

## Short Report on the NVAS Conference “Africa without Borders” 28 October 2005

**By Sahro Mohamed**

On 28 October 2005 the bi-annual NVAS conference was held in Leiden. Entitled “Africa without Borders” and was well attended by over 60 participants, the majority being NVAS members. Prof. Jan Abbink opened the conference and extended a warm welcome to everyone present. He hoped that everyone would be able to increase their knowledge about Africa and would also enjoy some thought-provoking discussions. John Houtkamp then officially launched the new NVAS website (<http://www.afrikastudies.nl>).

Prof. Michael Bourdillon from the University of Zimbabwe, as keynote speaker, gave an interesting presentation on “The Importance of Children”. How is it possible, he asked, that while our youth and children make up a significant part of our population, their potential as agents and contributors to society is highly underestimated and often neglected by society and by the academic world? Can history and social change be understood without paying attention to children and childhood? Prof. Bourdillon argued that this was not possible, that children are not simply passive recipients of nurture and culture and that in any case two extremes are to be avoided – treating children as objects and as adults. If we want to hear young people’s perspectives, it would simply be no use inviting them, for example, to this meeting and expecting them to take part like the rest of us adults.

Sessions 1 to 5 started immediately after Prof. Bourdillon’s address. All the sessions comprised at least 5-6 speakers and ran parallel to each other. Session 1 was entitled “Resources in public places: The interlocking uses of power and religion” and dealt with topics varying from the elections and repression of freedom in Ethiopia, understanding the Mungiki youth movement in Kenya, the Hutu-Tutsi conflict, indigenous ways of resolving conflict and violence in Ethiopia to a synopsis of how Franco-Mauritians are sustaining their elite character in post-colonial Mauritius.

Session 1 was attended by quite a number of Africans, mostly from Ethiopia. An intense debate followed the first presentation on the elections, political unrest and human rights abuses in Ethiopia, which continue as we speak. It was obvious that people » are quickly losing trust in the current Ethiopian government. Perhaps it could learn a thing or two from its indigenous people – the Anyua – and their traditional ways of resolving violent conflict and disputes peacefully by negotiation and compromise (called *agem*).

After the third presentation, it was time for lunch and the attendants had time to socialize and share their impressions of the conference so far. Considering the smiles, laughter and good humour, everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. After coffee it was time for the long-awaited film “Voices in the desert” produced by Metje Postma. The film, the first in a series of three documentaries, was based on the recordings of a group of Sudanese *Rashayda Bedouins* who had settled in a camp in Eritrea after being harassed by the Sudanese authorities. Impressed by the film and while discussing the contents, everyone then headed off for the rest of the presentations.

The sessions gave in-depth and exceptional insights into their respective themes and although I was mainly in Session 1, I made a determined effort not to confine myself to that alone and went off to see what was happening in the other sessions. Since the speakers each had 40 minutes for their presentations, there was enough time for a Q&A session and for regional analysis and fully contextual and critical discussion on the different topics presented.

The topics in Sessions 2-5 ranged from land problems, the environment and ecology in Africa, African verbal art, perceiving economic and technological changes in Africa to encounters between Africa and Europe.

For the names and affiliations of the different speakers and the exact titles of their presentations, please visit the NVAS website: <http://www.afrikastudies.nl>. ■