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CONTENTS

Australia's Re-Engagement with Africa.	3
<i>Tanya Lyons – ARAS Editor</i>	
Adult education and community capacity building: The case of African-Australian women in the Northern Territory.	13
<i>Susana Akua Saffu</i>	
Intercultural Communication Challenges Confronting Female Sudanese Former Refugees in Australia.	37
<i>Aparna Hebbani, Levi Obijiofor and Helen Bristed</i>	
Working it Both Ways: Intercultural Collaboration and the Performativity of Identity.	62
<i>Anne Harris and Nyadol Nyuon</i>	
African Cultural Education and Schooling: towards Bicultural Competence of African Australian Youth.	82
<i>Peter Mbago Wakholi</i>	
Social or Unsocial? The Linkage Between Accommodation, Health and Well-Being Among Former Horn of Africa and Sudanese Refugees Living in Australia.	106
<i>Surjeet Dhanji</i>	
MEMBER PROFILE: Peter Mbago Wakholi.	137
OPINION: The 2010 Sudanese Election.	138
<i>Noah Bassil</i>	

BOOK REVIEWS

- Mwenda Ntarangwi, David Mills and Mustafa Babiker, (eds.),**
African Anthropologies: History, Critique and Practice. 141
Miroslava Prazak
- The “African Geopolitics” Series.** 143
Geoffrey Hawker
- Charmaine Pereira, *Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System.*** 144
Margaret O’Callaghan
- Kenji Yoshida and John Mack (eds.), *Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Africa: Crisis or Renaissance?*** 147
Peter Mbago Wakholi
- Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide.*** 153
Bronwyn St Clair
- AFSAAP President’s Report.** 157
Fernanda Claudio
- ARAS Guidelines for Contributors.** 161
- About AFSAAP.** 162

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Australia's Re-Engagement with Africa

Tanya Lyons

ARAS Editor - Flinders University

The Foreign Affairs Minister, the Hon. Stephen Smith emphasised at an international forum at Sydney University on 19 March 2010, that he has “on many occasions spoken about the Government’s commitment to broaden and deepen Australia’s engagement with Africa.”¹ This is indeed true. The mantra from Rudd’s Australian government since 2008 on Africa, is that it has been neglected, and we need to re-engage with it - because of the benefits and opportunities of trade now appearing in the many more stable African countries; because of security, especially in terms of the Gulf of Aden and Somali piracy; and indeed because we care, and aim to provide more aid to Africa, as we increase our ODA from a low of 0.25% of GDI during the Howard years, toward 0.5% by 2015 (despite many NGOs calling for 0.7%). Of course, many cynics would conclude that all of this so-called re-engagement amounts to nothing more than a buttering up of African leaders to shore up support for positive votes in the 2013 UN Security Council elections, which Australia would like a seat on. If it is, we can only hope the same African leaders will still be in power in a few years time, or the efforts will be lost. Stephen Smith has another view, which he broadly defended at the Sydney forum. He stated that -

The cynics who assume Australia’s engagement with Africa is simply or only about this [UN Security Council seat] really miss the fundamental point: Australia’s re-engagement with Africa is driven by a clear-eyed and pragmatic view of our long-term strategic and economic interests into the future. It also reflects Australia’s commitment to be a good international citizen, and to support Africa, which remains the continent with the highest percentage of people living in absolute poverty, in making progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.²

¹ Stephen Smith, “Australia and Africa: Looking to the Future,” Speech to the University of Sydney International Forum on *Australia’s Re-Engagement with Africa*, 19 March 2010, http://www.usaid.gov.au/minister/releasesmith.cfm?BC=Speech&ID=9385_2277_6666_9627_8345 (accessed 14 April 2010).

² Stephen Smith, 2010.

It makes sense that Smith would be engaged with Africa. He comes from Western Australia and would have been lobbied by the mining sector there, and they are closest to Africa after all, across the Indian Ocean. Providing strategic assistance to select African countries to achieve the MDGs, and create good governance and stability – channelling this assistance through established multilateral institutions, and through Australian NGOs already on the ground in various humanitarian hot spots, is an effective way to ensure business opportunities are supported. It is not just the mining sector that has interests in Africa, although they are the third largest investors after Canada and South Africa.³ For example, Australian agricultural exports to Africa totalled over \$1.2 billion between 2006-09, although we only imported \$600 million worth of products, we were effectively dealing with most African countries in this trade – that is with 42 countries, excluding Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Lesotho, Mauritania, São Tomé Príncipe, and Sierra Leone.⁴ Trade and Business in general has been bubbling and booming since the late 1990s, and now amounts to over AUD\$26 billion in total.⁵

So the question is, when did we *stop* re-engaging with Africa? The fact is, that Australia has always been engaged with Africa - from the Boer war and Baden Powell's siege of Mafikeng through to the World Cup in South Africa in 2010 - Australians were there, and will be there! As I have previously argued, "Australia did not colonise an African country, and has not benefited from postcolonial trade links between former colonies and colonizers, such as the European nations have,"⁶ but we do share the same ocean with Africa's east coast.

³ Roger Donnelly and Ben Ford, "Big Profits, Losses Out of Africa", (August 2008a), www.lowyinstitute.org/Publications.asp?pid=680; and Roger Donnelly and Ben Ford, *Into Africa: How the resource Boom is Making Sub-Saharan Africa More Important To Australia*, (Lowy Institute Paper 24, Lowy Institute for International Affairs: 2008b).

⁴ Wilkins, Lachlan "Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) Response to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa", Submission No. 26 to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa, (2009). These figures exclude confidential items including wheat and most fish and seafood.

⁵ Donnelly and Ford (2008b)

⁶ Tanya Lyons, "Australia in Africa: The Human Dimension," in the *Australian Strategic Policy Institute online forum June 2009*, the *Australian Strategic Policy Institute* – 2009, <http://www.aspi.org.au/> (accessed 14 April 2010).

Australia has always focussed some Overseas Development Aid (ODA) toward Africa, not much, but always strategically focussed to utilise our strengths in a few key areas such as water, sanitation, maternal health, and governance. The ‘crowded’ development sector in Africa is competitive and Australia acknowledges the need for ‘brand awareness’ to get the most for its pithy assistance – 1% of total global ODA to Africa comes from Australia, and has hovered around 3% of our total Australian ODA.⁷ The Australian community would seem to be the most active in connecting with Africa, and this will only further increase after more than 40,000 Australians travel to South Africa for the World Cup in 2010 and see for themselves the issues facing many Africans today. Virgin airlines are now competing with Qantas with newly established direct flights from Melbourne to Johannesburg. It would be good to see Virgin also establishing a charitable exercise such as the one Qantas has in place to assist African children. Nevertheless, private aid to Africa surpasses official development assistance from Australia. In 2008 more than one third of all private funds donated by Australians went to Africa (34.65% compared to 29.62% to East Asia), whereas Ausaid directed only 18.96% of its aid funding to Africa, compared to 42.21% to East Asia.⁸

In terms of military connections to Africa, these are small, but not insignificant to Australia. A total of 3383 military personnel have been involved in African deployments since 1961, mostly assisting multilateral interventions, such as the United Nations and Commonwealth. Two of the fifteen deployments included the worst humanitarian and civil disasters that the Africa continent has experienced. An infantry battalion of 1,500 were sent to Somalia in the early 1990s and a team of 638 medical support officers were posted to Rwanda in 1995. The latter tragically witnessed the massacre of over 2000 civilians, but could not intervene due to the UN mandate.⁹

⁷ AusAID, *Australia and Africa: facing the challenges as partners 2003-2007*, Commonwealth of Australia, (2005) www.ausaid.gov.au/publications (accessed 14 April 2010); AusAID *Annual Program Performance report for Africa 2007-08*, December 2008, www.ausaid.gov.au/publications (accessed 14 April 2010)

⁸ Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) *Regional Distribution of Aid Funds*, (2008), <http://www.acfid.asn.au/resources/facts-and-figures/regional-distribution-of-aid-funds> (accessed 14 April 2010); and Apollo Nsubuga-Kyobe, Personal Submission No. 34 to the Review of Australia’s Relationship with the Countries of Africa, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, December 2009.

⁹ Matthew J. Cuttall, *AFRICOM and Australian Military Engagement in Africa*, Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leaven worth, Kansas, (2008); Brett White, “Department of

So we have been involved in Africa, engaged with Africa, and even care about Africa. Now, Australia can boast an increasing number of Africans living here, and thus must 're-engage' with Africa and Africans from a local perspective as well. According to the 2006 Census there was a total of 211,074 African born Australians, amounting to an increase of 64,484 since the 2001 Census data, which totalled 146,590.¹⁰ Thus African born Australians make up at least one percent of our total population and are of increasing importance to our domestic arena.

In academic circles there appears to be many people conducting research on issues facing new arrivals in Australia, and naturally this lends to a focus on former African refugees and associated settlement issues, because Africans make up a 'visible' proportion of new arrivals. This particular issue of ARAS examines a number of these issues, but builds upon the existing literature, and hopefully will provide a focus for future research. This issue of ARAS is also published at a time when there is increasing media attention to such 'settlement' issues – usually focussing on youth violence, such as stabbings. The Sudanese community in South Australia is still coming to terms with the murder of one young boy by another in the city last year. Furthermore, a recent article in the *Advertiser*, highlighted the concerns facing “the exclusion and isolation of refugee children in Australia,”¹¹ whereby new arrivals and refugee children were marginalised in the playground by 'mainstream' students. This concerns me, and highlights the importance for the Australian Human Rights Commission to finalise its “African Australians: A report on human rights and social inclusion issues.”¹² At the time of writing, the deadline has yet to be advised. If the Australian government is serious

Defence Submission to the Joint Standing Committee in Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa,” Submission No. 30 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa, (2009); and Australian Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Veteran's Association, “The ADF and Police involvement in peacekeeping and peacemaking operations since 1947”, in www.peacekeepers.asn.au/missions/index.htm (accessed 1 March, 2010)

¹⁰ See David Lucas, “Africans in the Australian Census,” *The Australasian Review of African Studies*, 29: 1&2 (2008): 110-111

¹¹ Miles Kemp, “Shunned from year 1: Refugee children excluded in the school yard,” in *The Advertiser*, (3 April, 2010): 5. Kemp was citing C. Due and D. Riggs, “Playing at the edges: use of playground spaces in South Australian primary schools with new arrivals programmes,” in *Social Geography Discussions*, 6:1 (2010): 1-38, <http://www.soc-geogr-discuss.net/6/issue1.html>

¹² Australian Human Rights Commission, “African Australians: A report on human rights and social inclusion issues,” Discussion paper prepared by Claire Moroney, 30 June 2009, www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus (accessed 14 April 2010).

about its re-engagement with Africa, then it needs to take seriously the issues facing former African refugees now living here. They also need to read the articles below, which examine many of these problems and provide some solutions.

From the pages of *ARAS* we have previously published a number of articles on Africans in Australia, and I repeat these details in the bibliography below to re-emphasise the need for future scholars to build upon this knowledge, and indeed for current policy makers to refresh their knowledge with the issues that have been raised here.¹³ What is noteworthy about this current bibliographic list is that it dates from Gavin Kitching's 'depressing' analysis of conducting African Studies research in Australia,¹⁴ and leads through an interesting journey of seasoned scholars, such as Liz Dimock and her important Bibliography of Africans in Australia,¹⁵ that should be the first stop for all scholars and policy makers. The current bibliographic list however also includes new and enthusiastic scholars coming up through the ranks, committed to issues facing Africans in Australia. The authors in this edition of *ARAS* also form part of this new and exciting force in African Studies in Australia. They are Susana Akua Saffu, Aparna Hebbani, Levind Obijiofor and Helen Bristed, Anne Harris and Nyadol Nyuon, Peter Mbago Wakholi, and again we see Surjeet Dhanji, building upon her previous research in these pages.

Susana Saffu examines settlement issues for African migrant and refugee women who have settled in the Northern Territory. Her focus is on adult education programs and understanding how these can be a source of confidence and capacity building for women aiming to settle into Australian life. Aparna Hebbani, Levi Obijiofor and Helen Bristed also examine a similar issue facing African women in Australia, but in terms of their intercultural communication challenges that they confront with settlement issues. Their research focuses on Sudanese women in Southeast Queensland, and like Saffu they have interviewed a number of women and investigated their narratives.

Anne Harris and Nyadol Nyuon contribute a unique methodology for exploring similar issues facing Africans in Australia, their article

¹³ See all bibliographic references in below bibliography.

¹⁴ Gavin Kitching, "Why I gave up African Studies," *African Studies Review and Newsletter*, 22:1 (June 2000): 21-26.

¹⁵ Liz Dimock, "Bibliography: Africans in Australia," *The Australasian Review of African Studies*, 29: 1&2 (2008): 133-154.

“Working it Both Ways: Intercultural Collaboration and the Performativity of Identity,” is essentially a dialogue between the authors that examines some of the issues – in particular discrimination - facing young African-Australian women in Australian schools. Their research bridges the intellectual gap between researchers and the researched. Peter Wakholi’s article “African Cultural Education and Schooling: towards Bicultural Competence of African Australian Youth,” provides some tangible solutions to the difficult experiences facing many African-Australian youth in the Australian education system, with an African Cultural Education Program incorporated into schools to assist both students and their parents. Finally, Surjeet Dhanji continues her exploration of the issues faced by former refugees from the Horn of Africa and Sudan now residing in Victoria. In her first article in the last issue of ARAS, she posited the question in terms of the participants of her research being welcomed or made to feel unwelcome, by certain racist elements in our community. This present article examines the participants’ experiences of the ‘Social or Unsocial.’ That is, by examining the links between their access to accommodation, health care and thus physical and mental well-being through various settlement programs, Dhanji provides an important critique of the outcomes of these programs on the diverse, not homogenous, target groups. Importantly she concludes that “Social exclusion and isolation can easily compound into ‘depression’ and mental health issues particularly for single women refugees.” This observation needs to be extended across the full spectrum of new arrivals in Australia, whether in Dandenong or on Christmas Island.

All of the authors’ contributions in this issue of ARAS demonstrate the importance of conducting research into the issues facing Africans in Australia, and the importance of conducting this research ethically, to assist those communities. These authors, many of them African-Australians themselves, also demonstrate the importance of utilising the skills that they bring to the debates, and perhaps drawing upon their knowledge of Africa to assist Australian policy makers as they move through this current ‘re-engagement’ with the continent.

Finally, under a Rudd government, with the focussed skills of a foreign Minister apparently concerned with Africa, a ‘re-engaging’ rhetoric is being spun, providing temporary reassurance that Africa may actually be of reasonable priority to the Australian government. This may, or may not, result in increased funding to researchers, or rather to academics pursuing, perhaps naively, careers in African Studies in Australia. One

outcome of Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith's focus on Africa has been the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's, *Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa*. While the public hearings into this inquiry are being held as ARAS goes to press, and a report will not be expected until the end of the year, to date there have been 45 submissions to this inquiry, of which five were made by current AFSAAP Executive members, four from previous AFSAAP executive members, and a last minute submission from AFSAAP makes a total of ten. This indicates that the AFSAAP Executive make up over 20 percent of the opinions - professional, personal and governmental - on issues relating to Africa.

All have called for the establishment of an Australian-African Research Institute of some kind or another, based in Australia, which would ideally contribute to knowledge about Africa in Australia, and would draw on the strengths and knowledge of local Africans in Australia, and keen Africanists in the field. Such a national institute or even centre of African research would benefit from government support, and find a place in tandem with, rather than in competition with any Australian universities vying for limited government funding. This is not a new scramble for Africa from Australia. It would be an achievement if more publications, more public discourse and debate on African issues could be produced from the so-called knowledge economy within Australia, thus making the *Australasian Review of African Studies* not just the only journal publication devoted to Africa in this region, but would naturally boast at being the first, among many. The African research room is not currently crowded in Australia. While AFSAAP can be proud of its long standing place in that room, there is plenty of scope for more networks and forums across a range of relevant issues that bring us together, perhaps even for a common goal, the Millennium Development Goals in Africa. There is plenty of space for African research in Australia, although a re-engagement between government policy-makers, NGOs, community groups, business, scholars and importantly funding sources is required.

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