

**Tanya Lyons, Africa 2011 34th AFSAAP Conference Convener,
Flinders University,
“Africa 2011: The Challenges”**

From the African continent to the African diaspora in Australasia, understanding Africa is of increasing significance. "Africa 2011" was the theme of this 34th Annual Conference of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific. The conference brought together academics, scholars, the African Community and service providers working with the African community, NGOs, government agencies, foreign embassies and high commissions, to debate and discuss where Africa is situated politically, economically, socially, environmentally and historically. 81 papers were presented between November 30th to December 2nd 2011. 43 of those papers are now presented below in the conference proceedings, with more to follow. We have left the abstracts here and encourage you to pursue the authors if you are interested in their research.

2011 saw dramatic protests in North Africa and the formation of Africa's newest state – "South Sudan", reminding us that our knowledge of Africa must encompass those countries North of the Sahara – more often included in and restricted to Middle Eastern area studies. Importantly, Elizabeth Lang's paper [“Reframing our knowledge's: the formation of Africa's newest State, the Republic of Southern Sudan”](#) provided the background to this new state formation, while Peter Run chaired an important panel on this issue "South Sudan: From conflict to the drawing boards of nation-building" which examined the many challenges facing South Sudan – including in politics, economics, agriculture and resources and education.

While Theo Neethling's paper on [“South Africa, the African Union and international intervention in Libya: A Critical Appraisal”](#) provided an important analysis of the crises that rolled out across North Africa during the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, Naomi Steer, the National Director of Australia for UNHCR in her keynote speech to the conference, provided an important and detailed analysis of the [“The Horn of Africa Crisis-The Humanitarian Response”](#). In the lead up to the conference during 2011, 'another' famine unfolded in Somalia, and the Australian media and public were fascinated (to a limited extent) in the ongoing causes of conflict and famine in that region. Donors were mobilised and yet again Africans were portrayed as victims to their own environment, politics and conflict. Steer's address, coupled by the photographs and images of the crises by the Kenya photographer Thomas Mukoya, exposed many of the myths and generalisations made and enabled an in-depth understanding of the issues at work.

The United Nations proclaimed 2011 as the International Year for People of African descent, “with a view to strengthening national actions and regional and international cooperation for the benefit of people of African descent in relation to their full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights, their participation and integration in all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society, and the promotion of a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture”. This 34th AFSAAP provided a forum in which many of these issues were explore in greater detail.

Australia is currently expanding its interests in Africa – in trade, aid and defence. A new Australian embassy in Addis Ababa highlights the importance of diplomacy with the African Union, and comes at a time when domestic budgetary pressures have sparked debate about increasing aid to Africa. Gashahun Lemessa Fura's keynote speech, ["Inter –University. Linkage Approach to African Studies of Australasia: Some Reflections on Jimma-Flinders Universities Recent Academic Linkage"](#), addressed these issues in particular focusing on the strengths and importance of partnerships between Africa and Australia.

2011 has also seen the introduction of more scholarships under the Australia Awards for Africa Program, and the release of the report from the Parliamentary Inquiry into "Australia's Relations with the Countries of Africa". The roundtable forum chaired by David Mickler "The emerging Australia-Africa relationship", enabled the discussants - Gashahun Lemessa Fura (Jimma University); Geoffrey Hawker (Macquarie University); Sam Makinda (Murdoch University); Peter Run (University of Queensland); and Tanya Lyons (Flinders University), to explore the implications and significance of the Australian government's approach, both to Australia and the peoples of the countries of Africa. One of the main points realised by the text of the final report from the Inquiry was that whatever Australians pursue in Africa, either in development aid, trade, defence relations, education, and of course the mining sector, we still need a more critical mass of local Africanists whose research can inform these relations, in all of the political, social, economic, cultural contexts in which these activities are pursued. An acknowledgement of this need was stated in the tenth recommendation, that an African Studies Centre be established in Australia. While the merits of such a centre is being debated, the coordination and promotion of African studies in Australia will remain the purview of AFSAAP.

Of particular interest and a noteworthy focus in African Studies more recently in Australasia has been the excellent research conducted by Australian and New Zealand based scholars on the issues facing Africans settling in these respective countries. The 2011 AFSAAP Postgraduate Prize winning paper by Mike Oliver is one example of the excellent research being conducted in this field. His paper ["Standing up, reaching out and letting go: Experiences of resilience and school engagement for African high schoolers from refugee backgrounds"](#), provides a comprehensive analysis of the issues faced by students and was based on interviews and field research in South Australia. Furthermore, contributing to this field of research at the conference was Lynda Lawson, Thandie Ngoma and Kashim Oriaje, who presented their research on ["African student experience at university, a paradigmatic case using narrative analysis."](#)

Furthermore, two excellent panel forums *"African-Australians' functional English: What hindrances does it pose to their successes and integration in Australia?"* and *"Does visibility matter? African-Australian refugees and migrants in regional Victoria"*, provided opportunity for the important issues facing African Australians to be debated and discussed.

The issues facing the Sudanese Diaspora in Australia and New Zealand in particular were also explored by Melanie Baak, in her paper ["I think it's a little bit the same": Negotiating Belongings as Diäärjäng from Sudan, through Exile to Australia"](#); Dani Milos in her paper

[“Customary v Statutory legal systems: The challenge for South Sudanese communities in Australia”](#); and Ryan O’Byrne, in his paper [“Speaking From Experience: Issues Surrounding Third Country Resettlement for Sudanese Acholi in New Zealand.”](#) David Lucas, Barbara Edgar and Monica Jamali also contributed to the understanding of African migration to Australasia in their paper specifically looking at the [“Zimbabwe’s exodus to Australia.”](#) The points of comparison and reflection with the issues faced by Sudanese migrants to Australia and New Zealand would be well worth further exploration, and indeed were explored recently in the December 2011 issues of the Australasian Review of African Studies special issue on the Sudanese Diaspora in Australasia, edited by Jay Marlowe from New Zealand.

The 2011 AFSAAP Conference also highlighted the strengths in research in this region on political, social and economic issues related to the countries of Africa, seen in Helen Ware’s paper [“Good enough governance”: Destroying kleptocracy as a path to poverty reduction and reform in post-conflict Africa”](#); Anna Rabin’s paper [“How will demographics affect Kenya’s ability to reach Millennium Development Goal One”](#); and Stefan Plenk’s [“Paper Tiger or Veto Player? - The Role of OPDS in Southern African Security Polity Architecture”](#). Also contributing to an analysis of life in Africa was Danielle Potts’ [“Botswana an African success story: Liberal Democracy, a misconception?”](#); and Franklin Obeng-Odoom’s [“Is Life in Africa Getting Better?”](#). Utilising a ‘happy index’ this paper offers a way forward for development thinking across African concerns, and can be compared with the issues raised by Rachel Outhred in her paper [“‘\[The NGO\] is here to obliterate what we have left of our African culture.’ Escaping the traditional/modern dichotomy in program design.”](#)

Contributing to the field of research which aims to explain the ongoing conflicts and crises in and across Africa was Jean-Claude Meledje’s examination of [“The separation of ethnicity and election in Africa: The case for Cote d’Ivoire”](#); Christine Cheater’s paper on [“Exposing without Sensationalising: The Christian Science Monitor and the plight of child soldiers in Africa”](#); David Duriesmith’s [“Masculinity in the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone: greed, grievance and entitlement”](#) and Raymond Lau’s [“Intervention to stop mass atrocities in Northern Uganda: first protection, then justice?”](#)

Timely papers on the complex issues facing Nigeria were also examined by Bernard Nwosu in his paper [“The Integral State and Construction of Hegemony: Gramsci and Democratisation in Nigeria”](#); and M. D. Suleiman’s paper on [“Southern Kaduna: Democracy and the struggle for identity and Independence by Non-Muslim Communities in Northern Nigeria 1999-2011.”](#) Given the recent conflict in Kano state, this paper will be a must read for all.

International Interventions in Africa were examined by David Robinson in his paper [“The Political Economy of China in Africa: The Case of Mozambique”](#), while Geoffrey Hawker’s examination of [“Natural Resources of Minerals and Food: A Missing Link in Agency”](#) sheds some light on the fundamental issues of the resource curse in African countries. Of particular interest to Australians who have fallen victim to various online scams was Oluwabukola Adelaja’s paper [“Catching up with the rest of the world: The legal framework of cybercrime in Africa.”](#)

Access to primary health care should be considered a fundamental human right and is included in the Millennium Development Goals, and serves as a particular focus of Australian foreign aid to the countries of Africa. Olasupo Owoeye's examination of ["The WTO TRIPS Agreement, the Right to Health and Access to Medicines in Africa"](#), provides a global analysis to the fundamental problems across the continent in relation to this; while Kiran Pienaar's paper ["An analysis of dissident representations of the 'problem of AIDS' in South Africa \(1999-2008\)"](#); and Jean Burke's ["Swahili-based concepts: Explaining how social ties manage HIV and infant feeding"](#) remind us that the unresolved issues of HIV-AIDS management in African countries remains an under resourced area of concern.

An examination of gender issues was well represented at the conference and Clare Buswell's 2011 AFSAAP Postgraduate Prize winning paper ["Moral Authority, Power and Women's Identity in Colonial Kenya"](#) brought an historical and feminist dimension to an examination of women's lives in colonial Kenya. Christina Kenny's contribution, ["I could never be your woman – Gendered citizenship and the 2007 General Election in Kenya"](#) brought the discussion forward to this century in the post - postcolonial Kenyan political arena and the specific issues facing women. Furthermore, Nicole Webster's paper ["Resisting Reproduction: An Anthropological Analysis of Self-Induced Abortion in a Rural Ghanaian Village"](#); and Rachel Riak's ["Gender balance issues in Africa"](#) provided a great deal of material for debate and discussion, on what is often 'surprisingly' controversial gender issues.

Social issues were examined with a particular focus on education and knowledge. Truphena Oduol's ["Ethical issues: a cases study of secondary school leaders in Kenya"](#); Kofi Poku Quan-Baffour, ["Sankofa: 'looking back' to reclaim indigenous knowledge and skills to confront youth unemployment in Ghana"](#); and Aideen O'Connor's ["Governance and Regional Co-Operation as Factors of Post-Independence Stability: The Role of Education in the Belgian Congo and French Senegal"](#) provided an important examination of the pertinent issues in Africa's history and development. Furthermore, Anlia Pretorius; Nita Lawton-Misra & Tanya Healey's contribution on ["Disability: Continued Marginalisation!"](#) highlights the ongoing challenges faced by ordinary Africans in their daily lives.

In any attempt to understand African politics generally, an examination of local government issues and the public sector is paramount. The papers by Bornwell Chikulo's, ["Local governance and service delivery in South Africa: Progress, achievements and challenges"](#); and Clive Napier's, ["South African local government – New roles and challenges evaluated – The uneasy fit"](#), provide a detailed and important examination of the issues faced by our South African counterparts. And also contributing to an understanding of local politics in Kenya was Sylvester Odhiambo Obong'o, with his paper on ["Particularistic exchanges and pacts of domination in Africa: Examining how patronage appointments may have increased resistance to public sector reforms in Kenya"](#).

An important although underrepresented area of research in African Studies has been the environment – usually falling into the domain of environmental sciences, rather than being presented to African Studies audiences. Marie-Louise McDermott's paper ["Investigating](#)

[actor-networks linked to South African & Australian ocean pools](#) provides a timely and important analysis of comparative environmental concerns.

Finally, but not least importantly, were the contributions made to the discourse on postcolonialism, literature and drama with Kudzai Matereke's, ["Searching for a "postcolonial moment" of cosmopolitanism in Ousmane Sembène's Moolaade"](#); Dapo Adeleke's, ["The African writer: an endangered species in the African socio/political milieu – Nigeria as a case study"](#); and Tiffany Knight's, ["African Voices: Who May Speak? Who is Listening? An examination of the process of theatre making and the right to speak in another's voice"](#). Knight's paper resonates importantly in the field of African Studies as we must always reflect on who is speaking for whom and to ensure that we shift from a context of crisis toward coping, to comprehend the challenges faced – to ensure a sustainable future for Africans in Africa and in the diaspora.

Overall, the conference was a great success, determined not only by the quality of papers and presentations, but also by the amount of time it took to usher participants back into the sessions from the breaks. The African Studies Association of Australasia and The Pacific (AFSAAP) has for 34 years provided a forum for scholars and others interested in African Studies to come together once a year and share their research and ideas. The 35th Conference will be held in Canberra in late 2012, and the 36th in Brisbane in 2013. In between these forums AFSAAP encourages all to engage in comprehensive research in African Studies.

Tanya Lyons, January 30th 2012.