

Researching and Reporting Africa without Fear or Favour Stephen Ellis (13 June 1953–29 July 2015)



Stephen Ellis was one of the most authoritative Africanists of our time. He was easily the most versatile among the scholars of Africa, featuring not only as an academic, but also as a journalist and a public intellectual. His research interests ranged from religion to organised crime, from Madagascar to Liberia, from Africa's position in a globalising world to the role of the South African Communist Party in the struggle against apartheid. A glance at his list of publications would convince anyone of his prodigious productivity and his wide-ranging interests. Ellis had the gift of the helicopter view: he crafted his stories of Africa's predicaments with fascinating details, warts and all, while situating his analysis in a broader global perspective.

Stephen Ellis died in Amsterdam on 29 July 2015, having suffered from leukaemia for some three years. Stephen Ellis was born in Nottingham, Great Britain on 13 June 1953. He studied modern history at the University of Oxford. For his PhD he wrote about a revolt in Madagascar in the late 1890s, which was published by Cambridge University Press (the *Rising of the Red Shawls*, in 1985). Later he published a book about Madagascar in French (*Un Complot à Madagascar*, Karthala, 1990). In 1979-80 he had worked as a lecturer at the University of Madagascar, but that was not his first time in Africa: when he was eighteen years old he worked as a teacher in Douala, Cameroon. Between 1982 and 1986 he was head of the Africa desk

at the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London, followed by a position as editor for the *Africa Confidential* newsletter. His subsequent directorship of the African Studies Centre in Leiden, The Netherlands (1991-94) was not the most fortunate episode of his career. While enormously inspiring as a fellow researcher, he had neither time nor talent for tedious administrative duties. After an unhappy exit as director, he thrived again as a researcher, sought after by academia, publishers, mass media and policymakers alike. He remained a senior researcher at the African Studies Centre, which he combined with the position of Desmond Tutu Professor at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam from 2008 on.

His most popular book is *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (1999), which he wrote together with Jean-François Bayart and Béatrice Hibou. The authors exposed how the World Bank demand for the privatisation of state assets resulted in their transfer from state institutions to the ownership of the politically powerful. This grab for the national wealth by the political elite contributed to the wars and violence of the 1990s. Other well-known books of his hand are *The Mask of Anarchy: The destruction of Liberia and the religious dimension of an African civil war* (2001), *Worlds of Power: Religious thought and political practice in Africa* (with Gerrie ter Haar, 2004), and *Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in exile* (with Tsepo Sechaba, 1992). Among his recent publications are *External Mission: The ANC in exile, 1960-1990* (2013), *Season of Rains: Africa in the world* (2012), and “West Africa’s international drug trade’ (in *African Affairs*, 2009). His last book, a history of organised crime in Nigeria, will be published in 2016.

Undeterred by taboos, Ellis pursued shocking topics such as cannibalism in the Liberian civil war or the murky waters of the African drug trade, as well as touchy issues such as the dominant role of the South African Communist Party during the exile years of the African National Congress. He also delved into African traditional spirituality, together with his partner, Gerrie ter Haar. His explorations of the obscure sometimes landed him in hot water, as happened after his revelations of Charles Taylor’s cannibalism as part of traditional ritual practices in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Taylor sued Ellis but when several witnesses offered to testify in support of Stephen’s allegation, he did not pursue the case.

His descriptions of the atrocities in the ANC's detention camps in Angola, where young ANC recruits were badly tortured on the basis of ill-founded suspicions, which found fertile ground in the exile condition of rampant paranoia, were a hallmark of his determination to tackle the unsavoury aspects of liberation movements. Ellis exposed the ANC's drug dealing business and its profitable smuggling rings as examples of the intricate intertwining of crime and politics, which was not an unusual feature for liberation movements in search of revenue. *External Mission* infuriated people, who wanted to stick to the one-dimensional view of the ANC as an heroic movement led by larger-than-life saintly leaders such as Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela.

Some have called him a cynic, a label which Stephen resented. Just because he did not share the belief of many of his contemporaries in academia and journalism in the egalitarian utopias promised by Africa's liberation movements, did that make him a cynic? Was it not much more cynical to gloss over rampant corruption and ruthless abuses of human rights in the name of solidarity with the cause? In Stephen Ellis' idea of research there was no place for holy cows, sentimental musings or ideological doctrine. His critical stance did not mean that he lacked compassion, as is evident from his work for Amnesty International and his quiet initiatives to assist less fortunate colleagues.

Stephen also left his mark as a talent scout, mentoring numerous young talented researchers in Africa and beyond. As editor of *Africa Confidential* (1986-90), he had cultivated an extensive network of sources feeding him with information that authoritarian rulers would rather keep in the closet. Yet, the thin blue newsletter was considered vital reading for Africa's power holders and power brokers. Later, he helped to open up the bastion of academic journals for more contributions from Africa, notably from young researchers. As editor of *African Affairs* (1998-2006) he was keen to provide a platform for promising young African scholars as well as established pundits.

We mourn the loss of a prominent scholar and an inspiring colleague. But it is more in keeping with Stephen's spirit to celebrate his legacy and to continue asking irreverent questions, pursue unlikely leads and publish the outcomes, even if these outcomes are not always palatable in certain circles. As countless others who have enjoyed the legendary

hospitality and the fascinating conversations with Stephen Ellis and his partner Gerrie ter Haar, I will cherish the memory of an impressive scholar, a generous colleague and a great friend of Africa.

Ineke van Kessel