

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AFRICA, SOUTH OF THE SAHARA, IN THE NETHERLANDS

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It is probably true that there are at the moment only two peoples in the Netherlands who work as African historians in academic institutions of the highest level. Until a few months ago, they both worked in the same office, room 720 of the Afrika-Studiecentrum, which was almost certainly the untidiest in Leiden. Since then, with the authors appointment to the Werkgroep Geschiedenis van de Europese Expansie of the Rijksuniversiteit in Leiden, part of the mess has been spread to another office on the other side of the town, where I have become the only African historian working in a Dutch University. Moreover, neither my colleague Rene Baesjou nor myself did our degree in history at a Dutch university. Baesjou did his 'doctoraal' in African languages, with history only as a 'bijvak', while I received my undergraduate training in Cambridge, and am not even a Dutchman.

As a corollary to this, opportunities for students to study African history as part of their regular university course scarcely exist. One or two students who have a particular interest in Africa have found their way to us and have been able to do African history as a 'bij-' or 'keuzevak', but these have necessarily been individuals motivated by some special contact with the African continent. For the normal student who might well want to study African history if he or she knew of the possibility, the difficulties of arranging their own course stand in the way. The only exception comes with those following the teachers training courses in Utrecht. Here, Jan Schipper, who himself taught for several years in Zaïre, has been able to encourage many students to work on African history. Perhaps, in the course of time, the pupils they make interested in the history of Africa will progress through to the universities and force the authorities to introduce courses in the subject. Some of Schipper's students may themselves go on to do their 'doctoraals' in history and demand an African component in their course. But as yet there is no sign of that.

Why is it that Dutch historians have so far paid so little attention to Africa? In a sense it is rather surprising. There are numerous sources for the history of Africa available in Holland. Admittedly the Netherlands sold its last possession on the coast of West Africa to the British in 1872, but before then they had been settled on the Gold Coast for over two hundred years, while for a somewhat shorter period they had ruled the Cape of Good Hope. These sources have been widely consulted by historians. To name one, admittedly probably the

finest, example, Ivor Wilks's magisterial Asante in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge 1975) makes frequent use of documents in the Algemeen Rijksarchief in the Hague or in the library of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde. Scholars of South African history have in general made less use of the material in Holland, because most of it is duplicated in the archives in Cape Town, but for anyone resident in Europe or America, the Hague is often more readily available, and may be more attractive than the cape. Richard Elphick's book, Kraal and Castle, Khoikhoi and the founding of white South Africa (New Haven, 1977) is the most recent and in many ways one of the best of the studies based very largely on the material of the V.O.C. held in the Hague.

Nor is it so that no tradition for African history ever existed in the Netherlands. In the first half of this century a small group of researchers were at work on particular problems of the history of Africa. Such scholars as van Winter, Coolhaas and Godée Molsbergen proceeded to work on Southern Africa, both in the V.O.C. period and under the republics. In addition a certain amount of attention was paid to the Dutch records referring to the coast of Guinea, with l'Honoré Naber and the retired trader Ratelband well to the fore.

In total this was not a great performance. Nevertheless, before the war the total European historical effort directed towards Africa was minuscule. The Dutch contribution was at the very least in proportion to the total share of European historiography practised in the Netherlands. However, African history did not "take off" in the Netherlands in the way it did in the USA and Canada, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in Great Britain and France. What was the reason for this?

First, the old tradition died out. The work on the west coast was always a hobby, way outside the mainstream of the Dutch historical consciousness and indeed very often carried on by amateurs. It would have required considerable good fortune for this to be translated into a flourishing historical school and this historical accident just did not happen. (Any reader who dislikes the theory of historical accidents are welcome to rephrase this in terms of probability theory). On the other hand the demise of the Southern Africa group is more rationally to be explained. Their interests were based first and foremost on the affinity which they, along with many other Dutchmen felt for the Afrikaners. In a sense this was a backwash of the massive support for the Boers in what, in official South African Historiography, is known as the "Tweede Vryheids Oorlog". However this support was not long lasting. During the 1950's the feelings of brotherhood which the Dutch had for the Afrikaners switched, under the impulse of the "ethical" strain so common in Dutch public life, to a feeling of repulsion. Nationalism, even one based on linguistic criteria, can be very long-lasting, but it can also be very fragile, especially when fellow nationals (as they were almost seen) behave in un-

acceptable ways. As a result, Dutch historical interest in South Africa almost entirely collapsed, and even where it has survived it has tended to be unwilling to break surface, rather hiding behind old-fashioned, and in general non-Africanist, colonial history.

Interestingly, in contrast to the historians, the theologians of Holland and South Africa remained talking at each other for much longer. Presumably, in addition to their common membership of the 'Gereformeerde Kerk', this stemmed from their vested interest in brotherly love.

In a sense what is surprising is not that the old, essentially pro-Boer tradition died out, but that it was not replaced by a radical, "relevant" history of Africa. The point is that Africa has remained of considerable political importance to the Dutch, or, shall we say, it has continued to engage their sympathies. The 'Angola-comité' above all became perhaps the most vocal left-wing pressure group in the realm of foreign affairs, both preceding and, as far as I can judge, enjoying greater support than similar movements aimed at protest against Dutch involvement with post-Sukharno Indonesia. It would seem that a land that had a Dutch post for a few years in the middle of the seventeenth century and, since then, had been of marginal importance, at least equalled in public interest the greatest, longest-lived and by far the most important of the former Dutch overseas possessions. In addition, of course, the 1960's saw the great rise in Dutch Third World consciousness, aimed perhaps more at the problem of development than of revolution. In no other western country is the 'Minister van Ontwikkelingssamenwerking' or his equivalent anything other than a politically marginal figure (Sweden is perhaps an exception). In Holland he matters and, as a result of the same phenomenon, university courses in non-western sociology and cultural anthropology are flourishing. But interest among Dutch students of history in the affairs of the Third World is, at least in my rather limited experience, marginal and, perhaps understandably, directed mainly towards those areas where the Netherlands colonies lasted far longer and were of far more importance than in Africa. In general, however, when a Dutch student of history demands a history course more relevant to the problems of his time than the old-fashioned conservatism, as they see it, peddled to them at the moment - and they do make such demands fairly frequently - what they actually want to study is the history of the Dutch socialist and Trades Union movement. If they ever get to look at Africa, what interests them first is the history of the South African Trades Union movement, mainly the white one.

There are perhaps indications that this neglect of African history may be changing. On the one hand the social anthropologists are moving away from the old Dutch, and ultimately Germanic, preoccupation with culture and language to a far more historically conscious approach. One of the few Dutch historians of whom I had heard before I arrived in Holland has very probably never done a course in history since leaving school, as

Matthew Schoffeleers progressed from being a Catholic missionary to a Ph. D. in anthropology under Evans-Pritchard to being 'lector' in non-Western religion at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. It is however for his work on the early history of Malawi that he is perhaps best known. There are other examples of Dutch anthropologists writing what are in fact histories, even if these are more likely to relate to the twentieth century than to the pre-colonial period studied by Schoffeleers. Secondly there are indications that the absence of African history in Dutch history departments is felt to be a gap that must be filled. But as yet this remains more of a hope for the future than a concrete reality. Perhaps pressure from certain groups in the society may come to force Dutch historians to take Africa seriously. Unfortunately, however, African historians in the Netherlands cannot make their impact felt on the wider society because they simply do not exist, even in the ivory towers.