

# news

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# A portrait of Tore Linné Eriksen

Tore Linné Eriksen is associate professor at Oslo University College and teaches development studies. His research interests over the years reflect both an interdisciplinary approach and a strong wish to address topical issues of political relevance. Although he is trained as an historian, with special emphasis on African history, he has over the years written extensively on subjects which conventionally belong to the realms of sociology, political science and economics.

*The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI): What is your academic background and your major areas of research?*

Tore Linné Eriksen (TLS): My first major work in the early 1970s was concerned with economic history and economic planning in Tanzania, and reflects, of course, the optimistic mood in the age of decolonisation and socialist transformation. Like many of my friends in the academic community, I had then already been involved in the anti-apartheid movement for quite some time. In fact, I was only 16 when I took part in a torch rally to honour Albert Luthuli when he was awarded the Nobel peace prize in December 1961. To show my credentials, I can also tell you that my first visit to the Nordic Africa Institute was in August 1967. Since then not many years have passed without pilgrimages to Uppsala.

When I was based in Zambia in 1975–76, I was influenced by the struggle for something called ‘the new international economic order’, and – partly funded by SIDA – I did research on copper producing countries and the prospects for forming producer cartels to counter the power of the dominant transnational corporations. When I moved to Uppsala to take up a post as research fellow at the Nordic Africa Institute in 1977, one of my most important tasks, which I willingly performed, was to establish links between the Institute, the liberation movements in Southern Africa and the solidarity organisations in the Nordic countries. This experience led to a keen interest in Namibian studies. From the early 1980s to 1985 I worked closely with the United Nations Institute for



Namibia (Lusaka), which assigned to me the daunting task of preparing a comprehensive, critical and annotated bibliography, *The Political Economy of Namibia*. As an obsessive hunter and gatherer, I also collected as many books, papers, theses

and documents as possible from all over the world, and this collection was presented to the Namibia National Archives at independence in 1990. This gave me a most welcome feeling of being useful in a practical sense and of contributing, although modestly, to the scholarly community in an African country. I also remember my deeply felt pride when a reviewer in an academic journal described the bibliography, which was published by the Nordic Africa Institute in an up-dated edition in 1989, as a work of power, passion and purpose.

During my long spell at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), which lasted until 1997, I mainly focused on what is often referred to as ‘the African crisis’, which led to several books and research reports. In this regard, I was especially interested in the contributions made to this debate by African scholars and social activists, and I tried to work within an analytical framework which questioned the hegemonic World Bank discourse. My research also convinced me that the popular notion of Africa being ‘outside’ the global

economy is empirically mistaken and ideologically confused. It is of course not necessary to be an economic historian to understand how Africa has been integrated into the global capitalist system over the centuries, and how it has been forced by the major powers and institutions to privatise, liberalise and deregulate in recent years, but it certainly helps.

In the mid-1990s, I also became involved in the wide-ranging research and documentation project called 'Nordic countries and national liberation in Southern Africa', which was initiated by the Nordic Africa Institute. The Norwegian volume, which appeared in 2000, was not only concerned with official policies, aid and UN diplomacy, but contained chapters on the role of the trade unions, churches and solidarity movements. The book is not at all a *Festschrift* to Norwegian politicians and diplomats. Having in mind widespread commercial collaboration with the apartheid regime and restrictions placed on Norwegian solidarity by cold war warriors in the major parties, Norway may more aptly be described as an ambiguous champion. I also think that our book shows how historical research can serve as an antidote to the self-congratulatory image that the power elite like to exhibit.

*NAI: What are your present activities and future plans?*

TLS: Since 1997 I have been associate professor at Oslo University College, where I am teaching development studies. Since the number of staff is rather limited and the issues to be addressed unlimited, I am not in a position to restrict myself to teaching history or African studies. This situation is not without its blessings, it has compelled – or tempted – me to teach a great variety of subjects, such as social movements and popular struggles, theories and ideologies of globalisation and the structures and contradictions of the world economy. I have recently introduced my students to a subject called nothing less than “global history”, with special emphasis on connections, comparisons and conjunctures. An important purpose of this subject is to question the Eurocentric approach to history and to explore the main

reasons for the present gap between countries and classes on a world scale.

In terms of writing, I have just completed a book-length study on the first genocide of the 20th century, a subject which has renewed my interest in Namibian history. Our understanding of German colonialism, genocidal war and the history of the concentration camps in Namibia in the period 1903–1908 has improved immensely since I was last concerned with Namibian history in the 1980s, and the quality of German-language books and research reports on the contentious issues of genocide and links between the Namibian experience and the *holocaust* is most impressive. I have also been struggling for several years to complete a textbook on the historical origins of globalisation and global capitalism and hopefully the manuscript will be submitted to the publisher in the autumn term.

The next project is one which I have had in mind for the last 30 years or so: an introduction to African history for a general audience in the Nordic countries. I feel a bit like the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who once said that he had played one of the six Bach suites every day of his entire life, but did not feel confident or mature enough to record this classical work until he had turned 60. This delay has of course its bright side, since a general history at this stage can benefit from the vast improvements in African historiography over recent decades, not the least in archaeology, gender history, social history, environmental history and the history of culture and ideas. I also hope that my background in comparative history and development studies will make it possible to examine Africa in the wider context of world history, and to explore ways in which Africans and African history may be integrated into the grand narratives of global history. If I ever doubted the need for an undertaking of this kind, my mind was finally made up last year, when I was invited to give a lecture on recent trends in African historiography at the Göteborg book fair. On my way to the lecture hall I happened to pass by some stalls displaying Swedish high school textbooks, and even a cursory glance convinced me that the sections on African history could have been written in the 1950s. Perhaps they were.

*NAI: Do you consider yourself as a researcher, educator or social activist?*

TLS: In my view, academics who are being paid by the taxpayers to read and think, have a special responsibility to address broader issues and make their work relevant to a wider audience in their own country. Since I can hardly be described as an original thinker, and with a few exceptions have avoided spending years in dusty historical archives, I have deliberately chosen to put my efforts into writing textbooks, pamphlets, review essays and books for younger readers. For instance, I spent quite some time in the 1990s on writing a multi-volume high school textbook on world history, which also includes Norwegian history. Two years ago I received a prestigious award from the Ministry of Culture, which more importantly included the decision to provide more than 2,000 school libraries with my book on Nelson Mandela and the liberation struggle in South Africa.

I have for the same reasons prepared a great number of bibliographies on Africa and third world issues, many of them have over the years been commissioned by the Nordic Africa Institute. I happen to believe that libraries, scholars and teachers in the Nordic countries will benefit more from annotated bibliographies than from one or two more books penned by myself. To give an example: there is no lack of books by prominent historians, many of them with African origins, but the problem, as I see it, is that their work is barely known in the Nordic countries. How many scholars or teachers in our part of the world are for instance familiar with the recent five-volume textbook written by a team of African historians under the guidance of Toyin Falola? In fact, it took quite some time even for the excellent library at the Nordic Africa Institute to pick it up. This is why bibliographical guides, such as *Att studera Afrika* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004), are so important. My own contribution to this survey of books and source materials has been to compile and annotate lists of recent books in the field of African history and social science studies.

I find writing to be a very lonely and cumbersome process, but I enjoy teaching and engaging in dialogues with students. My role as a social

activist also means that I am constantly involved in debates and issues which are relevant for understanding and changing the global society we live in. Development studies and African history without values are of no value. The ivory tower has never been my favourite habitat.

*NAI: What is your view on relevance to policy-making?*

TLS: To be honest, I think my direct influence on policy-making has been almost non-existent. To give a concrete example, I doubt that any senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has even opened a book or a research report on structural adjustment, the World Bank and the African economic crisis written from a critical perspective. My only comfort, of course, has been that after some years they have had to admit that the World Bank has been too dogmatic in its neo-liberal orthodoxy, paid too little attention to poverty alleviation and has seriously undermined the capacity of the state.

In the late 1980s I was commissioned by the World Bank itself to contribute a paper to its 1989 report on the African crisis. The idea was to include in the report a case study on the 'Nordic model' of development in the second half of the 19th century, but my emphasis on state capacity and popular struggles ran counter to the report's ideological message. I got my payment, but the paper is not even mentioned in the list of commissioned papers.

I would also be surprised if The Norwegian Shipowners's Association spent much time on studying my analysis of the role played by Norwegian oil tankers in supplying the South African war machine in the dying days of apartheid, or if STATOIL was much concerned about my writings on popular struggles in the oil delta of Nigeria. There have, therefore, been few profitable ventures into consultancy work.

To end on a more optimistic note, I will not leave out the possibility that my work has had some indirect effects, in the sense that it has influenced public opinion, the mass media and movements campaigning for a more decent Norwegian role in global affairs. If this is the case I have, after all, not lived in vain. ■