Stephen Ellis 1953-2015
A tribute to Stephen Ellis from Jean-François Bayart

Stephen Ellis died as he had lived: as a philosopher, a man of faith, a perfect gentleman. Ethnically speaking, he was a historian, and in spite of his successive changes of professional skin he remained one right to the end, in his scrupulous attention to sources and the diversity of those on which he drew. Thanks to the different posts he occupied throughout a particularly successful and varied career, his social skills, his human warmth and his absolute discretion, he probably had one of the best address books a specialist in African affairs could boast of: in it, leading lights in the international scholarly community rubbed shoulders with civil servants of all nations, activists, journalists, bankers, brokers, ex-mercenaries, business figures sometimes with a background in armed struggle, priests and pastors, environmentalists, diamond merchants, and a host of anonymous people he had met in the course of his travels, especially in Africa, to whom he evinced a respect which did not cloud his clear-sightedness. Working with Stephen was a pleasure, but also a necessity, as his erudition was always so valuable for the research of all of us. I experienced this myself on several occasions, especially when I wrote, with him and Béatrice Hibou, The Criminalization of the State in Africa. Although I personally learned a great deal from him for my own books, other people are better placed than I am to salute his activities as a historian of Madagascar and the Republic of South Africa, his contribution to an understanding of the civil war in Liberia, and his decisive work – with Gerrie ter Haar – on the study of religion in Africa.

Having derived such benefit from it, I am, on the other hand, pretty well qualified to express the gratitude of Africanists for his generosity to his colleagues and students, on whom he lavished advice, information, bibliographical leads, and contacts – that famous address book again! Stephen was a sharer. He was active in many collective endeavours – including being a co-editor of African Affairs for many years – to the detriment of his personal projects. Nor did he ever hesitate to offer his French-speaking peers the services of his superb English, without regard for his own schedule.

But as our sorrow might otherwise lead us to forget it, I would like here, if I may, to mention one aspect of his personality that lay at the basis of his professional integrity and that I particularly valued, especially in the course of the long field work we undertook while working on our Criminalization of the State in Africa: humour.
Stephen enjoyed a good laugh, and knew how to make others laugh too. People will object: ‘is this so unusual in a Briton, especially a man so British as Stephen?’ The fact is that his laughter was not just a sign of decency and distance with regard to the cruelty of the world which saddened his humanism. His laughter was subversive – a guarantee of his freedom of thought. The best proof of this is that, although he was a subject of Her Majesty’s, he could also laugh at animals. His favourite scenes, which he could watch again and again, were the bits in *A Fish Called Wanda* where three horrible dogs are killed in succession (one of them crushed under a falling concrete block) when it’s their mistress who is the real target, if I remember rightly. And we would be overcome by uncontrollable laughter, in the presence of a few flabbergasted American colleagues, when he told us how South African tourists would slip plastic snakes under the stones to scare off some creepy-crawly or other in the Kruger Park. He was a free man, as I have said, and as his Stoic lucidity and courage reminded us when his death approached.

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