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Linking Democracy, Development and the Diaspora

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At the age of 82, celebrated Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe died on March 22, 2013. His best known work was his novel *Things Fall Apart* which was published in 1958 two years before Nigeria gained its independence from British rule and powerfully illustrated that Africa had an important history prior to European colonisation that should be heralded and celebrated.¹ This novel was inspired from a WB Yeats verse in a poem entitled “The Second Coming”:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Achebe’s works provide a critical reminder that we remain mindful of the past as it shapes both the present and future – and so too that the present and future also inform the past. Whilst things may fall apart and there are numerous examples where centres have not been able to hold, it is also important to recognise that such events do not indelibly damage people or that new centres cannot be forged.

The importance of the past and its connections to the future are celebrated in this issue of ARAS, which features the new cover design

¹ See Diane Schwerdt, “Ezenwa Ohaeto – Chinua Achebe A Biography” *African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific Review and Newsletter*, Vol 21, No 2, December 1999, p. 39; and also see Russell McDougall, “Things Fall Apart: Culture, Anthropology, Literature,” *Australasian Review of African Studies*, Vol. 30 No. 1 June 2009, - pp. 118 – 128.

to match the launch of AFSAAP's revitalised website. There may be many diverse and different ways to explore and explain this redesign, but we leave it to you to find your own meaning in the choice of colours and design of the logo. We do hope you like it. Furthermore, in a previous editorial (ARAS Vol 32 No 1 June 2011) Tanya Lyons explored the meaning and reasons behind AFSAAP's logo image - the Benin Head, and justified its continued use as AFSAAP's logo.²

This re-discovery of meaning enabled also re-vitalised AFSAAP's connections across the Tasman, - for example, we can now boast one third of the ARAS Editorial team as based in New Zealand. Additionally we are pleased to introduce Prof. Tony Binns from Otago University as one of a few important new members of the ARAS International Editorial Advisory Board. There are other connections with New Zealand that AFSAAP enjoys, including increased memberships and participation in AFSAAP's annual conferences.

This issue of ARAS is being published at a time in Australia's political history that has experienced six years of a purposeful 're-engagement' strategy with the countries of Africa, under the Rudd then Gillard Federal Labor governments. The outcome of the September 2013 federal elections will determine the durability of this strategy and test recent advances made in diplomatic and trade links with Africa. The legacy of this strategy may well be through the Australia Awards in Africa scholarship program, which has seen up to 1000 scholarships offered to African recipients in 2013 (and which is budgeted for until 2016). As Makinda and Turner detail in their article below, one of the most likely outcomes to be achieved by these scholarships are the 'people-to-people links' that develop during recipients' time studying in Australian universities. An example of these 'people to people links' is evident by a poignant article submitted to these pages by a former Australia Awards scholar from Liberia, on the issue of transparency and democracy in the electoral processes of that 'post-conflict' society. As Lyons explains:

I met Titus on the Belair train. I had just visited the South Australian Museum with my youngest son Tom and we sat next to him. As it turned out we had a lot to discuss.

² Tanya Lyons, "AFSAAP and the Benin Bronze - Building Bridges?" *Australasian Review of African Studies*, Vol 32, No. 1, June 2011, pp, 6-11.

This was importantly my first (and hopefully not last) encounter with Zotawon Titus, a remarkable student from Liberia, who after graduating from Flinders University and upon his return to his home country, was appointed to the role of Deputy Minister for Information Communication Technologies in Liberia and also has an academic position at the University of Liberia. Remarkable in many ways, Titus expressed a clear passion for the development of his own country, and suggested that he would indeed be interested in writing an article for ARAS upon his return to Liberia. Keeping his word, Titus present contribution to ARAS “Examining Transparency in Liberia’s Pre- and Post-Civil War Electoral Process” explores the many issues surrounding transparency in Liberian elections and how important this issue is for democracy and development. It also shows that many positive initiatives across Africa will ensure things will not fall indefinitely apart. Tom may be interested in reading about this one day, but for now is happy to have met one of his ‘mum’s students’ on the train and showed off his new toy dinosaur. We all play our role in international relations!

Titus has argued that while electoral governance in Liberia since 1997 has been transparent, there is a risk that renewed electoral violence could undermine all of the advances made in post-conflict Liberia. His article explores Liberia’s electoral processes using a comparative analysis of the conduct of elections before and after the Liberian civil war. This is an important contribution to African Studies and is significant to Australia’s interests in Liberia and understanding of the wider political concerns and processes across Africa.

Ironically while Lyons was reflecting on the outcomes from this individual Australia Awards scholarship recipient, Turner and Makinda were researching the impact and effectiveness of the wider Australian scholarship program to Africa. Their article “Contextualising Aid Effectiveness: Australia’s Scholarship Program in Africa” argues that despite the rapid growth in scholarships offered to Africans, there is no established mechanism for measuring its effectiveness in terms of achieving the Millenium Development Goals. Turner and Makinda suggest that any assessment should examine the personal transformations of the individual scholarship recipients and their ability to apply their knowledge to the alleviation of poverty in their home countries.

This direct relationship between African students studying in Australia, and then returning home to make a difference in their countries, can also be applied to the African diaspora in Australasia. In between editing the last three issues of this journal, the present co-editors have been busy adapting the previous special issue of ARAS (Vol 32 No 2 December 2011) into a book which will be published by Cambridge Scholars Press in late 2013 as “South Sudanese Diaspora in Australia and New Zealand: Reconciling the Past and the Present”. This unique volume includes article updates from many authors in the original special issue, and also some exciting new authors to round out the text. While this book focuses on the South Sudanese community in Australia and New Zealand, it also raises the issues of how this diasporic community can assist in the development of South Sudan, either through remittances, or returns, in many cases with hard-earned educational qualifications from universities in Australia and New Zealand.

Furthermore, within New Zealand, Jay Marlowe has been conducting research with Ethiopian and Somalian communities from refugee backgrounds about their perspectives and responses to the Christchurch earthquakes.³ The two major earthquakes and thousands of subsequent aftershocks caused extensive structural damage to the city and resulted in 185 fatalities. Though these events have rocked the Canterbury region, these two communities (amongst many others) have shown great capacity to respond to this adversity and have demonstrated a myriad of ways that people source such forms of resilience. So again, things may have fallen apart but African Australians and African New Zealanders are also re-building in ways that illustrate the power of looking to the future whilst remaining mindful and honouring of the past.

In relation to addressing the relationships between such past and present, Virginia Mapedzahama and Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo have written an article here that speaks to the issues faced by all African Australians negotiating their lives in Australia. “Negotiating Diasporic Black African Existence in Australia: A Reflexive Analysis,” examines the multiple layers of issues faced by Africans living in Australia – ranging from stereotypes of the oppressed ‘Other’ through to life in the African diaspora. These two authors, both regular attendees at AFSAAP’s

³ Marlowe, Jay and Lucy Lou. ‘The Canterbury Earthquakes and Refugee Communities’ *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work Review*, in press.

annual conferences have both in their own right played significant roles in challenging the stereotypes and perceptions of Africans in Australia.

This article is testimony to their ‘tales of blackness,’ of their “dilemmas of negotiating subjectivity, of the multiple and paradoxical ways of being ‘other’ in a society that claims to be multicultural and is hailed as such worldwide.” Future policy makers mapping or renegotiating Australia’s (or New Zealand’s) relationships with the countries of Africa would do well to understand these nuanced experiences of Africans in Australia, particularly when promoting the benefits of doing business between Africa and Australia.

The next article in this issue of ARAS brings this issue of negotiation and existence down to a more practical and logistical issue as Wendy Harte provides a clear example of the problems facing social planners when trying to collect information about communities composed of individuals from ethnic minorities in Australia. In her article “Towards a culturally-appropriate model of collecting demographic data from ethnic minority communities: A case study of the Burundian community census in Queensland,” she argues that African refugee communities in Australia are considered to be the most disadvantaged in Australia. And yet, she notes very little is known about the who, what, and where of these communities across Australia, making the provision of social and settlement services challenging. Harte’s research reports on a community-based census, undertaken by Queensland’s Burundian community, and this is compared and contrasted with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics census and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship Settlement Database, the latter of which is more commonly used by support services. Harte proposes a community census model, based on the Burundian experience, which is a more culturally appropriate and inexpensive method of collecting these important data from new and emerging communities.

This issue of ARAS presents two important research articles on the issue of ‘witchcraft accusations’ in Malawi. The first, “Witchcraft Accusations Amongst The Muslim Amacinga Yawo Of Malawi And Modes Of Dealing With Them,” by Ian Dicks, whose book *An African Worldview: The Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi*, was previously reviewed by Alan Thorold in these pages of ARAS (Vol 33 No 2 December 2012), argues that the *Witchcraft Act* in Malawi cannot adequately deal with the current situation and practices in Malawi in

which witchcraft is believed to flourish. His study is based on his detailed research amongst the Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi and provides valuable insights into the historical significance of witchcraft and the context in which it has developed.

Dick's article is followed by another important contribution to this issue, by Erwin Van der Meer, entitled "Child Witchcraft Accusations in Southern Malawi." In this article van der Meer's research focusses in particular on the problems faced by children who are accused of witchcraft, and he explores the factors and reasoning behind these accusations, all contextualised within the debate about the relevance of the *Witchcraft Act* in Malawi. Van der Meer argues that it is not simply cultural factors that have influenced the rise in accusations in Malawi and across Africa, but socio-economic concerns and the impact of HIV/AIDS on society. His concern is that children and other vulnerable groups in society are not protected by the *Witchcraft Act*. These two articles should provoke some debate about the topic in Southern Africa, and provide a level of understanding about this phenomenon which is often surrounded with mystique and stereotypes.

Returning to Achebe's influential writing and significant contributions to African studies, he provides an important statement about diversity:

The world is big. Some people are unable to comprehend that simple fact. They want the world on their own terms, its peoples just like them and their friends, its places like the manicured little patch on which they live. But this is a foolish and blind wish. Diversity is not an abnormality but the very reality of our planet. The human world manifests the same reality and will not seek our permission to celebrate itself in the magnificence of its endless varieties. Civility is a sensible attribute in this kind of world we have; narrowness of heart and mind is not. - *Chinua Achebe, Bates College Commencement Address, 1996.*

Whilst things can fall apart, Africa also has many stories (past and present) of building capacities, responding to the transgressions of the past and working in partnership with local, national and international actors. It is within this understanding that everyone has a potential role to play. We hope that this issue of ARAS and the forthcoming AFSAAP conference in Perth in November 2013 provides further

knowledge about African Studies in Australasia that build upon this endeavour.

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