villages, I also said goodbye to the reef when it was time to leave. In my fieldnotes and dive logbook, I even named them: REEFolution goodbye dives.

> This morning, I did two 'goodbye' dives together with Yatin. For the first dive, we followed the same route on the Pilli Pipa site as we did during last Sunday's night dive, and we spotted the same big orange frogfish once more. The sense of familiarity was comforting, both in recognizing the underwater structures and in seeing our froggy friend, but this time during the day. For the second dive, we went to the Firefly site. As it was my 'goodbye dive', it felt meaningful to visit both reef sites across the channel, on the Shimoni and Wasini Island sides. Still, it felt bittersweet, knowing that these were my last dives in the channel (hopefully just for now). (Fieldnote, April 18, 2023).

These fieldnotes reflect a sense of connection, and perhaps even hint at the kind of farewell one shares with relatives.

Reflexivity: My Own Positionality

Regarding reflexivity of this research, I would like to reflect upon my position as a researcher and my research by presenting a rather long quote while staying close to the ocean component of my thesis:

> It requires us to dive deep into the sea of other people's lives and find a way to swim with them. It requires commitment, endurance, constant improvisation, humility, sociality, and the ability to give oneself up to and for others. It also entails the ability to retrieve oneself and be prepared to rethink, from this position, everything one thinks one knows. And then it needs one to swim back to the shore and be prepared that this shore is almost always going to be different from the shore where one began (Shah, 2017, p. 53).

This beautiful quote captures the essence of my research journey, emphasizing the need for immersion, or in my case to dive into the lives and experiences of others, both humans and non-human beings. However, a challenge I faced is the uncomfortableness to venture beyond the safety of my familiar shoreline, thus the standard research methods as interviewing, etc. This was driven by the fear of diving into the vast unknown waters of applying multispecies ethnography and using my observations of diving as a research method. Many times, I found myself questioning: 'Who am I to observe the coral reef solely through my anthropological lens?' Can I write about coral reefs while having no educational background in marine ecology? My insecurities seem to intensify, especially since I lived among individuals who possess extensive knowledge about coral reefs and marine ecology. Yet, to evolve and grow in my own academic thinking, but also to argue that within the social sciences 'the social' cannot be assumed to be exclusively tied to human beings. Therefore, it was essential to overcome this fear, embrace new

perspectives and delve literally into the depth of the sea, and expand upon multispecies approaches.

Shah's notion of 'constant improvisation' also resonates. Doing research rarely follows a straight path. It often requires adapting to new circumstances and environments, rethinking approaches when faced with challenges or new information. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I postponed my research, took a gap year, and completed an internship at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. When I finally arrived in Kenya, my life changed dramatically: from formal office wear to flip-flops, and from city life to living in a tent located in the coastal forest. For seven months, I lived outdoors, surrounded by nature, which was a source of great joy.

However, I struggled in the early weeks, not with the tent lifestyle but with rediscovering my research path and re-entering an ethnographic mindset. My research had been on hold for a year, and my proposal, originally based on desk research and literature, needed to be reworked to fit the realities I was now encountering. The field was much broader than I anticipated. Through REEFolution, I met a wide range of people and other interesting organizations located in the area, such as seaweed farming projects. Even though I had very interesting conversations, I noticed that I drifted away from my geographic scope, and therefore also my actual focus, the coral reef. Doing research is a dynamic process, and as I needed to go back to the shore, I reflected upon it and narrowed down my scope and returned to the reef.

After graduating, I was offered a position with the REEFolution Foundation, the Dutch-Kenyan NGO, that had played a key role during my thesis research. Working as Operations Officer, I supported the organisation's daily operations, facilitated communication between the Dutch and Kenyan teams, and contributed to fundraising and grant writing proposal efforts. This role allowed me to stay actively involved with the work and the people who had become so meaningful to me during my fieldwork.

It's a strange yet full-circle moment: two years after I first left this place, I now find myself writing about it for this book chapter. Reconnecting with the reef, the community, and the familiar faces of friends and colleagues brought a deep sense of homecoming. I am immensely grateful to the many people I met in Kenya, individuals who shaped my journey both academically and personally.

Looking ahead, I hope to pursue a PhD someday and continue exploring the questions and themes that first emerged during my thesis. With a strong network and deep familiarity with the area, continuing this work feels like a natural next step.

For now, I aim to keep diving, stay involved in marine conservation, and remain closely connected to Kenya.

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5

From Urban Shores to Remote Breaks: Surfing fantasies and Apartheid Realities along South Africa's Wild Coast

David Drengk

Introduction

As a ResMAAS student from 2013 to 2015, I conducted ethnographic research along the coastline of South Africa and in local communities within the former *Bantustan* of the Transkei, a territory primarily designated for the Xhosa-speaking part of the Black South African population.[18] This six-month research project was an integral part of my MA studies in the Netherlands – a period that would become foundational for my subsequent academic career. Working independently and immersing myself in village communities profoundly shaped my research skills and personal development.[19]

Beginning in Cape Town, I travelled along the coast, passing through the Garden Route, South Africa's surfing Mecca, Jeffreys Bay, and eventually reaching my destination: The legendary Wild Coast. Even before arriving in South Africa,

18 The name of the main research site has been changed to Lwandhle because this chapter partially addresses issues that are sensitive in a South African context. This can provoke reactions and evoke emotions among certain individuals, which I cannot predict. Such reactions could, in turn, trigger specific social and political dynamics that can quickly escalate. Ethically, the most important consideration during the writing process is the protection of all interviewees, and I aim to minimise disruption to people's lives through my work.
Furthermore, the names of interviewees are not stated for reasons of anonymity and individual protection.

19 I have turned parts of my research into another chapter in an edited volume published by Ohio University Press. This contribution examines the interactions between the aforementioned visiting White surfers and local village community members against the backdrop of racial segregation in apartheid South Africa before 1994. This chapter shifts focus to visiting surfers, rather than the previously highlighted perspective. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognise that the experiences of White surfers in the former Transkei were also influenced by their interactions with local village communities. Including this aspect in the current discussion would exceed the scope of this contribution and has already been addressed in the following publication. For further insights into this other part of the narrative of surfing at the Wild Coast, see Drengk (2020: pp. 111-124).

I had heard numerous stories about the so-called untamed power of nature and the unpredictable, fast-changing weather along this approximately 200-kilometer stretch of coastline. Once in South Africa, in Mossel Bay, some veteran surfers further fuelled my curiosity with tales of picture-perfect waves, supposedly untouched landscapes, and rolling hills stretching endlessly into the horizon. As an avid, nature-loving surf traveller myself, these narratives of presumably empty waves and secluded beach life resonated deeply with me, representing the settings that surf travellers typically seek out.

As my research progressed, I realized that I was not the first young traveller to be captivated by the Transkeian Wild Coast. In fact, my journey paralleled that of the first surfers who ventured into this region in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like them, I was drawn by the allure of remote, unspoilt waves. At the same time, my research also sought to understand those who had travelled to the former *bantustan* during the height of apartheid, from the 1970s to 1994. What compelled these surfers to explore a region that was politically and socially segregated? Why did they defy the racist apartheid policies that were designed to privilege them? And what exactly did the Wild Coast offer that made it worth the risk? As I journeyed deeper into the Wild Coast, I encountered first-hand what Steve Pike, a renowned Capetonian surfer and author, had warned me about when I met him in Cape Town – I succumbed to 'Pondo Fever' as soon as I set foot on this remote and breathtaking coastline.[20]

As my interviews and interactions with travelling surfers indicate, these individuals can often be regarded as *soul surfers* rather than commercialized professional competitors. They embody a philosophy that 'celebrated the pure, non-competitive, aspect of the sport: the simple joy of riding ocean waves'" (Crawford, 1997). As in other contexts, in South Africa, '[c]ounterculture's "soul surfing" had much to offer. It proposed an alternative to the perceived bondage of consumerism. It also served to set apart surfing from other cultural formations by emphasizing its ideological difference' (McGloin, 2005, p. 98).

Amidst *soul surfing* fantasies and apartheid realities, this chapter draws on my ethnographic journey to the Eastern Cape to explore how, at that time, young White surfers interpreted their travels to the Wild Coast within the racial segrega-

20 'Pondo Fever' does not refer to an actual disease but symbolically represents the enchantment that the Wild Coast can cast upon its visitors from the moment they arrive. Indeed, as I describe myself as having been infected by this 'fever', I have adopted a specific position in the field. Consequently, the line between researcher and researched informants has become very thin. It is essential to acknowledge this, as it likely influenced the way I conducted research along the Wild Coast and, furthermore, impacted how research informants perceived me in the field.

tionist framework of apartheid South Africa. Their journeys were largely shaped by romanticised notions of discovering remote, untouched waves in what they often regarded as the 'true Africa'. However, these explorations unfolded against the backdrop of White privilege, which encompassed freedom of movement and the possibility of political participation, alongside the harsh realities of apartheid, characterised by the structural and physical segregation of South African society.

While the study of competitive surfing can draw on various sources – including official reports from surfing associations, swimming, lifesaving and surf clubs, newspaper articles, and accounts from influential athletes – the study of *soul surfing* often lacks such readily available documentation. This chapter provides a shift in perspective within the study of South African surfing history. It highlights surfing in the 'periphery' of the Wild Coast, in contrast to Thompson's previous writings on 'Surf City' and urban surfing (2011b), which trace the origins of South African surfing.

Here, the term 'periphery' in the broader national surfing community refers to remote coastal regions in South Africa, which, apart from a small group of privileged, travelling White surfers, had not yet been significantly engaged with by the wider national surfing community. This, if one wishes to go that far, reveals something about the surfing community in South Africa at the time: emphasis was placed on the urban centres where access to the most pristine surfing beaches was granted exclusively to White South Africans.

From personal experiences, I know that to most outsiders, surfers seem to be a homogenous group, often characterised by their seemingly easy-going nature and carefree lifestyle. Both in the past and today, such stereotypes have been deliberately crafted and reinforced by international film productions, television soaps, and a growing global surf culture industry (Ormrod, 2005).[21] However, despite the apparent uniformity of these portrayals, surfing, like most sociocultural practices, is inherently heterogeneous in both its practices and underlying motivations. As one interviewee aptly noted: '[…] people come to surf for various reasons. And you can't just say well surfers are, you know, surfing is escaping. […] the nature of escape can be very different to many different people based on a range of factors. So, the stereotype can't always hold.'[22]

21 For example, the Hollywood beach film production Gidget (1959) and other movie productions such as North Shore (1987), In God's Hands (1998), Blue Crush (2002).

22 Interview 1.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first two examine the origins of the earliest exploratory trips to the Wild Coast, place the Transkei within its historical context, and explore the significance of travel within this historically shaped *bantustan*. The second part, based on my research in South Africa, focuses on two motivations behind these journeys that contributed to the *soul surfing* fantasies of the time: the avoidance of conscription and the pursuit of *dagga* consumption.

Early Surfing Journeys in South Africa

The chronology of South African surfing shows its origins in the urban environments of Cape Town and Durban. After World War II, US American Navy soldiers were reported to have brought the first surfboards with them and introduced the sport to South Africa. While surfing began to flourish along Durban's beaches around 1947, a young Capetonian, John Whitmore, crafted the first foam surfboard in South Africa in 1954 (Spike, 2007). From the 1960s onwards, the number of surfers increased significantly across the country, leading to a rise in water users (Wilson, 1965). Surfing became increasingly popular, partly driven by the introduction of surfing magazines, such as *South African Surfer*, in 1965, and innovations in board design (Spike, 2007). This growth was also fuelled by the expanding White middle class resulting from apartheid.

Although South African surfing was not widely recognized internationally in the early 1960s, at a time when *soul surfing* had already become a significant issue in Australian surfing, this changed tremendously in 1966 with the release of the film *Endless Summer* (Ormrod, 2005). Suddenly, South African surfing and its showcased, untouched waves gained recognition and were increasingly on everyone's lips (Wavescape, 2008). The film, in particular, sparked a sense of euphoria for surf exploration within South Africa and across the global surfing community (Ladermann, 2014).[23] Ladermann (2016) argues that '[b]y the late 1960s travel had in fact become a foundational element of the modern surfing experience' (p. 870).[24]

The drive for exploration of uncharted waves not only marked the early days of South African surfing but also embodied the essence of *soul surfing*. As McGloin (2005) describes, *soul surfing* was 'romantic, non-competitive, naturalistic and unregulated', and its 'early years were marked by travel, usually overseas to what were considered bigger and better waves […]' (pp. 99-100). This enthusiasm for

23 Finnegan mentions that *Endless Summer* influenced him to a large extent. It was one of the initial reasons for him to go to South Africa for the surf (Finnegan, 1994, p. 12).

24 Sometimes, this newly emerging mobility of surfing on a global scale stood in contrast to local surfing endeavours (Anderson, 2014).

exploration continued in the 1970s, with John Whitmore's first surf explorations along the coastline and Durban surfers' trips to Seal Point in Jeffreys Bay laying the groundwork for the penetration of surfers into the Wild Coast. As a Volkswagen salesman, Whitmore owned one of the first VW Kombis produced in South Africa. This Kombi, equipped with roof racks, later became an iconic symbol of surfing adventure and exploration along South Africa's coastline.[25]

In 1968, Australian surf travellers introduced a new way of wave riding: '[s]urfing changed from riding waves to performing on them' (Spike, 2007, p. 19). These travellers brought with them new images from other global surfing scenes. The late 1960s were a period defined by global ideals of peace, countercultural movements, and the emergence of a hippie lifestyle, often associated with Californian beaches (Thompson, 2011c). Drugs, particularly marijuana varieties like Durban Poison and Transkei Gold, played a significant role in the lives of many young people (Spike, 2007).

Through the influence of travelling Australian surfers, among others, ideas of *soul surfing* began to take root in South Africa's surfing communities, leading to the formation of different factions within the scene. New liberal education systems in Australia, for example, contributed to the rise of an educated White middle-class youth who 'rejected high consumption, materialism and competition, and they expounded a form of "fraternal" individualism which extolled creativity and self-expression within a co-operative milieu' (Booth, 2008, p. 275).[26] The early days of surfing at the Wild Coast in the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, resulted from both the growing numbers of surfers in South Africa's urban centres, an emerging White middle class and the global trend of surf exploration. The emergence of a White middle class, in particular, mirrors developments in other surfing destinations worldwide, such as California (Ormrod, 2005). This fostered a community of young, adventurous White surfers who, like their Australian *soul surfing* counterparts, refused the relocation of 'the meaning of surfing within the notion of careers and professions' (Crawford, 1997).[27] They incorporated these ideals into their beach lifestyle and brought them to the rural areas of the former *bantustan*. The remoteness, high-quality waves, and empty line-ups of the Transkeian Wild

25 Thompson acknowledges that the VW Kombi was directly associated with surf culture (Thompson, 2008, p. 82).

26 Australian Emeritus Professor Douglas Booth has taught and researched extensively on the social history of sport. Among other issues, surfing is a prominent field of study (Booth, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1999, 2008, 2017a, 2017b, 2016).

27 'Waves of Transformation: Californian Surf Culture since World War II,' Unpublished paper for the First International and Eleventh National MELUS Conference. Honolulu, Hawaii. https://www.lajollasurf.org/waves-of-transformation/ [accessed 30 March 2025].

Coast were particularly attractive, especially as surf spots in Jeffreys Bay, Cape Town, and Durban became increasingly popular and crowded.[28]

Apartheid Realities: The Transkei in Perspective

The Wild Coast is located within the former Transkei, one of the so-called former *bantustans* established by the apartheid government as a separate residential area for isi-Xhosa-speaking Black South Africans. Southall (1983) identifies three primary motives behind these *bantustan* policies. First, the government employed the strategy of 'divide and rule'. Second, *bantustans* were integral to the broader objective of securing the independence of these designated areas, thereby fragmenting the country 'into a white core and Black peripheral states' (Southall, 1983, p. 281). By stripping Black South Africans of their South African citizenship and conferring *bantustan* citizenship, the government ensured their political and economic exclusion from the White-dominated core of South Africa. With such sociopolitical practices, apartheid consciously created peripheries in the territory. Third, these policies were driven by the ideology of 'separate development' of the African population (Richardson, 1978). This concept sought to establish a system of local governance in which Africans would be governed by their own leaders, albeit under the strict supervision and control of the White South African state (Carter, Karis, & Stultz, 1967). Black South Africans were thus confined to their respective 'tribal' *bantustans*, preventing their integration into White, predominantly urban, settlements (Carter, Karis, & Stultz, 1967).

In 1963, the *bantustan* of Transkei attained self-governing status with its appointed political authorities. The Transkei Constitution Act of 1963 officially established the territory as a self-governing entity.[29] One of Transkei's most prominent chiefs and political leaders, Chief Kaiser Daliwonga Matanzima, played a key role in paving the way for its independence, receiving support of the Pretoria government in the early 1970s.[30] On 26 October 1976, Transkei was granted juridical

28 Interview 16. 'The line-up is the place just outside the breaking waves where surfers wait for their waves.' See online at: http://www.surfing-waves.com/surf_talk.htmL [Accessed 07 March 2025].
Several interviewees mentioned the increasing crowds that were chasing the most popular waves, which often lead to heavy localism and often even aggression in the water. Therefore, people went on surf adventures to find 'calmer waters' where they could escape this kind of pressure.

29 Carter, Karis, and Stultz discuss the resulting provisions of this Constitution Act, such as Finance and the Cabinet (1967, pp. 120-124).

30 This independence is not to be mistaken with the independence of nation states as the declaration of independence of the Republic of the Transkei was not internationally recognized.

independence.[31] As Southall notes, this development aligned with the apartheid government's broader rhetoric and strategy of structuring South African society along racial lines (Southall, 1977).

After the Transkei was declared a republic in 1976, border posts, visa requirements, and other administrative barriers became significant obstacles for travellers. Numerous police and military roadblocks throughout the Transkei exemplified these challenges, often involving passport inspections and general security checks. For foreigners travelling to and not boycotting South Africa, border crossings became particularly cumbersome due to the limited number of official entry points. Consequently, travellers were frequently unable to follow the coastline directly and were instead compelled to make substantial inland detours to reach designated border posts where entry permissions could be obtained.[32]

These restrictions also highlighted the persistence of White privilege. Although the Transkeian administration, under its first president, was nominally an independent state, Matanzima's government remained closely aligned with and supported by the apartheid regime in Pretoria.[33] This political arrangement created conditions that were particularly favourable for White travelling *soul surfers*, as the White government continued to exert control over the region. Consequently, young *soul surfers* retained the same privileges at the remote Wild Coast as they did in the urban White core of South Africa. Despite their 'lifestyle consumption' and their 'ideals and values that pushed against apartheid's political regulation of social life and the moral authoritarianism of the apartheid state' (Thompson, 2017, p. 159), the status as 'a privileged social class in apartheid deprived competitive [and soul-] surfing the possibility of unshackling itself from this history' (Thompson, 2011a, p. 44).

The political history of pre-independence Transkei and the republic after 1976 is highly complex. It was shaped by intricate power dynamics and competing political and economic interests, resulting in a political landscape characterized by representation issues, structural weaknesses due to limited financial resources, and ongoing power struggles.[34] The political and economic fragility of the Tran-

31 This independence was never accepted by the international community, and the United Nations condemned the newly formed state.

32 Interview 11.

33 For a detailed analysis of the life of Matanzima and his politics, see Streek (1981). For some further information on the supposed independence of the Transkei, see Southall's examinations (1977, 1983).

34 Peires examines the internal power struggles and structural administrative weaknesses extensively (1992).

skei, both as a *bantustan* and later as a republic, contributed to the systematic underdevelopment of its rural areas.

The central regions of the Wild Coast have historically suffered from this structural disadvantage, resulting in the continued deterioration of local infrastructure and persistent underdevelopment in the education sector. Even today, a lack of financial resources exacerbates these issues. While some roads have been constructed in recent years, infrastructure, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities remain in a dire state. As a result, the local population faces significant challenges, with limited prospects for economic and educational advancement (Bank & Minkley, 2008).

During the 1970s and 1980s, tarred roads were non-existent, and even gravel roads were scarce.[35] As one account describes, '[…] before there wasn't a road, there was a track. So, you would follow the track […].'[36] At the time, private cars and motorbikes were the primary modes of transportation, once again signalling a rising White middle class in South Africa.[37]

> Travelling within South Africa used to be mostly about venturing into the unknown, entering a strange, wispy world of rumours, hand-drawn maps, petrol budgets and camping equipment. This was a world populated by beat-up old Kombis, as well as Beetles, old bakkies and an assortment of barely functioning modes of transport handed down from generation to generation. Whether it was a Ford F1 or a Passat station wagon, it was desperation over functionality over glamour (Jarvis & Beatty, 2007, p. 14).

Some surf spots could only be reached by hiking along physically challenging paths, sometimes for several hours. As a result, accessing the isolated coastal areas of the Transkei was both a demanding and adventurous endeavour – an aspect that particularly appealed to *soul surfers*. This challenge served as a natural filter, attracting individuals who were not only adventurous and passionate about travel and exploration but, more importantly, those with the financial resources and flexible schedules necessary for such journeys.[38] At the same time, it should be acknowledged that these surfers were largely aware they were unlikely to face the same penalties if caught along Transkeian beaches as Black South Africans apprehended for attempting to access Muizenberg beach in Cape Town, for in-

35 Interview 15.
36 Interview 8.
37 Interview 7.
38 Interview 23.

stance. Therefore, their freedom of movement should never be underestimated when it comes to surf exploration.

Deteriorating infrastructure and border posts were not the only challenges young travellers faced during their journeys. Particularly in the mid-to-late 1980s, many reported that Transkei officials openly asserted their authority during encounters, marking a recognizable shift in power dynamics. As one traveller noted, this 'was a new thing for us, you know. As a White South African, for the first time they were in charge.'[39] This shift must be understood within the broader political context of the 1980s, a period in which both the Transkei and its population became increasingly politicized. The African National Congress (ANC) and its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), became more visible and active in the region, contributing to a changing atmosphere for White surfers.[40] By the mid-1980s, clashes between government forces and anti-apartheid fighters had become more frequent (South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), 2010; Houston, 1999; Manganyi & Du Troit, 1990). As one account describes, 'the apartheid thing was heavier. Everyone was rioting. So the news got to them, and they started showing their aggression towards [W]hite people. And especially Afrikaans, […T]here was a bit of an anti-Afrikaans thing at that stage.'[41] In this sense, towards the end of apartheid, the Transkei surf retreat became increasingly entangled in the country's broader political struggle. As apartheid realities became more pronounced, these began to challenge the escapist fantasies associated with the surfing subculture of *soul surfing*.

The Transkei Surfing Imaginary: Seeking the 'True' Africa

Many *soul surfers* were influenced by global countercultural trends that encouraged them to seek out remote and untouched locations (Ormrod, 2005). In South Africa, this pursuit led them to the former Transkei, where they aimed to practice what they saw as the 'purest' form of surfing – far removed from the commercialism of mainstream 'surf city' culture. However, their motivations were complex and varied.

A close examination of the narratives of South African *soul surfers* reveals both similarities to their counterparts elsewhere in the world and distinctly South African characteristics. While one important motivation for these journeys was the search for waves, this was not the sole reason for travelling to the Wild Coast.

39 Interview 23.

40 For example, Douek examines the increasing political unrest and clashes in the Transkei towards the end of apartheid (2013).

41 Interview 4.

Many surfers spoke of the unique allure that the Transkei, and particularly the Wild Coast, held for the younger generation of White South Africans. Above all, surfing in the former Transkei was – and continues to be – regarded as an adventure.[42] People came to the area

> […] for the same reason that everybody comes here now. It's untouched, it's peaceful. It's a little bit risky maybe. […] You can do things that you couldn't do, you are less likely to do in South Africa. […] I suppose the guys smoked too much here and stuff like that. Those kinds of things you know. […] I suppose it's just relaxed and stuff like that you know. […] It's an adventure, it's beautiful and stuff like that.[43]

In their accounts, surfers frequently employ vivid and evocative language to describe the landscape. The presumably untouched nature of the area is often depicted as breathtaking, as one surfer recalled: 'It was wild, there was nothing there. It was a beautiful place, untouched.'[44] Their narratives suggest a strong sense of nostalgia when reflecting on their experiences in the Transkei, particularly the environment and scenery of the Wild Coast. Another surfer described it in detail: 'The hills were just like, with the scrambler you could just ride anywhere you know. The valleys are nice. They got trees and some beautiful forests and things there. But the hills are quite open, just sort of grassland you know [with] cattle, sheep.'[45] This romanticized portrayal aligns with broader analyses of *soul surfing*, which

> …was a romantic movement motivated by a somewhat utopian view of 'back to nature' simplicity that sat in contradistinction to a burgeoning technological society. The emphasis was on symbiosis and harmony with the 'natural' world, rather than ownership, competition and acquisition (McGloin, 2005, p. 50).

Indeed, surfers travelled to the Wild Coast and lived off the sea for weeks. As one surfer recalled, 'we got a lot of stuff from the sea there: Grayfish, […] big grayfish every day if the sea was right you know. And shells and mussels and things like that.'[46] The region seemed to exert a mystical influence on those who visited. As Taylor (2007) notes, '[f]or some, surfing is a religious experience, and it does not take long analysing material surf culture or its associated rhetoric to see its spirituality-infused nature' (p. 924).

42 Interview 16.
43 Interview 17.
44 Interview 8.
45 Interview 4.
46 Interview 4.

Young *soul surfers* at the Wild Coast often spoke of the spots as places of peace and isolation. A White Capetonian surfer in his 50s, who moved to the Transkei in his childhood and returned frequently during his time at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, explained, '[our] generation, we were not interested in apartheid at all. We were just young guys who were trying to make sense of the world. And the Wild Coast was one place where you could suspend all that crap you know.'[47] One anecdote about nudity exemplifies the sense of liberty and independence some of the surfers were looking for:

> [O]n the South African side of the border, you were not allowed to be topless on the beach with the girls. But at Wild Coast […], they were. So it was a very different world. Very different. And of course, when we used to come down to the Transkei area […] we'd basically strip naked and party and carry on. The whole week or the time we were there.[48]

For these surfers, the Wild Coast served as a retreat from political tension and racial confrontation. However, again, it strikingly illustrates how privileged they were during apartheid, as they were the ones in society who could afford and enjoy such retreats. The majority of South African society could not enjoy such privilege. One interviewee even expressed a desire to have been born in the Transkei, stating: 'I wish I had been born there [in the Transkei] as a subsistence agriculturalist person rather than in the [W]hite culture".[49] However, this surfer's idealization of life in the rural areas of the Transkei reflects a fantasy, one that overlooks the stark realities faced by local Black communities under apartheid rule.

Notably, the Wild Coast is frequently described as the 'true Africa' in such accounts. During the 1970s and 1980s, surfers often relied on hand-drawn maps, the content of which was typically gathered through word of mouth. Additionally, other maps could be obtained in the Transkei's capital city Umtata.

> [In Umtata] they had these hiking maps, which were really rare. And they were even out of print and stuff. But they had a high zoomed in view sort of the coast with all the contours of the points. So we used to collect them […] and then take a pencil and try and figure out where the waves were. And then draw on the maps where we have been.[50]

47 Interview 4.
48 Interview 8.
49 Interview 7.
50 Interview 7.

A map, published in *Down the Line* in 1976, features a hand-drawn map of the Wild Coast, providing a range of information about surfing and weather conditions in various Transkeian coastal areas. Alongside these practical details, the map's unknown author also includes personal impressions and perceptions of the rural Wild Coast and its inhabitants. For instance, the map provides insights into the road conditions of the time, as well as the author's broader perspective on the region. What is particularly striking is how language plays a significant role in crafting a mythical image of the rural Transkei and the Wild Coast. This is especially evident when considering titles such as 'Into the Wild' (Sanders 2015). Although Sanders' photo report documents more recent surf trips, his introduction reflects the perception of young surfers from previous decades, mirroring their nostalgic view of the Wild Coast:

> That feeling of sitting in an empty line-up and looking back to the shore, seeing nothing but beautiful green rolling hills and traditional homes and cattle on the beach really makes you feel like you are in Africa (Sanders, 2015).

The image evoked by such language in travel reports and maps reinforces stereotypes of Black African village communities that apartheid also propagated, portraying them as symbols of the 'deepest Africa' or the 'true Africa'. All of these elements reflect the common perception of the Transkeian coastal areas as being highly underdeveloped and untouched. One interviewee recalls being positively surprised during one of his early surf trips by the way people lived, as this had seemed unimaginable to him before. This reflects how effectively the apartheid administration managed to segregate people along racial lines, particularly in their minds imaginations:

> And you realized that in the rural areas they are quite friendly. […] Just go once and you realize, well, actually, it's cool, you know. People are cool. […] I mean I have broken down in the middle of the Transkei, the car slid off into a ditch, combi, couldn't get it out. And […] I just went up to the first hut, and you know you expected the hut to be this black room with a fire on the floor in the middle and people huddle around it, kind of rough living you know, like a cave. And the lady opened the door, a two-piece door and I looked in it and it was immaculate. It was, she used linoleum on the floor and she had all her furniture. Everything was spottily [sic] clean; it was just an amazing little spot. She called some people to help and span an ox; they pulled the car with the oxen. They didn't want anything [in return].[51]

51 Interview 7.

Hideaway from Military Conscription

The opposition to war is a central theme that can be found in both Australian *soul surfing* in the 1960s and South African *soul surfing* from the 1970s and 1980s. While it mirrored the anti-war sentiments of surfers in other nations, it was also reflected in the resistance of young South Africans to mandatory national military service. Some *soul surfers* in the Tranksei were actively avoiding their army service. This resistance gained momentum in the 1980s, particularly after the passing of the Defence Amendment Act of 1967, which made conscription more stringent.[52]

On one hand, many young White South Africans were reluctant to join the South African Defence Force (SADF) and fight in the South African Border Wars, which took place in Namibia, Zambia and Angola between 1966 and 1990.[53] On the other hand, opposition to the increasing number of soldiers deployed in townships across the country, particularly during the 1980s, also grew. Young White men were faced with the choice of either serving two years in the military or evading service, an act that could result in up to six years of imprisonment. The only way to avoid jail was to leave South Africa or go into hiding (End Conscription Campaign, 1990). Many who refused to fight in the SADF, for various, often very personal, reasons, either left the country or sought refuge. Between 1977 and 1981, for example, 1000 young men were granted political asylum in Great Britain (Brittion & Graham, 1983, p. 71). Others

> …objected to that [the call up/conscription] and they said, no they are not part of this government and they gonna go stay in the Transkei. [B]ut the problem is as soon as you came back, they catch you and they throw you in jail for two years and then you still have to do your service. [Therefore], some just stayed away for ten years you know. Or forever.[54]

Some of those who surfed at the time sought refuge in remote areas of the Transkei to evade conscription, an act they could ultimately perform only due to their

52 South African History Online: towards a people's history, 'Military conscription for all white males in South Africa is enforced', online available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/military-conscription-all-white-males-south-africa-enforced [Accessed 11 March 2025].
Since the opposition to war and military service created a long-lasting discussion in South African White society, there exist several further examinations that deal with this issue: Conway (2012, 2004), for instance, looks at the aspect of projected and throws a light on the increasing militarization within South Africa.

53 As an illustration, Oosthuizen examines a particular operation during that war (2005).

54 Interview 4.

privilege of being able to move comparatively freely.[55] As one surfer explained, 'the police they wouldn't get you in there. So, a lot of the guys went to Port St. Johns I think and stayed there during conscription.'[56] This form of resistance or evasion contributed to these young men's marginalised position in society. Refusing military service was viewed as an act of betrayal, and objectors were often demonized and ostracized. Conway (2004) suggests that objectors were regarded as 'sexually "deviant"' (p. 208). Within the army, young men were occasionally subjected to lectures about the evil influence of The Beatles and communism, which indicates that military officials brainwashed young South Africans during their service (Paarman, 2009). Thus, as both *soul surfers* and objectors, these young people faced rampant prejudice, particularly from the conservative establishment of society.

Dagga Consumption and Social Positions

> It was amazing. We used to surf in Lwandhle. And you come down this hill and there is this long beach and river and the hill. We surfed this point for a while and then one of the guys said to the kids 'Have you got any intsangu?' Iphi intsangu? Where is the grass? Where is the marijuana? And the guy is like 'come with me'. And he took him along the beach, they got to the river and then he had to whistle, and a guy came down the mountain, down the hill. He came across in his boat, you need to pay him five Rand and then you go across the river and then you go up the hill and on top of the hill is a big plantation, right there. And we went there. It was growing in rows everywhere. Right there on top of the hill, overlooking the surf spot. There were the women kneeling down or sitting down on the ground talking and they were stripping with their hands, like the branches. And they were rubbing the hash off their hands and making little balls. And then the old man […] he took us for a walk around his plantation.[57]

The use of drugs, alongside the opposition to conscription, was another issue that contributed to the disapproval many *soul surfers* faced from conservative White South African society when they travelled to the Wild Coast.

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55 For some surfers, army service also meant that they could surf even more than outside the army. Paarman describes that both his brother Jonathan Paarman and Shaun Tomson used to surf on government's expenses during their army service (Paarman, 2009, p. 78).
The SADF supported surfing and (team) sports in general because sports was regarded as 'an important means by which individual [W]hite men's bodies were shaped and prepared for military service. Sport was a powerful social metaphor for [W]hite society and had been a persistent theme in Afrikaner nationalist discourse' Conway (2012, p. 71).

56 Interview 7.

57 Interview 7.

> South Africa's insular and socially conservative society in the late 1960s and 1970s did not take easily to the Californian inspired hippie movement. Since the late 1960s, South African surfing's enthusiasm for organised surfing sidelined much of the potential subversiveness of counter-cultural tendencies within the sport […]. (Thompson, 2011a, p. 34)

Nevertheless, a small number of surfers, referred to here as *soul surfers*, were inspired by countercultural movements and often influenced by developments in the Californian and Australian (soul) surf/hippie scenes. Thompson (2011b, pp. 2116, 2125) employs the term 'Californication' to describe the growing influence of the Californian surf culture on South African (*soul*) surfers. In one of his surf studies, Thompson (2017) argues that '[…] there was a re-imagination of the surfing self through the consumption of (southern) Californian surfing culture' and that a 'youthful lifestyle' coming from California was consumed by young Whites (pp. 158-159). As such, these surfers can be seen as part of the globally emerging trends in the wider surfing world, a phenomenon also illustrated by Ladermann's (2014) description:

> […] those undertaking the journeys, were not generally members of the landed elite, their itineraries were fluid and the object of their gaze was not the patrimony of the West. These were young men looking for waves, most often in relatively untouristed destinations, and they relished their cultural exchanges along the way. The discoveries were undoubtedly important to them, but "the search" – […] – was just as significant. These were essentially backpackers with boards, seeking out those quieter parts of the planet where they might be alone – or close to it – with the locals and the ocean (p. 44).

As Ladermann demonstrates for globally travelling surfers, the same description can apply to young White South African *soul surfers* who toured through the Transkei. The global hippie movement and Californian surf culture played a pivotal role in introducing marijuana, along with other drugs, into the South African surfing scene. As a result, 'surfing's image took a nosedive into the soup' (Ladermann, 2014, p. 44). Marijuana consumption (in the modern spelling and pronunciation, widely referred to as *dagga* in Afrikaans and English in South Africa) became prevalent among young White South Africans who distanced themselves from conservative societal norms and embraced an alternative lifestyle.[58] The Transkei, historically one of South Africa's primary *dagga* growing areas, offered

58 Du Toit discusses the origin of the term further (1996, p. 130).

a secluded retreat off the radar.[59] Smoking *dagga* was once a natural part of life in the Transkei.[60] In one instance, a former White student and surfer recalled how a narcotics agent, previously employed by Rhodes University in Grahamstown, closely followed the surfing students when they travelled to the Transkei.[61] This suggests that both the government and the police were aware of young White South Africans travelling to the Wild Coast to surf and smoke *dagga*. In the Transkei, surfers had direct access to the country's prime *dagga* producers.[62] The route between Durban and Jeffreys Bay was particularly important in both the *dagga* trade and surfing culture. The Wild Coast became a sort of transit zone between these two surf destinations, where travelling surfers often became involved in the trade between Durban and Jeffreys Bay.[63] Additionally, other cities were supplied with *dagga* by travellers as one interviewee recounts: 'You put that in the back of your bakkie and when you get back to Joburg or Pretoria or Durban, you've got enough for the rest of the year and you sell it off to your friends. It was good stuff.'[64] It was not only South African travellers who became part of this trade; Australian surfers, too, were sometimes involved, feeding into fantasies of surfing and smoking *dagga* off the beaten path. They

> […] were going to the Wild Coast throughout the '60s and '70s. And they would land in Joburg, get to Durban and then they would get a combi, drive it through the Transkei, fill it up with grass and then hit for J-Bay and sell it. And then take the money and go down to Cape Town or something and have a big party. That is considered something you do, [to] pay for your trip.[65]

These accounts suggest that, in addition to personal consumption, trading *dagga* during the surfing journeys served as a means of generating income for young White travellers. At the time, *dagga* was widely accepted in the area, as it was one of the most significant sources of income for rural farmers. As one local informant explained, 'it's the cash crop of the Transkei. Everybody farms it […] it's part

59 The government also acknowledged the Transkei as one of the country's largest production site (Union of South Africa 1952, p. 13). See also interview 3.

60 For example, interview 2, 7, or 10.

61 Interview 2.

62 Although I claim that many Transkei visitors who smoked *dagga* in the area happened to be surfers, I do not intend to generalize and suggest a naturally given connection between surfing in South Africa and *dagga* smoking. I state this because I am aware of the specific image especially *soul surfing* used to have within South African society. My examination does not mean to fuel such stereotypes but only draw a historic picture based on some individuals' personal accounts and memories.

63 Interview 1.

64 Interview 8.

65 Interview 7.

of their culture'.[66] Many members of the local community in Lwandhle acknowledged that surfers came to the area primarily to smoke *dagga*, and the issue of supplying them was always a central concern.[67] There were a few *dagga* growers in remote areas where visitors could purchase it. Consequently, there were two main ways in which people could obtain *dagga*. One community member in his sixties recalled how he and his friends would guide travellers to well-known local growers, hiking to their plantations together.[68] The other method involved an intermediary.[69] In Lwandhle, one well-known middleman served as a bridge between buyers and local farmers, the growers.

Farming and consumption of *dagga* were illegal in South Africa, with violations resulting in heavy fines and often imprisonment (Paterson, 2015, p. 119). Aware of the significance of *dagga* plantations in the Transkei, the government in Pretoria regularly dispatched the South African Police (SAP) to the area to seize farms and destroy marijuana plants, typically by spraying poison from helicopters. As one interviewee recalls:

> [T]here was a special branch of the SAP that used to go and look for the stuff. […] the cops were very strict. There was a unit called SANAB – South African Narcotics Bureau. And they were pretty, pretty clued up. And they would pick you up. If you would become a regular target, a dealer, you get picked up very quickly. And they would use helicopters and fly repeatedly up and down the dagga growing areas.[70]

Consequently, community members sometimes hesitated to sell *dagga* to random White visitors or guide them to the farmers. This scepticism stemmed from local experiences with SAP forces, who regularly interrogated people in the region. There was often uncertainty about whether a White visitor might be an undercover agent or simply a surfer seeking to purchase *dagga*.[71] One of the main intermediaries disclosed that he served as the contact person in the area for any visitor wishing to buy *dagga*.[72] This arrangement was deemed safe for both visitors and growers.[73] While some community members found it unusual to see young White people smoking *dagga*, several local interviewees easily recognized

66 Interview 7.
67 Interview 30.
68 Interview 36, 39, 41.
69 The information on this sensitive topic derives from an interview with one of such former local intermediaries (interview 15).
70 Interview 8.
71 Interview 15.
72 Interview 15.
73 It did not become apparent how such intermediaries could finally decide who might have been an undercover agent and who was not.

the connection between visiting *soul surfers* and *dagga* consumption.[74] It has even been noted that seeing White people smoke *dagga* was a positive sign as it suggested they were aware of the illegality of their actions. As such, they were presumed not to sympathize with apartheid, which set them apart from others.[75]

The collected accounts suggest that *soul surfers* in the Transkei were aware of the country's political landscape, and by smoking *dagga*, they opposed the law, and, by extension, apartheid regulations and policies. Their consumption of *dagga* placed them within the illegal *dagga* market in South Africa. Craig Paterson (2010) argues that '[b]y being involved in cannabis markets, one's interracial contact almost inevitably increased, possibly duelling anti-apartheid sentiments amongst cannabis-using groups'(p. 72). In this way, they subtly challenged apartheid. Their *dagga* consumption was perceived as an act of resistance, particularly by the country's authorities (Du Toit, 1991, p. 126).[76] While not all *soul surfers* were necessarily hippies due to their *dagga* use, they were 'almost sort of judged' in the same way as hippies. I think because of the whole freedom thing […] the [soul] surfing had a sort of very negative connotation to it. And up until about into the 90s, you know, you were sort of a bit frowned upon if you were a surfer."[77] A government report from Pretoria clearly illustrates the views of both the government and conservatives toward White *dagga* consumers, stating that

> [a]mongst Europeans dagga-smoking is generally regarded as a vice and in consequence it is hardly ever respectable. From the evidence it would appear that the habit is largely confined to vagrants (hoboes, tramps) and criminals. Some female vagrants and prostitutes also seem to have taken to the habit (Union of South Africa, 1952, p. 2).[78]

Similarly to those evading conscription, young *soul surfers* who rejected conservative societal norms and values were labelled as a fringe group, met with (social) rejection, and pigeonholed.[79]

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74 For example, interview 17.

75 Interview 39.

76 Interview 39.

77 Interview 4.

78 Although this report is from 1952 and I have not identified any report from a later period, it is most likely that the government's attitude toward *dagga* smokers did also not change in the 1970s and 1980s.

79 According to Paarman, once he made it into the Springbok surfing team, officials unambiguously suggested a haircut to him (2009, p.: 14–15). After he left the competitive surfing world, he turned his back on professional surfing and got more in touch with aspects of *soul surfing*.

One key finding in the context of Transkeian *dagga* trade is the mutual dependency that existed between the *soul surfers* and the local suppliers and growers. *Soul surfers* relied on the willingness of the growers to sell them *dagga*, while the growers often depended on the money that *soul surfers* brought to the area. However, despite this interdependence, White *soul surfers* ultimately maintained the upper hand due to class differences and race. These power imbalances were too significant to overcome within the *dagga* trade, and their Whiteness dominated interactions with local Black community members. In this sense, *soul surfers* 'evaded social discipline and ideological control rather than overtly resisting forms of domination' (Thompson, 2001, p. 100).

Conclusion: Ambiguous Narratives of *Soul Surfers*

This chapter helps illuminate the role of young travelling surfers in their 20s within the structure of White domination. It provides insight into the social dynamics of a segment of White youth during apartheid, specifically, their varied responses to the rule of the racist government.

I aimed to demonstrate that society cannot be analysed as a homogeneous entity, whether in historical contexts or the present. In the context of South African surfing, I broadly identified two factions: competitive surfers and *soul surfers*. However, this chapter also highlights the limitations of such sub-categorization, as even the term *soul surfers* risks oversimplification and stereotyping within the historical contexts of South Africa.

The journeys of *soul surfers* were highly ambiguous. Their pursuit of 'back to nature' lifestyle, the exploration of untouched waves, and the desire to venture into the presumably unknown 'true Africa' fostered fantasies among young White travellers – paralleling broader trends in *soul surfing* worldwide at the time. Rejecting the consumerist values associated with commercialized competitive surfing and White society, they sought an alternative path. The Wild Coast served as a secluded retreat where these surfers could practice their surfing almost free from state interference or oversight by official surfing bodies. Their engagement in the *dagga* trade, their preference for surfing in peripheral regions rather than the country's established surf cities, and their opposition to warfare and conscription positioned them as nonconformists. In this way, they rejected social control and, to some extent, aligned with the ethos of *soul surfing*.

At the same time, it is crucial to avoid an uncritical romanticization of such so-called *soul surfing* endeavours in apartheid South Africa. These travellers' ideal-

ized journeys were often disrupted by the harsh realities of apartheid and their own racial privilege.

First, their experiences were not always idyllic. In particular, the growing political tensions of the 1980s in the Transkei and the broader country created an atmosphere that often shattered their escapist fantasies. Second, while some surfers have opposed apartheid – as evidenced by their avoidance of conscription and use of *dagga* – they remained socially conservative, benefiting from and perpetuating the privileges of Whiteness. On the Wild Coast, they found themselves in a paradox: striving to distance themselves morally from the dominant conservative White society while simultaneously enjoying the material and social advantages deriving from their racial position in apartheid society. They ultimately profited from their status as young, White, middle-class men. Additionally, their ability to adopt an alternative lifestyle was facilitated by their financial resources and unrestricted mobility within South Africa and the Transkei prior to 1994. In this regard, Thompson (2017) states that after all 'the consumption of pleasure and fashioning of surfing identities should rather be seen as impetus for maintaining, and not challenging, the status quo in South Africa' (pp. 159-160).

Most certainly, these insights into surfing on the Wild Coast during apartheid have only scratched the surface. To present a more nuanced and heterogeneous account of South African surfing history, future research must engage more extensively with written primary sources, such as newspaper and magazine articles, while further exploring oral histories and the lived experiences of (soul) surfers. Notably, aspects such as gender and sexuality, which were not addressed in this chapter, represent valuable avenues for future investigations into the construction of *soul surfing* identity in South African (sports) history.

Ultimately, I would like to conclude on a personal note: Excitement, curiosity, nervousness, and insecurity – all these emotions, in retrospect, accompanied me continually on my journey from Cape Town to Lwandhle on the Wild Coast, where I ultimately conducted my research. Along the way, encounters with locals and their stories intensified these feelings, particularly as accounts from veteran surfers heightened my anticipation when sharing their past (surfing) experiences in the Kei.

Reflecting on my research, one thing is clear: conducting fieldwork in the Transkei, particularly on the Wild Coast, was both exhilarating and influenced by various external factors. The weather was unpredictable – at times harsh, at others breathtaking – making it impossible to plan without considering its impact. Conditions could shift rapidly, often forcing last-minute changes to my carefully

arranged interview schedule. Heavy rain, intense heat, or significant ocean swells could upend even the best-laid plans. Surfing itself was another variable I had to consider, as the region's remote beaches, beautiful waves, rolling hills, and stunning river mouths had a magnetic pull that could easily divert my attention from work. In retrospect, it was my supervisors who ultimately persuaded me to undertake the research. They believed that my surfing background would enable me to engage with surfers on one hand and local community members on the other. After six months on the Wild Coast, a social history of surfing and its key figures began to take shape. Once again, oral history proved to be a vital component of my historical research. In the end, the ResMAAS program and my research in South Africa were not only pivotal in deepening my personal connection to the ocean and surfing but, most importantly, also provided invaluable qualitative fieldwork experience, which continues to inform my academic pursuits and shape my identity as a historian today. Without the experience of conducting over 45 interviews in various rural areas of South Africa, I would hardly be qualified to debate the pros and cons of oral history research with students today. The fieldwork experience during the ResMAAS program taught me essential lessons through hands-on involvement. This knowledge cannot be acquired in a classroom; it is an experience to be lived in practice. One never truly understands what can go wrong during an interview unless one has faced it oneself. Yes, one can read about the importance of trust in ethnography handbooks. However, the process of building relationships of trust in the field with individuals who often inhabit a vastly different everyday reality from one's own can hardly be conveyed through a textbook. Instead, one must immerse oneself in local settings and grasp what it means to conduct fieldwork and inhabit places that were previously unknown to the researcher. This has been a learning journey for which I am endlessly grateful, and it truly made undertaking the ResMAAS in Leiden worthwhile.

List of interviews

- Interview 1, Muizenberg Beach, 12-09-2014.
- Interview 2, Muizenberg Beach, 16-09-2014.
- Interview 3, Mossel Bay, 18-09-2014.
- Interview 4, Mossel Bay, 19-09-2014.
- Interview 7, Jeffreys Bay, 03-10-2014.
- Interview 8, Cintsa, 05-10-2014.
- Interview 11, Coffee Bay, 09-10-2014.
- Interview 15, interviewee's private house, Lwandhle, 29-10-2014 and 06-01-2015.
- Interview 16, Coffee Bay, 02-11-2014.
- Interview 17, Coffee Bay, 03-11-2014.
- Interview 23, across Lwandhle River, 15-01-2015.
- Interview 30, on a hill in Lwandhle, watching the cattle, 23-01-2015.
- Interview 36, interviewee's private house, Lwandhle, 27-01-2015.
- Interview 39, interviewee's private house, Lwandhle, 30-01-2015.
- Interview 41, Lwandhle, 04-02-2015.

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6

‘Openness to the World’: A Critical Analysis of Geography Content in Senegalese High Schools

Tikam Liese Sall

Photo 6.1
High school in Dakar
Photo credits: Tikam Liese Sall, taken 7 January 2021

Introduction:

After independence, 1960, the Senegalese state recognized the need to reform its education system, which had been profoundly shaped by French colonialism. *L’Enracinement et l’Ouverture* – Senghor’s emblematic vision for the education system of Senegal – has oriented the content of national educational curricula since the 1970s. As the first president of independent Senegal, Senghor saw in the

philosophy of 'Rootedness and Openness' a way to break with colonial education by emphasizing so-called African values and deeply rooted local identities, while staying open to the rest of the world. *In 1971, it became the first law passed to guide the orientation of Senegalese education.* In Senghor's conception, openness is a way to avoid introversion and emphasize cooperation and exchange.

The teaching of history and geography became an important tool in constructing a post-independence identity (Fall, 2012). From the 1970s onward, several reforms were implemented, including the removal of any form of glorification of French history. History and geography curricula were 'cleansed' of content that was degrading to African people and culture (Fall, 2010, p. 253). Initially, geography instruction adopted a country-based approach that focused on the African continent. However, this method was later criticized for being overloaded, as it required covering too many individual countries within a limited timeframe. It was ultimately replaced by a thematic approach, which allowed for the use of case studies from various countries to explore broader themes such as migration, development, and international cooperation (Timera, 2013, p. 150).

As a result, social, economic, and environmental themes were introduced, with a focus on the students' local environment and African issues (official geography program of 2024). The economic development of nations became a major theme in geography for the final two years of high school *called première* and *terminale*. For instance, *terminale* students study the American and Japanese development models, as well as the economic integration of the United States, Canada, and Mexico, and the European Union. Towards the end of the year, one session titled *'Problems and Perspectives of Development in the African Continent' outlines the development problems in some African countries and proposes solutions (*Geography Course Plan for 2020-21, reduced due to Lockdown Covid-19 Restrictions).

This chapter will analyse how the concept of development is presented in high school geography courses and how it may impact students. Concepts of development and modernity will be analysed through Mignolo's work (2007). He is particularly noteworthy for linking coloniality to modernity, arguing that coloniality persists even after the formal end of colonialism, and that Western epistemology rooted in colonialism has marginalized alternative ways of knowing and being.

Theoretical Framework

The perspective of the modern/colonial world system is a critique of modernity developed by scholars from Latin America (Mignolo, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). They build their argument on Quijano's coloniality of power (2000) who

bases his on Wallerstein's world system theory (Wallerstein, 1974). The philosophical concepts of universalism and modernity/globalism are not essentially wrong, but they are embedded in power dynamics, which (Mignolo, 2014) refers to as the colonial matrix of power. Historical imbalances come into to play with political and economic domination. Considering the long-lasting effects of the Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, and colonialism, decolonial thinkers see in a so-called global or universal culture the domination of Western European and North American culture.

Mignolo (2014) interprets modernity as a Western projection, articulated according to Western norms (individualism, material consumption, capital accumulation, non-environmentally friendly technologies and infrastructure). He further argues that modernity is a continuation of coloniality, which is why he associates the two concepts as 'coloniality/modernity'. He advocates the idea that modernity and coloniality have worked and 'continue to deny, disavow, distort, and negate the knowledge, subjectivities, worldviews, and ways of life [of non-Western spaces]' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 4). Indeed, 'Westerness' is viewed as the only form of modern life, negating other forms of modernity. Thus, the accumulation of goods, an individual professional career, a nuclear family, infrastructures surpassing nature, and a sedentary lifestyle have been accepted as norms of modern development. Not to say that Western epistemology has no value, but the major issue raised here is that all other ways of life, conceptions, and beliefs different from Western ones are understood as hierarchically inferior. This also applies to education and educational content. Therefore, all modern, or Western, education is considered superior to alternative modes of education.

Furthermore, the over-representation of European knowledge models in academia, education, and theories existing since colonial encounters, however, is now being reinforced by new standardized models of education and global systemics (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

In the African context, tradition and modernity have often been opposed: 'Modernity would be defined as that which substantially opposes the values, systems of reference, in short, the epistemes of tradition' (Sarr, 2016, p. 31). Modernity and African tradition are in a dialectic of opposition and mutual exclusion, so the hidden mission of modernity in an African context seems to aim at creating a 'new African man.' Thus, 'African modernity would only be a withdrawal from tradition, a negation of the old' (ibid, p. 32). According to Sarr, the path to African modernity would consist of the selective incorporation of technologies, discourses, and modern institutions of Western origin into an African cultural and

political universe, in order to give birth to a distinct and autonomous modernity (ibid., p. 33).

Thus, by decolonizing practices this chapter refers to any effort aimed at deconstructing colonial ideologies in education. For instance, to integrate critical reflection into Senegalese education seems important. Critical thinking associated with decolonial theories means thinking outside the hegemonic framework of Eurocentrism because, as Mbembe explains, 'A Eurocentric canon is a canon that attributes truth solely to the Western mode of knowledge production. It is a canon that does not take into account other epistemic traditions' (Mbembe, 2015, n.p.). In my view, and in line with the literature, a truly decolonial curriculum critically engages with power inequalities and embraces diverse epistemic traditions, including Indigenous, African, and Islamic perspectives. It also seeks to recover and highlight silenced or marginalized aspects of Senegalese and African histories, including events, figures, and social movements.

Methodology

During the first year of the ResMAAS program, faculty members provided precious guidance in developing a concrete research plan and establishing initial contacts in the field. I was granted an external supervisor, Dr Hamidou Dia, whose research focus was also Senegal. One seminar was structured to foster interdisciplinarity: each session a professor from a different academic field gave a class. In each session, students were required to present their project, after which the invited professor would pose questions and provide comments and suggestions. This format helped to articulate the research project clearly, and contributed significantly to refining the research focus and design.

Faculty members were always available to discuss individual projects, offering insightful advice and encouragement. One of the aspects that drew me to this program was the freedom to choose my own research topic based on my personal interests, allowing for a meaningful and self-directed academic journey. The opportunity to design and conduct research over an extended period of time and subsequently write a thesis based on personally collected empirical data is deeply rewarding. Such an experience is only possible in an academic environment that prioritizes time for building a rigorous research project, conducting in-depth fieldwork, and receiving sustained support for data analysis and thesis writing. The research-focused framework, particularly its prioritization of fieldwork, played a decisive role in motivating my decision to pursue a doctoral thesis. It underscored the value of empirical inquiry in uncovering the complexity of local contexts and confirmed my passion for research.

My first supervisor, Prof. Mayke Kaag, PhD – who has also been supervising my PhD since 2021 – has shown genuine interest in my ideas from the very beginning and has provided valuable support. Her calm and reassuring approach created a stress-free environment in which I always felt welcoming. Before our meetings, I often felt anxious about presenting my work; yet after each discussion, I left feeling more confident, focused, and encouraged about the next steps to take. By encouraging informal meetings over coffee or drinks, she also until today creates a relaxed and open atmosphere that extends beyond academic supervision. Our personal conversations have played an important role in navigating the emotional and practical challenges of balancing academic work with personal life.

I conducted fieldwork in Dakar, Senegal, for five months, from November 2020 to March 2021. The research period was a bit shortened, to the initial six months planned, due to the corona pandemic. Particular emphasis was placed on the teaching of history and geography, as these subjects were initially instrumentalized within the French assimilationist ideology to create colonial subjects who were expected to identify with French culture and history (Blackmore, 1970). Additionally, history and geography have the potential to convey certain ideas about the world and, more specifically, were used after Senegal's independence (1960) as courses aimed at fostering postcolonial national consciousness.

The methodology mix included: a) content analysis of Senegalese secondary school history and geography curricula, by analysing the program and the course planning, b) interviews and discussions with teachers and education system actors, asking about the significance of decolonisation educational content, how it has been done in Senegal, and whether they were happy with the actual content taught in history and geography. Highschool teachers and educational stake holders at the ministry of education were interviewed as well as history and geography teacher that participated in the writing of the actual program. c) Observations in ten different high school classrooms in Dakar, over a period of three months gave me a good insight of classroom dynamics, pedagogies and content taught as well as students reactions and interest. Suburban schools, private and public schools, as well as French/Arabic schools were included to have a diversity of settings. d) Finally, students' perspectives on history and geography classes were also collected through 138 questionnaires distributed across four classes in two different high schools in Dakar. Students had about twenty minutes to answer six survey questions anonymously. They were asked to share their opinions and suggest improvements to the history and geography curriculum. They were asked which topics they preferred and what they want to do after graduating high school.

Schools offer a particularly valuable site for research, as they serve as microcosms where broader societal tensions and ideological dynamics are made visible. This study focuses specifically on high schools, given the significance of this stage in students' cognitive and social development. At this level, pupils are generally regarded as young adults capable of critical reflection and the formation of political opinions. Moreover, it is a period during which they begin to make decisions about their future professional path.

Findings

A geography curriculum turned to the West for the final years of high school

L'Enracinement et l'Ouverture – Senghor's emblematic vision for the education system of Senegal has oriented the content of national educational program since the 1970s. Senghor being the first president of independent Senegal saw in the philosophy of '*Rootedness and Openness*' a way to break with colonial education, in emphasising so-called African values[80] and deeply rooted local identities, while staying open to the rest of the world. It became in 1971 the first law voted for the orientation of Senegalese education.

Metaphorically, one of the professors interviewed describes Senghorian philosophy as follows: '*A student, like a tree, must first take root before growing and opening up to the world.*' This became the title of my master thesis: '*Avant de s'ouvrir un élève comme un arbre doit d'abord s'enraciner*' (teacher Fabouwa, 2020, High School North). Senghor's philosophy of '*Rootedness and Openness*' which significantly refocused educational content on local realities, also tended to promote a form of Western universalism (French language, rationalism, alignment with Enlightenment ideals (Lamola, 2016). While history and geography syllabi theoretically present a balance between Senegal-related topics and global issues, my observations showed that, in the last two years of high school, non-African content is predominantly taught. In my opinion, each school year curricula should show a balance between local and international topics, integrating a critical reflection. Especially in the last two years of high school where pupils learn these lessons by heart for their graduation.

Openness, in the Senghorian concept, is a way to avoid introversion and to emphasize cooperation and exchanges. I argue that the principle of 'Rootedness

80 I intentionally use the term 'so-called African values' to underscore the constructed and contested nature of what is often presented as a coherent set of values. While the Senegalese curriculum invokes 'African values' within a decolonial framework – emphasizing their importance in education – this formulation remains problematic, as the concept is too broad and heterogeneous to be meaningfully treated as a unified category.

and Openness', as applied currently in the observed lessons, reproduces a hierarchical binary: the 'motherland', associated with deeply rooted local identities, is positioned in contrast to a 'modern world' that is implicitly constructed as the aspirational norm. *Openness* aims at making future Senegalese student global/universal citizens. Yet, considering the long-lasting effects of the Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, and colonialism, decolonial thinkers, such as Mignolo (2007), Sarr (2016), Ndlovou-Gatsheni (2018), see in a so-called global/universal culture the domination of Western European and North American culture. A subtle hypocrisy hides behind the use of the term 'universal culture' that turns out to be a western culture.

The geography curriculum for the final three years of secondary education (*Seconde, Première,* and *Terminale*) is mandatory for all general education tracks in Senegal. This analysis focuses on the *Première* and *Terminale* classes, as the *Seconde* curriculum primarily covers physical geography, with lessons on Earth's movements, oceans, climates, and related topics.

For *Première*, corresponding to eleven grade, the reduced lesson plan (missing lessons) due to Corona is as following:

> **Lesson 1**: Global Development Inequalities; **Lessons 2+3**: Global Population Growth and Demographic Policies (Construction and Interpretation of Growth Curves); **Lesson 4**: Migrations; **Lesson 5**: Global Population Structures; **Lesson 7**: Global Population Distribution; **Lesson 9**: Agricultural Development in Tropical Countries and Its Evolution; **Lesson 12**: Evolution of Agricultural Development in Europe; **Lesson 13**: Agricultural Development in Newly Settled Countries (Example: The United States), **Lesson 14**: Fishing: Traditional and Modern Practices; **Lesson 16**: Urbanization Patterns Worldwide and Their Challenges; **Lesson 18**: Urban Activities Around the World; **Lesson 20**: Means of Communication: Transport and Telecommunications; **Lesson 22**: Global Trade Organization and Unequal Exchange; **Lesson 23**: Economic Integration Spaces: Issues and Organization (Geography Course Plan for 2020-21, reduced due to Lockdown Covid-19 Restrictions).

The curriculum shows topics addressing global issues. Apart from a brief mention in the program's introduction stating that local examples should be prioritized, the geography program for this year does not feature a majority of lessons directly related to students' local issues. Yet all the topics above could be linked to Senegalese realities and compared to other countries worldwide. The responsibility of providing local examples is left to the teachers, who are not always equipped to access local information. Teachers shared that physical and online material are missing in the public education, making it harder for them to improve their les-

sons. Moreover, their schedule and the high number of students does not allow enough time for researching new content. Timera concludes in his analysis of the 1967 geography curriculum that: 'The concern to give young Africans a universal and humanistic culture led to the development of comprehensive and encyclopedic content covering the entire planet and addressing issues and subjects of various kinds' (Timera, 2013, p. 150). Despite the concern raised in the introduction to the official 2004 geography curriculum to break with encyclopedism and emphasize the use of the immediate reality and environment of students in geography lessons, Timera's argument can still be applied to the current geography curriculum since 2004. The non-specific titles and observed lessons demonstrate this desire to integrate as many different subjects as possible without particular specificity.

Strikingly, in grade twelve, *Terminale*, only the last three lessons in the curriculum explicitly reference the African continent: '*Lesson 15: The Problems and Development Perspectives of the **African** Continent; Lesson 16: Environments and Populations of **Senegal**; Lesson 17: The Issue of Water in **Senegal***' (my emphases). Whereas the rest of the lessons focus on other countries, most of which are Western or non-African:

> **Lesson 1**: The World-System: Interdependent Spaces; **Lessons 2+3**: The **North American Space**: Natural Environments and Populations; **Lesson 4**: The Construction of the Economic Space: **United States, Canada**, Mexico; **Lesson 5**: The **American** Economic Model: Characteristics and Issues; **Lessons 6+7**: **European** Integration: Realities and Perspectives; **Lesson 8**: Economic Study (alternating each year) between **France** and **Germany**; **Lesson 9**: Factors of Emergence and Their Limitations; **Lesson 10**: The **Japanese** Economic Model: Characteristics and Issues; **Lesson 11**: China's Demographic Challenges, **Lesson 12**: The **Chinese** Economic and Social Development Model; **Lessons 13+14**: **Brazil**: A Third-World Power (Geography Course Plan for 2020-21, reduced due to Lockdown Covid-19 Restrictions. My emphases).

Timera's research has corroborated my observations, showing that the final lessons outlined in the curriculum are often not covered in class due to time constraints and an overly ambitious course schedule (Timera, unpublished). During the time of my observations, teachers were all late according to course plan. Consequently, it is highly likely that in *Terminale*, the academic year concludes before students have the opportunity to engage with topics related to Africa and Senegal.

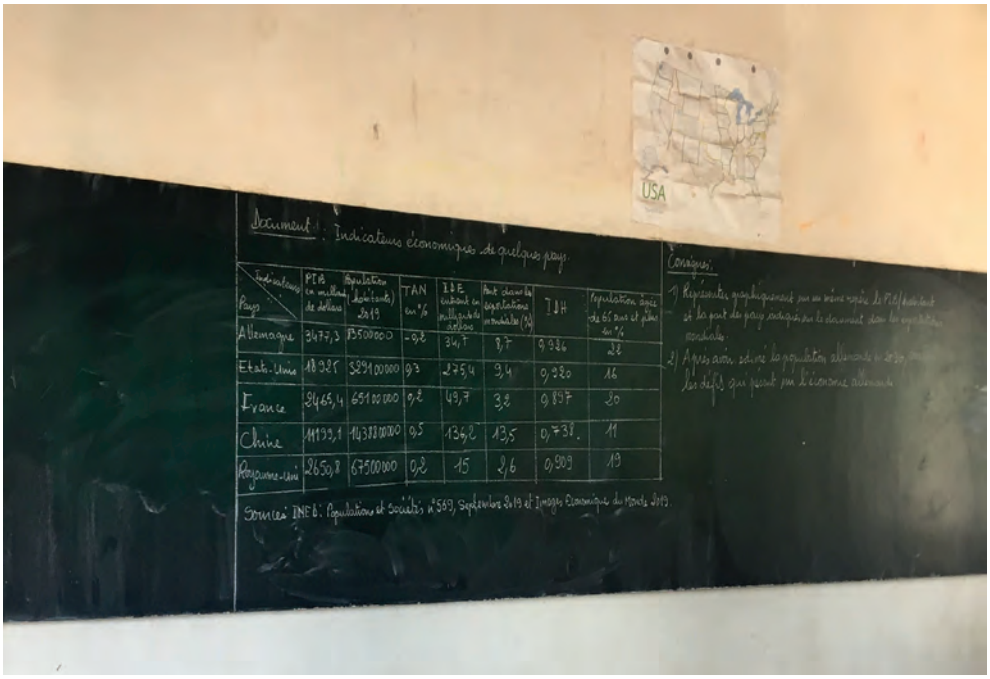


Photo 6.2
A blackboard during a senior-year geography lesson on economic indicators
Photograph by author, Dakar, 3 March 2021

Here the economic indicators of Germany, the United-States, France, China, and Great Britain are being compared according to GDP, habitants' number, share in global exports, human development index, etc. During my four months of observation, most of the statistics used by teachers were produced by and concern Western countries and some emerging countries such as China. Most statistics are from the French National Institute for Demographic Studies (French: Institut National d'Études Démographiques). When development indicators are taught without reflecting on their utility or relevance to the Senegalese context – where, for instance, half of the population works in the informal sector, using mobile money instead of bank accounts – they risk reinforcing a negative perspective that overlooks local economic realities and alternative measures of progress.

By learning about the European Union without linking it to the long-lasting effects of the Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, and colonialism, these countries are portrayed as leaders and winners in economic growth and overall development whereas Senegal as loser. By portraying these nation's development as inherent of

their intelligence and strength a part of history is being silenced. Indeed, in geography classes, Senegal is portrayed as a country unable to adapt to international development standards.

Although the discourse of some teachers emphasizes nationalist values and expresses a critique of power relations, the content taught is uncritical and reinforces Western ways of conceiving development (individualism, material consumption, modernity, capital accumulation, technologies). Western hegemony in education hides alternative capacities that are not recognized within the American/European spectrum, such as oral history and spirituality. Geography courses observed are based on a *Eurocentric epistemology* of development. By continuing to present Senegal as a *developing country lagging behind* and using *Western narratives* in the teaching of geography, learners lose hope for any improvement in their conditions and those of their country.

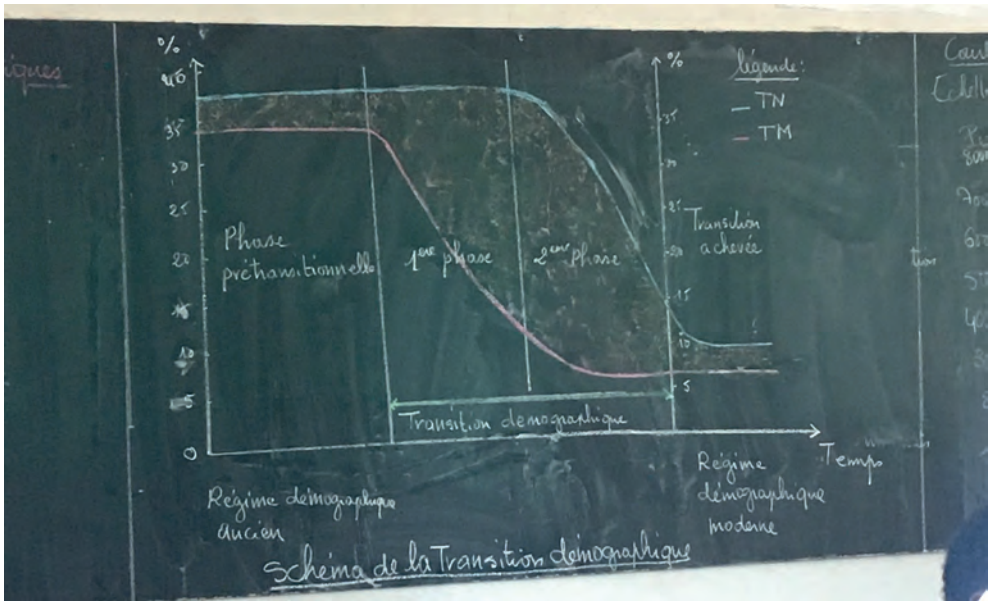


Photo 6.3
The demographic transition model
Photograph by author, Dakar, 10 February 2021

Another observed example is the lesson on demographics: The distribution of the world's population, which focuses on birth rates and the demographic issues they generate in certain regions of the world. The three-phase birth curve is presented as the norm, and a teacher explains that Senegal has not yet reached the last phase. Thus, Senegal is portrayed as lagging behind and compared to 'countries

that have succeeded' and are already beyond the birth curve. Having more than three children per woman is depicted negatively. In this way, a Western idea is propagated in the students' minds. However, one teacher does mention that the decline in birth rates in Japan and Germany has led to new problems.

The issue behind this race for development is that it fixes a binary between developed and underdeveloped, modern and traditional, thus interpreting achievements along the axes of good and bad. This dichotomy between countries labelled developed and underdeveloped was frequent in classroom observations. Timera had already analysed in the 1967 curriculum that the geography program seemed to become 'a sort of ideological shell in which semantic pairs such as city-village, modernity-tradition, Africa-foreign are used. Their translation into knowledge to be taught in geography seems to result in a contemplative discourse' (Timera, 2013, p.151). This duality maintains a hegemony that envisions comfort and personal, as well as national, fulfilment in light of Western development. Western modernity is presented as the only key to success and even happiness.

Teaching about globalisation and modernity

The geography lesson on the world system addresses power relations in globalization, but it fails to critically examine the systemic exploitation produced by this system. The concept of globalization claims that the interests of the world take precedence over those of individual nations. However, Lamola argues that globalization benefits the West (2016). In a 12th-grade class – *Terminale* – on 14 December 2020, the teacher explains the unequal integration of different regions of the world into globalization, without emphasizing on the sources of these inequalities. Explaining that the most powerful states are part of global exchanges, while Senegal still depends on foreign aid, the teacher laments, '*Other countries have gone ahead of us*' (class of Terminale on 14 December 2020, private high school West). Acknowledging the wealth gap between countries is important in geography lessons, but omitting the fact that the West has historically exploited the rest, and that these privileges accumulated over centuries and perpetuate their position of abundance and domination, should be addressed in a decolonial framework. This is why Sultana advocates for the imperative of decolonizing the notion of development and addressing and finally recognizing that development is rooted in exploitation, and that development institutions maintain coloniality (Sultana, 2019).

Only one observed teacher critiques the capitalist system and its economic inequalities. He complained about the World Bank and IMF, and the unequal flow of capital. In his critical discourse, he adds that even though the system is exploitative, African governance is also responsible for their exploitation. He adds that

globalization benefits the rich: '*the rich become richer, and the poor become poorer*' Moreover, he does not hesitate to remind the learners that '*countries have no friends, only interests to protect*'. This same teacher, despite his patriotism, emphasizes the importance of other models of development, notably referring to Asian countries: The Tigers and Dragons.[81] He highlights the hard work of the Japanese in his class but compares it to the laziness of the Senegalese, who are blamed for their '*underdevelopment*' (Teacher Fabouwa, High School North, 2020). Thus, Japan serves as a non-Western development model and a key player in globalization, being a member of the Triad[82] (Timera, 2012).

By analysing the geography lesson content with question such as 'How is modernity defined? How is the relationship between modernity and colonialism defined? What notion of time and progress is deployed? What analysis of power relations is made?' (Andreotti, 2011, p. 392). I argue that the content taught in geography represents a Western definition of modernity, focusing on technologies, extractive industries, individualism, and industrial economies, without addressing the connection between modernity and colonialism. The notion of imperial and colonial privileges is overlooked, and both the notions of time and progress are framed within a Western context. Power relations are rarely critically examined, nor is the underlying reason for Senegal's economic dependency explored. It becomes clear that, in seeking to propose modern content, the teaching of geography reproduces a Western definition of modernity and a factors of development according to Western parameters (formal income, education level, GDP, trade balance). Indeed, development indicators are taught without reflection on their utility or relevance to the Senegalese context.

Students Opinion's on Geography Classes

A majority of students have expressed dissatisfaction and ask to learn more about Senegal and Africa. The fourth question of the survey asks students what they would like to improve in the teaching and content of history and geography courses. In all classes, many students requested more content related to Senegal or Africa:

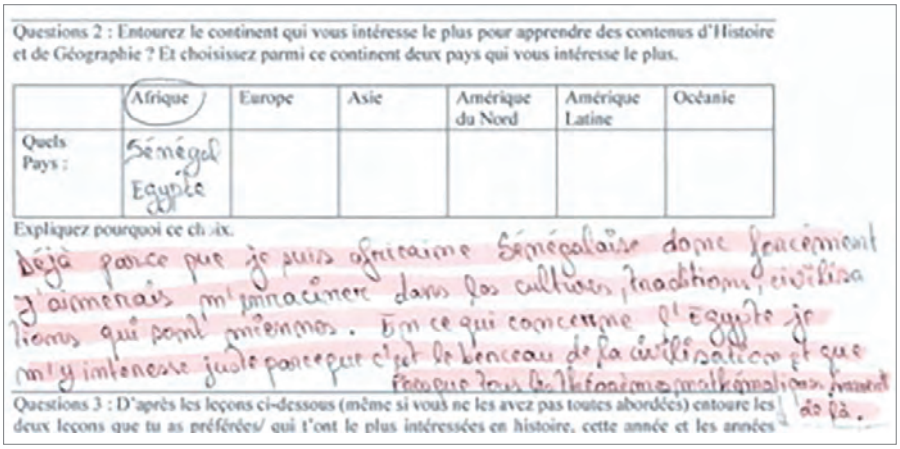
- would like to reduce the curriculum by focusing on lessons directly related to Africa (Student North_TerminalS1_3)
- Reduce the lessons and try to focus most of the lessons on Africa (Student North_TerminalL2_2)

81 Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Hongkong are called the Tigers and Dragons for their fast economic growth.

82 The three major economic powers that dominated global trade and production in the late 20th century: the United States, the European Union (primarily Western Europe), and Japan.

- More topics related to our Senegalese traditions (Student North_1èreS2_4)
- Learn about the exploitation of Africans before our independence (Student South_1èreS2_3)
- It is interesting to note that learners also feel an imbalance in the distribution of content and are asking for more content focused on Senegal and Africa.

Pupils prefer to study African content and justify their choices because of national belonging. Almost all of them have chosen the African continent in answering question 2, that asks what continent and what countries they are mostly interested in to learn history and geography content about. They did not all choose Senegal as an African country they would like to study. Interestingly they mentioned many different African countries: Rwanda and South Africa for their developing models, Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea because of the learner's will to know their origins, Egypt because of its civilization, the pharaoh, and its ancient history.



Questions 2 : Entourez le continent qui vous intéresse le plus pour apprendre des contenus d'Histoire et de Géographie ? Et choisissez parmi ce continent deux pays qui vous intéresse le plus.

	Afrique	Europe	Asie	Amérique du Nord	Amérique Latine	Océanie
Quels Pays :	Sénégal Egypte					

Expliquez pourquoi ce choix.

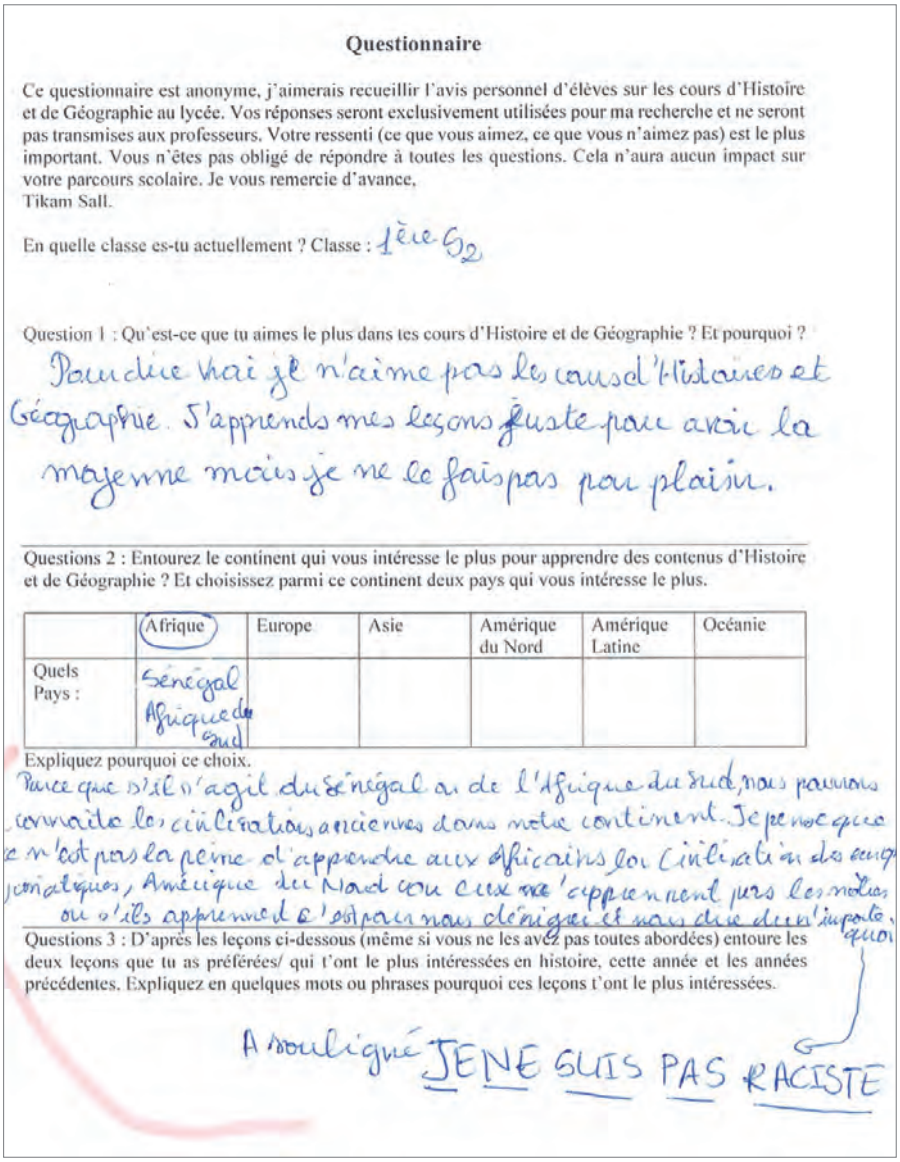
Déjà parce que je suis africaine Sénégalaise donc forcément j'aimerais m'immerger dans les cultures, traditions, civilisations qui sont miennes. En ce qui concerne l'Egypte je m'y intéresse juste parceque c'est le berceau de la civilisation et que [illegible] de là.

Questions 3 : D'après les leçons ci-dessous (même si vous ne les avez pas toutes abordées) entoure les deux leçons que tu as préférées/ qui t'ont le plus intéressées en histoire, cette année et les années

Photo 6.4

Excerpt from a self-filled survey distributed to students, 2020. Question 2 asks: Circle the continent you are most interested in for learning history and geography content, and choose two countries from that continent that interest you the most.

This learner explains that because she is African and Senegalese, she wants to root herself in the cultures, traditions, and civilizations that are hers. And about Egypt, she finds it interesting because it is the cradle of civilization and because many mathematical theorems have been invented there.



Questionnaire

Ce questionnaire est anonyme, j'aimerais recueillir l'avis personnel d'élèves sur les cours d'Histoire et de Géographie au lycée. Vos réponses seront exclusivement utilisées pour ma recherche et ne seront pas transmises aux professeurs. Votre ressenti (ce que vous aimez, ce que vous n'aimez pas) est le plus important. Vous n'êtes pas obligé de répondre à toutes les questions. Cela n'aura aucun impact sur votre parcours scolaire. Je vous remercie d'avance,
Tikam Sall.

En quelle classe es-tu actuellement ? Classe : 1ère G2

Question 1 : Qu'est-ce que tu aimes le plus dans tes cours d'Histoire et de Géographie ? Et pourquoi ?

Pour dire vrai je n'aime pas les cours d'Histoires et Géographie. J'apprends mes leçons juste pour avoir la moyenne mais je ne le fais pas par plaisir.

Questions 2 : Entourez le continent qui vous intéresse le plus pour apprendre des contenus d'Histoire et de Géographie ? Et choisissez parmi ce continent deux pays qui vous intéresse le plus.

	Afrique	Europe	Asie	Amérique du Nord	Amérique Latine	Océanie
Quels Pays :	Sénégal Afrique du sud					

Expliquez pourquoi ce choix.
Parce que s'il s'agit du Sénégal ou de l'Afrique du Sud, nous pouvons connaître les civilisations anciennes dans notre continent. Je pense que ce n'est pas la peine d'apprendre aux Africains la civilisation des européens, Amérique du Nord ou Chine ne s'apprennent pas les mêmes ou s'ils apprennent c'est pour nous dénigrer et nous dire que l'important, quoi

Questions 3 : D'après les leçons ci-dessous (même si vous ne les avez pas toutes abordées) entoure les deux leçons que tu as préférées/ qui t'ont le plus intéressées en histoire, cette année et les années précédentes. Expliquez en quelques mots ou phrases pourquoi ces leçons t'ont le plus intéressées.

A souligné JE NE SUIS PAS RACISTE

Photo 6.5

First page from a self-filled survey distributed to students, 2020. The questionnaire header states that the questionnaire is anonymous, and that I would like to collect students' personal opinions on history and geography courses in high school. Their responses will be used exclusively for my research and will not be shared with the teachers. Their feelings (what they like and what they don't like) are the most important. Participation is voluntary, and this questionnaire will have no impact on their schooling. Question 1 asks: What do you like the most in history and geography classes and why?

The frustration of this learner can be noted in this answer:

> Because if it is about Senegal or South Africa, we can learn about the ancient civilizations of our own continent. I don't think it is necessary to teach Africans about European, Asian, or North American civilizations because they do not learn about ours – or if they do, it is to disparage us. Just to clarify, I am not racist (Student North_1èreS2_3).

Interestingly, this learner understands their position within a global system shaped by domination and inequalities in knowledge representation. They complain about them learning about all the other continents, while other continents are not learning about Africa.

While the majority of learners prefer and ask for more content about Africa, the majority of them also wish to study abroad. Canada, the United States, and France being the preferred countries for further studies and work. Hence, a question that arises is whether personal development and professional success for students seem achievable *only outside of Senegal*? If so, then a *shift in discourse* within teaching is essential for fostering a *change in perspective* regarding students' personal growth and the development of their country.

Recommendation for a Decolonial Approach in Geography

Decolonising education content has been mostly applied in Senegal by integrating Senegalese and African content. However, the content did not include criticism of the power relations entailed in modernity and universalism. Moving away from generic geography lessons that concern mostly global issues and using specific topics to transmit a message of hope and motivation to Senegalese learners is fundamental. For instance, the topic of migration could be focusing on what is happening in Senegal, from the first wave of Senegalese migrants to today's illegal migration using dugouts to cross the Mediterranean, while giving examples of success within Senegal.

Cheikh Anta Diop[83] developed the concept of cultural alienation. He defines it as a denial of a worthy history and culture of one folk vis-à-vis another. This has been used throughout history as a tool of domination. The denial of African history consequently deprived African people of creative capacity, which makes one only capable of imitating the dominant culture hence being inferior. Western epistemology has been used for centuries to justify the view that Black Africans

83 Cheikh Anta Diop, a Senegalese historian and physicist, played a pivotal role in demonstrating the richness of precolonial African history and the existence of advanced African civilizations.

have not been responsible for anything worthwhile due to the lack of what is described as rational proof to justify innovations (Diop, 1954, p. 14). Cheikh Anta Diop has proved that the ancient Egyptian civilization is connected to the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa and that Egyptians capable of innovations and great civilization were actually the forefathers of Sub-Saharan Africans. So, in this sense, the recognition of African history and civilization is already a decolonizing initiative. Learning about ancient Egyptian astronomy or cartography shows that Africans were capable of great innovations.

Moving beyond the perception of Africa as a tragic figure or the idea that Africa had been discovered are decolonizing practices. Removing Europe from the central position, (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014) and comparing every action of Senegal with Europe could give the ability and recognition for 'African people to write, think from where they are' means that Africa is recognised as a legitimate historical and epistemic site (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014, p. 3). As Sarr recommends moving away from the position of the perpetual 'bad student' that is constantly trying to catch up (Sarr, 2016, p.39). Sarr calls for rediscovering one's centre in the context of becoming a *modern African*, his book *Afrotopia* offers a deep reflection on what an alternative modernity for Africa could be and how to reclaim epistemic and cultural sovereignty. All these decolonial authors quoted in this article could be used in history and geography lessons, as well as for teachers to re-adapt their lesson content.

The matter of understanding and being able to reflect on the role of power in history is also a significant decolonising asset (Nederveen-Pieterse & Parekh, 1995, p. 3). Teaching and learning can be considered as decolonial when they provide the opportunity to use different philosophies and ideas that value local realities. For instance, myth, oral history, and spirituality could be linked to historical sites such as Mame Coumba Castel[84] for learning about Gorée Island. Children's novels are starting to emerge in Senegal with *Les icones de Kimia*, for example. A series of novels that celebrate African heritage through different historical figures. Teaching should mainly encourage critical thinking and critical engagement with western forms of knowledge, instead of memorisation. Learners should learn to search for information, and gain an understanding of positionality of researchers and inventors as well as critically engage with the veracity of facts.

Furthermore, the importance of schoolbooks is imperative for teachers and learners. As Kipré explains, 'in countries, where other teaching materials are rare, [the] history textbook is the main instrument for introducing history to the classroom,

84 Mame Coumba Castel is a spiritual figure that is protecting the Island of Gorée.

learning both critical and analytical skills' (Kipré, 2005, p. 167). Indeed, my observations in public schools showed that only occasionally was teaching material used and that no history nor geography schoolbooks exist for high schools. Most often the teacher distributed black and white printed documents, which mostly included text extracts or statistical data. I could not observe any uses of pictures or any kind of other visual material except for statistical graphs and curves that were mostly drawn on the board by the teachers themselves (as shown in photos 2 and 3 in the chapter). Schoolbooks should allow a move away from encyclopaedic knowledge and Western epistemology, providing a standard of quality for teaching history and geography.

Conclusions

This chapter argues that the '*Openness*' orientation of Senegalese education perpetuates the hegemony of Western knowledge and, by doing so, silences other types of world knowledge and perspectives. Western hegemony hides alternative capacities unknown to the American/European spectrum (for example, oral history, spirituality, ecology, etc.).

To conclude, the content of geography falls short of decolonial aims in my opinion. Although history and geography curricula have undergone a series of decolonizing reforms (Timera, 2013) – 'Africanization' in the 1970s, followed by 'Senegalization' in the 1980s – numerous political and historical obstacles to further decolonization remain: The inheritance of a French colonial schooling pedagogy, the structural adjustments in the 1980s that reduced the state budget allocated to education, while the current structural changes are slow and rely on a top-down political hierarchy influenced by external donors rather than by public demands. The difficulty in accessing up-to-date school material and in preparing lessons is neglected and does not provide a favourable teaching environment for alternative and critical knowledge. Additionally, the daily difficulties in teaching modalities (no funds for equipment, too many students per class) makes it almost impossible for teachers to engage in new forms of teaching and content. They are almost predestined to fall back into mainstream and encyclopaedic teaching, even though their personal will and conviction might desire more decolonial content.

This may partly explain why the curriculum does not fully meet decolonial objectives, although the stakeholders did not share this view and considered their curricula to be sufficiently decolonised. Still, the dichotomy observed between the developed and under-developed countries was not deconstructed and Senegal was always portrayed from a Western perspective, as backwards and in an urgent need of development. My feeling is that the geography lessons I observed

are part of a Eurocentric epistemology of development. By continuing to portray Senegal as a country lagging in development, and using Western discourse in geography teaching, learners lose hope for any improvement in their condition and that of their country. I argue that a shift in discourse in teaching is fundamental for a change in the students' perspective on their personal development and that of their country's development. Senegalese geography education should be designed to engage local students rather than to showcase a broad curriculum focused on the world's most powerful regions for external validation.

Finally, this chapter has also highlighted the significant agency of teachers, whose own positionality influences the content they teach – whether critical or not. As the final and essential link in the educational chain, positioned directly in front of pupils, they are key actors in the decolonisation process.

Educational curricula:

- Plan de cours de géographie pour 2020-21, réduit en raison du confinement (restrictions Covid-19) (Geography course plan for 2020-21, reduced due to lockdown (Covid-19 restrictions)).
- Plan de cours d'histoire pour 2020-21, réduit en raison du confinement (restrictions Covid-19) (Geography course plan for 2020-21, reduced due to lockdown (Covid-19 restrictions)).

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7

Writing a Biographical Labour History of Sierra Leone, c. 1845-1900 at the ASCL, 2017-2020

Felix Kram

Introduction

With the Research MA (ResMAAS) programme in African Studies at the African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL) facing termination and in the face of wider cuts to higher education in the Netherlands, a defence of both higher education and the specific value of the ResMA programme in African Studies as offered at the ASCL is in order. The approval by the Eerste Kamer for the education budget that included these cuts means that there are no more political obstacles to their implementation. It is my intention to highlight these hard to nail down, indirect benefits of the programme in this chapter. Instead of engaging in a battle of accountancy by enumerating the tangible value of African Studies as a field, I shall defend the programme largely in terms of my own personal development. I am thereby leaving aside the question of the economic importance of higher education and the question of Africa's growing importance in the context of the emergence of what some have called a multipolar world (Westcott, 2024).

This chapter is intended to mirror the biographical approach of the thesis I wrote during my time at the ASCL. I have chosen to focus on how the programme contributed to both my academic career and my subsequent non-academic work. With regards to the former I trace a direct line from my time at the ASCL to my academic work, while in the latter case the programme's influence is only obvious in hindsight. This chapter demonstrates how my participation in the programme has shaped my intellectual development in ways that are ill-suited to formalised evaluation. I offer my own story as an illustration of the possible benefits of the programme, with the caveat that mine is but one among many different experiences. The purpose of my chapter, then, is twofold. It is both a defence of the programme as a preparation for students intending to work in the academic field of African Studies and a reflection on the serendipitous nature of the educational and professional benefits of the programme.

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the contents of my thesis, which was entitled '*Whatsoever Thy Hand Findeth to Do, Do It With Thy Might*: S.H.A. Case and J.T. Ojukutu-Macauley and Artisan Trade Unions in Sierra Leone, 1875-1900.' I will present its main arguments and findings in the broader context of the literature on labour history to which it aimed to contribute. Having established the intellectual outcome of my time at the ASCL, I then sketch the development of this thesis before concluding with a reflection on my time at the ASCL and its effect on my subsequent career. This latter part is a biographical reflection on the production of a biographical thesis on African labour history.

The Thesis: Academic Background

Let me begin by summarising the argument I presented in the thesis. Based on the study of the lives of Samuel Henry Athanasius Case and James Thomas Ojukutu-Macauley, two prominent artisan labour unionists in Sierra Leone at the end of the nineteenth century, I concluded that the union activities of these two men and other artisan trade unionists should be understood as an attempt by the artisans to carve out their own socioeconomic niche within colonial Sierra Leonean society. The artisan class to which Case and Ojukutu-Macauley belonged aimed to join the emerging elite of the colony by shoring up their own economic position.

As Eric Hobsbawm (1998, pp. 76-81) has noted in the case of English artisan unionists, the aim of early artisan unions was to restrict the supply of artisan labour in order to safeguard high wages and maintain the exclusivity of the artisans' crafts. This aim, as I argue below, was shared by early artisan unionists in Sierra Leone, including Case and Ojukutu-Macauley. But the personal involvement of these two men in elite networks affected both their ability to undertake trade union organisation and the demands they made as trade unionists.

A little over half a century after the founding of the first British colony in Freetown in 1787, an elite consisting of the descendants of the freed slaves – called 'liberated Africans' – had begun to emerge in Freetown. Religious affiliation was an important marker of social status. Among the Christian liberated Africans, the established Anglican Church was the most prestigious, followed, in descending order of importance, by the Wesleyan Methodists, the United Free Methodists (U.M.F.C.), and then smaller denominations (Porter, 1953).

The members of the elite derived their power from their work in the professions or as merchants or rentiers and their acculturation to Victorian-era British middle-class values. By 1863, they had gained a degree of influence within the co-

lonial administration. A group of Sierra Leonean merchants succeeded in appointing one of their own as a member of the Legislative Council. Although the position of such a so-called unofficial member was *de jure* not very influential, it nonetheless gave the emerging elite access to the political decision-making process (Fyfe, 1962, pp. 318-322). This westernised elite expected to be rewarded for its loyalty to the British Empire. However, like other westernised African elites across British Africa in the Victorian period, their power was gradually reduced by a colonial administration that mistrusted African elites and looked down on them (Bickford-Smith, 2004).

The descendants of the western-educated liberated Africans, to which group both Case and Ojukutu-Macauley belonged, remained a distinct group well into the twentieth century. In an analysis of Sierra Leonean civil servants in the 1970s, Abner Cohen (1981) argued that these civil servants formed an elite. Cohen's definition of an elite stressed the importance of informal education in transmitting a shared way of life, expressed in ways of dress, marriage customs, ways of speaking, which coalesced into an 'ideology of eliteness' (Cohen, 1981, p. 3). This ideology is transmitted to young people through informal elite networks, such as associations or by joined extracurricular activities such as sports (Cohen, 1981, pp. 60-61). Using Cohen's conception of an elite, I could trace the manner in which Case and Ojukutu-Macauley were exposed to such networks, and thereby whether both men belonged to the emerging Sierra Leonean elite in the nineteenth century. Indeed, I ended up arguing that the artisans' ambition to join the nascent Sierra Leonean elite explains the emerging artisan labour movement better than an analysis that sees them as part of an emerging working-class movement.

The existing literature on labour history on nineteenth-century Sierra Leone had mainly focussed on providing chronological accounts of strikes and trade unions (Conway, 1968; Fashole Luke, 1985). While being valuable contributions, these texts were largely descriptive and offered little to no overall analysis, by sidestepping issues like the development of class consciousness. Ibrahim Abdullah (1998) made the argument that strike action and trade union organisation originated among the colony's artisans, the well-educated class of carpenters and other skilled workers who first organised themselves around *The Artisan*, a periodical newspaper published by S.H.A. Case starting in 1884. Although it was unsuccessful, this effort by the artisans to organise themselves was revolutionary by virtue of being the first attempt to formulate a class-based solidarity among workers in Sierra Leone. My interest in the relationship between the emerging artisan unions and the Sierra Leonean elite was inspired by Abdullah's insistence on the artisan unions being the first working-class movement in Sierra Leone.

For the period I covered in the thesis, Abdullah's work was the most recent substantive work of labour history research. Interestingly, it was published the year before the field of labour history received the first impulse towards what would become the field of Global Labour History. The publication of the *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History* (Van der Linden and Lucassen, 1999) expressed a desire to move the field of labour history beyond its traditional confines: a focus on the history of trade union organisation and male proletarian workers was to make way for an expanded conception of labour history. This intellectual project was to include the work of enslaved people, women, and other groups of workers who had hitherto largely been excluded from labour history. The other pillar of the approach proposed by Van der Linden and Lucassen consisted of a move away from a Eurocentric conception of labour history. Labour history was to become a field that included insights from the experiences of workers from around the globe. They sought to move away from what they called 'methodological nationalism', the idea that labour history as a field ought to analyse the development of national working classes (Van der Linden, 2008, pp. 5-8).

Although the subsequent development of Global Labour History (GLH) has proven to be fruitful, one major critique of the field proved particularly insightful to my work. Cobble (2012), from a feminist perspective, argued that GLH still insufficiently grappled with the relationship between the public and private lives of the actors involved in the building of labour movements. In the study of the labour movements built by both men and women, Cobble argued, labour history as a field still needed to pay attention to the relationships (such as friendships), and identities that informed the activities of labour unionists and activists. This connection between private and public lives dovetails well with Cohen's interest in the transmission of an ideology of eliteness through informal networks.

Abdullah's article on the development of the artisan working class in Sierra Leone (Abdullah, 1998) had already paid attention to the ideas artisans put forward, but his article did not consider the link between the artisans' public and private lives. Abdullah argued that the artisans drew on the ideas that the Sierra Leonean bourgeoisie had developed in relation to the colonial government. The members of this elite believed that their loyalty to the British ought to be rewarded by their inclusion in the colonial apparatus. The artisans similarly insisted on their own respectability to lay claim to better wages and a higher social status.

In short, in my own thesis I strove to incorporate the works by Cobble and Abdullah into an understanding of artisan trade unionists in Sierra Leone that investigated this interaction between the public and private lives of artisan unionists in their work as trade union organisers. I became intrigued in the tension I per-

ceived between Case and Ojukutu-Macauley's involvement in elite networks in nineteenth-century Freetown and their position, as artisans and trade unionists, within a working class. A biographical study that combined an analysis of their work as artisan organisers and as participants in the Sierra Leonean elite could shed light on the ways in which their position within elite networks related to their work as trade union organisers.

Sources

Before I proceed to the argument of the thesis, I want to briefly discuss the sources I employed in the course of my research. For the lives of Case and Ojukutu-Macauley I mainly employed the various newspapers published in Freetown during their lifetimes. These newspapers were run by, and written for, representatives of the colony's urban professionals and well-to-do merchants (Deveneaux, 1976, pp. 48-50). This focus of the newspapers on the affairs of the elite proved useful for the reconstruction of the private lives of Case and Ojukutu-Macauley, as the papers covered notable social events, such as meetings, church services, and public celebrations. It therefore gave a me an overview of the involvement of these two men in the affairs of the colony's elite.

Copies of Case's newspaper *The Artisan* as well as *The Commonwealth*, a periodical Case briefly edited and published in the late 1880s, are available in the British Library. These provide access to Case's own writings. Ojukutu-Macauley did not leave a similarly large collections of writings behind, but his opinions have been recorded in other newspapers. The advertisement sections of these newspapers also contain information on the work by artisans. For example, one advertisement for Ojukutu-Macauley's workshop from 1876 mentions that, in addition to his work as an artisan, Ojukutu-Macauley also provided funerary services, including a 'New Fashionable and Splendid Hearse with Rich Plumes' ('Advertisements', 1876).

Despite their usefulness, the newspapers did not cover the entirety of the period under study. Coverage of the period is uneven until the appearance of the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* in 1884, which was published continuously well into the twentieth century. No other newspaper lasted as long as the *Weekly News*, but for the period 1892-1904 the competing *Sierra Leone Times* also proved a useful source. For this chapter, I will mainly be referring to these two newspapers as well as the *Independent*, a newspaper that was published in the mid-1870s. In addition to this, because Case had been a Freemason, I visited the collection of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry in London, where a few documents from the lodge to which Case had belonged have been preserved.

Government archives, deposited in Freetown and London, also proved useful, although they contained little direct information on the lives of Case and Ojukutu-Macauley. Their value came from the statistical information on the colony's economic situation, ongoing debates within the colony's legislative and executive councils, and the records on membership of various social organisations (such as the trade unions) they contained. They play no role in this particular chapter, but were invaluable to the overall thesis by providing insights into the political and economic context in which the lives of Ojukutu-Macauley and Case took place.

The Thesis: The lives of S.H.A. Case and J.T. Ojukutu-Macauley

Case and Ojukutu-Macauley made for interesting case studies because of the ways in which their own lives reflected the complex position of the artisans in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone. The two men were born in Freetown a little less than one year apart from one another, in 1845 and 1846 respectively. Both men were well-educated, although the existing source material is somewhat hazy regarding the details of that education. Case, whose father had died when Case was only eight years old, went to work as an apprentice stonemason at the age of fourteen. He subsequently worked a number of jobs, including stints as a clerk for a local merchant and a job in the colonial prison in Sierra Leone, and government jobs in the Gambia and the Gold Coast. Case finally returned to Freetown to take a job as a foreman in Sierra Leone in 1874 ('Death of Mr. S.H.A. Case', 1901).

Ojukutu-Macauley began his apprenticeship as a carpenter at the age of nineteen, and by the mid-1870s, he was running a successful workshop of his own ('Death of Mr J.T. Ojukutu-Macauley', 1904). Case's own career reflected the precarity of artisan livelihoods. Though proud and well-trained, artisans constantly feared to be demoted from artisan work to other, less prestigious jobs. As outlined above, Case himself, despite his later successes, had worked a number of other jobs before he launched *The Artisan* in 1884. Ojukutu-Macauley, by contrast, was a successful artisan who ran his own workshop and trained large numbers of apprentices.

Case launched his periodical *The Artisan* in early 1884 and was among the founding members of the colony's first artisan union, called the Mechanics' Alliance, later the same year. The ambition to found an artisan union had been long in the making, with attempts to found such a union going back to around 1875. Two initiatives took place that year. The first was prompted by the death of Charles Hazleborg who had been among the local merchants who had appointed the first Sierra Leonean member of the Legislative Council in 1863. In commemoration of Hazleborg's apparent commitment to improving the conditions of the colony's

artisans, four anonymous artisans proposed to found an artisan union to honour Hazleborg's legacy ('Correspondence', 1875).

Another initiative was recalled by the stonemason J.A. Davies during the first meeting of the Mechanics' Alliance in 1884. Davies claimed that he and William Glouster, another local artisan and Case's cousin, had been encouraged by Algernon Montague, a controversial government official, to form an artisan union eight years before the meeting, that is, in 1875 or 1876 ('Meeting of mechanics', 1884). Case's own role in these initiatives is unclear, but based on a letter he anonymously contributed to the newspaper *Independent* in 1875, he was at least already considering the question of artisan organisation as early as 1875. The contents of the letter neatly map onto the views Case would later, under his own name, expound in *The Artisan*, and the brief autobiography offered in the article matches Case's own ('To the editor of the *Independent*', 1875).

Case envisioned artisan organisation as a solution to three interrelated problems. Firstly, he argued that successful artisans would support claims to equality between Africans and white Europeans. Case claimed that previous generations of Sierra Leonean artisans had demonstrated their ability to absorb instruction from white European instructors, showing that Africans were not inferior to Europeans. Secondly, Case argued that regulation of apprenticeships would remedy the shortage of highly-trained artisan labour. He argued that apprentices had no incentive to sit out long apprenticeships, as they could make the same wages if they absconded from their instructors after a few months. By introducing a scheme of government certification, apprentices could be prevented from hiring themselves out as artisans before they had completed their apprenticeships. Thirdly, Case sought to improve the social position of the artisans. He lamented that many artisans, failing to make a living amidst this heavy competition from inferior workmen, would abandon their artisan occupations to become small retail traders ('To the editor of the *Independent*', 1875).

It is likely that Case was at least aware of Glouster's discussion with Montague. The two men were related, and, according to a description of Case's funeral in 1901 found in the archive of the Masonic Lodge to which both men belonged, they were very close (Barlatt, 1901). But, given the scarcity of sources on Case's live between the late 1870s and 1884, it is difficult to reconstruct the details of his involvement. It is clear, however, that Case made extensive use of his contacts among the Sierra Leonean elite in preparation for the launch of *The Artisan* in 1884. Case himself claimed that the prospectus for the journal had been well received by 'many influential persons' and that he expected contributions from 'em-

inent officers in the Royal Engineers [the department for which Case himself had worked] and the Civil Service' ('Prospectus', 1884).

The first meeting of the Mechanics' Alliance took place in July 1884. By late 1884, the union had 190 paying members ('The Mechanics Alliance', 1885). Yet, by early 1885 Case was worrying about the success of his venture. *The Artisan* relied on donations from sympathisers to survive, and Case grumbled that there was little interest in the union when only 51 paying members remained by late July 1885 ('The Mechanics Alliance', 1885). Case hoped to join forces with the German consul Ernst Vohsen, who was the driving force behind the Sierra Leone Association, an organisation of the city's merchants. Case hoped to advocate for the interests of the colony's merchants and artisans by appending the Mechanics Alliance to the Sierra Leone Association ('Our letter-box', 1885). But the Association, too, collapsed in 1885 due to internal dissent (Hargreaves, 1958, pp. 50–51). Case supported Vohsen in the internal struggles within the Association ('Our letter-box', 1885), but by 1886 neither the Association nor the Mechanics' Alliance was active anymore.

Ojukutu-Macauley, meanwhile, had apparently not been involved in the Mechanics' Alliance. In 1889 he participated in a public discussion on government education in the colony. Education was an important topic to early artisan organisers. Case had already proposed government-organised artisan schooling as a solution to the overcrowding of the artisan labour market in 1875 ('To the editor of the *Independent*', 1875). In his speech in 1889, Ojukutu-Macauley argued in favour of his own paternalistic attitude towards his apprentices. Ojukutu-Macauley lamented the fact that young educated men preferred white-collar careers over artisan occupations. Speaking of his own apprentices, who lived with Ojukutu-Macauley in his workshop, he argued that his training built their character ('Industrial Education', 1889).

Ojukutu-Macauley next appeared in connection with the nascent artisan trade union movement when he presided over a meeting of the colony's artisans in late 1892, in the wake of a large labour strike among the colony's casual day labourers. At this point, the artisans were not organised in trade unions. A report on the meeting in the *Sierra Leone Times* offered no particulars about the participants of the meeting. It merely recorded the fact that the artisans debated their economic position and passed several resolutions regarding their pay ('The labour strike', 1892).

New artisan unions sprang up over the next few years. Unions for carpenters, blacksmiths, and shipwrights announced wage rates to be paid to their members

in 1895 and 1896. ('No. 1 Shipwright Union Society,' 1895; 'Special notice', 1896; 'Public notification,' 1896; 'Working men's association', 1896). The new unions had emerged from a conflict between the master artisans and the government railways. Work on the railways proved attractive to young apprentices, who left their masters to work for the railways. In response, newly-formed artisan unions presented their wage rates. At least according to the *Sierra Leone Times* ('Working men's association', 1896) both private and public employers conformed to the rates demanded by the unions of blacksmiths and carpenters.

The importance of both Ojukutu-Macauley and Case to the emerging artisan labour movement was recognised during their lifetimes. The editor of the *Sierra Leone Times* discussed Case's efforts to unionise the artisans. Although the article was favourable towards Case's work, it lamented the lack of support Case had received. ('Working men's association', 1896). The same article referred to Ojukutu-Macauley as one of the 'principal Freetown workmen' who had contributed to the formation of the emerging artisan unions. Ojukutu-Macauley was a member of the carpenters' union and presented an address to the governor of the colony on behalf of his union in 1897 ('The Carpenters' Defensive Union', 1897).

The artisan unions did not embark on strike action. Already in 1884, Case stressed that the Mechanics' Alliance 'is not intended to be aggressive as some think and speak; it is intended to promote and perfect as well as could be, the industries of the Colony, and to assert the rightful claims of the mechanics, not by bravado-but by merit' ('The artisan alliance', 1884). This lack of militancy was shared by the artisan unions of the 1890s. They were, as indicated above, initially successful in enforcing their wage demands. But, unlike the Mechanics' Alliance, they did not publish a periodical of their own to propagate their views, nor do they appear to have organised further collective action. The artisans union appear to have fit quite comfortably into Freetown's elite society. Case and Ojukutu-Macauley certainly were not ostracised by the elite for organising the artisans.

Although they moved in the same social circles, their personal relationship is difficult to reconstruct. They attended the same church, Samaria Church, where they were both lay preachers. Both men were involved in the construction of Tabernacle Church around 1884 ('Tabernacle Church', 1884). Given the fact that the two men had attended the same church, where they both had visible roles as lay preachers, the two men must have known each other. They were both present during the meeting in 1889 to discuss public education ('Industrial education', 1889). They also both attended the banquet in honour of the knighthood awarded to Samuel Lewis, a prominent barrister who had served in the Legislative Council since 1882, in 1893 ('Banquet to Hon. S. Lewis, C.M.G', 1893). Yet, when it comes

to artisan trade union organising, they never appear together in the source material. If the two men had personal differences, these have not been recorded in the sources.

I would suggest that, outside of the church and some public events, both men moved in their own networks and circles of acquaintances. Samuel Lewis and Ojukutu-Macauley had known each other since childhood. Lewis had served as a witness to the marriage of one of Ojukutu-Macauley's daughter, and Ojukutu-Macauley was one of the executors of his will when Lewis died in 1903 ('Death of Sir Samuel Lewis', 1903). Ojukutu-Macauley was famous for organising lavish parties on the occasion of his children's weddings. He, according to an article in the *Weekly News*, was famous for organising the best parties in Freetown, which were renowned among the colony's upper and middle classes ('Marriage Johnson-Macauley', 1897).

Case, too, was well-connected. The Sierra Leonean amateur historian Aaron Sibthorpe recalled that he and Case had met in primary school, and they maintained a friendship until Case's death in 1901 (Sibthorpe, 1970, p.138). As noted above, Case leaned on his connection to the Sierra Leonean elite to keep *The Artisan* afloat. Case took part in the centenary celebration committee, which took charge of the festivities around the centenary of the colony's founding in 1887, an occasion that coincided with Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. The membership of the committee was a true who's-who of Freetown's elite, and included, for instance, Samuel Lewis ('Centennial committee', 1886).

After the failure of *The Artisan* and the Mechanics' Alliance, Case joined forces with the Wesleyan minister John Augustus Cole (1848-1943). Cole and Case attempted to get an Industrial and Scientific Institute off the ground in 1887, of which Case was to be the secretary ('Professor J. Augustus Cole in America', 1887). The two men also briefly published a newspaper together, called *The Commonwealth* in 1888. Case was further involved in a local sports association, the Grand East Club ('Banquet at the Wilberforce Memorial Hall', 1889), and the Unity Club, an association that hosted lectures for its members ('Unity and self-respect', 1891; 'First anniversary of the Unity Club', 1892). Case also joined a Masonic Lodge in the 1890s, where, again, he would have moved in the same social circles as the colony's white-collar elite, as indicated by membership lists of the lodge (Pratt, 1990, pp. 14-17). In 1891, Case launched another newspaper, entitled *The Trader*. Case argued that his paper would supplement his previous work on *The Artisan*, as 'the artisan (or his wife) is generally at the same time a trader. ('The Trader', 1891). In this quote Case summarised the complex position of the artisan, who was at the same time an entrepreneur and a worker.

That tension between the artisan as a wage worker and the artisan as a trader (whether by choice or due to economic necessity), is, in my view, crucial to understanding the unions Case and Ojukutu-Macauley participated in. The artisans took pride in their crafts, for which they had taken long apprenticeships, but found their economic position precarious. This precarity also undermined their self-confidence vis-à-vis the elite. The solution to the problem of an oversupply of low-quality artisan labour was found in tighter restrictions on the supply of artisan labour. In this regard, the Sierra Leonean artisan unions discussed here fit Hobsbawm's (1998) discussion of artisan labour organisation.

But Case and Ojukutu-Macauley, from an early age, took part in the networks that transmitted an ideology of eliteness. Both men moved in elite circles and were held in high regard by their non-artisan elite contemporaries. These connections to the elite offered Case much-needed support for his artisan trade union work, chiefly through financial contributions to the *The Artisan*. Yet, in spite of this support, tensions between artisans and the elite are evident from the sources. Case and Ojukutu-Macauley both rejected elements of the lifestyle of the Sierra Leonean elite. They denounced the depreciation of manual labour by the elite and insisted on the respectability of artisan labour, so long as the artisan performing that labour conformed to a rigorous standard of training. Yet, the unions did not challenge the status-quo. They insisted on good wages for artisans and grumbled about the laziness of Freetown's elite from time to time; but they did not, for instance, support strike action. Instead, Case and Ojukutu-Macauley moved in elite circles. They were respectable, and that respectability may well have been undercut had they been overly radical in their convictions.

Their biographies, then, contribute to our understanding of early artisan trade union organisation in Sierra Leone by elucidating the connection between the emerging artisan class and the white-collar elite. Their connection to the elite afforded Case and Ojukutu-Macauley a degree of respect. It gave them access to the press, where their opinions were recorded and distributed. Case required this kind of support to get *The Artisan* off the ground. As the elite and the artisans were not wholly separated, it was possible for successful artisans like Case and Ojukutu-Macauley to join the ranks of the elite. This was facilitated by the fact that both men had moved in the same circles as that elite since childhood. They were familiar with the unspoken rules of the elite and could, therefore, make use of their connections. At the same time, this elite connection moderated the demands of the artisan unions, which remained largely focussed on calling for better wages and enforcing hierarchies between apprentices and their masters. Artisan unionisation served to prepare the artisans to take their rightful place in elite circles, not only by increasing their wages but also by enhancing their

respectability in the eyes of their compatriots. Case and Ojukutu-Macauley were very successful in this regard.

Developing the Research

When I arrived at the ASCL in late 2017 to begin my master's degree, I had only a faint notion about my research interests. I had previously written undergraduate seminar papers on the 2012 Marikana Massacre and the song *Stimela* by the South African musician Hugh Masakela, which is about migrant labour to the South African gold mines. My bachelor's thesis had been about the political ideology of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a radical, self-proclaimed Fanonian political party in South Africa.

As we were expected to embark on our research in the first semester of the second year, I had some time to come up with something to write about. My research topic came from an internship I did at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, beginning in late 2017. For this internship I collected records of strikes from a series of Sierra Leonean newspapers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I also investigated the existing bibliography. Given the material I had already collected during the internship, and since the labour history of Sierra Leone still offered many opportunities to be expanded upon, I was now in need of a supervisor. Dr Klaas van Walraven agreed to fill this role, and his mentorship was crucial in shaping the subsequent thesis.

I remember from our initial meetings, where I showed up with long lists of the strikes I had recovered from the newspaper records, that the challenge would be to develop a fruitful analytical approach. The strikes themselves were interesting as events; but without a well-developed analytical framework, they would amount to little more than that. It was Klaas van Walraven who suggested a biographical approach to provide an overarching framework to my research, inspired undoubtably by his own work on biography within African history (Van Walraven, 2020).

Biography had long been a bit of a *bête noire* of academic history, despite the great popularity of biographical books among the wider public. Historians had dismissed biography as a genre of historical writing for being, allegedly, insufficiently rigorous and preferring anecdote over rigour (Salvatore, 2004). Only by the 1990s did biographical studies begin to be taken more seriously by social scientists (Wengraf et al., 2002, p. 251). The so-called biographical turn has also made it presence felt in African history (for a fuller discussion see: Van Walraven, 2020).

As Research Master's students, we spent a fair bit of time during our seminars discussing methodology. I needed a methodological framework that not only suited the topic of my research, but that also fit within the interdisciplinary approaches that were and, as I understand it, have remained the bedrock of the programme (Leiden University, 2025). This proved a challenging, but intellectually rewarding, process. Indeed, as the topic itself was very historical, in the sense that it was couched in a historiography and relied on a fairly traditional corpus of mostly written sources, developing it into a multidisciplinary research project required some effort. In the end, the final thesis remained firmly within the historical discipline, though with a biographical focus, informed by theoretical developments in the social sciences (for instance, the work of Abner Cohen to which I have referred above).

One line of argumentation I pursued in my thesis emphasised the inherent multidisciplinarity of history as a discipline. I drew on the argument developed by the historian Jan Vansina. He argued that historians rely on theories from other disciplines, such as the social sciences, to develop their analysis. Vansina advocated a research process in which historians formulated hypotheses to be tested by the empirical material, in which this empirical material served to cast systematic doubt on these hypotheses. Multidisciplinarity, therefore, lends history its explanatory power (Vansina, 1974). Iva Peša subsequently argued that biography can usefully serve the function of testing prior hypotheses and established explanations within the historiography (Peša, 2020).

Another line of methodological inquiry I discussed in my thesis concerned the precise delineations of biographical genres. In the end, I framed my thesis as a life history. Traditionally, such life histories, as used by anthropologists and sociologists, depart from lengthy narrations of one's life in an interview setting (Goodson, 2001). The postmodernist thinker Pierre Bourdieu was critical of life histories, for, in his view, the narration of a life imposes an *ex post facto* coherence on the narrator's experiences (Bourdieu, 1986).

Thus, I had two challenges to contend with. The first is rather obvious; I could not collect the kind of oral narrations of Case and Ojukutu-Macauley that are the traditional bedrock of life histories. To construct their life history, I drew on written sources rather than narrations, and although that written record was patchy in places, I was able to reconstruct the lives of both Ojukutu-Macauley and Case to some extent.

The second challenge consisted of the degree of coherence I, as a researcher, could impose on the lives I was describing and analysing. This second challenge proved

productive rather than detracting. I grappled with the question of how should we understand their identities as trade unionists vis-à-vis their other identities? I have given my answer to this question above, but I think it is useful to stress here that this answer came as the result of ongoing reflections on the empirical evidence at my disposal, the existing historical literature, and the methodological discussions we had during our seminars at the ASCL.

Looking Back on the ASCL

For the final part of this chapter, I would like to reflect on my time at the ASCL and the way it has influenced my subsequent career. After finishing the ResMA African Studies in 2020, I embarked on a second master's program at Leiden University, this time in International Relations, where I took the specialization Global Political Economy. My interest in political economy had been sparked by a lecture on the subject by Dr André Leliveld, which was part of the African Studies programme. I remember being gripped by his discussion of economic affairs from perspectives beyond pure economics. This lecture then indirectly led to my current position as a policy advisor at the FNV, where I have worked since February 2025. As mentioned above, that lecture sparked my interest in political economy, and having finished my PhD I found myself pursuing this interest professionally in my work at the union.

But before that, I first embarked on a PhD in African History at the University of Pavia, in cotutelle with Leiden University, which I began in late 2021. This research produced the final dissertation *Establishing Control: The Krio Elite and the Transformation of Labour Relations in Colonial Sierra Leone, 1868-1919*. The topic of the dissertation, which I defended in Leiden on 21 February 2025, had emerged directly from the topic of the thesis I had written for my Research Master's degree. The dissertation was an opportunity to further develop the issues I had discussed in my master's thesis. The research process had also left me with several topics I had found in the archival material or the literature which fell outside of the scope of the thesis. For my dissertation I revisited many of the collections on which I had drawn for my previous thesis. I did part of the work of writing the dissertation in the PhD room of the ASCL, which proved a nice place to undertake some of my work, including the opportunity to speak to the other PhD candidates while I worked on the dissertation.

Any discussion of the ASCL would be incomplete without mentioning its library. Not only is the library well-stocked with works – movies and journals as well as monographs and essay collections – it also provided me with access to the extensive Readex *African Newspapers* collection. I first used this collection during my

internship at the IISH, and it remained a valuable source of information throughout my academic work. As I understand it, access to the collection had been purchased by the ASCL. I have also seen students, whom I instructed during a course on missionaries in Africa at Leiden University together with Dr. Walter Nkwi, make fruitful use of this database.

I still recall my first visit to the library, somewhere in autumn 2015. Professor Jan-Bart Gewald had sent us, unwitting second-year students enrolled in his course of the history of migrant labour in South Africa, to the library to remedy the fact that we had never been there. We were received by librarian Ella Verkaik, who introduced us to the collection. Throughout the years that followed that library visit, then still located in the Pieter de la Court building, she and her colleagues were ever receptive and accommodating to students and researchers working on Africa in whatever form. Apart from its considerable value as a repository of knowledge, I cherish the ASCL as a place to visit and nourish one's interest in African affairs – no matter where that interest might lead to.

Conclusion: The Value of African Studies

In this chapter, I have attempted to briefly trace both the academic and personal benefits of the ResMA programme African Studies at the ASCL. By its very nature, this has not been a sweeping, figures-driven defence of the direct financial or economic benefits of African studies in general or the programme at the ASCL specifically. Its value lies in educating future scholars of Africa and thinkers, policy makers, and educators who deal with that continent. But beyond this, the programme challenged me, and many others with me, to develop a set of extremely useful skills.

I could, on the grounds that my current job has nothing to do with either Africa's past or present, simply conclude that my time at the ASCL has amounted to an enormous waste of time and money. Could I not have simply skipped all of it and moved straight to a master's degree in Global Political Economy to go work at the union? But as I have discussed – though I should keep in mind Bourdieu's warning that the narration of my life can impose a coherence I did not experience as I was doing my studies at the ASCL – it was only because of my time at the ASCL that I find myself in my current position.

Of course, my experience is but one among the many alumni of the programme. I am unsure whether it is representative, though from what I occasionally pick up about the subsequent careers of my cohort it seems to me that all of us have gone on to many different, interesting, and useful things. But what my experience

does outline is that the programme carries tremendous potential. Even if financial constraints demand the termination of the programme (I leave this question to those more intimately involved with the programme's governance), the simple act of its abolishment does not solve the larger question posed by the end of the programme. I believe that question boils down to the tension between the value of a university education as a form of *Bildung* that equips its alumni with intangible skills and benefits and the monetary metrics that inform the decision whether to maintain the programme. If we want to endow future generations with a solid educational foundation that allows them to embark on all kinds of different careers as fully-fledged human beings, we must tolerate a degree of serendipity. And, perhaps, African Studies is the most serendipitous of them all.

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8

Malawi's Critical Urban Commentariat: Redefining Political Legitimacy in the Post-authoritarian Public Sphere

Maurice Hutton

Introduction

For the first three decades of independence, Malawians lived under the iron-fisted rule of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Banda relied heavily on kinship metaphors and traditional symbolism to legitimise his autocracy. He was the 'father' of the nation and the traditional guardian of all women ('Nkhoswe Number One'). The citizenry were expected to listen and obey like children, and he was entitled to discipline them (Gilman, 2009; Chirambo, 2009, 2010). He was also praised as the 'Ngwazi' (conqueror), 'Mkango' (lion), and 'Moto' (fire) – traditional Chewa titles that bolstered his legitimacy in a way that he deemed 'ideal for the post-colonial political order' (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 194). Like a father who is not replaceable, Banda declared himself 'President for Life'. There was little space to counter these hegemonic narratives without facing imprisonment or worse, except through metaphors in poetry and song.

But in 1993, Malawian civil society rose up and demanded change, catching the wave of democratisation that was breaking across the continent (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). The pressure was considerable, and Banda gave in to it, agreeing to hold multiparty elections for the first time in the country's history. One of his party's election campaign ads declared: 'Only one man has won the right to be our President…Kamuzu, the father of Malawi' (*Malawi News*, 14-20 May 1994). But Malawians evidently felt otherwise, as they elected someone else to be their president, Bakili Muluzi, and Banda's reign came to an unexpected end. At this pivotal moment, Malawi's public sphere opened up to remarkably free expression.[85] Politics began to be discussed everywhere – in the newspapers, the markets, the

85 Legally, independent media have enjoyed relative freedom of expression since the adoption of the 1994 Constitution (article 36). But Freedom House notes that there are still issues in terms of access to information, court injunctions, libel, and a politically biased media regulatory authority.

minibuses. As one letter writer complained in the *Sunday Times*: 'All we care for is politics, politics and more politics' ('Rise, mother Malawi!', 2005). Following the departure of the disciplinarian 'father' president, citizens began to debate what democratic leadership should look like. This chapter examines the ideas that emerged in this new public sphere.

The literature on postcolonial political cultures in Africa has often portrayed state-society relations as somewhat dysfunctional and anathema to liberal democracy. Ceremonialism and corporeal symbolism – reflecting a 'politics of the belly' (Bayart, 1993) and indigenous 'cultural logic of legitimacy' (Schatzberg, 2001) – are associated with the legitimation of elite excess and disempowerment of the masses. This perspective was articulated most vividly and pessimistically by Achille Mbembe (1992, 2001), who identified, in people's contradictory mockery and adulation of their rulers' vulgar excesses, a profound ambivalence towards state power; and a relationship between rulers and ruled that robbed both of their vitality – resulting in 'mutual zombification' (1992, p. 4). Many scholars recognise aspects of this in the societies they study (including in Kamuzu Banda's Malawi), but few would fully embrace Mbembe's overly generalising characterisation of postcolonial African state-society relations, and his fatalism about an 'inescapable cycle of pointless violence and cynical laughter' (Karlström, 2003, p. 60; see also Olaniyan, 1992). Nevertheless, at the time of this study (2012-13) the literature on African politics, whether 'from above' or 'from below' (see Chabal, 2009), still tended to portray 'the people' as in thrall to big-man politics (neopatrimonialism); there was little interest in the more educated, cosmopolitan voices deconstructing and challenging these aspects of political culture.

Providing a counterpoint to these somewhat pathologizing portrayals of African publics, this study examines the highly critical discourses of the educated, cosmopolitan commentariat that emerged in Malawi's urban public sphere after 1994. This commentariat tried to cut political elites down to size and change Malawian citizens' mindsets. It espoused many of the global ideals of liberal democracy, but did not simply parrot the rhetoric of Western NGOs and diplomats: in fact, there was deep resentment of Western interventions in Malawi's urban public sphere. This commentariat seriously provoked Malawian political elites, yet it has not received much scholarly attention. This study therefore offers a complementary perspective to the many other studies of changing attitudes to state power in democratic Malawi, that have focused instead on rural and vernacular discourses or the prisms of religion and the occult (see e.g., Poeschke & Chirwa, 1998; Van Dijk, 1999, 2000; Kishindo, 2000; Englund, 2002; Brown, 2008; Gilman, 2009; Gaynor, 2010).

The chapter is based on my MA dissertation (Hutton, 2013), completed at the African Studies Centre, Leiden. The first year of coursework and reading had inspired my interest in political cultures in Africa, which I then explored through research in the second year, conducting five months of fieldwork in Malawi, in 2012, where I analysed hundreds of newspapers (current and archived); interviewed 30 journalists, academics, politicians and activists; and attended a historic conference of the most influential Malawian civil society actors. The chapter is written mostly in the past tense, because of the time that has elapsed since the research was conducted. Many of the dynamics described surely still prevail; however, Malawi's public sphere has no doubt been transformed by the expansion of mobile internet access, bridging the gap between urban and rural yet also fragmenting public discourse.

Prominent Voices in Malawi's Urban Public Sphere

This section introduces the prominent voices – journalistic, academic, and activist – in Malawi's urban public sphere. This study refers to an 'urban public sphere', because many Malawians perceived a cultural and discursive divide between urban and rural areas, which they sometimes described as 'like night and day'. Thus, Malawian scholar John Lwanda asked: 'Does one argue for two or more public spheres or various components of the main one, each accessible to a particular grouping?' (2008, p. 95). The study certainly recognised that discourse circulated between urban and rural to some degree.[86] But most rural dwellers were excluded from urban mediated discourses, by barriers of language, access and cost.[87]

In the urban public sphere, the print media was particularly important. Professor Kanyongolo of the University of Malawi noted that:

> Politicians…take the newspapers seriously, more seriously than others would, perhaps because they know that, unlike in other places, for example where you have

86 It also recognises that the urban areas have several 'part public spheres' and nothing like the ideal-type public sphere famously expounded by Jürgen Habermas (1989 [1962]) (cf. Fraser, 1992; Kaarsholm, 2009). Bias, hidden agendas, chauvinism, and political influence no doubt shaped it. For further discussion of the concepts of the public sphere and discourse, see Hutton (2013).

87 The main medium for critical political discourse at the time of this study was the independent newspapers, which were distributed around the urban centres of Mzuzu, Lilongwe, Zomba, and Blantyre. Only 60-65% of the country's adult population was literate, with the literate more concentrated in urban areas. Many rural dwellers heard daily newspaper reports summarised on Zodiak Radio, which had a geographically widespread audience of two million, but not necessarily the detailed political opinion columns. The internet, another important medium, was only accessible to approx. 2.2% of the population. Rural dwellers tended to generate vernacular discourses (amplified through radio) demanding economic rights (Englund, 2011).

> many newspapers (so somebody will read the *Sun*, somebody will read the *Mail*, it's kind of more diversified) here you know that every literate member of the middle class will read *The Nation* and the *Daily Times* today. So what is there matters. It begins to shape how people think. And as a politician, if you are a clever politician, then you are paying attention to that.[88]

The *Daily Times* and *The Nation* (and their weekend editions) were the main newspapers with significant circulation.[89] A large proportion of their news reporting was devoted to politics. Additionally, there were often full pages devoted to an interview with a prominent person (an academic or politician) examining political issues, and also sometimes two-page centre-spreads with debates on political issues. Letters to the editor, columns and editorials almost invariably dealt with political events and the conduct of politicians, while poems and stories were often political allegories. The newspapers could therefore potentially be saturated with politics from front to back.

The newspaper commentariat enjoyed wide reach, as newspaper readership was many times greater than sales figures would suggest, given the habit of sharing papers. One important set of voices was the newspaper columnists, whose numbers increased from the early 2000s. Columnists tended to be more experienced journalists. For example, columnist Gracian Tukula had about two decades of experience and was also the editor of the *Nation on Sunday*. Yet many were surprisingly young. Of eight columnists whose ages I requested, the average was 34; one of the most irreverent, Madalitso Musa, was only 23, a recent graduate in English Literature at Chancellors' College. These columnists can be described as 'cosmopolitan' in the sense used by Hasty in her study of the Ghanaian press, where 'journalists are embedded in an adversarial drama of national politics pitched in local cultural terms, [while] at the same time they position themselves professionally in larger global narratives of free speech and democratization' (2005, p. 6). These columnists aim to directly influence politicians, as we will see below.

Another set of prominent voices that commanded authority was University of Malawi (Chancellor College) academics, some of whom had been persecuted by

88 Author interview, Zomba, 20 Oct. 2012.

89 Blantyre Newspapers Limited (founded in 1895) publishes the *Daily Times* (in various incarnations since 1895), *Malawi News* (since 1959) and *Sunday Times* (since 2005). Nation Publications Limited (founded in 1993 by journalist Aleke Banda) publishes *The Nation* (since 1993), *The Weekend Nation* (originally *Saturday Nation*, since 1995) and *Nation on Sunday* (since 2006). BNL and NPL publications are similar in format, writing style, and reputation (though NPL has a slight edge over BNL in terms of popularity and winning media awards), and many of their employees have worked in both media houses. For historical context, see Chitsulo and Mang'anda (2011).

Kamuzu Banda, others of whom came to prominence in the democratic era. This study focused on three in particular who had their own newspaper columns, and were often interviewed in the media and spoke at civil society conferences. They were Professors Blessings Chinsinga, Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula, and Edge Kanyongolo – sometimes referred to jokingly as 'superstars'. They were cosmopolitan in the sense that they had all studied abroad, accessed global media, and posed as transcendent critics of Malawian culture (from gender to gerontocracy).

Blessings Chinsinga was and is a professor of Political Science and Public Administration at Chancellor College. He completed his higher education abroad (Master's at Cambridge and PhD at Mainz). He appeared frequently in the newspapers, often accompanied by a large photograph. One of his regular columns was 'Talking Political Economy' in the *Sunday Times*. He played down his influence over public opinion but suggested that he may have had some impact through his speeches at various high-level fora, including the AGMs of The Malawi Congress of Trade Unions, the Employers' Association of Malawi, the Economic Association of Malawi, and the high-profile conferences of the Public Affairs Committee.[90] He told me: 'Through those high-level meetings, I should think I've been able to influence how some of the people think about the future of this country… [and] the way some think about the political processes in this country.'[91]

Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula was head of the English Literature department at Chancellor College. She obtained her PhD from Binghamton University, and lived for several years in New York with her family. Aside from full-time lecturing, she was a human rights and feminist activist, appearing frequently in the newspapers and writing a column on women's empowerment. Many people I spoke to said that she had become a household name in urban spheres after spearheading the tumultuous 'academic freedom' campaign in 2011 (see below). On her influence in the public sphere, she says:

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90 The Public Affairs Committee (PAC) is a group of civil society leaders, which formed to oppose Kamuzu Banda in 1992. Its membership expanded from religious leaders, to include other civil society groups. PAC has played an important role in curbing abuses of power but also generally consolidating a democratic culture in Malawi. It maintains a certain authority to read the 'signs of the times'. In 2012, it demanded that Mutharika call a referendum on his leadership or resign, threatening civil disobedience should he not comply. Two weeks later, Mutharika died of a heart attack. Some months later, the PAC convened to discuss the leadership of Joyce Banda at a 'second all-inclusive stakeholders' conference' in Blantyre, October 2012. The conference was themed 'Time to Restore Democratic and Economic Governance', and was attended by representatives from the media, the political parties, the Defence Force, the legal fraternity, trade unions, civil society organisations, the private sector and faith leaders. I attended and observed the primary role that academics like Chinsinga and Kanyongolo played in it.

91 Author interview, Zomba, 12 October 2012.

> The few of us who are educated, happen to be very influential because of our background, that educated people 'know things'… There is a large part of the African psyche that has given up the running of this country to the few of us who are educated. It's unfortunate, but that's how it is. We're very powerful here. Being an academic in Malawi, and who does research, it actually inundates you with responsibility. It's not a power that we celebrate, because trust me it comes with a lot of responsibility. It's a big, big weight, you know?[92]

Edge Kanyongolo was and is a professor of Constitutional Law at Chancellor College, who obtained his Masters from Cambridge and PhD from the University of East Anglia. He was a politically active student under Kamuzu Banda's regime and was consequently jailed without trial. He had been active in PAC since its inception in the early 1990s, and had written newspaper columns on and off over the years, on the law and constitutionalism. He was quoted in the papers from time to time as a 'constitutional expert', and he spoke at the PAC's all-inclusive stakeholders' conference assessing the rule of Joyce Banda. On his influence he confessed:

> It's frightening; it is frightening; it's frightening, I'm telling you, it's frightening! Because I'm beginning only to realise this now, to some extent, and I think that it is frightening, and I don't say this lightly. I think it is frightening in the sense of how much responsibility it gives one to be very, very careful in terms of what you say. You cannot be like a student any more, where basically you say what comes to mind, because the consequences of what you say are now much greater.[93]

A third set of influential voices in this critical urban public sphere were some high-profile political activists. One of the most vocal was Rafiq Hajat, who had worked underground during Kamuzu's reign, helped write the constitution, and then entered Muluzi's government until he was 'ignominiously ejected from the party' for opposing Muluzi's third term bid. Hajat featured periodically in the newspapers and radio discussion forums, though he preferred to influence policy through research rather than 'screaming polemics from the rooftop'.[94] He made sophisticated social scientific assessments of Malawi's political culture, whilst also organising demonstrations, like that on 20 July 2011 against Mutharika's regime, following which his organisation's headquarters were burnt down and he went into hiding.

92 Author interview, Zomba, 11 October 2012
93 Author interview, Zomba, 20 November 2012.
94 Author interview, Limbe, 2 October 2012.

I also examined some of the ways in which the general public picked up and circulated ideas espoused by these prominent voices in the urban public sphere. Although much of this happened in *unmediated* spaces like bars, buses, and markets, I focused on mediated discourse because this was much easier to track. I examined letters to the newspapers and a large Facebook forum called 'My Malawi My Views,'[95] which had around 15,000 members at the time of this study (it now has 56,700[96]). Its purpose was stated as follows:

> It is a place where members of the group examine present realities in their nation; pointing out positives and encouraging them, and identifying shortfalls and constructively suggesting ways to improve. It also seeks to be a conduit for discussions and suggestions that might be used for action on the ground, or make policy suggestions to government or bodies that affect the lives of Malawians.

Usually, debates began spontaneously and sometimes fizzled out inconclusively or turned to trivia. But the group's moderators promoted a communicative rationality reminiscent of Habermas's idealised public sphere. For example, one debate was introduced as follows:

> Welcome to the debate titled 'How can Malawi come out of the perennial economic problems?' The debate will start with the moderator's views. Then all people will be welcome to debate objectively with facts backed with evidence where necessary. This is NOT a time to hand-clap for parties. Any views contrary to the topic are not welcome. Tough questions will be asked to any claims, so be ready to take them. The debate may take days to finish.

The debate that ensued in this particular case was informed and cordial, involving several dozen members. It began with an extremely detailed overview of several thousand words on Malawi's economic situation, entirely in English. Most responses, however, code-switched between English and Chichewa. The next section analyses how this urban commentariat discursively challenged and reimagined Malawian political culture in the public sphere.

95 Available at https://www.facebook.com/groups/338949242820625.

96 This group is now private, but another public 'My Malawi My Views' page opened in 2015, and has 291,000 members.

Redefining Political Legitimacy in the Urban Public Sphere

The transition to multiparty democracy in 1994 was meant to be a transformational moment. However, it was soon observed that, whilst some things had changed, somehow the 'rules' had remained the same (*'Zinthu Zasintha, malamulo sanasinthe!'*[97]*).* Procedural democracy had been introduced; but excessive symbolism, ceremonialism, and clientelism prevailed. The executive branch of government continued to wield excessive power, contrary to the spirit of the 1994 constitution (Brown, 2008, p. 198; Cammack, 2011).

Bakili Muluzi, as the first president of the new democratic era (1994-2004), explicitly rejected the symbolism of his authoritarian predecessor, presenting himself instead as a new type of leader with rational-legal rather than traditional or charismatic authority. He replaced Banda's name on various public buildings (airport, football stadium, highway, hospital) with the names of his victims (Chirambo, 2010, p. 6); he banned the practice of *Mbumba* dancing; and he refused to live in the 'obscene opulence' of the presidential palace that Banda had built.[98] But these gestures did not last long. He soon reinstated *Mbumba* dancers (Gilman, 2009, p. 6); engaged in extravagant ceremonialism; mooted the idea of a Kamuzu Banda mausoleum; and ended up a demagogue, trying to extend his reign beyond the constitutional two terms (Lwanda, 2008, p. 96).

Muluzi's successor, Bingu wa Mutharika (2004-2012), went even further in this regard: He frequently prorogued Parliament in his first term, when he only had a parliamentary minority (Chirambo, 2009, p. 80), and cracked down heavily on civil society and free media in his second term, losing massive donor support in the process. He also declared himself the new 'Nkhoswe Number One'; reinstated 'Kamuzu Day'; renamed some buildings after Kamuzu; built a Kamuzu statue in Lilongwe; and actually built the aforementioned mausoleum at a cost of US$ 620,000, declaring at its opening, 'Today is a day when history for this nation is written anew. It is a day when we are affirming that, as a nation, we respect our elders.'[99]

Joyce Banda (2012-2014), who became president by default when Mutharika suddenly died in office, was less prone to self-glorification, and repealed many of the repressive laws introduced by Mutharika. But she became embroiled in a massive corruption scandal ('Cashgate'), and also felt it expedient to hail the legacy of

97 This notion was popularised in the 1995 song 'Zinthu Zasintha', by Saleta Phiri (Lwanda, 2016).
98 'Malawi 'haunted palace' arrests', BBC, 17 March, 2005, [accessed 26 May 2025], available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4350667.stm.
99 'Malawi: Mutharika pays Banda a US$620 000 tribute', *IRIN News*, 15 May 2006; see also Chirambo (2010).

Kamuzu Banda, whose work, she said, 'shall forever remain the foundation upon which the development and prosperity of this great nation is built' ('Malawi President hails Kamuzu', 2013). Even beyond the presidents, it appears that few members of the political class provided a satisfactory model of leadership to Malawian citizens. Nearly three decades after the fall of Kamuzu, the influential Public Affairs Committee, which had contributed to his fall, lamented that:

> Although as a country we claim to be in a multiparty dispensation of political governance, our style of doing politics remains trapped in the one-party era. This has led to formal rules being ignored and personal agendas taking centre stage.[100]

What did the urban commentariat make of all this? There was a pervasive sense of disillusionment, captured in one columnist's inversion of the 'Warm Heart of Africa' slogan to 'Rotting Village of Africa'. But we cannot assume that this disillusionment was expressed in terms of 'universal' democratic ideals unattained. As Michael Bratton and Robert Mattes point out with regards to newly democratised African countries: 'Emerging from life under military and one-party rule, citizens could hardly be expected to have in mind a full set of democratic rules or to evince a deep attachment to them' (2001, p. 450). This section describes how, on the one hand, the urban public tried to humble political elites, yet on the other, it yearned for more visionary leadership and an enlightened citizenry that would elect it. To this end, commentators often addressed leaders and/or the public directly, in the imperative mood. Columnists told me in interviews and questionnaire responses:

> My audience is mainly politicians: the President, her cabinet and the ruling party clique. I also consider Malawians and the donor community just to get their attention and support to issues that I raise.[101]

> My audience is the general public, anyone who reads the *Sunday Times*, young or old, rich or poor. Sometimes the articles address the politicians and key decision makers directly, i.e. it serves as a conversation between the common man and the powers that be, hence the name 'Mouthpiece', for it is a mouthpiece of thousands of invisible people who cannot address our leaders.[102]

100 Public Affairs Committee communiqué following the second all-inclusive stakeholders conference, 30-31 October 2012.

101 Email correspondence, 10 April 2013.

102 Email correspondence, 15 May 2013.

Humbling Political Elites

After a long period of traditional-charismatic leadership under Banda, and in a context of ongoing appeals to symbolic authority, the urban commentariat was engaged in vigorous discursive efforts to cut leaders down to size. Professor Kabwila-Kapasula told me: 'We are yet to get a president who understands that they are supposed to be a servant leader, not to be the boss.'[103] She and others tried to instil this message by demanding humility and sacrifice, and deconstructing symbolic performance. Some of this was quite sophisticated political science analysis. For example, activist Hajat cited academic theories of neopatrimonialism;[104] Chinsinga offered a Weberian analysis of Malawian leadership in a newspaper article titled 'When the African chief invades the legal-rational sphere' (*Sunday Times*, 1 May, 2011).

The first way of deconstructing 'big man' behaviour was to reframe it as *arrogance*. Columnists frequently derided political arrogance towards 'the people':

> If you want to know to what degree politicians believe that we are such a daft and docile nation, you should just observe the arrogance with which they address us and ostentatious manner in which they carry themselves wherever they go (*Daily Times*, 23 November 2012).

> Our leaders behave as if they are the most important people around whom the whole world revolves…What is different about the current crop of politicians is that they do not even have the decency to pretend that they care about you and me (*Nation on Sunday*, 1 May 2011).

When Muluzi bid for a third term, a columnist compared him to other African leaders who 'suffer delusions of grandeur, and because of their vain glory, are puzzled by a sense of rejection.' ('Politics of Vain Glory', 2002). Bingu wa Mutharika was similarly vilified for appropriating Kamuzu praise titles and failing to understand that these symbolic sources of legitimacy would not cut it with the urban public: 'The bottom line is that Mutharika has failed to grasp that trust must be earned, not commandeered' ('To trust or not to trust the president?', 2011). As he became increasingly despotic, the term 'executive arrogance' (allegedly coined by Kabwila-Kapasula) began circulating in the urban public sphere, becoming a trope.

103 Author interview, Zomba, 11 October 2012.
104 Author interview, Limbe, 2 October 2012.

Shortly after Joyce Banda took office, an editorial hailed her 'golden opportunity' to 'redefine the relationship between the leader and the people she leads', thereby becoming a 'true democrat.' But it warned that, 'a fish rots from the head. Once the leader of a country assumes an air of arrogance… then there won't be telling of how far the cancer will grow' ('JB's golden opportunity to make a difference', 2012). Others warned of this too. And sure enough, Joyce Banda eventually came to be accused of arrogance, such as in this direct address: 'Dear Joyce, I and many others have with dismay noticed that, just like your predecessor, you have developed some arrogance' (Editorial, 2002).

Another grievance, related to arrogance, was *extravagance* in times of national hardship. Commentators portrayed a near perpetual state of hardship, and therefore demanded sacrifice from political leaders. The newspapers and the PAC accused Muluzi of wasting resources in his 'useless' foreign trips. A front-page headline in the *Malawi News* (at that time oppositional) screamed: 'MULUZI'S EXTRAVAGANCE: He has blown K200m in four months on travel'. An editorial commanded: 'Stop the trips, Mr President, we just cannot afford them' (Editorial, 2002). Similarly, Mutharika was told: 'From what we are seeing on the ground so far, everyone is tightening their belts except the citizen number one…So much for leading by example' ('President should lead by example', 2004). And Joyce Banda faced such relentless criticism about her extravagant travel that she caved in and cancelled a trip to Belgium. One columnist wrote:

> I expected this government to lead with real commitment and sacrifice. And this should have started at the very top. My type of committed cabinet could have slashed their salaries by at least 10%, frozen all foreign travel, and stopped importation of all luxury goods ('My type of government', 2012).

Joyce Banda did in fact reduce expenses on coming into office – she sold the presidential jet, reduced the presidential convoy and took a 30% pay cut. This made the news internationally, but Malawi's urban commentariat was not particularly impressed. Some called her gestures a 'drop in the ocean' – mere symbolism – and demanded she go further. In this regard, it is particularly striking how irreverent even young columnists, academics, and lay commentators were, in what is supposedly a gerontocratic society. For example, 23-year-old columnist Madalitso Musa addressed Banda thus:

> I am writing hoping that my August letter to you found you in good health. November is folding her mat ready to go to give room to December, yet you have not responded to my letter. Unrequited friendship hurts so much dear Joyce but, knowing that friendship must survive trials, I have gathered courage to write you again…

> Dear Joyce, people out here are angry with how your government is splashing out in these economic hard times. I will take it that you are not aware of what is happening because you are too busy gallivanting to petty rallies instead of being at the office to sort out national issues… ('To Joyce and Country', 2012).

A third aspect was *ceremonialism*. Large political ceremonies were deconstructed: Revealed to be symbol-laden distractions in place of substantive policy agendas. Muluzi had begun his time in office by rejecting Banda's personality cult, but ended up embracing excessive ceremonialism, thronged by *Mbumba* dancers in carefully staged displays of power (Gilman, 2009). As one editorial pointed out with devastating bathos: 'They ululate because they get paid' ('Editorial', 2002).

Bingu wa Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) launch in 2005 was also roundly mocked for its vacuous ceremonialism. The *Sunday Times* coverage (June 19, 2005) described the build-up to the launch on national TV as 'torture by monotony', and when the event happened it said:

> Thank goodness, Bingu's DPP was finally launched…The party's publicists and fanatics-in-chief had seemed to suggest that the day this party is launched, our lives will come to a standstill.

When Joyce Banda's People's Party held its first convention in August 2012, it was hailed as a step towards intra-party democracy and transparency, but was scrutinised for substance and found wanting:

> It turned out to be an occasion of petty talk and petty action, to reward minions and beat personal drums, all at the expense of the need to articulate vision and strategy. Where in the world do people go to national conventions only to come back with free mattresses? ('Of failing to run a convention', 2012)

The Nation dedicated two pages to deconstructing this PP convention, with the help of Dr Chinsinga of Chancellor College, the verdict being that, whilst the convention represented a 'milestone' in Malawi's 'relatively short and turbulent democratic experience' in terms of intra-party democracy, it ultimately lacked policy substance ('Examining the PP Convention', 2012).

The sense of disdain for party conventions was neatly summarised within one column, which summarily mocked each party in turn, starting with a DPP rally that was described as nothing more than 'some blubbering devoid of sanity', where politicians 'took turns to swear at the incumbent leadership… as if they have a clean record', whilst 'the flattering multitude … had to clap hands to every

asinine statement made by the DPP leaders.' Moving on to the United Democratic Front (UDF), the writer described their 'tattered remains' and 'cartoonish behaviour', claiming their sham convention was staged simply to 'elevate daddy's boy to the seat his father once owned'. It concluded that '[t]he party is devoid of any reasoning and maturity', just a gathering of 'crookedness and fickleness [that] is legendary.' For the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the columnist had nothing to say, because 'to think they will ever be called ruling party until they put their act together' is a 'waste of time'. Finally, the column turned to the 'blinding orange of the [ruling] PP', and bemoaned the way it 'foul mouths' the people.[105] There are certainly echoes here of the lewd mockery of leaders that Mbembe and others observe amongst African citizens, but there was little evidence of a simultaneous adulation of elite excess. Rather, there was a desperate yearning for leaders with vision.

Calling for Visionary Leaders

Whilst on the one hand cutting leaders down to size, the urban public on the other hand calls for political leaders to present an ideology and a 'vision' – in other words, to lead. The activist Rafiq Hajat lamented that:

> There's no ideology. That's one thing about political parties in Malawi: they're personality driven. They have no ideology. If you look at their manifestos – alleviating poverty, eradicating illiteracy. But they don't talk about how they're gonna do that, which is where you reveal your ideology.[106]

Malawian politicians' lack of ideological commitment means they change their political identities and alliances so often that the anthropologist Harri Englund (following several other Malawian writers and poets) has likened them to 'chameleons' (Englund, 2002). MPs often 'cross the floor' immediately after an election to join the winning party. Section 65 of the Constitution says their seats should be declared vacant when they do this, but this law has always been ignored. Mutharika's DPP was composed entirely of defectors from the UDF, MCP, and the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) in his first term. When Joyce Banda unexpectedly came to office at the time of the DPP's rapid demise in April 2012, a wave of MPs from various parties crossed to her People's Party. The public decries this shameless 'crosstitution'.

105 All quotes in this paragraph are from the column 'Be ashamed, be very ashamed', 2012
106 Author interview, Limbe, 2 October 2012.

The lack of ideology and vision has been apparent throughout the democratic era, creating a sense of a nation without purpose and direction. As a guest opinion writer wrote in 2005:

> What are you supposed to say about your country, when you suddenly realise that it is running without unity, common national vision and purpose? What words do you choose to describe the destructive tomfoolery and all the acts of political buffoonery that are so evident on your country's political landscape? ('The troubled coughs of history's echoes', 2005)

At the DPP launch party that year, the *Sunday Times* (19 June 2005) searched in vain for a vision:

> The situation at the DPP launch was made worse by the conspicuous absence of the party's manifesto. Malawians have suffered enough rhetoric for 41 years. What the people want now is a political party that has a clear vision and a plausible blueprint for the future.

When Joyce Banda ascended to the presidency in 2012, commentators hoped this would herald a new beginning: 'It should be a new beginning of new things, not a case of same script, different cast' ('Same cast, same script', 2012). But just a month later, after Banda's first state of the nation address, the words 'Same Old Story?' splashed across the front page of the *Nation on Sunday* indicated that her 'honeymoon' period was over ('Same old story', 2012). The pervasive mood of national failure and deficiency returned in the papers and online. As a columnist wrote a few months later, 'Everywhere one looks, it's the same old failures, the same people who have plundered the economy, the same corrupt faces, the same myopic individuals coming forward to offer themselves as change…Once again, Malawi has been let down' ('When good fish are mixed with rotten fish: The case of PP', 2012). Photos of shabby beggars often circulated on *My Malawi My Views* to exemplify this. Comparisons were made with surrounding countries that appeared to be on the rise.

Figure 8.1
Same old Story? Photograph of *Nation on Sunday*, 20 May 2012

In the absence of visionary leadership, nostalgia for Kamuzu Banda crept into public discourse. Some in *My Malawi My Views* eulogised Kamuzu and the days when Malawi had pride and purpose. But the commentariat warned against such nostalgia. In one analysis titled 'Kamuzu Day and Malawi's Festival of Forgetting', a political and social commentator warned that:

> The point of celebrating Kamuzu Day is far more complex than celebrating his life. It is a leadership failure in Malawi that has created this day. It works as a kind

> of smokescreen, inhibiting critical engagement with our present as much as our past…Malawi will not develop if nostalgia and hero-worshiping are drivers of its leadership. The country needs visionary leaders ready for public service…Here the electorate have a role to pay: look beyond personalities and focus on their policies instead.[107]

A constructive trope that began circulating around the urban public sphere was that Malawi needed 'transformational' rather than 'transactional' leaders. Chinsinga appears to have introduced or elevated this trope at his presentation to the *Public Affairs Committee* conference in 2012. He argued that:

> Malawi's problems are solvable, but leadership is the most important ingredient of the political transformation we seek… Nothing short of a fundamental revolution will dramatically change Malawi's fortunes on the political, economic, social and even cultural fronts… It is time to start investing in the cultivation of transformational leadership… Transformational leadership emphasizes higher goals of development and arouses followers' motivations by means of creating an inspiring vision of the future…[108]

The trope then appeared in newspapers and online. A month later, someone wrote enthusiastically in the *Sunday Times:*

> Since JB came into power, Malawi continues to experience a new level of debate of national issues, making parliament look like nursery school. The most important debate – pushed by the Public Affairs Committee and other economic pundits and experts, is what type of leaders does Malawi have – transactional or transformative…Where are your manifestos, your visions and ideologies? ('Public opinion matters in politics', 2012)

This leads us to the other main aspect of Malawi's urban discourse: changing not just leaders' behaviour, but the mindsets of ordinary Malawian citizens, so they would elect transformational, rather than transactional, leaders.

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107 By Jimmy Kainja, in *Africa is a Country*, 22 May, 2013, retrieved 8 July 2013, available at https://africasacountry.com/2013/05/kamuzu-day-and-malawis-festival-of-forgetting.

108 PAC all-inclusive stakeholders conference, Blantyre, 30-31 October 2012.

Changing Mindsets

Whilst there was an element of fatalism in the way the urban commentariat focused on failed leadership as the source of all the nation's woes, there was also a strand of discourse that criticised the Malawian public (represented as a singular entity) for enabling this failure. Citizens were found to be stuck in an outdated mindset, which meant they supported the wrong leaders and for the wrong reasons. When Bingu wa Mutharika was re-elected with cross-regional support in 2009, there was a moment of hope that Malawians had finally employed 'rationality' rather than emotion in their voting decisions:

> What this election has done is to refresh our meaning of what democracy is all about ('Speaking of the unprecedented unpresidented', 2009).

> We are slowly – but surely – moving away from personality-based to issue-based politics ('End of an era', 2009).

> The fall of these political heavyweights means people are no longer voting according to regionalism, status, or according to the big man/party founder political syndrome (Rafiq Hajat writing in *Sunday Times*, 2009).

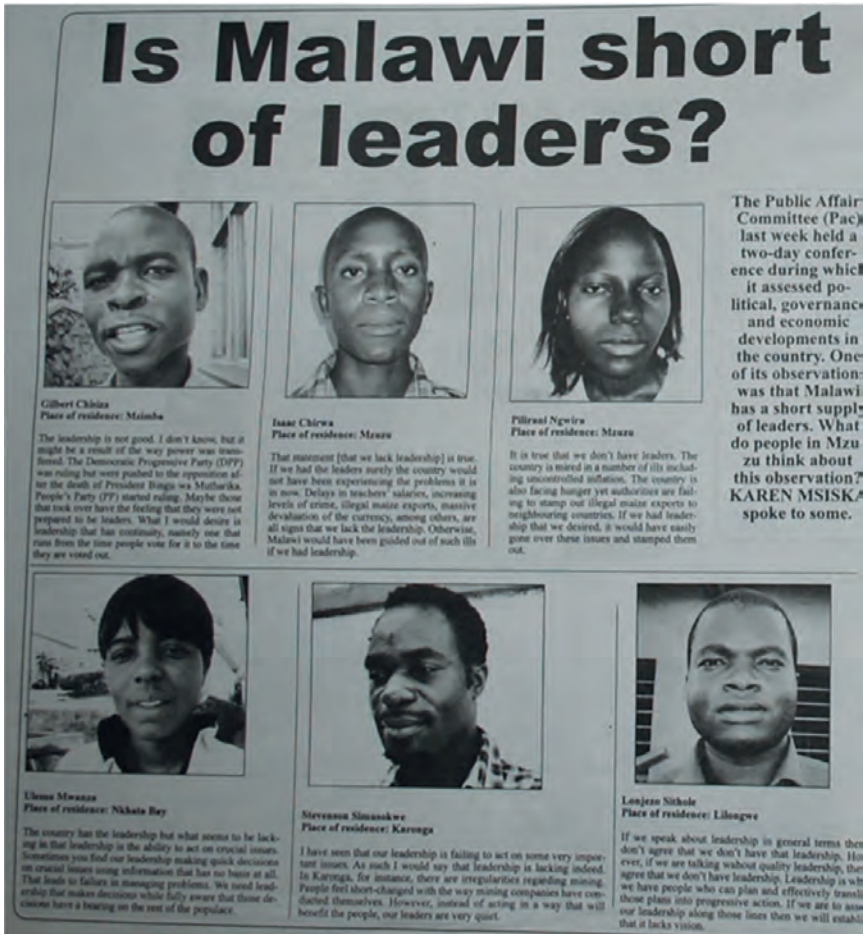
But this optimism evaporated rather quickly, and the commentariat went back to criticising the myopic mindset of the Malawian public, often revelling in self-loathing. A few years later, one verbose column (the same one that ranted about party conventions, quoted above) expressed deep collective shame:

> Forty-eight years and counting as a nation, it is so disheartening but necessary to accept that we have only been given, or have given ourselves, leaders who only know how to exude arrogance, promote thievery and other tactics in the book of wrongs…But having observed that even though we know we are so cursed as far as leadership is concerned we continue to praise them high and tell them they are some God given gift to us, we should be ashamed, very ashamed. ('Be ashamed, be very ashamed', 2012).

Transforming the public mindset was a key theme in the *Public Affairs Committee's* second all-inclusive stakeholders conference, held in Blantyre in 2012. At this conference, Professor Blessings Chinsinga argued that: 'A democratic developmental state seems to be our only way out, but it will not drop down from heaven like manna. We will have to work for it. Another Malawi is possible!' Professor Edge Kanyongolo called for a democratic mindset, specifically 'the readiness of the citizenry to use their collective power to demand effective representation, ac-

countability, transparency and oversight.' Professor Matthews Chikaonda, a former finance professor and one of Malawi's top businessmen, identified a lack of self-confidence as one of the main problems:

> Malawi is fast descending into a nation of mediocrity arising from the lack of belief and confidence in ourselves…If we could even believe for a minute who we really were and how great our destiny, the balance would shift, and we would emerge from this imprisonment.



Is Malawi short of leaders?

The Public Affair Committee (Pac) last week held a two-day conference during whic it assessed political, governanc and economic developments in the country. One of its observation was that Malawi has a short supply of leaders. What do people in Mzuzu think about this observation? KAREN MSISKA spoke to some.

Gilbert Chiziza
Place of residence: Mzimba

The leadership is not good. I don't know, but it might be a result of the way power was transferred. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was ruling but were pushed to the opposition after the death of President Bingu wa Mutharika. People's Party (PP) started ruling. Maybe those that took over have the feeling that they were not prepared to be leaders. What I would desire is leadership that has continuity, namely one that runs from the time people vote for it to the time they are voted out.

Isaac Chirwa
Place of residence: Mzuzu

That statement [that we lack leadership] is true. If we had the leaders surely the country would not have been experiencing the problems it is in now. Delays in teachers' salaries, increasing levels of crime, illegal maize exports, massive devaluation of the currency, among others, are all signs that we lack the leadership. Otherwise, Malawi would have been guided out of such ills if we had leadership.

Pilirani Ngwira
Place of residence: Mzuzu

It is true that we don't have leaders. The country is mired in a number of ills including uncontrolled inflation. The country is also facing hunger yet authorities are failing to stamp out illegal maize exports to neighbouring countries. If we had leadership that we desired, it would have easily gone over these issues and stamped them out.

Ulemu Mwanza
Place of residence: Nkhata Bay

The country has the leadership but what seems to be lacking in that leadership is the ability to act on crucial issues. Sometimes you find our leadership making quick decisions on crucial issues using information that has no basis at all. That leads to failure in managing problems. We need leadership that makes decisions while fully aware that those decisions have a bearing on the rest of the populace.

Stevenson Simasokwe
Place of residence: Karonga

I have seen that our leadership is failing to act on some very important issues. As such I would say that leadership is lacking indeed. In Karonga, for instance, there are irregularities regarding mining. People feel short-changed with the way mining companies have conducted themselves. However, instead of acting in a way that will benefit the people, our leaders are very quiet.

Lonjezo Sithole
Place of residence: Lilongwe

If we speak about leadership in general terms the don't agree that we don't have that leadership. Ho ever, if we are talking wabout quality leadership, the agree that we don't have leadership. Leadership is wh we have people who can plan and effectively transl those plans into progressive action. If we are to ass our leadership along those lines then we will establ that it lacks vision.

Figure 8.2
Vox Populi in Mzuzu, following the PAC's second all-inclusive stakeholder conference in Blantyre
Daily Times, 7 November 2012

A more revolutionary academic in the audience said: 'We need to go beyond civic education and mobilise the masses to get Malawians into the streets! It's the only time things change.' Others chimed in with comments like: 'We need to change Malawi's political culture and *especially mindset* to flush out the old chameleon politics.'[109]

Defending the Public Sphere

Malawi's political leaders appeared to be threatened by this critical discourse in the urban public sphere. Whereas in many countries a prominent state press counters the private press (e.g., Ghana (Hasty, 2006, p. 73)), in Malawi the state does not control print media in this way. The main papers used to have strong political party alignments, but since the early 2000s their owners have apparently severed all such ties (Mchakulu, 2011) (which is not to say they are not covertly influenced). This leaves a significant state-influence gap. In this context, politicians try to clandestinely influence/intimidate those with a public platform, or invoke defamation laws to clamp down on criticism (Maghama and Kanyang'wa, 2011; Kainja, 2022). Of the eleven newspaper editors, reporters and columnists I asked, all but one confessed to having been threatened or offered inducements at some point. Some confided their typical interactions with the powers that be:

> I sometimes get telephone calls on various topics, where some politicians would want us to discuss or laugh about what I had written in the column.
>
> Several [politicians] have contacted me with feedback and sometimes they release press releases to refute. The last president directly referred to my stories at rallies.
>
> Judging by correspondence that hits my inbox…politicians read my articles.
>
> Many politicians do not miss reading my articles as evidenced by the phone calls and emails I get from them all the time. The feedback is both positive and negative.
>
> I get a lot of feedback from politicians, including ruling power executive members and cabinet ministers.[110]

At the height of Bingu wa Mutharika's authoritarian clampdown, one columnist and editor discovered the bolts removed from his car wheel hubs.[111] And a few

109 These speaker and audience-member quotes were recorded by the author at the PAC conference in Blantyre, 30-31 October 2012.

110 Information acquired through face-to-face interviews and an emailed questionnaire.

111 Author interview (anonymised), Blantyre, 21 September 2012.

years later, he was personally called by President Joyce Banda, who said 'I know you hate me. But this is not about me, about Joyce Banda. This is about 14 million Malawians. So please, think about the statement.' He was shocked, as he actually held her in high regard at the time.

But the urban commentariat fought back, fiercely denouncing curbs on free expression, often raising the spectre of dictatorship. As one commentator wrote about one of Mutharika's speeches: 'In both tone and content, the speech was a throw-back to the tragic era gone by when intimidation and violence were the stock-in trade for all politicians' ('Bingu could do without pettiness', 2011). The fiercest defence of free expression was what came to be known as the 'academic freedom saga' in 2011. It kicked off when Professor Blessings Chinsinga gave a lecture on the Arab Spring, comparing some of its causal factors to conditions in Malawi, and was subsequently summoned by the Inspector General of Police on 12 February 2011. In response, there were lecturer boycotts at Chancellors College and Blantyre Polytechnic. President Mutharika accused Chinsinga of 'preaching revolution' and ordered the boycotters to return to work. Professor Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula then led marches around Chancellors College campus with her mouth gagged in red cloth. This led to frequent clashes involving police, students, and neighbouring villagers. The *Daily Times* described it as a 'war zone'. After 100 days, the lecturers led a march through Zomba. Chinsinga, Kabwila-Kapasula and two other lecturers were fired. Chancellors College was closed. After eight months, the impasse was resolved when Mutharika agreed to reinstate the fired lecturers. The whole saga got a lot of media attention and red cloth became a symbol of resistance. Kabwila-Kapasula told me:

> I wasn't only talking about the way he's rude to us as an executive member of the government, but the way the bloated executive, the bloated powers of the executive, they are just pretty much ego. They just thought they could run this world.[112]

She pointed out that the media played a large role in the resistance, taking risks and expressing a shared sense of grievance with the academics at the curtailment of free speech. By March 2012, Mutharika was fed up with the relentless criticism. State House issued an angry statement complaining about the media and CSOs 'attacking and demeaning' him. The next day, the *Nation on Sunday* mockingly reported: 'The State House statement [was] couched in a language bristling with anger and paranoia…' ('Mutharika intimidates media, CSOs', 2012). Mutharika's bemused face was splashed across the front page next to the headline 'UNDER SIEGE: Mutharika attracts rebuke for threats on media, CSOs'.

112 Author interview, Zomba, 11 October 2012.

When vice president Joyce Banda took the reins of power after Mutharika's death, she was initially a darling of the press and a rebel-hero for having stood up to her former boss's authoritarianism. But a letter writer warned her:

> Dear Editor,
> Through this letter, I would like President Joyce Banda to know that the worst mistake she will make in her tenure of office is to be at loggerheads with the media. Had it not been for the media she is now attacking, I do not think she would have been where she is now. The President knows how she was treated by the State-owned MBC [under Mutharika], but the private media houses provided her with the opportunity to be heard by Malawians. Therefore, now that she is in the driving seat, she should not expect the media to praise every policy, good or bad, that her government is implementing. ('Letter written to *The Nation*', 2012).

Professor Kabwila-Kapasula also told me that Banda had to contend with the fact that Malawians had truly found their voice:

> We are not going to be voiceless again. And that's why Joyce Banda is in serious trouble because she is taking over…the administration of her people, who have just awakened to their power, and they know this is their thing. People like me – I don't have time to be a sycophant, or to be a hand-clapper. It can't happen.[113]

Joyce Banda's whole press team comprised of formerly critical journalists – an attempt at co-optation. Alaudin Osman, a radio station owner, former newspaper publisher, and former State House press secretary for Bakili Muluzi, warned Joyce Banda of this challenging communicative situation:

> I gave her a 10-point issue trying to point out that she's going to face huge challenges in terms of public relations…I tried to point out that democracy is a messy business. People are highly disrespectful to the leadership. But you don't operate by threatening the media or keeping quiet and hoping the problem will go away. You engage the masses and especially the media in a conversation – daily ongoing conversation.[114]

Sure enough, Banda soon fell out with the media. In April 2013, she made headlines when she stated that, 'The media killed Bingu' ('The media killed Bingu', 2013). She had met with several media practitioners at the presidential palace,

113 Author interview, Zomba, 11 October 2012.
114 Author interview, Blantyre, 6 December 2012.

who were trying to persuade her to sign the Table Mountain Declaration. In the meeting she confessed:

> You have been irritating me, now you want me to sign what? When I became the president, I thought the media were my partners. But I have serious problems, especially with our newspapers… At first, I thought Bingu [wa Mutharika] was wrong. But I have now realised that you have no compassion, and you can kill a sitting president… Bingu tried to fight the media, and you killed him (*ibid*.).

There were calls for Banda to resign. When someone said on *My Malawi My Views* that it was 'wishful thinking and disrespectful to speculate that she can just resign effortlessly like that', they were met with the rebuttal: 'The power in a democracy like Malawi belongs to the people. Read your constitution again… I am not sure if you realise that Malawi today is not the Malawi of yesterday.' (22 February 2013).

Interestingly, whilst espousing many global democratic ideals, the urban commentariat resented foreign interference in their public sphere, especially when it came to challenging the legitimacy of their leaders. A very clear example of this was when Western diplomats defended Joyce Banda's legitimacy in the face of relentless criticism from the public. Several Western representatives decided to either publish their own articles or partake in interviews with the local press, explaining why Malawians should support her: 'US envoy backs JB' (*Daily Times*, 4 Oct. 2012); 'JB 'deserves credit' – German ambassador' (*Sunday Times*, 7 Oct. 2012); 'Why Malawi should stay the course' (*Daily Times*, 2 Oct. 2012); 'US remains committed to Malawi' (*The Nation*, 28 Sep., 2012); 'Donors call for sacrifice' (*The Nation*, 21 Sep. 2012). The US ambassador defended JB's trips to the UN, at a time when she was being heavily criticised for her 33-person entourage to the US as her government preached austerity. The UN Resident coordinator to Malawi explained to the public in a full-page opinion piece why Malawians had to 'stay the course' of economic reforms that Banda had implemented under donor pressure. A full front-page article quoted the Norwegian ambassador stating that: 'most donors are impressed with the bold steps Banda has taken to put the country on the recovery path…' ('Donors call for sacrifice', 2012).

All of this preaching was deeply resented by the urban commentariat, exemplified in this letter to the *Daily Times*:

> Dear Editor,
> I want to agree with comments and views of other Malawians who have voiced out their concerns on the recent remarks in the local media by the United States Am-

> bassador…and her German counterpart…Let me remind the two envoys that Malawians do not want to be ruled by a Western puppet who do [*sic*] their bidding at the expense of poor Malawians. How would people in the West, especially Greece, Italy, Spain, feel if a Malawian ambassador stood on the podium telling them that they should…have patience with their leaders… I hope the two ambassadors will stop taking Malawians for granted and leave local politics to local Malawians… (28 November 2012).

Whilst donors referred to 'fixing and restoring' democratic procedures, Malawians seemed to peer further into the past and the future, fearing sliding back into authoritarianism, whilst yearning for a more transformational vision of the future.

Conclusion

Malawi experienced a historic transition from dictatorship to multi-party democracy in 1994. But to some it was, regrettably, a transition without transformation, as many of the ceremonial, symbolic, and neopatrimonial aspects of the old political culture were continued by the new elites. This was particularly regretted by the educated, cosmopolitan commentariat that found a voice in the new urban public sphere, where it took to critiquing and deconstructing elite performances of power. With scholars focusing attention on traditional, charismatic and identity-based appeals for legitimacy by elites, and rural or vernacular responses and reframings, the cosmopolitan urban commentariat had largely been ignored, despite its influence, and perhaps because it was assumed to be espousing uninterestingly 'universal' liberal democratic ideas. This chapter has shown how, on the contrary, this commentariat adapted global ideas to the Malawian post-authoritarian context, in order to more effectively influence local leaders and fellow citizens, and it actually resented foreign interference in these endeavours. It may be that even these educated commentators, with their fixation on failed leadership, were beholden to a deeper cultural logic of 'familial relationships' between leaders and citizens, in the sense that Schatzberg and others have described, but this would require further ethnographic study to ascertain, and, in many ways, it is evident that such logics were explicitly rejected.

It is important to emphasise that this study is not claiming that Malawi's urban public sphere was fully autonomous from 'the state' and the political elite class in general, nor that the critical stance adopted by the featured commentators was always morally right and socially beneficial. Some members of the urban commentariat were surely biased or bought off, some were critical for the sake of it, and some joined the ranks of those they had formerly criticised – notably Bless-

ings Chinsinga, who became a Minister of Local Government, and Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula, who became an MP and Minister of Higher Education.[115] But these divergences from ideal conceptions of the public sphere or the 'fourth estate' do not reduce the significance of Malawi's critical urban discourses in contributing to the reshaping of ideas about political legitimacy and democratic citizenship after a century of authoritarian colonial and postcolonial rule.

Postscript

The Research Master's at Leiden's African Studies Centre was an intellectually enriching experience. Certain courses, like 'Patterns of Power', inspired my interest in political anthropology, and the world-class African Studies Library was an incredible resource. Most importantly, the programme provided a valuable opportunity to conduct substantial research in Africa, which, in my case, meant I gained experience in interviewing, discourse analysis, and a bit of archival research and participant observation, as well as an understanding of the challenges (and joys) of extended fieldwork. This gave me a solid foundation to pursue subsequent doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh, and launch an academic career thereafter. The MA also established my identity as an interdisciplinary Africanist with a broad interest in the continent but with a primary focus on development, citizenship, and political culture in the urban domain. I have been fortunate to study and work at some inspiring institutions in the years since my MA, but I still look back at my time at the ASC Leiden with nostalgia and fondness.

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Nyasa Times
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The Nation
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115 Though neither gave up their academic careers, and it is not suggested that they compromised their values by entering politics.

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9

Understanding Africa, understanding the World: How WEIRD can it be?

Bert van Pinxteren

Introduction: A Personal Note on Understanding Africa and Its Place in the World

The Research Master African Studies at the African Studies Centre of Leiden University offers something that is unique in the Netherlands and rare in the world – a chance to spend two years in an intellectually stimulating environment, with resources, researchers, and fellow students devoted to Africa. It also offers relative freedom to explore – and there is still much to explore about the continent. It gave me the opportunity (and freedom) to try something unusual, namely to explore similarities and differences between African cultures, using insights from the field of cross-cultural psychology. This is a different field of study from the ethnographic approaches that are more dominant in the African Studies Centre Leiden, leading to complementary and sometimes new insights. I found that there are considerable cultural differences within Africa; not all cultures in Africa are equally 'collectivist', for example. The pattern of these cultural differences is unique to Africa. In addition, the essentially Eurocentric approach of equating language with culture[116] cannot always be used in Africa: In some cases, cultural areas share different languages; in other cases, one language may be shared by people with different cultures. Such situations may be relatively common in Africa. My findings took issue both with the idea that African cultures resemble each other as 'peas in a pod' and with the idea that Africa is hopelessly fragmented and divided. Instead, I called for a new perspective on African identities, one that is based on an examination of current differences and similarities in value systems as held by its peoples – for more information, see Van Pinxteren (2020, 2021).

This chapter follows on from that work, by examining Africa and its diversity in relation to its place in the world. In that sense, it follows the clue from Macamo

116 There is a long tradition of attempts to distinguish, name, and map all the ethnolinguistic groups in Africa. A key classical publication is Murdock (1959).

(2018), the African sociologist and director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel, who remarked: 'Africa is not what it is because of what it is like. Africa is what it is because of what the world is like, and vice versa. So we study Africa to understand the world.' For this chapter, I use as my starting point Henrich's 2020 book *The Weirdest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous.*

Is WEIRDness a Good Idea?

This story starts with the influential 2010 article by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan. In this article, they criticize common assumptions on what humans are like that are entirely based on research done in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. This is the article in which they coined the acronym 'W.E.I.R.D' for such individuals and the societies they live in. They show how much psychological research is based on subjects from the US, and US college and university students in particular. They argue that members of WEIRD societies (or, more specifically, from the US) cannot be taken to be representative of the rest of humanity. Rather, they argue, the opposite is true: According to Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, US subjects are often outliers in cultural terms when compared to the rest of humanity. Based on that, they propose a more inclusive form of social science research, that would include more people from other societies (p. 20).

It is commendable that Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) have managed to show a blind spot in psychological research and for this, their work deserves to be applauded. They have opened the eyes of psychologists the world over: The original article has by now been cited almost 17,000 times according to Google Scholar (as searched on 14 February 2025).

Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan carefully avoid saying that the differences between WEIRD people and others are specifically cultural in nature – instead, on page 2, they merely say that 'many of the differences are probably cultural in nature in that they were socially transmitted'. In the rest of the article though, it is the cultural they concentrate on, speaking about 'Western' and 'non-Western cultures', 'cultural meaning systems', 'cultural worldviews', and so on. This is problematic, because nowhere in the article do the authors explain what they mean by 'culture' and why the examples they give are culturally relevant. It is all the more striking, because as far back as 1952 Kroeber and Kluckhohn already pointed to the existence of over 160 widely different definitions of the concept at the time. In order to get an idea of what they mean by 'culture', one can go back to earlier work of Henrich. In a 2003 article, Henrich and McElreath (2003, p. 124) do give a

definition of sorts: 'We use "culture" to refer to the information acquired by individuals via social learning.' This definition seems logical in light of the purpose of that article, which deals with trying to explain 'cultural evolution' in early human groups, as a complement to genetic evolution. The definition is very wide – aside from that, it is also problematic for two main reasons: It is a definition at the level of individuals – and it restricts itself to 'acquired information'. I will return to that further down.

Spurred on by the success of the original article, Henrich went on to publish two books. In 2017, he published 'The Secret of Our Success'. In this book, he sets out to explain what he calls 'cultural evolution'; it aims to show how humans evolved to become the most dominant species on Earth. Then in 2020, he took his reasoning one step further, by focusing on one particular group of people: WEIRD people. That is where, however, Henrich started to get carried away by his own ideas and drifted into territory where, from a decolonial perspective, he should not have gone. Why do I say this?

Is WEIRDness the Best?

Even though the US and related societies may be 'weird' outliers when compared to the rest of humanity – there is no doubt that they are also rich, relatively well-organized, democratic, and in general, successful. Therefore, Henrich's discourse can lead to a perception that the rest of the world should aspire to become just like the US in cultural terms if it wants to reach the same level of success. Such a line of reasoning would be highly problematic, for a number of reasons. One reason is that it would somehow lead to a perception of the US and related societies as superior and others as inferior, possibly even leading to racist undertones. In addition, it would suggest that there is only one path to development, namely to emulate the US. This is all the more problematic because the path chosen by the US is heavily dependent on destructive CO_2 emissions and other ways of exceeding planetary limits. Thus, it might be wise not to idealize the US path to development and success. A similar critique has been developed by Adams and Estrada-Villalta (2017) – see also Klein (2014).

Yet this line of reasoning is precisely the line followed by Henrich in his 2020 book. It has a telling subtitle: 'How the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous'. He traces the West's peculiarity to unique kinship and marriage patterns that evolved in medieval Europe under the influence of the

Catholic church.[117] That gives a clear message: the US is not only weird – it is also the best. Henrich himself does not say this in so many words, but a reviewer such as Hargreaves (2021) has no trouble pointing out that conclusion. Hargreaves even cites (p. 58) Deidre McCloskey: 'Liberty made us rich and made us pretty good, too.' One obvious question one may ask is how this way of thinking explains the relative success of countries like China or Japan, who are after all culturally quite different from the West. Yet Henrich finds an easy way out (p. 10): these countries had

> …preexisting cultural adaptations that happened to dovetail nicely with the new institutions acquired from WEIRD societies. Second, their more powerful top-down orientations permitted these societies to rapidly adopt and implement key kin-based institutions copied from WEIRD societies.

In other words, China and Japan owe their success to their quick (if perhaps authoritarian) decision to adopt key Western social and cultural norms and institutions. So, within that line of reasoning, countries like China and Japan owe their success to the West and the rest would be well-off to follow their example.

A decolonial perspective should lead to a questioning of such ideas, because it critiques the perceived *universality* of *Western knowledge* and the superiority of *Western culture*, including the systems and institutions that reinforce these perceptions (Quijano, 2007).

It is not difficult to imagine an antithesis to the one implied by Henrich, as indeed done by Adams and Villalta (2017). Such a counter-narrative would then in essence say that the US is prosperous not because it is so 'good', but because it is so 'evil'. A classical and still very worthy example of this type of argument was developed by Rodney (1972).[118] However, there is a problem with both these narratives: they are deterministic and severely limit possibilities for agency for 'the rest'. This is because essentially, both lines of reasoning take the WEIRD countries as their point of reference. The policy recommendations for 'the rest' that follow from either one of these approaches can lead to a type of 'tunnel vision': They seem to be limited either to a 'modernizing' discourse that would make the rest of the world evolve to become just as weird – or to a revolutionary path aimed at rejecting all that is 'Western'. Both types of discourse still take the West as their point of reference. Wouldn't it be possible to conceive of a development model that builds

117 Henrich's reasoning seems to echo earlier but different approaches, such as those of Weber, who explained the rise of capitalism through the development of the Protestant work ethic.

118 For a more recent broad analysis, see Manzanera-Ruiz et al. (2022).

on its own strengths, one or more alternative visions that are based on their own values and assumptions, rather than being either an emulation or a rejection of some other model?[119]

A Different View

Would another line of reasoning be possible? In this chapter, I will work on the assumption that there is no direct relationship between the features of a specific culture and the rate of economic development.[120] Put differently: Economic development is possible for peoples with all kinds of cultural backgrounds. Thus, economic development is possible for culturally very different countries, such as the US, Japan, or China. However, there is one culture-related element that is relevant for the type and rate of economic development of a country: This is that there should be a form of cultural autonomy. A strong argument for this line of reasoning in fact comes from an area that is perhaps surprising for some: The area of African Studies. I refer here to an old argument, that still has relevance today, first presented by the Belgian/US historian and anthropologist, Jan Vansina (1988). Vansina explains the relative difficulties in African development as a result of the destruction of Africa's cultural traditions during the colonial period. According to him, people in Africa were able to steer their development and deal with changes coming their way because they held a commonly-understood vision of the world, which gave them agency: 'A tradition determines its own future, and continues to do so for as long as the societies which carry it retain their self-determination' (p. 10). However, uniquely for Africa, this cultural autonomy was destroyed in the colonial period and its recovery (in part through the increased use of African languages) is seen by Vansina as key to economic recovery. This line of reasoning holds that building economic prosperity and appropriate development need not be built on copying Western models, nor on an outright rejection of such models, but rather on building in an autonomous way on the cultural capital that societies possess.

Now that my starting assumption has been sketched, it is time to look more in detail at the narrative of Henrich and to see if we can develop a counter-argument. In order to do this, I will propose an alternative way of looking at culture, one that

119 In an analogous way, see the insightful analysis by Mbembe (2002, p. 630), who criticises both the 'nativist' idea of African nationalism and Marxist-inspired 'Afro-radicalism' as sharing the same mode of knowledge production or 'episteme': '[B]oth consist of superstitions that function to persuade us that nothing is happening in Africa because history […] has already happened.'

120 Obviously, what is meant by 'economic development' can be defined in various ways, but for the purpose of this chapter it can be understood in the traditional way as GDP growth.

demystifies the special position of the US and related societies and recalibrates its alleged WEIRDness when compared to other societies.

An inherent difficulty with Henrich's approach is that it sees 'culture' as an attribute that belongs to individuals. Yet, if we want to compare societies, rather than individuals, we need a definition of culture that sees it as a phenomenon that is important at the level of societies – polities, ethnolinguistic groups, and/or nation states – and that can distinguish between the individual and the societal levels. Of course, one could argue that a collection of individuals with similar backgrounds (US, for example) taken together constitute 'culture' at the level of society. In the same way, one could say that a collection of individual trees together constitute a forest. However, just like with a forest ecosystem, the study of culture needs to go beyond a study of individuals or individual specimens. Therefore, an approach such as that of Henrich, that sees 'culture' as something of the individual, rather than of a society, is inadequate for discussing such societal phenomena as 'non-Western cultures', even though Henrich has no problem in doing this. For a further explanation of the difference between the individual and the societal level, see Hofstede (1995).

Another difficulty lies in the element of 'acquired information'. Information refers to techniques or perceptions or by extension perhaps to behavioural patterns. However, there is no reference in this definition to underlying value orientations that might be different in different societies; value refers to the normative lens through which information is interpreted and – as the word suggests – valued. In other words, if we want to talk about 'worldviews', we have to go beyond information and look at values – as pointed out already by Talcott Parsons in 1935 (see Camic, 1991).

What this means is that in order to demonstrate that research on WEIRD populations is not necessarily representative of humanity as a whole, the definition-free approach to culture as used by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan in 2010 can suffice. However, for further claims, as in Henrich's 2020 book, it is not. After all, the aim of the book is to explain the success of the West in part as a result of differences between Western and other cultures – it is difficult to see how this can be done in any reliable way without giving a clear definition of 'culture'. Henrich's statement on culture as given in the book (p. 20) does not stray very far from the 2013 definition; he claims:

> Beliefs, practices, technologies, and social norms—culture—can shape our brains, biology, and psychology, including our motivations, mental abilities, and decision-making biases. You can't separate "culture" from "psychology" or "psychol-

ogy" from "biology," because culture physically rewires our brains and thereby shapes how we think.

This clearly ties culture to individual psychology, rather than to society, and even includes an essentialist element: Apparently, the culture an individual is born into has 'rewired' a person's brain: It has a genetic element that shapes his or her perspective on the world. Individuals seem to have no or limited capacity for intercultural learning or for 'rewiring' their brains. On the one hand, it is clear to see how with such a definition all kinds of perceptions and behaviour patterns can be compared under the umbrella term of 'culture'; thus, it allows 'cherry picking' from the literature in order to construct a discourse based on the author's own ideological orientations. At the same time, the relationship between the individual and the societal level (the level where generalizations are made about 'Western' and 'non-Western' cultures) remains unclear with such a definition.

An alternative approach would be possible. Earlier, I have proposed seeing culture as a *value system that serves as a common point of reference to a people* (Van Pinxteren, 2022, p. 103).[121] This approach places 'culture' at the societal level and therefore in principle, allows for a comparison between different peoples and societies. It looks beyond behavioural patterns or information acquisition, focusing instead on underlying value systems. It stays away from the idea that individuals are necessarily determined by the culture in which they are born – they have *knowledge* of their country's prevailing value system, without necessarily being *bound* to such a system at the individual level. This approach, which is taken from the field of cross-cultural psychology (Minkov, 2013), allows in principle for a more narrow and more precise comparison of cultures on the basis of a comparison of dominant value systems. It is useful for a number of reasons, for example for making people aware of possible difficulties that may arise in cross-cultural communication settings. However, it does depend on the availability of comparable data on value systems. Such data are difficult to come by on any significant scale – but they do exist. Two data sets deserve special mention in this context: the data of the World Values Survey and those of Hofstede. This is due to the fact that they include a large number of countries, have been updated in recent times and also include data from a number of African countries.

121 The definition of a 'people' is itself a matter for debate but can be understood as a polity, ethnolinguistic group, or country. Some countries are more homogeneous than others in terms of their ethnolinguistic composition. In those countries, there is probably a 'national' culture. Other countries are much more diverse – for those countries, it may be impossible to speak of a 'national culture' – to what extent this is the case, and where, remains an under-researched area.

Data Sets on the World's Cultures

The World Values Survey (WVS) is currently operated by a consortium known as the World Values Survey Association,[122] with bases in different European countries. Since its founding in 1981 by Ronald Inglehart, it has grown into the world's largest representative values survey, currently (2025) in its eighth wave, covering 80 countries from all continents (of which 10 are on the African continent). The WVS groups national cultures along two dimensions: One dimension that runs from countries with traditional values to countries where rational/secular values are dominant, and a second dimension that goes from the dominance of survival values to countries where self-expression values are dominant.[123] What might seem remarkable to those that have followed the WEIRD discourse is that on both these dimensions, the US is not in any way extreme. The WVS traditional-to-rational/secular-scale has a value range[124] from -2.5 to + 2.0. On this scale, the US scores 0.2, so a little more towards the secular side than to the traditional side. On the extreme secular end of this scale are countries like Japan and South Korea, with scores of 1.5 or above. The survival to self-expression-scale ranges from -2.5 to +3.5. On this scale, the US scores just under 1.5. This is more towards the self-expression side than towards the survival side, but nowhere near the countries that are on the extreme self-expression end of the scale – all Scandinavian countries, scoring 3 or above.[125] The country scoring closest to the US on these scales is Belgium, but Northern Ireland and Uruguay have similar scores as well. The WVS values show considerable differences within 'the West' and also show an overlap between the West and the rest of the world: An EU country like Poland scores -0.4 on traditional versus secular values – it is more on the traditional side than a country like Thailand, with a score of 0.25, which makes Thailand more secular than the US. On the survival versus self-expression scale, Uruguay scores

122 https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp [Accessed 17 May 2025]

123 These dimensions were arrived at by carrying out a factor analysis that shows patterns in the replies to survey questions and interpreting the findings. Different data sets and different types of factor analysis may yield different dimensions – for an overview, see Minkov (2013). See also Beugelsdijk & Welzel (2018) for an attempt at integrating the Hofstede and WVS approaches into three dimensions.

124 These scales are a product of the type of factor analysis that was used. The word 'value' in this sense refers to the position on the scale, not to the actual cultural values the scales themselves try to map. The 'score' or value of a country on these scales is a measure of the average answers to survey questions obtained from that country, relative to the averages of other countries in the survey. They therefore give an indication of whether the dominant value system of a country is more oriented towards the one or the other end of either scale.

125 The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map – World Values Survey 7 (2022). Source: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/ [Accessed 17 May 2025]

+1.3, thus scoring more towards the self-expression side than an EU country like Lithuania, with a score of -0.1.

Therefore, if we use a more precise approach to 'culture', more oriented towards value systems, and take the WVS as a yardstick, then the US is no longer WEIRD. That doesn't mean that research based exclusively on US subjects can easily be generalized to the rest of the world – that basic point made by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan remains valid and valuable. However, it does mean that statements that try to explain the US success on the basis of the 'WEIRDess' of its culture deserve to be questioned.

However, there is a problem with the WVS – even though it shows that the US is not particularly WEIRD, it does provide an argument for saying that another group of countries would fit the 'WEIRDess' bill: Those of North-western Europe. The WVS has plotted the evolution of the world's cultures over time, spanning the period from 1981-2015.[126] What this shows is that there seems to be a tendency for the world's cultures to evolve towards more and more secular/rational and towards more self-expression values. This trend is not clearly visible in the US – rather, the country leading the way in this regard is another wealthy democracy: Sweden. This argument is further developed in Inglehart and Welzel (2005).

This perspective, therefore, debunks the idea that the US, though WEIRD, deserves to be emulated, but replaces it by positing the superiority of another country, Sweden – also part of the 'West'. That would seem to undermine my starting assumption, namely that there is no direct relationship between the features of a specific (national) culture and the rate of economic development. What could we learn by looking at that other large-scale survey-based dataset of national cultural values, namely that of Hofstede?

Geert Hofstede was the pioneer of the survey-based approach. His initial research was developed a decade before the start of the WVS, based on work done in the 1970s among IBM employees from different countries. He originally suggested four cultural dimensions (as opposed to the two dimensions of the WVS). His work has been criticized from different angles, one of them similar to the criticism of the WVS, namely that it is too centred on the West (Fougère & Moulettes, 2007). However, Hofstede and his collaborators have tried to deal with this criticism in several ways. One is that they have actively tried to include elements from other cultures; another is that they have been explicit about their own cultural biases, and a third is that their approach is essentially open and that they see it as a heuristic

126 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABWYOcru7js [Accessed 17 May 2025]

way of approximating cultural differences and similarities that exist within and between countries. One of the results of the ongoing research was the addition of two new dimensions to the original four (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010). The discussion on the nature and number of dimensions did not stop there, but a full discussion would be outside the scope of this article. See the appendix for a summary and short discussion of the six Hofstede/Minkov dimensions.

Hofstede is in fact cited by Henrich, especially on his well-known 'individualism versus collectivism' cultural dimension. In his landmark 2001 publication, Hofstede lists the US as the most individualist country in the world, with a score of 91 on a 100-point scale (Hofstede, 2001, p. 215). However, cultures evolve, and research has evolved as well. In 2017, Minkov and colleagues published a study based on work done in 56 countries which led to new scores on the individualism-collectivism dimension. Minkov and colleagues (2017, p. 396) use factor scores, with a range between the most individualist country in the world (the Netherlands, scoring 182) and the most collectivist country in the world (Nigeria, scoring -291). In this list, the US is no longer the most individualist country – instead, it occupies the 20th position, behind a number of other Western countries, but also behind Japan.

If that is the case, it becomes interesting to see where the US stands on the other five Hofstede dimensions: It could be that the US is still an outlier when it comes to those. This is difficult to find out, but in my own work (Van Pinxteren, 2021), I have used updated data from Minkov and colleagues for two dimensions (Minkov et al., 2017, 2018). I have furthermore been able to demonstrate how certain answers to round six of the Afrobarometer survey[127] questions correlate with four out of the six Hofstede/Minkov dimensions. In so doing, I have been able to extend the dataset to include 36 African countries. The result, using updated data from four out of the six Hofstede dimensions, can be summarized in graph 1 below (adapted from Van Pinxteren, 2022, p. 123), based on data from 89 countries.

For this graph, I have used the most recent Hofstede-based data available. The data for Africa are based on Van Pinxteren (2021). Non-African data on the LTO and IDV dimensions are taken from Minkov and colleagues (2017, 2018).[128] The scores for the IVR and PDI dimensions are taken from the Geert Hofstede web-

127 https://www.afrobarometer.org/ – round six took place between 2014 and 2016 [Accessed 17 May 2025].

128 The Minkov factor scores are on a different scale, but have been recalculated to a scale ranging from zero to 100, in line with the Hofstede scales. The scores for IDV and LTO have been reversed in order to obtain better score alignment.

site at https://geerthofstede.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/6-dimensions-for-website-2015-12-08-0-100.xls [Accessed 17 May 2025]

In this box-and-whisker plot, the boxes represent the central 2nd and 3rd quartile scores per continent. The x-marks within each box mark the continental average. The 'whiskers' on either side of the boxes represent the 1st and 4th quartiles. The dots represent outliers. Thus, on the Individualism versus Collectivism dimension (IDV in the graph), the average African score is 73, which makes Africa on average the most 'collectivist' continent in the comparison. Half of the African countries score in a range between 65 and 78 (the blue box). Europe as a whole is much more individualist, with a score of 35. However, note the outliers. Thus, by this set of scores, the most individualist country in Africa (Mozambique, scoring 51) is more individualist than the most collectivist country in Europe (Serbia, with a score of 75).[129] The US is certainly towards the individualist side, with a score of 18 but still less individualist than the Netherlands, which scores zero.

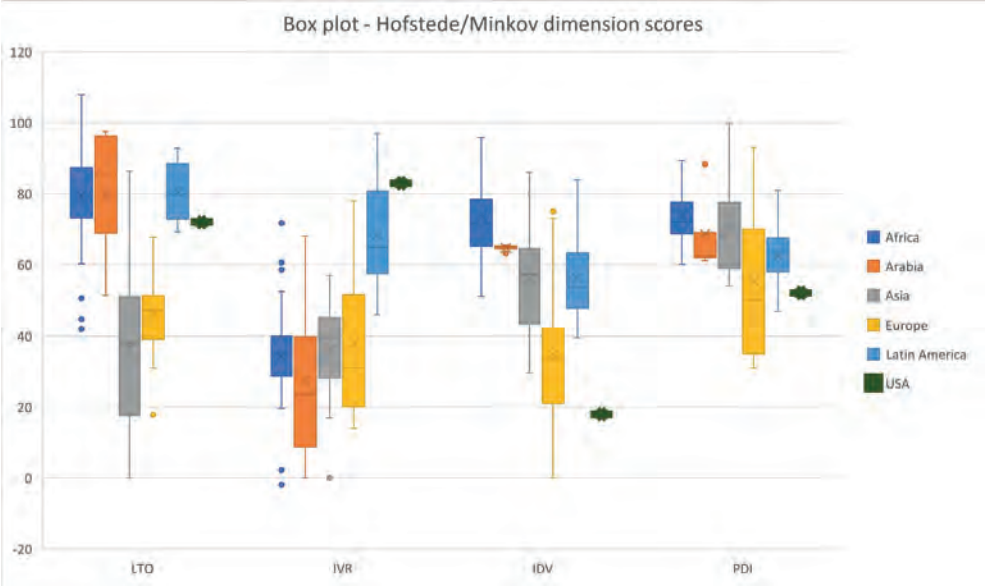

Figure 9.1
Hofstede/Minkov dimension scores per continent
Compiled and created by the author

129 Note, though, that for culturally diverse countries, like many countries in Africa, these national scores may hide considerable in-country differences, thus potentially making national scores a less useful measure than for culturally more homogeneous countries. For more information on this, see Van Pinxteren (2021).

Note both the large spread per continent as well as the large overlap between continents. Typically, though, the pattern is different for each part of the world. Again: Africa is more collectivist, whereas Europe is more individualist. When it comes to outliers, it is evident from this graph that the US is not at the extreme end of any of these four dimensions of culture. The US is on the indulgent side (the IVR dimension), much more indulgent than European countries but not the most indulgent country in the dataset – that is Mexico. On the IVR dimension, the US is more like Colombia or Mexico, culturally speaking, than to most other countries. This does not mean that the US does not have a unique culture, because the division of scores over the dimensions is unique to the US. However, Henrich does not only claim that the US is unique – he specifically claims that the US is extreme, compared to other countries.[130]

For Sweden (not included separately in the graph above), the situation is somewhat different, at least if one looks at the data presented at the Hofstede site.[131] On three out of the six Hofstede dimensions (individualism, power distance and masculinity-femininity), Sweden is close to one end of the scale. On the three others, it is not. Be that as it may, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries are culturally quite different from the US. Even if they are all WEIRD, they are not equally so. Thus, Henrich's attempt to explain the relative prosperity of the West out of their cultural similarities seems far-fetched indeed.

Conclusion

What does this all mean for understanding Africa and its position in the world? Henrich and colleagues (2010) have made a valid point about the difficulty of generalizing from limited (WEIRD) samples. However, the conclusions Henrich (2020) draws from his research deserve to be critically interrogated. He uses an approach to culture that is not precise and has essentialist elements ('how your brain is wired'). On the basis of this, he implicitly holds that Western (WEIRD) culture is superior. Other countries can only hope to achieve success if they adopt elements of Western culture, as China and Japan have done (in his vision). If on the other hand, we use a more precise and non-essentialist approach to culture, one that looks at the societal level and focuses on value systems, we get a completely different picture.

130 For the remaining two dimensions, not covered in the graph above due to the lacking information for Africa, the US is not an outlier either – see https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/ [Accessed 17 May 2025].

131 https://geerthofstede.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/6-dimensions-for-website-2015-08-16.xls [Accessed 17 May 2025].

Based on this more precise and non-essentialist view of culture, there is no basis for believing that Western or US culture is somehow superior. Explanations for the relative success of these societies have to be found elsewhere, for example in the centuries of ruthless exploitation of colonized peoples and of nature that these societies have been built on (as has been done abundantly in anticolonial literature – see Rodney, 1972). There is no need for non-Western countries to adopt the Western model – in fact, it may be better if they do not, for that model has reached the limits of its sustainability. As the African economist and director of CODESRIA[132] Mkandawire (2011, p. 13) remarks:

> The real issue about 'catching up' is not that of simply taking on every wretched instrument used by their pioneers to get what they have—wars, slave labour, child labour, colonialism, Gulags, concentration camps – but of finding more efficacious and morally acceptable ways of improving the life chances of millions of poor people.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the African historian and theoretician currently working at the University of Bayreuth, (2013, p. 3) writes: 'An un-decolonized discourse of development presents Africans as objects rather than subjects of development. African people feature in development discourse as a problem to be solved.' For a decolonial perspective to take shape, there is a need for African peoples to reinforce self-determination and autonomy, both in the economic and cultural sense.

To end on a personal note: without the space provided by the Leiden ResMAAS African Studies, it would not have been possible to develop these types of important insights, insights which potentially have a wide relevance for the continent and the world.

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Appendix – Hofstede/Minkov dimensions

The original Hofstede dimensions are based on surveys collected by Hofstede in the 1970s. He originally suggested four dimensions that could describe differences and similarities between cultures. They are:[133]

Individualism (IDV) is the extent to which people feel independent, as opposed to being interdependent as members of larger wholes.

Individualism does not mean egoism. It means that individual choices and decisions are expected. Collectivism does not mean closeness. It means that one 'knows one's place' in life, which is determined socially. With a metaphor from physics, people in an individualistic society are more like atoms flying around in a gas while those in collectivist societies are more like atoms fixed in a crystal.

Power Distance (PDI) is the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

This dimension is thought to date from the advent of agriculture, and with it, of large-scale societies. Until that time, a person would know their group members and leaders personally. This is not possible where tens of thousands and more have to coordinate their lives. Without acceptance of leadership by powerful entities, none of today's societies could run.

Masculinity (MAS) is the extent to which the use of force is endorsed socially.

In a masculine society, men are supposed to be tough. Men are supposed to be from Mars, women from Venus. Winning is important for both genders. Quantity is important and big is beautiful. In a feminine society, the genders are emotionally closer. Competing is not so openly endorsed, and there is sympathy for the underdog.

This is NOT about individuals, but about expected emotional gender roles. Masculine societies are much more openly gendered than feminine societies.

Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity.

Uncertainty avoidance has nothing to do with risk avoidance, nor with following rules. It has to do with anxiety and distrust in the face of the unknown, and conversely, with a wish to have fixed habits and rituals, and to know the truth.

133 Descriptions adapted from http://www.geerthofstede.com, accessed 7 March 2025.

Hofstede realised that his findings might be constrained by the questions asked in his surveys. In his later work, he pointed to the Chinese Values Survey (Bond & Pang, 1991), which asked different questions. They led to a fifth dimension, the dimension of **Long- versus Short-Term Orientation** (LTO) (Hofstede, 2001, p. 351). Later, Michael Minkov, using data from the World Values Survey (WVS), found a dimension that he called *'monumentalism versus flexhumility'* and that was related to LTO. Hofstede and Minkov decided to join forces and came to new LTO scores, using WVS data (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 253).

Minkov and colleagues (2018), using data from a new study undertaken with commercial funding, proposed a new conceptualisation that reflects national differences in high versus low self-regard and self-confidence, being always the same person versus being flexible and adaptable, and liking to help people versus being reluctant to do that. The Short-Term or 'Monumentalist' pole here stands for high self-confidence, being always the same person and being helpful.

In his analysis of WVS data, Minkov also found indications of a sixth dimension, **Indulgence versus Restraint** (IVR). 'Indulgence is about the good things in life. In an indulgent culture it is good to be free. Doing what your impulses want you to do, is good. Friends are important and life makes sense. In a restrained culture, the feeling is that life is hard, and duty, not freedom, is the normal state of being.'

10

Serendipity in African Studies

Tycho van der Hoog

Introduction

Between 2014-2016, I spent two happy years as a student of the Research Master's in African Studies at the African Studies Centre of Leiden University. I had originally studied history and political science for my undergraduate degrees but gradually became fed up with their Eurocentric focus. Following the advice of my mentor, Jan-Bart Gewald, I booked a flight ticket to Zambia and spend three months travelling the country in search of history. It was my first time in the African continent, and I was hooked. When I returned to the quaint university town of Leiden, I wanted to continue down this path and knocked on the doors of the African Studies Centre, which was the only research institute in the Netherlands that was entirely devoted to the African continent. Filled with kind-hearted staff and students, this place had a profound impact on my subsequent career.

My journey in academia pivoted from Zambian railways to Namibian beer, and then from North Korean monuments to military studies. It was a road with unforeseen twists and seemingly arbitrary turns. Looking back, it is possible to connect the dots and find a common thread between these topics: For me, this thread is the ways in which African actors appropriate foreign interventions to their own advantage. Whether it concerns Chinese infrastructure, German industrialization, North Korean heritage, or Western strategic thought, African actors skilfully transform these phenomena by making it their own (Gewald et al., 2012). In practice, however, this succession of topics was largely determined by one phenomenon: Serendipity.

Serendipity can be defined as 'an unexpected rupture, an opportunity, fortunate circumstances, and discoveries' (Goggin & Goggin, 2018, p. 4). Many of the greatest achievements in science, such as the discovery of penicillin, were unexpected, and in a way unintended (Merton & Barber, 2004). Such 'fortuitous accidents' are at the core of what research is about (Foster & Ford, 2003, p. 321), as knowledge production is never a straightforward process but should involve an element of

risk and surprise, which requires an open mind. For the writing of social histories of Ghana (Ntewusu, 2014), ethnographic research on violence in Zimbabwe (Nhemachena, 2024), fieldwork in Congo (Wild-Wood, 2007), or a qualitative study in a South African township (Keikelame, 2018), the field of African Studies has explicitly acknowledged serendipity as a factor of importance.

Yet, in this chapter I argue that serendipity does not come magically about – it thrives only in certain conditions, which can be purposefully created. The Research Master's in African Studies at Leiden University offered such conditions for students that were interested in African affairs, and this led to original scholarship that redefined the boundaries of the field. Over the course of fifteen years, the university built a productive environment which enhanced our understanding of a continent that has an ever-growing influence on global affairs. By cutting the two-year program, the university is making a considerable mistake.

Through a case study of my own student experience, which revolved around a research project on economic nationalism, I illustrate how the Research Master's nurtured new scholarship. This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the relationship between politics and the alcohol industry, which led me to focus my fieldwork on Namibia. The second part summarizes the main findings of my research and details how the resulting thesis came to be published as a book. The third part returns to the notion of serendipity by analysing the driving factors behind the master program: fieldwork, time, and supervision. The conclusion reflects upon the place of African Studies in the neoliberal university.

The Politics of Drinking

During my studies in Leiden, I became interested in the topic of beer through lectures on the Democratic Republic of Congo by Meike de Goede, one of my instructors. Amid the general state failure of Congo, the local Bralima brewery had become a powerful institution. The company behind the famous Primus brand – well-known for their 750 mm bottles with labels in the colours of the Congolese flag – was an economic powerhouse and had slowly taken over several state functions (Beemen, 2019). To my initial surprise, there was a keen scholarly interest in the study of alcohol in Africa. Previous scholarship recognized the intricate relations between politics and drinking (Bryceson, 2002) and produced social histories of alcohol in East Africa (Willis, 2002), West Africa (Akyeampong, 1996), or Southern Africa (Crush & Ambler, 2010).

Beer in particular is recognized as a 'powerful substance', which has far-reaching societal ramifications (Mager, 2024, p. 1). Beer is relatively inexpensive compared

to other forms of liquor, and thus popular across all layers of society, making it a huge industry. Since time eternal, beer was tied to religious activity and has a distinct cultural value. Moreover, beer could also be a tool for political control (Wolputte & Fumanti, 2010). The African consumption of beer has been researched for a long time, including by anthropologists and historians. Beer can serve as a lens to analyse colonialism (Diduk, 1993; Heap, 1996; Mager, 1999; Schler, 2002), community relations (Abbink, 1997; Holtzman, 2001; McAllister, 2005; Netting, 1964; Rekdal, 1996; Willis, 2001), or political-economic disagreements (Dumbili, 2014; Mpofu, 2014; Van Den Bersselaar, 2011), among other things.

Breweries, politics, and identity are closely intertwined, as the production of beer is a force of nationalism. As the musician Frank Zappa once said: 'You can't be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline. It helps if you have some kind of a football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer' (Zappa & Occhiogrosso, 1990, p. 231). Brought up in the Netherlands, where the Heineken brewery had become synonymous with Dutch culture, this rang true – and I decided to write my Research Master's in African Studies thesis on African beer. My original plan was to trace the trajectory of a bottle of Primus via the Congo River, by travelling from the brewery plant in Kisangani to the capital city Kinshasa on a boat. As the security situation in Congo did not allow such a journey, I changed tactics and decided to focus on Namibia instead. I was exposed to lectures on Namibia by Jan-Bart Gewald, who had completed his PhD on the sociopolitical history of the Herero (Gewald, 1999).

Namibia became an independent country in 1990, after a century of colonial occupation by Germany and South Africa. Following the tragedies of minority rule, which included gruesome episodes of genocide and apartheid, Namibia embraced a nationalist ideal of unity and optimism. Beer was a crucial part of this new, Namibian identity. The largest local brewery, Namibia Breweries Limited, projected itself as a quintessential *national* company, which embodied the spirit of the new, independent Namibia. Drinking Namibian beer such as Windhoek Lager or Tafel Lager was an act of pride, which benefited the nation. Their advertising emphasized that their local roots and beneficial role for the economy. Namibia Breweries Limited dominated the domestic market by virtually holding a monopoly on locally produced beer. You could get your hands on an ice-cold Windhoek Lager or Tafel Lager in even the remotest corners of the country, which was twenty times the size of the Netherlands but was home to only 2.4 million people (Van der Hoog, 2019).

Before I embarked on my research project, Namibian beer had already been subject to scholarship. During the era of colonialism, beer became a site of contes-

tation for the local population and White settlers (Gewald, 2002; Gordon, 2003). Contemporary alcohol policy continues to build on its colonial origins (Siiskonen, 1994). In addition to problems of the abuse of alcohol and its connections to HIV (Lightfoot et al., 2009; Pomuti & Eiseb, 1990), academic studies explored how beer informed identity formation in remote areas of Namibia (Wolputte, 2010), the construction of masculinity (Fumanti, 2010), or political discourse on the liberation struggle (Dobler, 2010). This body of scholarship notwithstanding, the role of breweries remained understudied. This reflected a broader pattern in the general literature on beer in Africa. Few exceptions aside, most studies focused on the consumption rather than the production of beer. Namibia was no exception. Curiously, Namibia Breweries Limited had so far been overlooked in the historiography, nor had it produced a corporate history to celebrate its history.

Namibian beer was not only a domestic success, but also an international revelation. Recognized for its quality, Namibia Breweries Limited continued to win awards at global brewing competitions and sold their brands in eighteen countries, including in Europe. It was, in short, one of the triumphs of an independent Namibia. Yet, there was an inherent paradox to this success. In the decades leading up to independence, the same drink from the same company was not available to the Black population. When Namibia was under apartheid rule and known as South West Africa (between 1920-1990), the government used beer as a tool for segregation: only White people were allowed to drink it. Namibia Breweries Limited was called South West Breweries, reflecting the political realities of the time, and their beer was the pride of White settlers (Van der Hoog, 2019).

This history was hidden from public view, which intrigued me. For my Research Master's thesis project, I therefore sought to investigate how Namibian beer was transformed 'from a settler's drink under apartheid into a symbol of the independent nation' (Van der Hoog, 2016, p. 10). Rather than writing a corporate history, I wondered if Namibian beer was an example of the 'invention of tradition' that pervades so much of modern nationalism (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Supervised by Jan-Bart Gewald and Laura Mann, I set to work. Between 2015-2016, I spent six months in Namibia and South Africa to work in a variety of national archives, regional archives, and private archives. Where the historical record was incomplete, I conducted interviews with twelve former and current employees of Namibian breweries. Finally, I collected a vast amount of visual data, such as beer posters, beer labels, and photographs.

Brewing Identity[134]

The story that emerged from my fieldwork illustrates how the Namibian beer industry became a pillar of political power. When European explorers arrived at the shores of what is today Namibia, local people had already been brewing beer for centuries. With the establishment of German South West Africa in 1884, the colonial citizens imported their own beer from Germany, which was an expensive and complicated business. After the consolidation of imperial rule, which included a genocidal war against the Herero and Nama peoples, the first commercial breweries were established across the territory. These were very small operations, which only serviced the White population. Drinking was the main leisure activity for German settlers and bars were ubiquitous – in 1903, one third of the firm licences in German South West Africa concerned the sale of alcohol. It was said that walking on bare feet was dangerous, on account of the broken glass that could be found everywhere.

Prompted by the First World War, South African forces attacked German South West Africa in 1915 and occupied the territory. By 1920, the country was formally incorporated into South Africa as a League of Nations mandate and became known as South West Africa. The war had ravaged the domestic economy and most of the smaller breweries went bankrupt or merged into a single company, which was established in 1920 as South West Breweries. Under the third article of the Mandate Agreement, the sale of alcohol to the local population was forbidden. A separate Liquor Law Proclamation was issued in the same year, which became expanded into one of the longest pieces of South West African legislation via numerous amendments that sought to close loopholes and clarify sentencing. The South African government thus created a segregated beer market through harsh penalties – locals that were caught with beer could be sentenced to twelve months of imprisonment and hard labour.

South West Breweries thus catered for the White population only, to great success. Despite challenging economic circumstances, such as the Great Depression and the Second World War, the company thrived and became an icon of South West settler culture. Yet, alcohol was simultaneously used as a measure to subjugate the local population. For those that desired a drink, the intrusive liquor legislation caused major problems. In the 1950s, almost sixty percent of criminal cases and almost ninety percent of the fines in Windhoek concerned alcohol. Local inhabitants circumvented the law on a wide scale, most effectively via home

134 This section summarizes my Research Master's thesis, which has been published as *Breweries, Politics and Identity: The History Behind Namibian Beer* (Van der Hoog, 2019).

brewing and smuggling routes from Angola. The government responded by raiding African homelands to demolish hundreds of informal breweries. Instead, Africans were invited in government-controlled 'beer halls' where a diluted form of beer was served – much to the dismay of the customers, who realized the drink was hardly stronger than water.

The apartheid government realized that this situation was untenable, and finally repealed the racial liquor law in 1967. A new era had arrived. For the local population, the prohibition had ended. For South West Breweries, it took a while to figure out how to respond to this: since its inception in 1920, the company had crafted an image as the 'national drink' of South West culture, which was explicitly White. This is perhaps best exemplified through its logo, which was an image of the Reiterdenkmal, a statue of a soldier on horseback that commemorated the German losses during the genocide of the local population between 1904-1908. The Reiterdenkmal was widely recognized as a representation of colonial power. Around the same time that the liquor law was repealed, the armed struggle for liberation commenced by the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO).

After years of fighting and political pressure, Namibia became independent in 1990, and multi-party democracy was introduced. SWAPO won the elections by a landslide and introduced a comprehensive approach towards nation building. South West Breweries responded by rebranding itself as Namibia Breweries Limited. It produced a special 'independence lager', removed all references to colonialism, and launched a campaign to promote its national credentials. The old brewery and the new government invested in good relations, as there was a mutual dependency. The company was a major employer and invested in economic and social projects across the country, while the young administration that was led by Sam Nujoma crafted favourable liquor legislation and benefited from the tax revenues that were brought in by the brewery. When Nujoma celebrated his birthday, Namibia Breweries Limited supplied beer for the celebrations.

However, the decisive factor for the success of Namibia Breweries Limited was competition from South African Breweries. By then, South African Breweries was the largest brewing company in the world and dominated ninety percent of the Southern African beer market – except Namibia. In comparison, Namibia Breweries Limited was tiny. The South Africans strongly desired to acquire a brewing licence in Namibia and proposed to build a local plant in 1994. Yet, the SWAPO government refused this offer, citing the fact that there was a Namibian alternative. The South Africans were accused of economic imperialism by Namibia Breweries Limited, which used the government protection to invest in the modernization of its business. In a twist of irony, this allowed the Namibian

brewers to eventually grow their exports to South Africa, which was a much larger market. In short, Namibia Breweries Limited successfully used the threat from an economic competitor – which came from the former colonizing power – to consolidate its brand.

My thesis, titled 'Brewing Identity: Beer and the Establishment of the Namibian Nation', was written up in 2016 and defended at Leiden University. It garnered sufficient interest in Namibia to be published as a stand-alone monograph by a local scientific institution, which hosted an excellent seminar series and has a wonderful library. Nevertheless, as I described in more detail in a dedicated analysis in the journal *Africa Spectrum* (Van der Hoog, 2022), the manuscript became subject to criticism by German-Namibian gatekeepers who desired to publish a fun story about beer and disliked my references to German colonialism. Shortly before the book went to print, the contract was cancelled. Despite the investment of considerable time and energy, the project seemed to be doomed.

Fortunately, the manuscript was subsequently picked up by Basler Afrika Bibliographien, the largest research centre and archive on Namibian Studies outside of Namibia. In 2019 a reworked version of my thesis appeared as *Breweries, Politics and Identity: The History Behind Namibian Beer*, with a foreword by the renowned South African 'beer historian' Anne Mager (Van der Hoog, 2019). The book was favourably reviewed in Dhau (Melber, 2020), the *Journal of Wine Economics* (Nugent, 2020), and *African Studies Review* (Saeteurn, 2022).

Reflection

Returning to the issue of serendipity, I want to elaborate on the factors that made the Research Master's in African Studies such a rewarding adventure. Reflecting upon my two-year involvement in the program, three deciding factors come to mind: fieldwork, time, and supervision. These qualities made the Research Master's stand out compared to other degrees, and are essential for the substance of the 'happy accidents' that serendipity entails (Goggin & Goggin, 2018, p. 133).

The first factor is fieldwork, which facilitated access to source material. Where, in modern university life, does one get the chance to complete six months of uninterrupted field research? The Research Master's emphasized the importance of 'boots on the ground', in order to experience the world rather than studying it from a distance. Crucially, fieldwork in the master's programme was not organized via an internship (how valuable that may be) but left to the devices of the individual students, which allowed us unrivalled freedom. As such, fieldwork became a formative experience, out of our comfort zones. Personally, spending

prolonged periods of time in Namibian archives proved invaluable for learning the craft of the historian while interviewing people with different perspectives enriched my analytical skill set.

Fieldwork is essential for innovative scholarship, as it provides access to source material. It is also a process that influences personal development. I enjoyed the privilege of discovering new places, eating unfamiliar foods, and meeting interesting characters. Under the guise of participant observation, I immersed myself in the annual Oktoberfest in Windhoek (which was hard work, wearing Lederhosen with 35°C weather and sunshine). On a more serious note, travelling alone exposes you to a host of dilemma's as well. Navigating feelings of loneliness or unsafe environments without close supervision to fall back on is challenging (Lecocq, 2002). Fieldwork can be tough, but also rewarding.

The second factor is time, which allowed for the undertaking of extracurricular activities. The benefit of having a two-year program rather than a standard one-year program is that the curriculum is less of a pressure cooker. This gives students a certain amount of 'breathing space' to expand their research into unexpected areas, to fail and try again, or to seek out new experiences. I saw around me that students took on extra committee work, attended non-required seminars, did internships at the African Library, or otherwise contributed to the academic life of the Centre. In general, there seems to be a trend in which study programs become shorter and shorter, leaving students with less and less room for unexpected manoeuvres. Yet, it is often the unpredictability that makes things interesting.

After the conclusion of my initial fieldwork period of six months, I received an unexpected chance to return to Namibia. This was not part of my official study program but could nevertheless be accommodated. On the invitation of Namibia Breweries Limited, I spent an additional six weeks in Windhoek to advise on the development of a pop-up museum on the history of Namibian beer. As such, the results of my archival research and interviews were directly translated into a public exposition that travelled across the major cities and towns of Namibia. To showcase their appreciation for this input, Namibia Breweries Limited awarded me the first 'Brewer of Honour' title at a festive gala evening in Windhoek that was organized at the site of a historical brewery building. I proudly feature this occasion on my CV as an example of valorisation.

The third factor is close supervision, as the relatively small class sizes significantly improved student-staff interactions. What was perceived by university administrators as a weakness of the Research Master's – a limited intake of students –

was in fact its strength. Classes usually consisted of 4-6 students, and the style of lecturing was more reminiscent of an Oxbridge college than the industrial-size classes that were to be found in other faculties of Leiden University. By nature, lectures were interactive and required student participation. It was difficult, if not impossible, to hide behind other students during these sessions. At times this was daunting, but it encouraged us to engage with the lecturer and the topic at hand.

The African Studies Centre boasted a diversity of academic approaches, all of which featured in the program. Students had ample opportunity to select a specific approach or region that suited their interests and would be assured of the opportunity to specialize in that particular direction. This was best displayed through the thesis project. At a value of 25 ECTS of the total of 120 ECTS, the thesis took up a significant amount of time and required intensive personal supervision. It is through these personal meetings with my supervisors that I learned the most. Critical thinking, lucid writing, and problem solving are the type of skills best practiced in very close cooperation with a mentor.

Conclusion

With the discontinuation of the Research Master's in African Studies, Leiden University is limiting the space for innovative scholarship on the African continent. This comes at a time when the growing importance of Africa for global affairs is hard to ignore. With tremendous demographic growth and turbulent economic development, African states are demanding a greater say in international politics. Foreign powers are competing for influence and critical minerals. At the same time, the detrimental effects of climate change and long-running conflicts threaten the stability of the continent, with possible negative spill-over effects to Europe, which is Africa's neighbour. We need scholars, policy makers, journalists, and a general public that is informed about African developments, and we need to highlight African perspectives in this discourse. The Research Master's in African Studies nurtured scholarship that did just that.

Cutting the Research Master's means cutting the conditions that allow serendipity to occur – such as prolonged periods of fieldwork, enough time to try new things, and close supervision. In a world that is fast-paced, universities are one of the few places where people can slow down and search for the unexpected (Frith, 2020). Scientific enquiry is dependent on serendipity, and this is the most important thing that I found during my time in Leiden. When I arrived in Namibia for the fieldwork for my research project on the history of beer, I decided to take a walk through the city centre of Windhoek. It was there that I first encountered a North Korean monument, which puzzled me. Up until then, I believed that North

Korea was a 'hermit kingdom' with few external interactions, and did not expect them to operate in Africa.

This chance encounter stayed with me and led to a PhD project on the ties that bind North Korea to the African continent, which was published by Hurst and Oxford University Press as *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa* (Van der Hoog, 2025). My book on African-North Korean relations would not have been possible without the Research Master's in African Studies, which granted me the space to find this topic in the first place, and to develop the skills that were necessary to research such a challenging subject. This illustrates an important lesson for university administrators: it is often difficult to predict the results of a study program, especially because these results may only reveal themselves in the longer term and in unexpected ways. The Research Master's program was a catalyst for discovery that has produced generations of students, who will have benefited from the program in a myriad of ways.

The Research Master's in African Studies was far from perfect. Some of the staff were known to shun teaching and desired to focus on their own research projects instead, taking little interest in the students around them. The marketing of the program was evidently not successful, for the general uptick of interest in Africa did not translate in a rise in student numbers. Even for a relatively small institute, with a tiny educational program, the amount of bureaucracy could be bewildering. But these are problems that can be encountered across all degrees, across all universities. No master's programme is perfect, and they don't need to be. The Research Master's in African Studies was hugely successful in what it was supposed to do: produce high-quality scholarship. It is a shame it needs to go.

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11

Wither African Studies? A Postscript

Lungisile Ntsebeza

Let me thank, unreservedly, the editors of this volume for inviting me to write this postscript. I thought it important to spell out from the outset the context of the invitation. In the evening of 15 February 2025, I received an email message from Harry Wels, one of the editors of this volume, and a friend of longstanding, going back to the early 2000s. To avoid muddying the water, I quote the relevant part of the message.

> And I have another reason to write to you, but now in your capacity as Honorary Doctor of Leiden University: As you may have picked up, our beloved Research Master African Studies will be canceled from 2026 onward … This is incredibly sad, and we are working on an edited volume to showcase the intellectual destruction that goes with it, by showcasing 10 former Research Master students who continued their studies after the Research Master in Leiden in a PhD-trajectory. The book is to become both a memorial and monument for the Research Master's… and we would like to ask you, if you would do us the honour of writing a final chapter/reflection as Honorary Doctor of our university, but also as former Director of the African Studies Centre at UCT and co-editor of our Brill-series?

Within minutes of receipt of Harry's message, I replied to him to arrange a meeting. Three days later, on 18 February 2025, the two of us were walking along the Kommetjie Long Beach in Cape Town, followed by lunch in the same neighbourhood. We spent most of the time talking about the impending tragedy of discontinuing the two-year Research Master's African Studies (ResMAAS). I had never, in the more than two decades I have known Harry, seen him so visibly upset and, quite honestly, annoyed. I can still feel that anger and dismay in the introductory chapter of this volume, right from the first paragraph.

When Harry wanted to ascertain my willingness to contribute to this volume, I could not find any reason why I shouldn't. For me, and I said as much to him, the experiences they were going through, possibly for first time, sounded familiar. African Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has in the past gone through

moments like the one ResMAAS is experiencing. Crucially, the former, African Studies, has in its more than 100 years of existence survived many deaths.

It is thus my hope that sharing the UCT story in this volume will be inspirational and turn despair into hope.

African Studies under Siege: Reflections from African Studies at UCT

This section draws substantially from an article I wrote and was published in 2020 by the journal of *Social Dynamics* with the telling title: *The ebb and flow of the fortunes of African Studies at the University of Cape Town.* My interest in African Studies at UCT was fuelled by research that I did in 2007/8 for the then vice-chancellor Njabulo Ndebele, when the UCT executive was grappling with its nemesis, the late South African-born Professor Archie Mafeje, whose appointment on merit in 1968 was rescinded by the UCT Council, an action which academics such as Fred Hendricks (2008) condemned as racist. When Mafeje re-applied during the South African political transition in the early 1990s, he was not even interviewed. Faced with what was clearly an embarrassment, especially after the advent of democracy in South Africa, Professor Ndebele appointed me to do research on this saga. The research findings led to UCT making a formal apology to the Mafeje family. By this time, Mafeje had passed away in 2007 (Ntsebeza, 2008, 2014).

Soon after concluding the research on Mafeje, news broke out that the Centre for African Studies (CAS) at UCT was to be 'disestablished'. This raised controversy among academics, compelling the then Dean of Humanities, Professor Paula Ensor to set up a task team whose brief was to develop possible scenarios that would assist the Dean, and the Humanities faculty at large, to make informed decisions about the future of CAS. I was once again appointed to lead these discussions. My involvement in this process gave me yet another opportunity to do research on African Studies at UCT. In the final analysis, CAS survived. In 2012, I was appointed as the holder of the A.C. Jordan Chair in African Studies, a position which carried the responsibility of being the director of CAS. I continued doing research on the history of African Studies at UCT, culminating with the 2020 article referred to above.

I trace the origins of the study of Africa and its people in South Africa to the nineteenth century, well before the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910. At the time, the area that later became known as South Africa in 1910 comprised two British colonies, the Cape and Natal, as well as two 'Boer Repub-

lics', the Transvaal, also known as the South African Republic, and the Orange Free State.

A Church of England missionary, W.A. Norton, who had mastered several African languages raised the need for the establishment of a Chair of Bantu Philology in the Cape. He again raised the issue during the transition to the establishment of the Union of South Africa, soon after the South African War of 1899-1902. Norton explicitly linked a study of the indigenous African people with the development of a policy that English and Dutch colonialists were grappling with, of how to deal with the 'Native Problem'. By this time, the majority of indigenous people had been conquered and their land forcibly taken by a White minority. For Norton, the study of the languages of the 'Native' was the best way of understanding their customs and psychology, which would form the basis for the development of policy. Flowing from these discussions, the School of Bantu Life and Languages was established at UCT in 1920, arguably making UCT the first university in Africa, if not beyond, to formalise the study of Africa and its people (Ntsebeza, 2020, p. 357–60).

What the above suggests is that from its inception, the study of Africa and its people at UCT was in many ways tied to the colonial project of resolving the 'Native Problem', a trend that prevailed well into the apartheid period which was established in 1948. Academics who could have transformed African Studies at UCT such as A.C. Jordan, who joined the Department of African Languages at UCT in 1946, and Jack Simons, left South Africa in the early 1960s for political reasons and went into exile. They were part of the School of African Studies that comprised the Departments of Social Anthropology, African Languages, Archaeology, and Native Law and Administration, which, under Jack Simons became the Department of Comparative African Government and Administration. The school faced further internal problems when Departments such as African Languages and Archaeology broke away from it and established themselves as independent departments. The last straw to break the back of the school was the retirement of its champion and stalwart, Monica Wilson in 1973.

Despite the formal demise of the School of African Studies, discussions involving academics, administrators and students on the need to pursue the study of Africa and its people continued unabated. The precise content of these discussions is something that is worthwhile research, but it seems clear that political developments in southern Africa would have been central to the discussions. Political resistance to apartheid, which had been violently suppressed following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, was by the early 1970s re-emerging inside South Africa. The fall of the Portuguese empire in 1974, leading to the independence of

its African colonies created a militant and revolutionary climate in the three yet to be liberated southern African countries of then Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South West Africa (Namibia), and South Africa itself.

The turning point was the involvement of the mine magnate, Harry Oppenheimer, who also happened to be the chancellor of UCT. He obviously would have taken an interest in developments in southern Africa and Africa in general and how these would have an impact on his massive investments in mining. It thus makes sense that he ended up donating for the establishment of the Centre for African Studies (CAS) in 1975. Part of the donation was to establish an African Studies library and the rest to sustain the activities of CAS, which included inviting prominent scholars in African Studies and the recruitment of students from countries on the African continent.

Developments following the 1976 Soweto students revolt resulted in CAS developing an interdisciplinary curriculum focusing on courses at undergraduate and post-graduate levels on 'Introduction to Africa'. This was over and above the seminars and conferences that CAS organised that critiqued the apartheid state (Ntsebeza, 2020, p. 364). I personally remember the hype of activities when I registered for an Honours degree in CAS in 1987. During the political negotiation processes of the early 1990s, the focus of the Centre was on establishing, in 1993, a Chair in African Studies, which was later named after A.C. Jordan. Connecting South Africa and its scholars with the African continent was high on the agenda of the A.C. Jordan Chair. This was a direct reaction to the isolation from the African continent that had characterised South Africa, particularly during the apartheid period.

The rise of African Studies at UCT in this period was not without its birth pangs. The turning point for me was the manner the selection process of the A.C. Jordan Chair in African Studies was (mis)handled. Archie Mafeje, whose appointment was, as indicated above, rescinded by the UCT Council, applied for the Chair. His pedigree, as I show in my published articles in 2008 and 2014, made him a natural fit for the job. Such was the prejudice, if not hatred, some senior members of the selection committee had against him that he was not even interviewed for the job. This to me casts doubt on the genuineness of these members to decolonising African Studies.

What could have been a corrective measure in the appointment of Mahmood Mamdani in 1996 again called into question the commitment of UCT's White academics to transforming African Studies. A dispute revolving around the African Studies curriculum put the proverbial cat among the pigeons. The committee that

was set up to assess the curriculum disagreed with the content and teaching of the course as proposed by Mamdani, the Director of CAS. The disagreement was so fierce that the members of the committee decided to suspend Mamdani from the committee. The remaining members continued and came up with a substitute course. Mamdani challenged members of the committee to an open debate, which unfortunately did not take place; only Mamdani presented his position at the seminar. He however published his critique and there were responses from two members (for details see, Ntsebeza 2020, p. 366). By way of protest, Mamdani chose to resign his position and leave UCT in 1999, his third year. For me, it is unfortunate that Mamdani decided to resign and not fight on.

In many ways, what promised to be a new path to decolonising African Studies at UCT from the time the Centre for African Studies was set up in 1975 to the early 1990s had by the late 1990s fizzled out. With the departure of Mamdani, the A.C Jordan Chair became vacant for more than a decade. During this period, there were, by 2009, well into South Africa's democracy and 10 years after Mamdani left UCT, rumours that CAS would be disestablished. This move left some of us mesmerised especially given the pronounced claim by the incumbent Vice Chancellor Max Price, that he wanted to make UCT an undefined 'Afropolitan university'. We felt it was a contradiction for him to make this announcement while not intervening in the threat of the closure of CAS. If the Vice Chancellor was consistent, he would have marshaled resources to capacitate and support CAS to fulfil his vision. Sadly, it was not to be.

In the final analysis, through various discussions that I led, CAS was not disestablished, and the A.C. Jordan Chair in African Studies, which, as already indicated, was vacated by Mamdani and never filled, was re-advertised and filled. Notable, though, is that UCT remained lukewarm about making a long-term commitment to providing sufficient funding to equip CAS to take on the task of truly decolonising African Studies at UCT and beyond. This was the position then, in 2011, as is now, in 2025. My well considered view is that CAS is marginalised, as I show in the next section.

Whither African Studies?

The budget cuts that are part of the rationale for terminating ResMAAS, are symptomatic of the neoliberal project that is currently dominating the globe. As is widely accepted, some of the features of neoliberalism and their impact on universities are austerity measures, which result in dwindling funding by the state, forcing universities to rely more and more on student fees and to raise money from the private sector. This entails that for departments to increase the number

of their lecturers, the department concerned is expected to increase the number of their students. As was the case when attempts were made to disestablish CAS at UCT, on the grounds that CAS, as already noted, was a small department, we hear from the editors of this volume that in their case, the claim was that ResMAAS was one of the programmes that were 'very small … with very low student enrollments' and 'extremely limited' impact on society.

In other words, under neoliberalism, quality is traded for quantity. No longer is research, knowledge production, education, and scholarship the core business of universities. The latter, universities have, by and large been reduced to producers of labour for the corporate world. Degrees especially in the humanities and social sciences that do not lead to an identifiable job upon completion are rendered less important and irrelevant, largely because they do not satisfy the market forces. Increasing reliance of universities on the private sector for funding almost compels them to be instruments of this sector, with the state assuming the role of, in the words of Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' (1977, p. 110-1).

Given the above, it is not surprising that African Studies does not attract many students. There are, as already indicated, no obvious job opportunities for graduates of African Studies as is the case with the health, engineering, and accounting sciences, although, it must be said, jobs, even in these sectors are not guaranteed after completion. I have personally experienced situations where students who wanted to do studies in CAS would ask me what jobs they would do with a degree in African Studies. As already stated, university study is increasingly becoming more and more about jobs rather than the pursuit of knowledge and inquiry for the public good.

Apart from the above external threats to programmes such as African Studies, there are also internal pressures that African Studies faces. When I took over as the director of CAS in 2012, I made it the main mission of the revived CAS to promote African Studies across departments and faculties at UCT and beyond. I saw CAS as a university-wide platform operating in an interdisciplinary environment that would facilitate discussions, research and teaching on Africa, while at the same time taking a leadership role in establishing and consolidating links with universities, particularly across the African continent and the global South. CAS would be home for departments from various faculties coming together to talk and share experiences about their research on Africa. Collaborations across disciplines would be encouraged. We even proposed the establishment of a university-wide course on various aspects of the African continent and its people.

Sadly, we fell short of our ambitious goals. I experienced a repeat of what happened to the School of African Studies that I referred to above. As noted, one of the reasons for the demise of the school was that when departments that formed part of it, notably African Languages and Archaeology began to grow, they established themselves as independent departments, cutting ties with the school. In the case of UCT, a school that I was instrumental in setting up in 2011, and which was supposed to be an intellectual hub for discussions of Africa and its people, used the school to grow themselves and have now set themselves up as independent departments. They clearly joined the school in 2011 because they were under threat of being closed as they were small departments. The school that I helped establish itself was thus seen more as a mid-wife, a ladder, or a taxi that would be dropped and forgotten once the destination was reached. Commitment to an intellectual project was seemingly a smokescreen.

Be that as it may, I view the above, just as I do with ResMAAS, as merely setbacks, rather than as symbolising a death knell to African Studies.

Long Live African Studies

'African Studies' as a field of study and teaching has, as I indicated earlier, survived many deaths. We have seen this in the vicissitudes of fortune that African Studies at UCT underwent and indeed is still going through. This publication is another example of how tough the going may be but also what it means to refuse to surrender. ResMAAS may be discontinued, but the spirit of this publication shows that African Studies is far from dead. Although there is a lot of anger, protest, and nostalgia that is palpable in the chapters that make up this book, these are presented with vim and vigour, demonstrating a will to keep up the good fight through evidence based rigorous scholarship.

As I conclude, I want to suggest that there is room for new collaborations to be forged. A question that has been occupying me for some time is about who should do research on Africa and its people? African scholars at times put themselves in a contradictory situation. First, they do not want 'others' to study the African continent and its people. I understand this when one refers to colonial scholars, who studied Africans in order to, as I showed above when dealing with the origins of African Studies at UCT, control and rule them. But can we say the same with all non-African scholars, the so-called Africanists in the Occident? At the same time, there are scholars at UCT who did not see the need for Africans to study their continent and themselves. Yet, they would be first to complain when non-Africans do so.

For me, no restrictions should be imposed on the study of anything, including the study of Africa and its people. In this regard, I am inclined to invoke the Chinese slogan of the 1950s: Let a hundred flowers bloom. This disposition is most certainly going to lead to exciting debates and discussions. As Harry Wels is reported in the Introduction to this volume as having said, intellectual discussions are there for each of us 'to learn from each other, as well as to learn to disagree'. I would however differ slightly with him on his view that these discussions are 'never to "convince" each other'. There is no harm in arguing to convince others. What is important is how the process is handled, that it must be based on the principle of being reasonable – listening to arguments and making counter arguments.

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Notes on Contributors

Oumaima Derfoufi is a PhD Candidate in Law at NOVA School of Law and Coordinator of the NOVA Centre for the Study of Gender, Religion, and the Law in Lisbon. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (Morocco) and a Research Master in African Studies from Leiden University (Netherlands). Her research interests include Islamic feminist theories and family law reforms in North Africa, with a particular emphasis on Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt.

David Drengk is an Africanist and historian of technology whose interdisciplinary research explores the interplay between people, the environment, and technology in 19th- and 20th-century Western and Southern Africa. Bridging environmental and the history of technology with anthropology and African history, his work draws on both archival research and oral histories. He has conducted fieldwork across several African regions and has taught at TU Dresden, Humboldt University Berlin, and the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT). Currently, he is a postdoctoral research fellow at Ruhr University Bochum, contributing to the ERC project "The Making of Monoculture: A Global History" (MaMoGH).

Rachel Dubale is an Ethiopian-Italian Research Officer at the Africa-Europe Foundation, where she monitors African Union – European Union partnership commitments. She holds a Bachelor's in International Relations from the University of Bologna and a Research Master's in African Studies from Leiden University. Her academic and NGO experience spans Europe, Martinique and Ethiopia, where she conducted fieldwork on Internally Displaced People in Addis Ababa. Passionate about diaspora studies, international relations and migrant rights, Rachel engages with these topics in her daily life. She speaks Italian, Amharic, English, Spanish and French, and contributes to journalistic publications in her free time.

Tanja D. Hendriks is a postdoctoral research fellow at KU Leuven, affiliated to the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi and the African Studies Centre Leiden University. Interested in (state) bureaucracy, development and disasters, she studies the work, motivations and aspirations of Malawian civil servants in the climate change crisis. She holds a joint PhD in African Studies and Anthropology from the University of Edinburgh and the

University of Oslo (2023). Her forthcoming monograph is entitled *The State in Relief: civil servants navigating duties, dependencies and disasters in Malawi.*

Tycho van der Hoog is an Assistant Professor of International Security Studies at the Netherlands Defence Academy. He completed a Research Master in African Studies between 2014-2016 at the African Studies Centre of Leiden University. Subsequently, he completed a PhD at the same institution on North Korean-African relations. His book, *Comrades Beyond the Cold War: North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa*, was published by Hurst and Oxford University Press in 2025.

Maurice Hutton has a MA from Leiden University and a PhD from the University of Edinburgh, and has researched/taught at the Universities of Nottingham, Brunel and Manchester. He is interested in state-led development in Africa, in historical perspective, with a particular focus on low-income urban areas. He is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Manchester, and is currently co-editing and co-authoring a book on the politics of urban development in Africa (Oxford University Press).

Ver Ikeseh is a Nigerian-born visual artist, muralist, and arts advocate whose interdisciplinary practice engages public art, cultural preservation, and community storytelling across Africa, Europe, and the United States. Bridging visual arts with cultural history, environmental consciousness, and social justice, his work draws on both site-specific interventions and community-based collaborations. He has executed large-scale murals, facilitated public art projects, and led educational workshops in diverse contexts, from urban centers to rural communities. His academic background spans Fine Arts, African Studies, and Studio Practice, with degrees from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, the University of Ibadan in Ibadan, Nigeria, and Leiden University in Leiden, the Netherlands. Currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts at James Madison University in VA, United States, he is also the founder of The 920 Project, an initiative dedicated to creating murals in 920 communities across Africa.

Felix Kram completed a Research Master in African Studies at the ASCL in 2017-2020. In 2025 he obtained a joint PhD in History from the University of Pavia and Leiden University for his dissertation on the labour question in Sierra Leone, entitled *Establishing Control: The Krio Elite and the Transformation of Labour Relations in Colonial Sierra Leone, 1868-1919*. Since February 2025 he has worked at the FNV as a researcher and policy advisor.

Indy Koster graduated cum laude from the Research Master African Studies at Leiden University in December 2023. Her thesis dove into human–reef relations in Kenya, combining multispecies ethnography with underwater fieldwork. This project flowed naturally from a personal passion for marine life and scuba diving. After graduating, she completed a Divemaster internship and surfaced in a role as Operations Officer for REEFolution Foundation, a Dutch-Kenyan coral reef restoration NGO. She is now Operation Lead at Reefy (https://reefy.nl)'. She is particularly drawn to the intersections of environmental humanities, African studies, and nature conservation and hopes to stay immersed in this field and return to the reef for PhD research.

Lungisile Ntsebeza is a Senior Research Scholar and Emeritus Professor of African Studies and Sociology at the University of Cape Town. At the time of his retirement in 2022, Ntsebeza held two prestigious research chairs: the A-rated NRF Research Chair in Land Reform and Democracy in South Africa, as well as the A.C. Jordan Chair in African Studies. In February 2020, Leiden University bestowed an honorary doctorate on Ntsebeza in a special ceremony marking its 445th Dies Natalis. His current research interests include a study on youth and education in South Africa, with specific reference to early childhood development.

Loes Oudenhuijsen works as a researcher in the research group 'Violence in relations of dependency' at Avans University of Applied Sciences in 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands. She holds a BSc in International Development Studies from Wageningen University and an MA in African Studies (research) from the African Studies Centre at Leiden University. Loes continued with a PhD at the African Studies Centre, where she conducted research on (changing) gender norms in Senegal through a focus on the positioning of sexually dissident women in society. Loes is co-chair of Lova, the Netherlands association for feminist anthropology and gender studies.

Bert van Pinxteren obtained an MA in adult education and community organization from the University of Amsterdam in 1981. He has had a long career in NGO work, working among other things on environment and development issues. He has lived in Kenya for four years. After taking early retirement in 2016, he obtained a Research Master in African Studies from Leiden University in 2018 and a PhD (with Maarten Mous) in 2021. He is currently a guest researcher at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, secretary to the Edinburgh Circle on the Promotion of African Languages and on the editorial team of the journal *Language Policy in Africa*.

Tikam Liese Sall holds a research master in African Studies from Leiden University and a bachelor in Political Science from the Free University of Berlin, Germany. For her master's research she analysed the content of history and geography teaching at Senegalese high schools questioning the opportunities and impediments to further decolonisation. Since 2021 she is an external PhD student in Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Her research is still located in Senegal, investigating reproductive health education. She studied how social actors raise awareness about reproductive rights and gender-based violence among populations.

Rafael Verbuyst holds a joint PhD in History (Ghent University, 2021) and Anthropology (University of the Western Cape, 2021). He is currently a Junior Postdoctoral Researcher at Ghent University's History Department and a Senior Research Affiliate at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg. His research focuses on post-apartheid South Africa, settler colonialism, indigeneity, and ethnographic methodology. He is the author of *Khoisan Consciousness: An Ethnography of Emic Histories and Indigenous Revivalism in Post-Apartheid Cape Town* (Brill, 2022). He is also a co-editor for a special section on ethnography and failure in the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography.*

Harry Wels is Associate Professor at the Department of Organization Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and at the African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL) at Leiden University. He has an Extra-Ordinary Professorship at the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape. His research focuses on multispecies organizational ethnography in the context of nature conservation in South(ern) Africa. Harry is Publication Manager at the ASCL and Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*.

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Following nationwide budget cuts in higher education, the Research Master African Studies (ResMAAS) at the African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL), Leiden University, will be discontinued in 2027. In this edited volume the ASCL brings together alumni who were angered and shocked by this decision, and passionate about delivering an urgent response. The scrapping of the programme, with its unique emphasis on conducting empirical research in Africa, puts an end to a steady stream of groundbreaking contributions to science by its students.
Through a blend of scholarly rigour and nostalgia, this volume showcases the diversity and intellectual strength of the work produced in the ResMAAS and celebrates its legacy. The chapters contain nine condensed versions of high-quality theses as well as reflections from their authors and the editors on what the programme meant to them and their academic careers. In an era in which academia — particularly the social sciences and humanities — face significant threats, this book underlines the necessity for scholars to articulate their concerns and to stand in solidarity against such profound and alarming developments.

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