

IIAS Reports

Towards an autonomous academic Africa-Asia framework

Philippe Peycam (IIAS Director)

Looking back on the conference *Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge*, Ghana, 24-26 September 2015.

IN SEPTEMBER 2015, the Association for Asian Studies in Africa (A-Asia), in cooperation with IIAS and the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), organized what was the largest social sciences and humanities international conference on Asia-Africa, entitled 'Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge'. The event brought together over three hundred participants from forty countries. Hosted by the University of Ghana (Legon, Accra) the conference included 55 panels and roundtables. The three-day meeting focused on the interactions between Asia and Africa. During the conference, participants from Africa, Asia and beyond, with different academic backgrounds in the humanities and social sciences, enjoyed the rare opportunity to exchange their ideas and approaches across many subjects on Africa-Asia, sixty years after the historic Afro-Asian Bandung Conference of 1955. Since Bandung, the Africa-Asia axis of knowledge has grown in relevance in today's rapidly changing geopolitical and economic global landscape.

One of the main reasons for organizing this event was the realization that the current academic discourse on Asia-Africa relations seems to only exist as a research field for its contemporary 'relevance', primarily in geo-political and economic terms, with often little reference or knowledge of their deeper historical and cultural significance. In Accra, topics of current concerns indeed occupied an overwhelming place in all the discussions. For instance, issues related to China's massive economic and political influence in Africa dominate the Asia-Africa academic landscape, and with it, questions related to migration, development aid, commercial competition, government-to-government relations, etc. Not surprisingly, there is an over dependency on macro rather than micro forms of knowledge with, as an epistemological consequence, an over reliance on colonial and post-independence Western categories, such as those of the Nation-State or of neo-imperial geographical ensembles. Categories such as 'the Africans', 'the Chinese', 'Ghana', 'China', 'West-Africa', 'Southeast Asia' are indiscriminately used, opposed to references to more localized histories through which other forms of agency and connectivity can be appraised. Even when keeping to this macro configuration of the Africa-Asia axis, moreover, some essential geographies of human agency are neglected: North-Africa, the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, the Arab World, Islam, but also the role of more specific diasporas, or urban centres, or historically determined communities that are equally important methodological prisms to 'read' Asian and African realities.

The 'new field' of Africa-Asia

This generalizing attitude is often wrapped in a developmentalist ideology, whereby political scientists, economists and international relations and development studies 'specialists'

play the important role. Consciously or not, their ahistorical approach not only dominates the main Africa-Asia narrative, it tends to prescribe a linear road to progress, keeping the West as the point of reference. In this same discourse, Africa is prescribed to 'catch up' with the rest of the world and follow the Chinese and Japanese examples on the path of 'development' and 'modernity'. Asian actors – i.e., states – are mainly described as providers of new modernization paradigms and as alternative players to their European and North American counterparts. This ideology, it should be stressed, is not only propagated by Western institutions and academics, but has also been adopted by large numbers of policymakers and academics in Africa and Asia, many of whom trained in Western universities.

The new Africa-Asia 'field' has become a 'hot' subject among many social scientists for which institutional money is readily available. The discourse, if it posits that 'Africa' or Africans are now given the opportunity of balancing their hitherto exclusive relations with Europe and North America with a new configuration where Asia becomes an alternative to Europe or North America, remains inscribed in an epistemology where Europe/the West is the historical reference. It is rarely cognizant of the fact that an alternative scholarship has long denounced this Eurocentrism and the shallow bases of its scientific foundations (see the works by E. Said, W. E. B. Du Bois, J. Needham, E. Wolf, J. M. Hobson, L. Abu-Lughod, J. Goody, etc.).

The current Africa-Asia institutional meta-discourse in fact fits well with the neoliberal ideology, according to which Africa's further integration into the global capitalistic economic division of labour – following that of Asia – is seen as the sole path to Africa's emancipation. At the academic level, the same narrow neo-liberal ideology prioritizes hard, ahistorical social sciences at the expense of long-term, reflexive, historically informed scholarship, ultimately leading to the marginalization and extinction of a gratuitous, speculative and potentially subversive knowledge tradition, in favour of a utilitarian, narrowly segmented field that can be filled with interchangeable 'experts' whose works abide to the 'Audit Culture' highlighted by some anthropologists. The high number of scholars of African or Asian backgrounds studying in or working in contemporary 'social sciences' programmes at Western institutions – in which no language skills are required and for which funding is usually attached to tightly delineated projects – makes sure that the field remains a fundamentally 'dominated' one, in the West but also in most Asian or African universities when these scholars return to teach there.

The challenge to the sustainability of this institutional Africa-Asia 'field' and its capacity to test traditional hierarchies borne out of the domination of the neo-liberal Northern academic model therefore lies in the very structure of this model, with its ability to truncate human phenomena and subject them to artificial epistemic, temporal, utilitarian agendas. These epistemological and institutional limitations offer little chance for interactions to flourish. As it is increasingly the case, the 'new field' of Africa-Asia as it has established itself in a number of universities thus bears the risk of falling prey to a few self-serving circles, mainly in the West, with a few African and Asian antennae. The 'field' can continue to be artificially shaped with few alternative perspectives, and the absence of a critical mass of African

and Asian participants from Africa and Asia – because their works or profiles may not 'fit' into the narrow framework of the field, or simply because there is no money to involve them, their home institutions are weak, their language ability limits them from accessing information, or from publishing in US and Europe-based peer-review publications, etc.; just to list a few of the usual barriers that ultimately bind an area of academic investigation.

No silo mentality

It is this tendency to crystalize subjects of study into institutionalised, funded, academic programmes, with their generic sets of assumptions, references, their internal hierarchies and dynamics, their 'gurus', their sociological economy of academic knowledge, that the Accra conference organisers sought to challenge. When drafting the programme, the organisers tried to incorporate the submitted abstracts and the discussions they entailed into broader thematic sessions, so as to try to open up segmented topics into a more complex texture of interlaced factors and genealogies. In this way, they sought to avoid a 'silo mentality'. Six sessions were thereafter set up: Trans-continental Connections and Interactions; Economics, Aid and Development; Intellectual Encounters; Arts and Culture; Migration and Diasporas; Asian Studies in Africa, African Studies in Asia. When possible, debates were integrated into broader genealogies so that, even when framed for their contemporary relevance, they could benefit from wider humanistically informed discussions, the objective being to question the Asia-Africa axis as a set of multiple temporalities and locations, beyond temptations of over-generalization.

There is no room here to discuss the sessions and panels individually, but some remarks can be made that illustrate the basic philosophy of the Accra event. The two thematic sessions 'Intellectual Encounters' and 'Asian Studies in Africa, African Studies in Asia', directly engaged with the question of knowledge production. Significant were the exchanges between two types of area studies scholars: those already specialised in Africa-Asia subjects, and those versed in knowledge particular to one of the two regions. An example for the latter was a French-language panel entitled 'Towards a comparative history of Christian Missions in Africa and Asia'. At this panel, three historians, two from West Africa and one from France, working on indigenous responses to the European Catholic missions in Japan and the Western coast of Africa, had the opportunity to exchange their views and share their knowledge. These people had never met before. The depth of their knowledge on local agencies against a common experienced phenomenon – the involvement of Catholic missions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – contributed to a high quality discussion that somehow resulted in focusing less on the European parts of the Missions, but more on what their intrusion in both regions revealed in terms of localized grass-roots forms of agency and their different expressions.

Another panel discussing early connections between southern India and Ethiopia through early Arabic, Muslim, Christian and Jewish mediations, also sought to confront different localized contextualized knowledge experiences. There were also two Leiden University-sponsored panels on 'Political Agencies in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Global: Convergences and Contrasts of African and Asian Contexts', which saw historians confront their approaches and methodologies over the connected subject of colonialism as experienced in localized contexts in the two continents.

An axis of knowledge

It is this effort to historicize and culturally contextualize Asia-Africa that at the end may give the field its true intellectual legitimacy and its expanded potential to itself transform other axes of knowledge. Thanks, moreover, to the inspiring mediation of those who already pioneered the (re-)discovery of numerous forms of Asia-Africa trans-continental connections, without compromising localized contextualized knowledge of places, we can expect an increasing number of striking intellectual parallels, links or 'bridges' to be brought to the fore.

It is hoped that if humanistic area studies in their multiple articulations are substantially represented in future Africa-Asia discussion frameworks, the dialectical relation between Comparison and Connection, which was so powerfully at play in Accra, may ultimately serve as the most effective matrix capable of re-shaping and re-centring the field. Only then can a process of autonomization of the Africa-Asia 'axis of knowledge', the one envisaged by the organisers of the conference, flourish. No doubt this process will take long to shape into an autonomous academic Africa-Asia intellectual framework. This is why, major events like Accra are important, especially if they are held in Africa or Asia with a critical mass number of Africans and Asians, for what they can do to accelerate this development.

www.ias.asia/asian-studies-africa
www.africas.asia

