

*Some thoughts about the relationship between The Nordic Africa Institute and the Danish research environment. (Not to be quoted without permission).*

By Hans Erik Stolten.

The outset for the following personal observations is my own experience as Danish Research Fellow at the Nordic Africa Institute during a three-year period ending 2002. This position in the group of Nordic researchers is one of the areas of cooperation (and also to some extent for disagreement) and a good observation post.

*On the position as Danish Research Fellow in the group of Nordic Researchers:*

It was on the whole a very satisfying experience, which gave me opportunities for getting much deeper into my field of research and made possible interesting periods of fieldwork. It gave opportunities for conference participation, and for partaking in all kinds of exiting discussions. And it made it achievable for me to build an extensive network to researchers in my field all over the world.

In my case most time was spend on the following work tasks:

Implementation of main research project on South African historiography.

Secondary research on higher education in Southern Africa.

Establishment of research networks in Scandinavia, Southern Africa, England, USA and Russia.

Organising an international conference around the field of research.

Organising a group at NAIs Africa Days.

Several lectures, seminars, briefings and conference papers given in Sweden, Denmark and elsewhere.

Ratings of applications for study and travel scholarships.

Guidance of scholarship students.

Participation in planning of research and information work at the institute.

I also used some time extending my annotated research databases, and I was member of researcher recruitment committees. During my stay, I made different kind of briefings, of which the preparation of the travel of the Swedish minister of education to South Africa, took some work-time. I have been involved in several NAI Research Forums and Public Lectures, which have given the opportunity to invite colleagues from abroad. I acted as host for a guest researcher for some months. I have had a trainee for a period.

The work of the Nordic researchers with the scholarship students was quite time consuming, even if it was frequently also an uplifting experience, and I can ascertain that the Danish students' stay at NAI has been important for many of them, who have kept contact with me later on.

Even if it is my impression that NAI actually tried to limit my non-research workload (maybe partly because I, as a non-Swede, was seen as less useful for policy making activities), the whole setup is quite binding and involving.

Seen in the rear-view mirror, I must realize that 3 years was not quit time enough, in my case at least, to realise all the plans I brought with me to NAI.

Several of the conference papers, which I made at NAI, still have to be transformed into articles. I had the opportunity to get most parts of my book manuscript on South African historiography translated into English, but I have not yet delivered the finished manuscript for

print. I had the chance for arranging an international conference on South African historiography, but I did not have the time for the follow up work and conference publications. I have a feeling of not having used enough time in the NAI library and I will probably have to come back some time in the future just for that purpose.

All in all I think that 3 years is a bit on the low side to realize a major research project, if the results really are to be visible. These problems might to a large degree be caused by my own work-stile and external obligations. However, I also have to note that the work frames and the surroundings that NAI provides, while indeed very impressive and convincing, are also rather absorbing and obligating.

My stay at NAI brought me together with some very good colleagues and I had many exiting adventures out in the physical surroundings in Sweden. Uppsala is a vibrant University City and has a lot of academic activities to offer and the nature in Uppland is generous.

As the time vent by, to some degree I even learned to appreciate some of the things in Sweden, which at first, I found mostly annoying and irritating: The patient thoroughness, the seriousness and disciplined correctness.

The scepticism, which I expressed now and then to the work of the institution (my first work task was actually to criticise the budget of NAI at the yearly staff planning day), was met with patient tolerance, but it never had any results or consequences in any direction.

The almost total control over own research was very satisfying, but outside the Research Group meetings, influence was extremely limited (despite the obligated weekly Wednesday morning staff meetings and the high profiled Planning Day) and the openness often appeared more postulated than real.

*On the question of co-operation:*

The cooperation between NAI and Danish institutions has not always been unproblematic and it is an ungrateful task to map the tensions, but it might be necessary in order to rise above them. The following is of course just my own preliminary thoughts.

It seems to me that there are a number of more or less objective factors which have from time to time contributed to a less than optimal atmosphere between the institutions of the two countries.

Danish students and researchers simply place less weight on having a Nordic orientation than their colleagues in the other Nordic countries. They have relatively good possibilities for fieldwork in Africa, and they have increasingly found EU and US connections relatively more relevant than Nordic. Signals from the present Danish government have some responsibility for escalating this development.

Ordinary competition between NAI and especially CAS. It is of course only natural that there should be both cooperation and competition between these institutions since they operate in the same area of research. The fact that leaders of both institutions are engaged in practical foreign affairs activities does however sharpen rivalry.

The fact that NAI does not belong under the Nordic Council but resides more directly under a foreign ministry agreement might make it more suitable for policy making activities. It also secures the Swedish financial and political dominance. In the area of policy making activities NAI is not a genuine Nordic institution. Sadly enough, it would on the other hand not have such a high profile and generous funding, if it was purely a research institution.

A situation with shifting forms of national competition between Sweden and Denmark has been “normal” for little more than one thousand years (and has been growing again over the Baltic states and Southern Africa since the end of the cold war and of apartheid).

Something could be done to better the concrete situation, however. It is hardly a secret that the Danish partners like the purely academic side of NAI better than its applied political studies and dissemination, information and publication activities (since the Danish Foreign Ministry can not use these in the same way as the Swedish UD can).

One way of limiting the political considerations would be to strengthen the academic side of NAIs activities relatively.

The practise at NAI having Research Unit Meetings every two weeks was a helpful step in this direction. It gives a constant backing from the Research Group to the Research Director and thereby strengthens his position towards other, non-academic, interests. At the same time it keeps the process around a full fledged Research Strategy alive.

So, to strengthen research relatively could have wider implications. The Research Group has the strongest element of non-Swedishness at NAI. A strong profile here would strengthen Nordicness and internationalism.

It has been a big step forward in this connection that there are now three Danish researchers at NAI.

Another possibility, which could strengthen the Nordicness of NAI, is researchers associated with NAI or NAI-researchers placed outside NAI. The idea of NAI-financed researchers in other Nordic countries than Sweden has been shot down several times, but I think that this principal issue must be brought up again if full recognition of NAI as Nordic institution is sought.

*On the Nordic governments' competitive use of solidarity history:*

A specific case of some annoyance within my own area of research interest has been the highly profiled project concerned with historical documentation of solidarity between the specific Nordic countries and Southern Africa which was based at NAI under Tor Sellström's coordination. For some this might seem trivial, others might see it as pure speculation, but actually it is worth an independent historiographical study in its own right.

In situations when the level of aid for Southern Africa appears to be rather unambitious, a strategy where the proud traditions of earlier times are used to supply the image of the donor countries might be to their advantage. It has already shown possible to build the historical legend, that the anti-apartheid support of the Nordic countries was especially protracted, loyal and heroic.

Despite that both Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark can call attention to particular areas where they came first with support to anti-apartheid activities, it was only after prolonged political pressure from domestic solidarity movements that the Nordic countries in the last years before 1990 became proper pioneers regarding sanctions policies against the apartheid regime. This change of policy, which domestic business opposed to the end, has together with the transitional aid shown to be an asset for Nordic export industries.

Trade delegations from Nordic countries headed by cabinet ministers and royalties repeatedly visited South Africa to discuss combinations of aid and export. One attempt which did not succeed despite the efforts of the Danish Crown Prince was aimed at selling Danish corvettes in hard competition with other countries. Sweden had more luck. As part of an arms deal which is still very controversial in South Africa, the Swedes got an order from the South African government which included a portion of JAS Gripen fighter planes. Most people from the former solidarity movements would probably agree that South Africa had very little need for these advanced jetfighters and that the many billions of rands would be better spend on poverty control. Economic promises in the shape of extensive counter purchases spoke for the deal. So did the history of solidarity.

It is an intriguing question, to which extent the more convincing documentation of Sweden's solidarity history has played any role in this matter. There were real differences in Danish and Swedish foreign policy. Sweden's was more intelligent and independent during the time of apartheid and still is. Sweden directly supported ANC. Denmark did not. On top of that comes that the Swedish aid follow up has at times been very massive. The official state visit of the Swedish prime minister, where a jumbo jet was filled up with a delegation of several hundreds spearheaded with some of Sweden's best pop-stars appeared nevertheless as something of overkill and partly a failure.

But there were also differences in the way in which history was used. In the possibilities, in the levels of consciousness, and in the resources allocated for the purpose. The Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala was used as base for the coordination of an extensive programme which intended to document solidarity with the whole of Southern Africa as it developed in each of the Nordic countries. The contributions from each individual country were funded by its foreign ministry, but Sweden had the most glorious past, the most laurels to gain, and most money for the project. In short, the Swedes had a better opportunity for taking their history serious.

The result of the Norwegian part of the project was a good quality anthology edited by the experienced Africanist Tore Linné Eriksen, which examined most sides of Norwegian support for Southern Africa. The Finnish contribution was a decent empirical representation of the policy of that country.

The Danish contribution was limited in size and scope with its main emphasis on source critical analysis of foreign ministry archives, while the strong Danish NGOs got less attention. Danish voices later expressed the suspicion that the coordinator had not been directly unsatisfied with the rather low Danish profile. The fact is probably that there from the beginning was a certain Danish animosity or carelessness towards a project which partly consisted of the history of popular movements' oppositional achievements.

The more concurrent consent between NGOs and foreign affairs department gave the Swedes a better hand. The qualified and hard-working Swedish coordinator of the overall programme was financed favourably through several years under which he focused mostly and with good workmanship on writing three quantitatively strong volumes plus collecting a massive archive material for the Swedish side.

It has been said that NAI in this connection mostly functioned as a policy making centre for the Swedish development agency SIDA. The departmental intrigues which surround this case will probably remain a mystery, but the Danish frustration of being taken hostage in a joint Nordic institution, which they were unable to use in the same way as the Swedish part could was clearly expressed at the programme's conference at Robben Island.

At the conclusion of the programme and the publication of the last Swedish volume (but before publication of the Danish contribution) the coordinator was conferred two (well deserved) medals and sent on a dissemination tour for the book series through the whole of Southern Africa before his appointment to a position at the Swedish embassy in Pretoria. After the end of his term, the South African ambassador to Sweden during the arms trade, my very good friend and comrade Raymond Suttner, was engaged in a research project in South Africa partly funded by SIDA.

In October 2003 the results of the project were used again at a conference on Swedish solidarity history organised by NAI, the Olof Palme International Centre and Swedish trade unions among others. The Swedish aid minister and the deputy secretary general of the ANC attended, and so did Cyril Ramaphosa and other nouveau riche former South African trade unionists. Simultaneously an even higher profiled English conference on the same theme was initiated by the South African High Commission in London, with the aim of using the bonds of popular international solidarity developed during the anti-apartheid struggle in a new attempt to accelerate stagnating trade and investments. There is no doubt that history of solidarity will be used even more intensively during the 10 years of freedom celebrations in 2004.

Danish exporters might want to sponsor Danish solidarity history in the future.

Irony aside, my point is simply that all parties must learn to respect the creation of equal possibilities during every part of the cooperation process. Researchers might do a better job in this matter than foreign ministry stakeholders.