

## NVAS 2022 Jubilee Conference: Conciliation and Conflict: The Role of Language in Bridging Social Differences in Africa

The following five panels have been accepted for the 25th Anniversary Conference of the Netherlands Association for Africa Studies (NVAS). The conference will take place in Leiden Friday 9 and Saturday 10 December 2022. Paper titles and abstracts are invited for submission before 31 August 2022. Papers to be presented are expected to be submitted by Wednesday 30 November 2022. For abstract submission and any questions related to the panels, see name and email addresses of panel organisers below.

For general session papers and for questions on logistics, etc. contact organisers Azeb Amha and Jan Jansen at [NVASConf@asc.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:NVASConf@asc.leidenuniv.nl)

Panel title: Persuasion, polemics & debate: Political rhetoric in Africa

Panel Organiser: J. Abbink, ASCL, LU ([g.j.abbink@asc.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:g.j.abbink@asc.leidenuniv.nl))

This panel will address developments in political (and religious-political) discourse in contemporary Africa, where both conflict talk and efforts at peace-making and ‘bridging narratives’ are prominent. They relate to actual, ongoing conflict settings as well as to efforts at nation-building or at alternative political organisation. Since the 1984 review article on ‘political language’ by David Parkin, many studies (cf. Garsten 2011; Norris 2017) have developed the empirical and theoretical analysis of political language in its various forms. But new approaches are developing to make sense of the implications of digital discourse (on the ‘social media’, blogs, and websites) as it impacts on actual conflicts and/or peacemaking efforts. The panel invites case studies on Africa both addressing the varieties of discursive debate and conflict polemics as well as of ‘inclusive’ discourse trying to (re-)establish social and communal peace or cohesion. We are especially interested in papers that explore a ‘rhetorical studies’ perspective, linking persuasion-oriented discourse (of any kind) with actual developments ‘on the ground’. I.e., not privileging only the discursive-textual domain, but also looking at how it interacts with actual social, insurgent, or civic activism. The subjects of persuasion, polemic and debate in Africa and elsewhere have prime societal relevance in view of the continuing global spread of polarising language, facilitated by the mere technological-digital possibilities (cf. Harari 2018): they allow immediate expression of politicised discontent and anger, which are often taking precedence over integrative and conciliatory approaches. Africa is no different here and again shows its close integration into world politics and global digital domains (as, e.g., recently seen in African responses to the Russia-Ukraine war). Papers in this panel might examine, on the basis of case studies or theoretical accounts, how such processes work in the contemporary world, and how African cases differ from or are similar to those in other global settings.

Panel title: Poetry for Peace

Panel Organiser: M. Mous, LUCL, LU ([m.mous@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:m.mous@hum.leidenuniv.nl))

One of the functions of communal verbal art is to establish harmonious relations among individuals and across societies. The words used in these situations are believed to have effect provided they are uttered under the necessary performative conditions. Language can have perlocutionary force in numerous prescribed contexts (Open Sesame, I declare you husband and wife, etc.). We are interested in its force in the communal verbal art that aims at peace. The panel is interested in a comparative approach finding out the commonalities and differences in the details of word choice, expression and performative context that have the effect of communal well-being. For example, the Oromo custom of Jarsummaa is well-studied in its societal function using, inter alia discourse analysis (Alemu 2013). For the panel we are interested in an analysis of the actual utterances in the original language used in such a ritualised genre. For example, the Iraqw of Tanzania have an elaborate ritual to lift a curse (Kamera 1986). We are interested in the word choice in such ritual speech that is considered to have the healing effect.

The panel addresses the following themes of the conference, but touches on some of the other themes as well

- Linguistic practices of reconciliation and peace-making
- Expressions of social inclusion and exclusion: taboo (transgression), curses, blessings

Panel title: The political and religious life of sexual polemics in Africa

A panel organised by the ASCL Collaborative Research Group Collaboration and Contestation in Words (Contact and queries: [l.w.oudenhuijsen@asc.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:l.w.oudenhuijsen@asc.leidenuniv.nl) and [r.a.van.dijk@asc.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:r.a.van.dijk@asc.leidenuniv.nl))

In many places around the world, including in Africa, the public sphere is marked by tense debates on gender and sexuality. But why is it that over the past two decades sexual and reproductive health and rights have become the object of such intense debate? Is it related to sociopolitical crises, frictions related to a globally circulating human rights paradigm, or the emergence of communities that are potentially recognisable as ‘homosexual’ or ‘feminist’? Following on the masterclasses organised by the ASCL collaborative research group Collaboration and Contestation in Words on the topic in spring 2022, this panel aims to investigate the various discursive trajectories that these debates have followed. It particularly aims to draw attention to the politicisation and religionisation of these debates in various contexts in Africa. Political and religious actors are interacting increasingly with sexual and reproductive matters in ways that produce new forms of tensed entanglements between these domains, which represent themselves in public life in ways that we haven’t seen before. It appears a new, bi-directional process is unfolding by which

matters of sexuality become increasingly the subject of ideological interests whereas at the same time ideological interests become enveloped in matters of sexuality. This can be demonstrated by the manner in which these interactions currently play out and become intertwined in, among others, issues of abortion, queer identities, or comprehensive sex education. Sexual polemics thus become a dense and tense point in these interactions. In this regard, violence, open speech as well as silences and silencing require new understandings of the social life of these polemics; the question being what eventually the outcomes are of these discursive interactions in everyday life. This panel calls for papers based on fieldwork research that offer a situated analysis of the unfolding of these sexual polemics in everyday life in Africa.

Panel title: Without words – body language, dress, ‘hairitage’, artistic expressions

Panel Organiser: Karin Willemse, ESHCC / EUR ([k.willemse@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:k.willemse@eshcc.eur.nl))

In this panel we will discuss ‘silent’ expressions that communicate identifications, resistance, in- and exclusion in particular contexts of power relations. In some situation to not speak is safer than to speak up, especially when it concerns ‘marginal’ people in processes of shifting power relation. However, that does not mean that people with seemingly less power do not reflect on these power laden contexts, as they may convey messages without being spoken. In some context silence speaks louder than a thousand words. However, also those in power may express their position without words in certain contexts. These unspoken reflections can be decoded only by those who are acutely aware of the local socio-cultural traditions as well as political and economic processes in which this wordless communication is conveyed.

We invite papers that address the use of for example body language (think of avoidance, ridiculisation, body space) certain dress codes (such as the wearing of a jellabiya or boubou, Vlisco-cloth dresses, pagnes), hairdos (think of braided or loose hair, moustaches, beards) and artistic expressions (such as murals, sculptures, monuments) and other kinds of non-worded messages conveyed in the public domain in order to express a particular positioning within and/or negotiation of dominant discourses that may be political, socio-cultural, economic, religious or an intersection of these. These unspoken communications can be both local, national and international.

Panel title: The Art of Joking – Multi-Sensory Studies of Counter-Power in Mande

Panel Organiser: J. Jansen, ICADS, LU ([jansenj@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:jansenj@fsw.leidenuniv.nl))

This panel invites contributes that feature joking practices in the West African Mande societies. It proposes to analyze them as “Art” in order to emphasise the importance of esthetics [“why some forms of joking convince (and others do not)”], to study them as “Multi-Sensory” events in order to invite detailed ethnographic case studies that include both discursive performances and experiences of the material

world, and to acknowledge them as “Counter-Power”, thus aiming to link joking practices to debates about civil society and trust in Africa.