

AFRAS

US

University of Sussex
Global Studies

AFRAS REVIEW

no1



School of African and Asian Studies (AFRAS)

Beginnings: 1960s

In the early 1960s, the University of Sussex was taking shape. As part of a developing breed of 'new universities', it set out to challenge the hegemony of existing red brick and Oxbridge institutions and to broaden access to higher education. The University was built around an unusual 'Schools of Study' model with the aim of fostering an interdisciplinary environment. At the heart of its founding principles lay the idea that specialism is insufficient if isolated from broader questions about society and history and when disconnected from the range of intellectual perspectives and methodologies offered by other areas of academic study. Amongst these new schools was AFRAS (founded 1964). AFRAS would go on to become a highly successful centre by bringing together different disciplines that were united in a focus on Africa and Asia. In the following years this was broadened out in acknowledgement of the increasing movement of people and culture across geographical locations, creating a vibrant intellectual hub whose engagement spanned networks and diasporas from Africa and Asia, to the Middle East, Caribbean, US and Europe.

Throughout its early days AFRAS sought to promote a different approach to area studies in Africa and Asia.

The School set out to challenge existing conceptions of race, ethnicity, identity, culture and economy in the postcolonial world by bringing together subject areas as diverse as history, literature, politics, anthropology, geography, psychology, economics and cultural studies.

It recruited widely and brought in academics from both colonial universities and those that had recently obtained independence. The aim was to ensure that those teaching and writing in the School also had experience of the places they lectured and wrote on. Guy Routh, for example, arrived

'There was a sense of intellectual initiative going on. The idea of drawing up a new map of knowledge was very important.'

Professor Jeff Pratt

from South Africa having been forced to flee due to his membership of the Communist Party and trade union activity and Peter Lloyd joined AFRAS in 1967, having lived and worked for fifteen years in Ibadan, Nigeria.

The possibilities this new and, at the time, radical School offered also attracted the attention of established academics who had become disenchanted with the stagnant approach of some older institutions. Among these were the eminent anthropologists David Pocock, from Oxford, and Frederick Baily, from Manchester. Both came in search of a community of ideas, scholars and students that suited their temperament and interest in challenging socio-political questions.

As well as the inter-disciplinary nature of the School, AFRAS was also at the forefront of promoting different approaches to established subjects.

Politics, for example, was not focused on histories of British institutions or relations between states but instead examined the domain of 'Behavioural Politics' which at that time was little known in the UK. In anthropology, the School was one of the first to introduce the notion of 'anthropology at home', which turned attention away from 'others' to ask questions of ourselves. Literature focused on questions of race and culture by teaching these themes in relation to Caribbean, South Asian and African novels, stories and poetry, rather than 'the classics'. Academics taught a mix of topics that reflected the disciplinary diversity of the School. All would

AFRAS Review No.1 Summer 1975. The edition contained articles on the Rastafarian movement, Tanzania, revolutionary alternatives along with poems from students.

'The academics, administrators and undergraduates all knew each other. The courses were exciting and topical.'

Elizabeth Lines
(AFRAS Student 1964-67)

teach specialist courses in their own subject area. However, they were also expected to teach modules outside their field in order to broaden their disciplinary approach and to create crossover with their colleagues from other disciplinary fields.

For students, too, AFRAS provided a very different philosophy. Undergraduates were expected to take modules in their discipline as well as contextual school courses. These included modules such as 'Reading and Writing' which was designed to teach students critical thought and techniques for approaching research and academic work. Students also had to take modules from other schools of study. Those in arts and humanities, for example, were required to take at least one science subject, with science students expected to do the same in the arts.

As well as providing a space for engagement across disciplines, AFRAS also instituted a democratic ethos.

Unlike many universities of the time, there was little separation between faculty and students. The culture of the School was informal and encouraged undergraduates to socialise with professors and lecturers.

From its foundation, AFRAS actively fostered this mingling. In early meetings regarding the setup of the School a great deal of attention was paid to the creation of spaces that would encourage an egalitarian atmosphere. Much of this discussion focused on a shared common room, which

would go on to become the heart of the School. Indeed, so successful was this space that it attracted students from various other schools of study who came to soak up its vibrant social scene and informal constitution. Faculty members were provided with money to engage in social activities with students and were encouraged to host annual parties or other events. This sociality and informality was taken into the wider Sussex campus by AFRAS students who often sported a style and approach to life that was markedly identifiable with the 'free love' era of the 1960s.

In spite of its informality AFRAS was a hotbed of vigorous academic debate. As with any school of study it had its own internal divisions and politics.

Seminars were often fiery, critically engaged and debate was intense. Amongst students, too, there was a strong culture of critical thought.

Debate was seen as a central part of the intellectual experience and was just as heated as in other top universities. Although AFRAS initially only offered undergraduate study, many students continued onto postgraduate level. Here, too, the expectation was that students should be engaged and contribute to the culture of the school. As one former student of the period recalls,

'...the postgrad seminars were fantastic... they really were intellectual occasions and you learnt. You were sort of nourished by other people's intellectual commitments.'

From its early days AFRAS had a radical edge. Students within the School and across the University as a whole energetically involved themselves in University politics and in broader political activity. Sussex always enjoyed a reputation for political radicalism. Due to AFRAS's deep involvement with global issues it was, from its founding, at the forefront of this radical political engagement. This engagement ranged

AFRAS Review No.2 1976. Edition contained articles on black youth in British cities, The Black Panthers, blues music and education in China .

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'[...] weekly tutorials [...] trained you to handle ideologically loaded materials, extract information from these and then analyse them for their teleological and empirical contents.'

**Professor Mustafah Dhada
(AFRAS Student 1964-67)**



from left wing political activity to solidarity campaigns, anti-capitalist movements and protests against apartheid, conflict and racism. Along with their peers in other Sussex schools, AFRAS students were very active in organising sit-ins, occupations and other protests both on and beyond the campus. Some of these demonstrations were concerned with aspects of student life such as accommodation, facilities or restrictions. Others engaged with broader issues such as the Vietnam War, colonial occupation or British support for oppressive regimes.

Although there were numerous actions, one of the most infamous was what has become known as the 'red paint incident'. In February 1968 students threw paint at a US embassy official who had been giving a lecture at the campus. The colour had been chosen both as a symbol of socialist alternatives and of the blood spilt in the Vietnam War.

Two students were suspended triggering a long running battle to have them reinstated. During the Paris upheavals of 1968, when students and workers came out in unified large scale protest and strike, several AFRAS students were quick to make the travel to the French capital in support. Whilst much political activity was student led, faculty were also active in a variety of ways. This was particularly so in view of the strong bonds many staff at AFRAS had with academics and others in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. It was a stance that would carry on into later decades through the School's support for emancipatory movements in various regions of the world including South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Burma, Bangladesh and Chile.

AFRAS, then, was founded on the ethos and practices of interdisciplinary enquiry and teaching, critical academic thought, informal and egalitarian student/faculty relations and energetic engagement in local and global politics. It was a place where students and academics could develop ideas together.

'There was no senior common room [...] there was an egalitarianism and a lack of status. There was no high table, no colleges... it had a democratic ethos.'

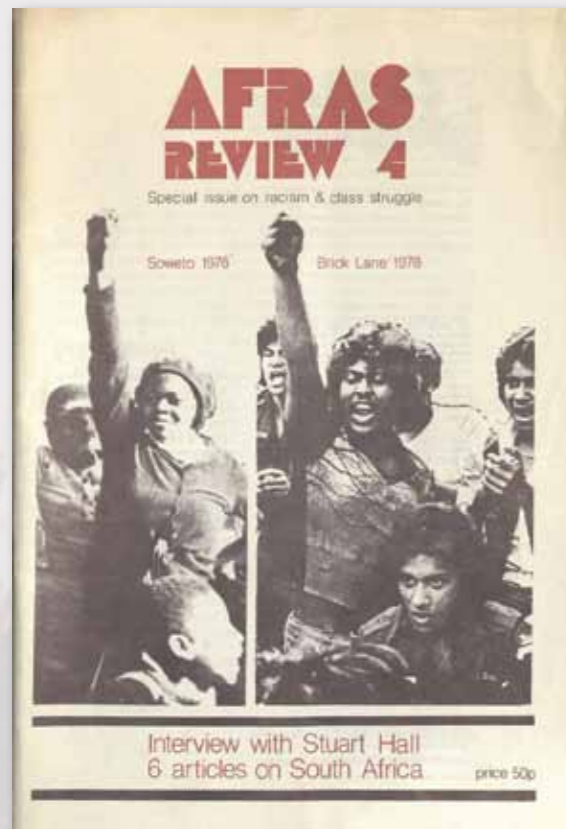
**Alan Cawson
(AFRAS Student 1964-67)**



Top: Visit from the Queen 1964.

Above: The Students' Union Executive, 1964.

Left: Climbing Arts A.



‘There were students who were political refugees from Zambia, Namibia, Zimbabwe or South Africa [...] It was very much a part of AFRAS’s early mission to actively involve itself in the economic, political and cultural components of Africa and Asia.’

Professor David Robinson

Coming of Age: 1971-80

By the beginning of the 1970s, AFRAS was firmly established as a major centre for studies of the region. Student numbers had begun to grow, yet the informal atmosphere remained intact. The decade opened with a major success when David Pocock and Tom Harrison successfully brought the ‘Mass Observation Project’, which had recorded everyday life in Britain throughout the 1930s and 40s, to the University (where it remains to this day). Additional faculty were recruited, increasing the range of experience. Many of the new arrivals were impressed by an atmosphere that offered something very different to the universities from which they came. Don Funnell arrived in 1970s and recalls, ‘...you mixed a lot with people from other departments and I spent quite a lot of time socialising with anthropologists and economists and people like that. Gradually it sunk in.... what the hell were we doing wasting our time being a geographer when actually there was so much cross work that we were fundamentally all interested in.’

Anthropologist Roderick Stirrat, who had previously been at Cambridge and Aberdeen, was equally taken with this new environment: ‘It was marvellous, looking back. We had 29-30 undergraduates doing anthropology. Some of them were extremely keen and extremely good. All the teaching was through seminars. Lectures were few and far between.’

‘It was very consciously different from every other university.’

AFRAS prided itself on not recruiting and selecting students on a results-only basis but instead favoured interviewing. As a result it had much higher numbers of mature students than the other schools and actively recruited those who had spent time working or living in the localities they now wished to study. Both AFRAS and the university as a whole became a highly appealing place of study for those coming from various countries around the world. Kamau Brathwaite, now a renowned writer in the West Indies and winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize, came in 1968. Len Garrison arrived

from Jamaica in 1976 and would go on to become a central figure in Afro-Caribbean organisations in the UK and a highly noted historian, poet and social critic. In particular, the University attracted talented young scholars associated with African independence movements. Amongst these political refugees and freedom fighters were Thabo Mbeki (ANC activist and South African President 1999-2008), who studied economics at Sussex having recently escaped from the apartheid regime in 1963. Other well-known South African graduates of Sussex included Albie Sachs (one of South Africa’s first Constitutional Court judges), Aziz Pahad (a former Deputy Minister in the South African government), and his brother Essop Pahad who completed an MA in African Politics at Sussex and who became a parliamentary advisor to Thabo Mbeki. They were joined by many others from Zambia, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. AFRAS and the University as a whole was very active in supporting the struggles represented by such individuals with a series of Mandela scholarships being created from 1973 and the building of Mandela Hall in 1978.

Within the UK, too, AFRAS attracted many talented students who would go on to become active in a variety of socially engaged occupations from politics and academia, to social work, charity and teaching. For many their time at AFRAS still features vividly and fondly in the mind. As a group of students who attended in the late 1970s recall: ‘We all have strong memories of being part of a mix of challenging British students who along with dynamic students from overseas took part in debates, arguments and agreements [...] This led to a decision that students should take some action and engage in influencing the curriculum, content and direction of AFRAS’.

It was this willingness on the part of students to challenge the authority of academics and others and drive the focus of teaching at the school that became an important part of its ethos.

‘...it wasn’t just that we studied things African or Asian; in AFRAS we lived it – we talked about the issues in the Common Room and whispered about them in the library.’

Collective Account (AFRAS Students 1978-81)



Above: Sussex University students marched from Brighton to London on 12 and 13 June 1964, on the eve of the sentencing of Nelson Mandela and his co-accused. The march was organised by Thabo Mbeki, whose father Govan Mbeki was one of the accused. AAM archive, © Morning Star.

Left: AFRAS Review No.4 1979. The special edition on South Africa contained articles on Economy, Labour, Resistance, Media and Nuclear Weapons.

'There was a backlash against progressive modes of education [...] there was a sense that after twenty years of this amazing project now we are facing a much less facilitating climate.'

Professor Hilary Standing

Throughout the decade the School continued its commitment to inter-disciplinarity, building a space from which authoritative study emerged on the ways in which economy, capitalism, class struggle, resistance, anti-racism, gender struggles and other activities were interlinked and connected in a variety of ways. It was, recalled anthropologist Hilary Standing, the 'golden era'. AFRAS was quick to bring in new areas of research and academic thought. In the late 1970s fresh areas of undergraduate and post-graduate study were introduced though courses on 'underdevelopment'. This drew on critical discussion emanating from Latin America on dependency theory and its inclusion was very much driven by a group of highly politicised students from the West Indies. It was a sign of the circulatory nature of student and faculty relations that much of the drive to engage with these emerging debates came from students themselves.

Throughout the 1970s AFRAS went from strength to strength. Student numbers continued to increase and a range of new academics were recruited. Lectures remained secondary to a small and intimate seminar style approach to teaching and the School's communal spaces remained a central feature.



Students at AFRAS were, from its foundation, much involved in creating innovative publications. The AFRAS Review dealt with topics of the time and included special issues on poverty, development, race, class and culture. Students also established 'WHICH WAY AFRAS', a collaborative effort involving the running of alternative lectures and the production a newsletter, both of which contributed to the direction of the school. AFRAS continued to establish links between Sussex and university faculties in the developing and postcolonial world. One such link established was with the University of the Witwatersrand, which involved a faculty exchange programme and collaborative work.

Challenges and Survival: 1981-90

AFRAS started the 1980s positively with the successful re-launch of the Mass-Observation project. Life for students and faculty began on much the same footing as it had finished the previous decade. The School continued to cater for both those who came from established educational backgrounds and those for whom access to a degree program was not seen as an automatic rite of passage. Kevin Meathan, who joined in 1981, was one such student. Having spent time working as a painter and decorator and being a little unsure what to do next, he decided to try his luck and apply: 'I was surprised to get in... I was wary at first as the other students were very articulate. At the end of the first year I went to meet my personal tutor and suggested that I might leave. He encouraged me to stay and I was glad I did. [...] In particular the common room was an important part of AFRAS as a place for students to meet and also as a place for staff and students to interact. There were always informal seminars in the common room where tutors would ask students 'have you read this'? or 'you should read that'? Those of us who were very keen would get together [...] we would meet together in our houses or rooms and would go through stuff we had read'.

In 1981, however, the scene at AFRAS and in universities across the UK began to change when the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher released the GRIPE report on higher education. The report was used to initiate sweeping subsidy cuts across tertiary education, in particular the Arts and Social Sciences. Those universities that had fostered non-mainstream approaches to education and particularly those that were associated with left wing politics were on the receiving end of some of the most substantial reductions in budgets. Throughout the education system the era represented a structurally defined shift. Along with reduced spending, the research agenda became increasingly focused on publication. At many universities relations between students and faculty also changed, with increasing importance placed on numbers and the emergence of the

notion that students were clients or customers. Professor Hilary Standing, who was affiliated to the university throughout the decade, recalls how: 'The new universities were much more vulnerable funding wise. They did not have big endowments like some of the more established universities. As the backlash against progressive modes of education started to gather force there was a sense of 'oh we have had twenty years of this amazing project and now we are facing a much less facilitating climate'. In the face of these changes, AFRAS staff and students began the fight to retain its independence, vigour and identity as an area studies school like no other.

As the 80s continued, then, the fight was on to battle through and resist the adversity caused by cuts and restructuring. AFRAS fought hard to maintain its founding principles. Inevitably there was a period where outgoing or retiring academics were not replaced, leading to a reduction in staff. Some members of faculty opted to retire out of disappointment in the direction higher education was heading. Cuts hit so deeply that even lighting was reduced in many of the corridors. However, those who remained did everything possible to ensure the student experience continued to be a positive one. Their efforts were not in vain and in spite of difficulties and challenges, many who attended AFRAS through the 1980s recall it in similar ways to their predecessors. Martin Macdonald, for example, remembered how: 'AFRAS added beautiful colour to my education and still informs a lot of what I do on a daily basis as a teacher today. Links with IDS and visits to Gambia broadened my understanding. Being taught by African teachers and developing a love of African affairs was amazing. It was a revolution in the way that I thought. Today I have a link school in Ghana which is a direct result of my time in AFRAS. We have a collaborative partnership and visits between both communities'. For many, then, AFRAS was more than just a student experience but something they carried with them throughout their careers and into various aspects of life. Such accounts provide an apt reminder of the continuing success of the school in spite of these challenges.

'My abiding memory is the friendliness of the staff. From the first encounter of my interview I was greeted with warmth. I met the teacher of international relations in the common room [...] we chatted all the way back to London.'

Michael Colley
AFRAS Student (1982-85)

Rejuvenation: 1991-2000

Toward the end of the 1980s AFRAS began to turn its attention to new ways of rejuvenating itself in a changed academic climate. Increasingly the School focused on the expanding field of international development. It proved a prudent move, enabling the recruitment of larger number of students and attracting prestigious funding awards. In turn, this opened the door to enabling new faculty posts to be created. This influx brought a fresh wave of ideas and debate. Among these scholars was the now world renowned, Homi Bhabha, whose first two books (Nation and Narration and The Location of Culture) give thanks to his former colleagues and students at AFRAS for helping him to formulate his themes and ideas. Others brought a range of skills and backgrounds imbued with a spirit of critical engagement. In literature, incisive writing on Postcolonial Studies and South African publications, as well as Atlantic and African Diasporas, all made major contributions. In development, the focus was on a critique of mainstream approaches and contributions that continued to offer alternative and more radical conceptions of the subject. The emergence of development studies was also the source of a lively debate regarding 'applied' approaches as opposed to empirically based theoretical understandings of the world. It is a debate that continues within Global Studies today. Whilst these differing approaches within the School continued to

push members on both sides of the discussion to strengthen their arguments, all remember the rigour and vigour of critical engagement as it was practised at AFRAS in the 1990s. Many make the case that one of the things which set AFRAS apart from other centres in the UK concerned with Africa and Asia was the importance it gave to both 'theoretical' and 'applied' approaches.

Whilst the expansion of the department did mean that lectures became more common, rather than the seminar-led approach of the early days, the atmosphere remained one of friendly informality. AFRAS students continued to stand out from the crowd and experience continued to be valued ahead of exam results and grades. Lauren Oliver recalls her arrival as a student in 1996: 'I applied to AFRAS but I did not get the grades. I had decided to spend my gap year in India and was there when I got rejected. I wrote a long letter to AFRAS saying that I was living the experience that AFRAS and social anthropology would teach me. On the back of that letter I got in. I got a response saying 'okay, you have convinced us'.

Just as in the past, students were active in shaping the school. The main publication had changed its name to Poda Poda (after the word for 'rickshaw' in Sierra Leone). This student managed and written magazine continued to produce engaging articles covering a range of political, social, global and cultural subjects. Many of those on undergraduate programmes took the opportunity to spend time studying or working overseas through various affiliations the school had established with government bodies, overseas institutions and charities. Student Lauren Oliver recalls: 'In my third year I took a year out and went to Guatemala. I had looked into doing some work with HIV orphans in Africa and then I looked at working with street children in various South American countries and it was Guatemala that came up. The trip was supported by Youth for Development. It was like the student version of VSO, sending unskilled students so they could learn from people in other countries.' AFRAS students remained vigorously involved with solidarity and other political campaigns

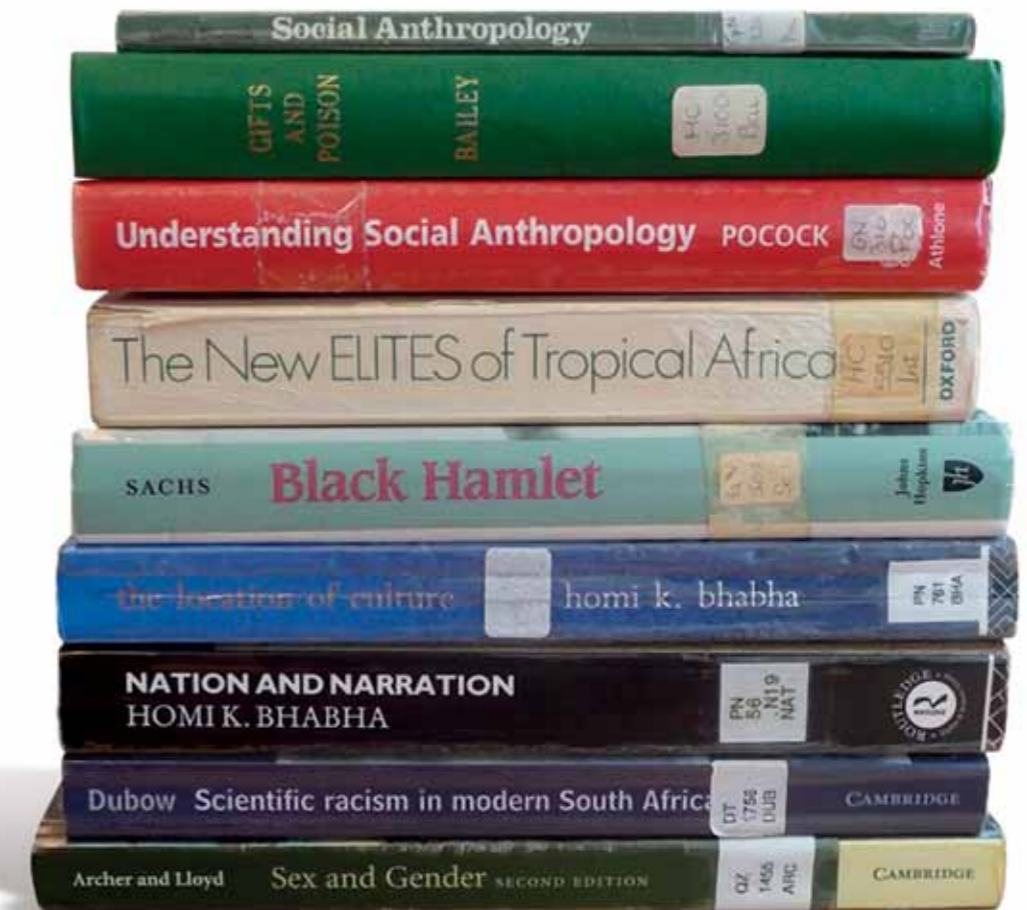
'I absolutely loved the structure [...] was wildly different from anything I had ever experienced. AFRAS added beautiful colour to my education and still informs a lot of what I do on a daily basis as a teacher today. I still have a links to a school in Ghana as a direct result of my time there.'

Martin McDonald
AFRAS (1989-92)

ranging from Palestine and Iraq to Burma, Tibet and Sri Lanka. The end of apartheid in South Africa and the fall of the Berlin Wall were watersheds with which many students felt passionately involved, and the 90s saw students retain a strong interest in international politics. AFRAS also found new pastures through the establishment of successful Masters Programmes that brought in large numbers of overseas students creating a two-way dynamic and ensuring a culturally varied community. This acted to continually reinvigorate the School, its approaches to teaching and its circulatory development ethos through exchange between places and cultures or students and faculty.

'When I arrived at Sussex my hair was tied up in all sorts of directions. I was not wearing any shoes and I was in this long skirt and flowing top. Later the halls monitor told me that they had known straight away that I was an AFRAS student.'

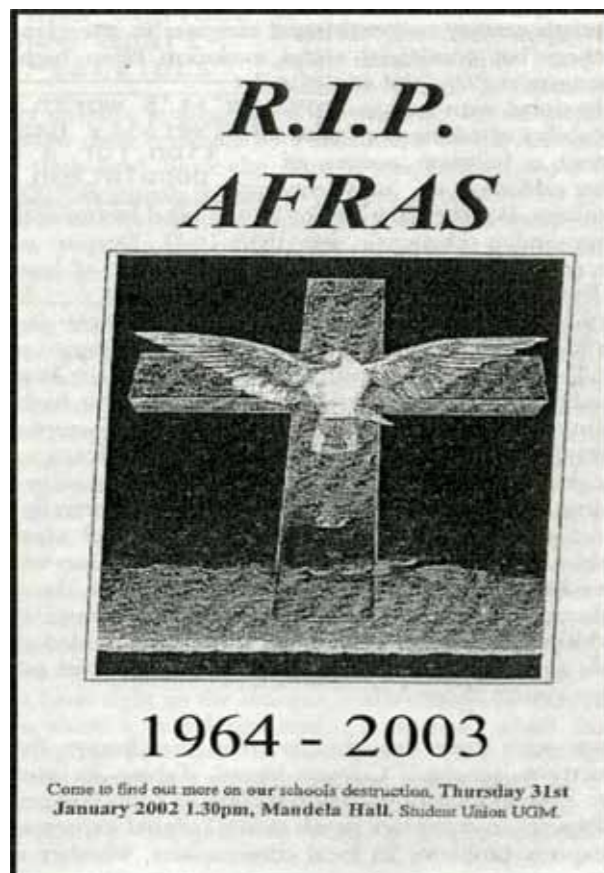
Lauren Oliver
AFRAS Student (1996-2000)



A selection of AFRAS faculty publications

The Twilight: 2001-03

The turn of the millennium saw AFRAS continuing to offer an innovative student experience and a vibrant research output. At this time, however, there were changes to higher education that would prove particularly challenging to inter-disciplinarity. The way in which research assessments were structured, aimed at producing league tables, posed new challenges to AFRAS. With these assessments based on departmental performance, universities which operated a setup where departments diffused across schools of study inevitably suffered. These changes would lead to intense debate in the first few years of the decade regarding the future of AFRAS and the schools system as a whole.



Poda Poda Issue 15 2002. Edition contained articles on Burma, Palestine, Tibet and the anti-war movement.

For those in favour of restructuring, the location of disciplines within departments or single schools would streamline Sussex's structures, decrease costs and reduce administrative work. It would also make Sussex more easily comparable in league tables and assessment exercises. Whilst there were a variety of practical concerns that became part of considerations around the end of AFRAS, for many staff and students its dissolution represented a major loss and its passing was much mourned. As one former faculty member at the time recalled: 'It was so sad when we got rid of AFRAS. I think it was one of the reasons for my leaving Sussex.' Students also voiced their concerns and Poda Poda published a heartfelt obituary proclaiming it to be 'a tragedy.' However, the article ended with a call to students and faculty to ensure

'that the diversity of choice that makes Sussex stand out from other universities is not lost, and that the rich spirit of AFRAS [...] will live on'.

It would prove to be a successful goal, with Poda Poda continuing to publish and many more students being attracted to the University as a result of the School's legacy. Whilst some sections of AFRAS, including literature, psychology and economics, were diffused into other areas of the university, many of the courses, subjects and structures of AFRAS were incorporated into the new Social Sciences and Cultural Studies (SOCCUL). In 2009, these same components would go on to become the basis for the formation of the School of Global Studies.

Today Global Studies continues to build on this rich legacy of research in Africa and Asia by offering a rich disciplinary mix of Anthropology, Geography, International Development, International Relations and Migration Studies. This year Sussex is extremely proud to mark the launch of a new Africa Centre in September to be followed by an Asia Centre in 2015. It is appropriate, then, that 50 years after the foundation of AFRAS, Global Studies is at the forefront of establishing two major area studies centres which will once again bring together a range of disciplines united by their regional focus.

Global Studies and the new Sussex Africa and Asia Centres

The School of Global Studies was established in the physical space that had been occupied by AFRAS in 2009. It is designed to offer a vibrant intellectual home to anthropologists, geographers, international development, migration studies and international relations scholars. The School's project is to study from a variety of angles how the world is changing. The AFRAS legacy lives on in the energetic and convivial atmosphere of Global Studies, as well as in its outward facing concern with the issues and problems of a wider and interconnected world. It is evidenced by the large number of faculty and students with Africa and Asia expertise.

The new Sussex Africa and Asia Centres build on the AFRAS legacy, through inter-disciplinarity and their emphasis on activism and engagement. They create structures for exchanging research ideas that stretch across the campus beyond Global Studies, including the School of History, Art History and Philosophy, the School of English, the Institute for Development Studies, the School of Social Work and Education and the Brighton and Sussex Medical School. They provide intellectual hubs among staff and a large community of more than 100 postgraduate students. The new Centres maintain a wealth of partnerships with African and Asian universities, research institutions and grassroots organisations. They are distinctive through their focus on transnational linkages and the scope of disciplinary interests involved – bringing together environmental science, medicine and education alongside social science, humanities and development studies.

In this globalised era, many universities are looking to raise their international profile in new ways. For Sussex, this means tapping into, celebrating and taking forward in new ways AFRAS's distinctive long tradition of scholarship and engagement.

Above right: Sussex students initiated the Tent State campaign which combined protest with education. The campaign asked 'why is there so much money for war, but not enough for education?'

'Although AFRAS had disbanded there was still a great deal of the culture present [...] what attracted me to Sussex was the political scene as well as the high academic standards and the quality of the people who taught there.'

**Koos Couvee
SOCCUL (2005-2008)**



To contribute to the on-going history of AFRAS project, please contact globalcomms@sussex.ac.uk

For further information about the School of Global Studies:
www.sussex.ac.uk/global

For more on the Sussex Africa Centre:
www.sussex.ac.uk/africacentre

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