

## Africa in Australia: antipodean analyses

The anglophobic halls of Trinity College at the well-established University of Melbourne might seem to offer a bizarre environment for the annual Australasian African studies conference, particularly given the continent's continuing crisis. Yet the ambiguities of Australia's connections with empire - American and Japanese now rather than British - provided an appropriately ironic background to a three-day review of Africa's condition, financial, cultural and intellectual, including a presentation on V.S. Naipaul's distinctive reaction to the Anglophile inheritance. The mix of African problems, Australian sensibilities, and assorted disciplines and disciples - combined with antipodean wine and warmth - produced a vintage debate, one of which Australasian Africanists can be proud.

Coinciding with the blossoms of the southern spring, the proceedings also constituted both a welcome antidote to the "Asia-first" preoccupations of the Jackson Report on Aussie aid and a persuasive rejoinder to "little Australia" diplomats, entrepreneurs and academics. Indeed, aside from theoretical discussions and historical descriptions the meeting was important for its political dimensions - the liberation of Southern Africa and Australia's foreign policy as well as development aid - which involved African and Australian diplomats, liberation movements and activists, NGOs and the business community. Panels on the futures of economic assistance and of Southern Africa were particularly well-organised and attended (almost a hundred in the former) and generated positive press comment in the Melbourne media: the 130 year-old high-quality "Age" not yet in the multinational Murdoch stable.

The African Studies Association of Australia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) "came of age" in the hallowed halls of Trinity as a six-year-old viable and vibrant professional-cum-political grouping recognised by Australian and African statespersons, scholars and students. This was



marked by <sup>an</sup> ~~our~~ elegant annual dinner and presidential address from Dr. Cheryl Gerzel of the politics discipline at Flinders in Adelaide, soon to be a visiting fellow at Cambridge. The maturity is further symbolised by the tri-annual appearance of a professional Newsletter (elegantly edited by Jim Polhemus at Deakin) and a revised and expanded Directory of antipodean Africanists (comprehensively compiled and classified by David Goldsworthy of Monash): 120 intellectuals, bureaucrats and activists in the South Pacific. The latter plus the conference papers and panels reveal the regional concentration of African Studies in this corner of the Southern hemisphere: anglophone eastern and southern Africa rather than west. Nevertheless, the meeting did include sessions of relevance to West African(ist)s, such as an intense debate on conflict on the Horn of Africa between Sam Makinda (from Nairobi, presently at the Australian National University) and Mira Ivic (Melbourne University), comparative diagnoses of agricultural problems in Zambia (Ken Good from Lusaka) and Zimbabwe (Clever Mubinge from Harare), alternative approaches to Kenya's political economy (Pal Ahluwalia (Flinders), John Murphy (Monash), and Geoff Reeves (WAIT)), and screenings of Sembene Ousmane's films on Senegalese contradictions. There were also a showing and discussion of British propaganda films and papers on crime, medicine, gender and genre in Southern Africa.

In particular, in addition to panels which touched on West African popular literatures and on anti-apartheid policies, there were presentations on the prospects for self-reliance in Ghana's building industry and on the return of the soldiers to power in Nigeria. On Ghana, Kwabena Donkar and John Lea from the University of Sydney cautioned that there are considerable sociological and financial obstacles to the replacement of imported concrete technology by appropriate indigenous materials: "a reflection of a range of dependencies and attitudes relating to the historical evolution of the economy and society". And Kinsheun Louie examined continuities of government structure between the Mohammed/Obasanjo and Buhari regimes, asserting that the latest coup is distinctive - "the first and the only coup d'etat carried out successfully by the military hierarchy against an elected civilian



government" - which has implications for its potential to transcend social contradictions and economic contraction in Nigeria.

AFSAAP 84 in Melbourne, ably coordinated by David Dorwood of LaTrobe, constituted a further milestone in the development of African Studies in Australasia. Its academic, discursive and adversarial roles are now well-established at home, "down-under", and deserve recognition and attention in wider African and Africanist circles. The alternatives and participation of Australian politicians, bureaucrats and activists as well as African diplomats and scholars and Africanist academics is indicative of AFSAAP's position and potential: a further indication that the Land of Oz is experiencing its own nationalist period of cultural renaissance and social development. Africa can both benefit from and contribute to Australasia's own redefinition.

