

# Celebrating 30 Years of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*

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## Abstract

With its first issue appearing in the spring of 1992, the *Nordic Journal of African Studies* recently reached its 30-year publication milestone. In celebration of the journal's history, and looking forward to its future, we offer this brief collection of memories about the journal's history, written by the journal's founders and several of its editors-in-chief.

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## Arvi Hurskainen: Reviewing my time as an Editor

The very first idea of establishing a journal for African studies in Nordic countries emerged in discussions with Abdulaziz Lodhi, the lecturer of Swahili at Uppsala University. For several years, he had edited and published *Lugha* (which means ‘Language’), a periodical on Swahili language, and there was need for a journal with a wider scope. Since 1980 I had been a lecturer of Bantu languages at the University of Helsinki. There was a plan to establish a research field where the study of African languages would be in the centre, but where also studies on cultural, anthropological, and other related subjects could be pursued.

The idea of establishing *NJAS* got new impetus in 1990, when my article ‘A Two-Level Computer Formalism for the Analysis of Bantu Morphology: An Application to Swahili’ was turned down by the editors of *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics*. The article did not fit into the profile of the journal. I myself, having written my PhD in anthropology, was not an established linguist and therefore perhaps not considered competent for publishing in an esteemed journal.

Since 1985 I had been studying language technology, called computational linguistics at that time, thus turning away from anthropology and traditional linguistics. I still published on anthropology, but it was very difficult to find a publication forum for my new research. Moving into a totally different research field takes time until research results can be published. For me, it took about five years. Because there was no natural home for my publications, I had to do something.

By that time, I was a board member of the International Africa Institute, London, just as a rearrangement of the status of the institute was underway. I learned how the constitution of an association should be written so that it fulfils the requirements of the government.

With these ideas in mind, I proposed at the Africa Days in Uppsala on 22.4.1991, that we would establish the Nordic Association of African Studies to be the host organisation of *NJAS*. I had drafted a constitution for the association,<sup>1</sup> and it got some 17 signatories, although some in the audience expressed their doubts about such an effort. We established an editorial board for *NJAS* with at least one member from each Nordic country. The list of subscriptions of *Lugha* was a great help in distributing the journal.

Since the very beginning, *NJAS* has been financially supported by the Nordic Committee for the Publication of Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS). During the years (1992-2003), when *NJAS* was published as a printed version, most of the subsidy went to covering the printing and mailing costs.

Since 2004 *NJAS* has appeared as a web version only. This solution decreased the editorial work dramatically, because all the work related to printing, maintaining addresses and managing all subscriptions and payments were suddenly swept away. Yet NOP-HS had doubts about our decision to start a web version, because there was now no income. After all, the web publication needed much less subsidy from NOP-HS, because we needed to pay only for technical editing. I have the impression that *NJAS*, in addition to being among the first of its kind in our field, was also one of the very first in the field to appear as a web-only publication.

Once the new issues were on the web, we also uploaded the earlier issues there, so that the whole set of the issues, starting from the first number, were on the web. This was possible because we already had the earlier publications also in digital form. All articles, except for a few articles written with a Mac, were converted into true digital form, which allows for accurate search. We did not need to

<sup>1</sup>The constitution is published in *NJAS* 1:2 (116–120), available at <https://njas.fi/njas/article/view/735/558>.

resort to bitmap copying, where a lot of search possibilities are lost.

Our technical editor from that time remembers especially two things about editorial work. Some contributors did not follow instructions to authors and used their own conventions, which required a lot of unnecessary editorial work. Also, special fonts of some languages were difficult to convert to acceptable form. The technical editor also remembers that readers sent positive feedback about our old web page. It had a clear structure, and access to any issue and article was easy. On the side bar, all issues were listed, and they were directly visible on the main page.

NOP-HS has carefully followed the share of Nordic contributors in *NJAS*. According to the criteria of NOP-HS, a periodical supported by them should have mainly Nordic contributors, and from all Nordic countries. For a periodical such as *NJAS*, such a requirement is very difficult to fulfil. There are very few scholars in Nordic countries studying the subjects of *NJAS*. On the other hand, African researchers have a significant need to publish research results in international journals. And because *NJAS* requires no fees from contributors or readers, it is an attractive publication forum for African scholars. I very much hope that the board members of NOP-HS understand the special situation of *NJAS*. The annual subsidy is, anyway, very small compared with the scope of publications that *NJAS* covers.

A peculiar feature of *NJAS* in early years was that although it was edited and published in Helsinki, the association was registered in Sweden. This was done because the bureaucracy in Sweden was less heavy than in Finland.

*NJAS* has accepted contributions in three languages, English, French and Swahili. It was considered important that at least one genuinely African language was included. In fact, several articles in *NJAS* have been published in the Swahili language. Most contributions are, however, in English, which is de facto the

lingua franca of the world, and especially of science.

As for the number of contributions sent to *NJAS* for publication, since the very beginning there have been so many contributions that it has been difficult to decide what to publish. On the one hand, some of the articles were so poor that it was not sensible to try to edit them. However, during my time as an Editor, I sent all articles, also the clearly unacceptable ones, to at least two reviewers for getting also other opinions.

I would like to express my wish that the current editors and contributors would publicize their contributions to *NJAS* as much as possible.

*Arvi Hurskainen, first Editor  
(at that time, there was no Editor-in-Chief)*

### **Abdulaziz Lodhi: *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 30 years**

The *Nordic Journal of African Studies* (*NJAS*) is a sort of successor to *LUGHA* (= Language), the irregular journal of the Swahili Section of the former Department of Asian and African Languages, currently the Department of Linguistics and Philology, Uppsala University, Sweden.

The first ever BA and MA program of Swahili Studies in the Nordic countries was started at Uppsala University in July 1974 by Abdulaziz Yusuf Lodhi of Zanzibar as Senior Lecturer affiliated to the Professorship of Semitic and African Languages. In 1977, the Swahili Section published Volume 1 of *LUGHA* which included essays, research reports, book reviews and half a dozen articles by Swahili students including 4 written in Swahili. At that time, there was only one Swahili journal in the world, *KISWAHILI* Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research (IKR) in Daressalaam. Because of a shortage of funds and editorial assistance coupled with the

heavy workload carried by Lodhi, the Editor, *LUGHA* could not be published regularly as an annual or biennial journal; instead, only 3 more volumes of about 130 pages each were published in 1982, 1984 and 1990. Volume 4 was a special issue on Swahili literature. Two hundred copies were printed of each volume and the journal was distributed free to all the contributing authors and on an exchange basis to universities around the world which had Swahili programs.

In 1990, at the initiative of Professor Arvi Hurskainen of Helsinki University, a Constituent Meeting was held at the Swahili Section in Uppsala, and the Nordic Association of African Studies was formed with plans to replace *LUGHA* with the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. Professor Lodhi served as Secretary of NAAS and Editorial Board Member of *NJAS* during 1990 – 2012.

Researchers in the Humanities needed a journal in the Nordic countries not only for Swahili but also for African languages and related studies in general to be published in Swahili, English and French. The first issue of *NJAS* was prepared in the spring of 1992. Today after 30 years, *NJAS* has developed into a very regular and interdisciplinary, open access, free journal of high academic quality, with 4 issues per year. Over these three decades, *NJAS* has published hundreds of papers from researchers around the world and is a highly respected journal among Africanists.

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### **Axel Fanego Palat: Memories of *NJAS*, 2008–2017**

Already before moving to Helsinki in 2008, I had been aware of the *Nordic Journal of African*

*Studies*. This is because my original field site for my PhD work in Northern Namibia was among the focus areas for Finnish activities relating to Africa. These included linguistic research and therefore, the journal was relevant for me even at a time when I had no idea I was ever going to move to Helsinki.

Once there, the editorial board welcomed me. And we got to work immediately given that the journal was suffering from a backlog. Having participated in similar work in other journals earlier, I was impressed with the huge amount of submitted manuscripts. We could usually only accept 10–12 percent of the submitted papers, so competition was quite stiff. At the same time, we needed to manage the competition – and the huge number of incoming papers. Sometimes that task could be arduous, but I guess that is a universal characteristic of this kind of work. I am extremely grateful to Miia Koivu and Jonna Katto, who assisted with much of that, as well as Anne Häkkinen, John Stotesbury, and certainly Arvi Hurskainen, who supported us in their respective functions.

Once a year I would get angry. That happened predictably when I had to face the funder's logic about printed journals as opposed to digital format. I never quite understood why – in contrast to printed journals – we were only entitled to apply for half of the full costs incurred. But we managed. And, to be fair, I have to say, the Nordic Committee for the Publication of Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS) granted us financial support on an annual basis, unfailingly.

The *NJAS* is quite special. A critical number of people – in particular, Arvi – had a very clear vision of where things were headed with regard to academic publishing. Currently, we are still debating open science issues so much, including issues of open access publishing without author fees. In view of this, it really deserves to be pointed out what an achievement it was for the *NJAS* to make that move to

Diamond open access already almost twenty years ago – at a time when that term had not even been invented.

With a due amount of nostalgia, I keep reminding my academic peers and colleagues in other places that such a move is possible. And actually necessary, in order to warrant a globally fair academic publishing practice. The *NJAS* has been on the forefront of this development, and I am proud to have been part of that during my years in Helsinki.

*Prof. Dr. Axel Fanego Palat,  
Institut für Afrikanistik,  
Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main*

### **Thera Crane and Jonna Katto: *NJAS*, present and future**

Our time at *NJAS* – with Jonna starting in 2017 as Axel Fanego’s editorial assistant and later becoming section editor in the cultural and historical studies section; and Thera starting in 2018 as languages section editor – has seen some major changes to the journal’s operating structures.

**Annika Teppo**, Professor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at Uppsala University, assumed the role of Editor-in-Chief in 2018, moving the journal’s base of operations to Sweden. The publication of *NJAS* was also transferred from the Nordic Association of African Studies to the Nordic Africa Research Network. Annika guided the journal through many changes and through sometimes uncertain financial waters during a time of dramatic world events.

The journal’s structure was reworked under Annika’s leadership to comprise four editorial sections – social sciences, cultural and history studies, language studies, and literary studies – each headed by a scholar in the respective field. Many of the sections have since expanded to include pairs or teams of editors.

This expansion has allowed us to give expert treatment to a much wider variety of submissions than would be possible for almost any single editor. The change has also been timely, since we continue to receive large numbers of submissions on a wide variety of topics, while, as is widely reported, the availability of peer reviewers has significantly declined in recent years. Sharing the editorial workload has, therefore, become increasingly important.

During Annika’s tenure, the journal also moved to its current online platform (<https://njas.fi>), an integrated submission-to-publication system based on the Open Journal Systems (OJS) interface developed by the Public Knowledge Project (<https://pkp.sfu.ca/>). OJS also allows for long-term archiving. Authors now upload their submissions directly to the system and can track their progress through the review process. A major benefit for our journal is increased transparency and transferability of the process, since everything is recorded and accessible via the online system. As a result of this move, we have had to retire the original website. We include a screenshot from the first issue of the first volume as a memento of that website’s long service to *NJAS* (see Image 1). All issues are now available at our current website, which we are continually working to make as accessible and user-friendly as possible.

The transfer from e-mail-based operations to the OJS platform has proved to be a long and technically rather complicated one, involving both a learning curve for editors and challenges in interoperability, but most of the problems we encountered have been resolved. We are happy to report that most interactions between the journal and our authors and reviewers now take place via the OJS, and we aim for all of them to be carried out there soon, outside of exceptional circumstances. Communications between the editorial staff mostly take place in regular meetings and, since last year, via private Trello boards,

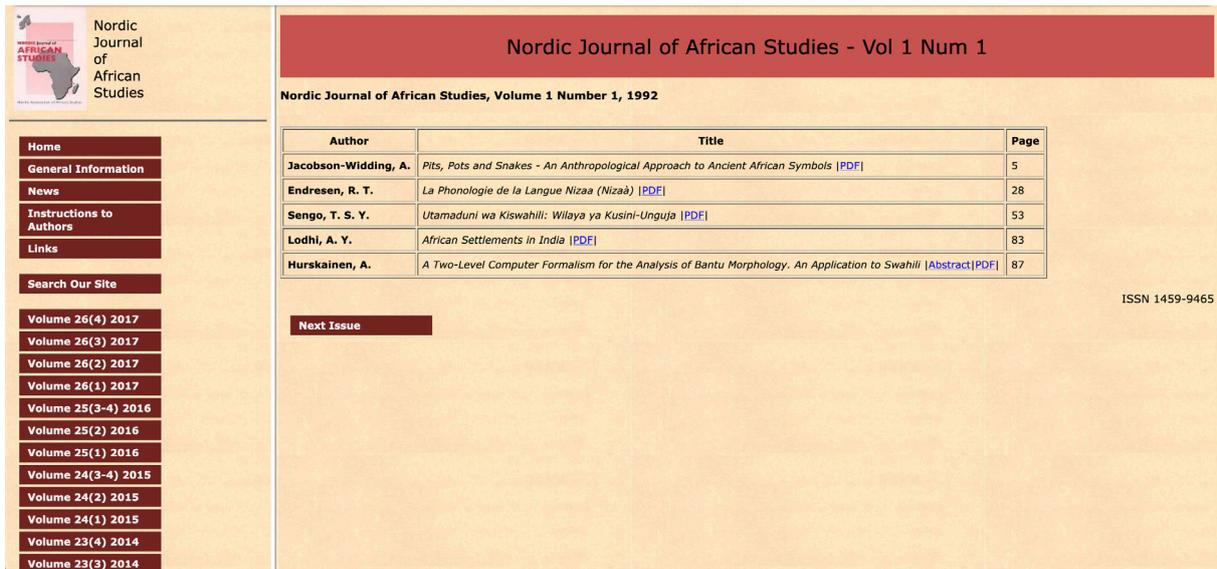


Image 1: The inaugural issue of the Nordic Journal of African Studies, on our original website

where we can link to various resources, store meeting minutes, and easily discuss common questions.

Annika also worked hard to improve our social media presence, messaging, and outreach, which – along with the continued journal promotion and support from previous editors and our Advisory Board – have helped us to increase our readership quite significantly over the past years. Our authors and readers continue to be highly international.

In 2022, we (Jonna and Thera) took up Annika’s mantle as co-Editors-in-Chief. In our first year heading *NJAS*, we’ve focused on developing efficient communication and collaboration structures and developing clear and standard editorial processes for the journal’s growing team (see <https://njas.fi/njas/about/editorialTeam>), with the aim of freeing the subject editors to do what they came to the journal to do: work with authors as they develop excellent publications. We’re also in the process of expanding the journal’s Advisory Board to include a wider range of experts from around the Nordic region, Africa, and the rest of the world. Over the course of the past year, we welcomed a number of

new Advisory Board members (also listed at <https://njas.fi/njas/about/editorialTeam>).

We continue to work towards getting the journal listed in major indexes. We’re already indexed in DOAJ, LingOA, and Sherpa Romeo, with several additional applications under evaluation. The day before this issue went to press, we received word that *NJAS* has been accepted for indexing by Scopus, as well. As part of our indexing applications, we’ve had to deeply consider and expand our ethics guidelines; you can read the current (but always in-progress) version at <https://njas.fi/njas/ethics>. We list the following key principles as our guiding ethical framework:

- Promoting diversity and just South–North research relations through our work with authors, our selection of reviewers, and the composition of our Editorial and Advisory Boards;
- Providing reputable, high-quality review processes and publication services without any cost to authors or readers; and
- Aiming to be a model of fair and ethical publishing practices, blending a rigorous review process with human kindness and consideration.

Another major task we face is finding new funding possibilities and models for the journal, as NOP-HS is no longer providing direct journal funding after this year. Meanwhile, our costs – which involve fees for web hosting, maintenance, and related services such as the creation of DOIs for all articles; professional pre-publication language and reference checking; typesetting; and other occasional expenses – continue to rise. All editors and reviewers still work on a volunteer basis. We are thankful for the many years of support from NOP-HS, and we will work hard to ensure the journal can continue its diamond open-access practices.

A final goal for the near future is updating our journal's "look", which is still based on the original print version's cover, to give it a slightly more contemporary feel while

retaining the essence of our visual history. Stay tuned to see what happens!

It's been a great pleasure for us to work with the journal, through all the changes and challenges our years at *NJAS* have seen, and we appreciate the chance this retrospective has given us to view our work and recent experiences in the context of the longer history of the journal. We're very grateful for what we've been given, and we look forward to seeing what the future holds for *NJAS*, as scholars around the world continue to critically (re-)engage with what it means to do research in African Studies.

*Thera Crane, PhD, University of Helsinki*  
*Jonna Katto, PhD, University of Helsinki*

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