Dear Gerrie, family, colleagues and friends of Stephen,

Stephen was our most prominent and influential scholar. Gerrie asked me to speak on behalf of the African Studies Centre in Leiden and I will also be the voice of many Africanists in the world who have expressed their sympathy and admiration.

Stephen was 18 when he went to Africa for the first time, as a volunteer teacher in Cameroon. He was 28 when he did his doctoral exam in Oxford as a historian who studied the anti-colonial revolt in late 19th century Madagascar. And Madagascar would remain dear to him ever since. When Stephen was 38 he became the general secretary to the Board of the ASC in Leiden and the Centre’s director, and after that a senior researcher. In his application letter to the Board he stated that learning Dutch would not be a problem for him as he had a Dutch companion. And so it was. Besides speaking Dutch, Gerrie and Stephen would also study and write together about the intriguing role of religion in African society. Worlds of power, published in 2004, would become their most popular joint publication.

Before coming to Leiden, Stephen had worked for Amnesty International and for the Journal Africa Confidential. It was the foundation for his interest in contemporary politics in Africa and its historical roots. Richard Dowden of the Royal African Society in London calls Stephen one of the greatest Africanists of his generation. A cool observer of Africa, who took on the big themes that dominated Africa after the end of the Cold War. His work for Amnesty had introduced him to the bad side of Africa’s politics during the Cold War, and as a scrupulous researcher Stephen wanted to dig deep. He was an excellent interviewer, posing simple, almost casual questions to find the threads that lead to the truth. In the words of Dowden, Stephen “hankered after the hidden and obscure”. And he made very good use of the many hidden treasures of the library of the ASC and of many historical archives.

When Stephen was 48, some of his books had already made him famous. First and foremost were two books, one in French, one in English, written together with Jean-François Bayart and Béatrice Hibou. The authors focused on the grab for the wealth of African nations by the politically powerful and called it the criminalization of the State in Africa. According to Stephen and his colleagues this result of privatization and the neo-liberal ideology that many African leaders embraced or were forced to embrace, contributed to the wars and violence of the 1990s. One of those wars got Stephen’s special attention: the gruesome war in Liberia. His book The mask of Anarchy: the destruction of Liberia and the religious dimension of an African civil war, published in 2001, brought him in direct conflict with Charles Taylor, against whom he would later testify at the International Court of Justice.

At a time when the first journalists and scholars began to highlight Africa as rising or emerging, Stephen’s sobering notes were sometimes misunderstood and he was even accused of giving Africa a bad name. Tim Kelsall, who worked with Stephen as editor of the journal African Affairs in those years, writes in his tribute to Stephen: “It saddened him, but did not deter him”. In his recent book Season of Rains Stephen comes with a very nuanced story about Africa rising, and that nuance was also very much appreciated when he was a keynote speaker at the two big Africa Works! Conferences that the African Studies Centre co-organized with the NABC in 2012 and 2014.

In his tribute Tim Kelsall also writes about Stephen’s research about the African National Congress. The results about the ANC’s behavior while in exile and about Mandela’s membership of the South
African Communist Party infuriated people who saw the ANC as a heroic organization, led by its saintly leader. For Stephen exposing the historical truth has always been more important than the chance that his findings could be misused politically or misquoted. Stephen’s South Africa research gave flavor to his work as part-time Desmond Tutu Professor at the VU University in Amsterdam, about which my colleague Ton Salman will speak.

Stephen was a very dedicated, often pioneering, and brave researcher. He was a mover and shaker, to use the title of the African Dynamics book, which he co-edited with Ineke van Kessel, and which was published in 2009.

His latest book is almost ready: about Nigerian organized crime. And for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs he and his dear colleague Benjamin Soares were in the midst of organizing three conferences about Radicalism and Islam in West Africa. When I last met Stephen he still had some hope he could hear what ideas the next conference would trigger.

In their responses to Stephen’s death, many colleagues talk about his generosity and modesty, despite his great stature. Let me end by quoting one of Africa’s leading scholars Francis Nyamnjoh: “Stephen Ellis shall most sorely be missed and in every way we can, we shall do our modest best to keep his memory alive. He deserves no less”.

So be it. Thank you Stephen!