

Does Area Studies require 'fine-tuning', or should we take a sledgehammer to it?

Elizabeth Walker

The Routledge Area Studies team were delighted to facilitate the second set of 'New Directions in Area Studies' roundtables during the international conference 'Africa-Asia: a New Axis of Knowledge', which took place in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in September 2018. Partnering with the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), we are proud to continue our intellectual support for partners who are working to de-centre 'Area Studies' and open up new methods of knowledge production and transfer. Our 'New Directions in Area Studies' roundtables, the first of which was held in collaboration with SOAS University of London in November 2017, help realise these ideals in practice, and make a tangible contribution to developing more equitable Area Studies publishing that will serve a new generation of global scholars.

Nearly 30 scholars, from a diverse range of countries, participated in the two roundtable sessions; we welcomed participants from Latin America, North America, Oceania, South and East Asia, and from Western Europe. As we hoped and intended, the roundtable was a truly global event with participation from scholars from around the globe. We would like to express sincere thanks to Professor Diana Jeater (University of Liverpool) for her professional and enthusiastic chairing of both sessions; without Professor Jeater's interest and commitment these sessions would not have taken place. Similarly, we thank colleagues

at IIAS, UDSM and SOAS University of London, Professor Rachel Harrison and Dr Philippe Peycam, who assisted with practicalities and logistics for the roundtables.

Acknowledging the developments and debates that have surrounded Area Studies since its inception, and the material consequences of how we define 'Area' and 'Area Studies', the first of our two sessions focused on developments in the current research ecosystem, which are resulting in the continued need to challenge the concept of Area Studies, to re-profile what we mean by 'Area' or 'shared geography', and to move beyond the institutional architecture, hierarchies and markets that are shaping knowledge production. Varying degrees of change were called for, from a lighter 'fine-tuning', to the need to 'sledgehammer it' [Area Studies], and real praxis was suggested during both roundtable sessions.

The group explored language as the means by which knowledge is packaged for consumption and shared initiatives that are disrupting the hegemonic dominance of English as the language of research, for example Kiswahili issues of the journal *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* through translation, to the creation of new vocabulary in the Khmer language where required! Indeed, could we use language, or the diaspora, to define 'Area'?

Participants shared examples from their research that focused on different 'entry points' to knowledge creation, for example: food, climate change or shared problems

or histories. We asked could it be possible to create a new knowledge system where 'all the disciplines fall away'? Can we become 'undisciplined' (as distinct from interdisciplinary)? Queering Area Studies was suggested as a possible intellectual framework that could help to dismantle existing hierarchies and re-centre researchers and knowledge from the periphery.

As an extension of disciplinary issues, participants discussed interrogating all forms of knowledge production that are not considered part of the academic model and working with sectors of society that are not usually considered actors in knowledge production, for instance examining the transmission of knowledge among craftspeople. If institutional change is proving difficult, moving outside the university environment, setting-up research institutions as capacity building platforms may be a way forward.

Moving from 'institutional confinement', to questions of power or 'white supremacy', it was widely acknowledged that collaborative research between scholars in both the so-called Global South and Global North, albeit well-intentioned, may end up merely 'ethnicing' a project, while also raising concerns around moral geography, proximity and distance. As one delegate noted "we need to push Africans/Asians to become the subject and not the object of the mission". Even in a world where technological and access issues were completely resolved, the question remains, who is producing knowledge, and whose questions are being adopted?

It was eloquently argued that, in fact, scholars in the north simply do not know what's really going on in the south, and that south-south cooperation is flourishing, language rearing its head, once again, as a possible barrier for those in the north. A case in point being Afro-Asiatic Studies, the first Latin American journal on Africa, and indeed the work of SEPHIS (the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development), which has been running for over

twenty-five years. As one participant noted "knowledge is out there, they become legible to academics when they become disciplined by universities who want to categorise that knowledge". Add to this the need to be alert to multiple, interacting forms of privilege, since problems between the Global North and Global South do not mean there are no problems or inequalities within the Global South.

There was a clear and consistent call to expand our 'circuits' or clusters of knowledge production (including knowledge transfer) and a need to conceptualise our connections in different ways, which more closely match the experiences of young scholars today. We heard tangible examples of how we can begin to do just that, for instance the use of 'real time archival collaboration', a new methodological approach to archival work that favours the distinct area and linguistic knowledge of the collective involved (see their manifesto), as well as the linguistic efforts described above. Themes of individual responsibility and the need to recognise linguistic and fieldwork limitations were raised several times. The Routledge Area Studies team would like to work with the participants further on enabling expanded circuits; indeed, we see these roundtables as a starting point in that endeavour.

We must also pay special thanks to our colleague Oscar Masingyana, based in Johannesburg, who attended the conference on behalf of the wider Area Studies team, and provided us with wonderful follow-up notes, photos and 'reportage' that have enabled us to gain a real sense of the nature of the discussion.

Finally, we would like to thank all those who participated for your support, energy and enthusiasm; we look forward to continuing both the conversation and the practical work involved in shaping our discipline, pushing at the boundaries of what 'Area Studies' means, while maintaining its usability.

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Unusual connections

Tharaphi Than

On the last day of the conference 'Africa-Asia: a New Axis of Knowledge 2', Dr Kojo Aidoo (Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana) and I left our hotel early to explore a Hindu neighbourhood in Dar es Salaam. Eventually we were unable to navigate the neighbourhood because of road constructions. Disappointed, we proceeded to the conference by taxi and during the drive Kojo decided to cheer me up with his lecture on Pan Africanism and recent political developments in Ghana. One of my questions to him was why we Asians do not have as strong a unifying version such as Pan Africanism, which to me is more than an ideology. It is a very practical way of finding solutions for historical and current problems of the continent mostly created by imperialism. It is also an empowering tool utilized by governments such as Tanzania's by making it visible, even as a trademark of the country and the region, in many public places including airports. The youth of African countries, from Senegal to Tanzania, can imagine their place within the connected land through economic, educational, and cultural opportunities created within this framework.

My conversation with Kojo was a micro version of the whole conference, connecting scholars who would otherwise not meet each other and have meaningful and even transformative conversations about subjects they know and live. Pan Africanism is not just a topic Kojo learns through books; he lives it as if his and his country's future depends on it. A belief originating in the Global South, by scholars and educators such as Paulo Freire, that only through praxis can we transform ourselves, is reflected in the way Kojo theorizes, engages, and practises Pan Africanism.

During the conference, I had many conversations like the one with Kojo. In one of the workshops, Dr Malami Buba (Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea/Sokoto State University, Nigeria) enlightened us how languages were the site of epistemic violence committed by colonialists crippling many communities to express their ideas, thoughts, and to pass down their heritage across generations. I started reading his works after the conference and they are empowering. Giants in their own fields, African (and Asian) scholars working outside the European and Northern American institutions are lesser-knowns than those working in those two regions. Geographical privilege is not afforded to them. But conferences such as this one are the means to circumvent many challenges scholars from outside these two regions face.

In another panel, Dr Abdourahmane Seck (University Gaston Berger, Senegal) and I surprised each other with the many parallels between his 'street food project' in Senegal and mine on 'history through food teaching methods' at Yangon University. Our research questions, methodologies and approaches, particularly the triangulation of interests among communities, students and universities in our projects, share many similarities.

Through our choice of intervention, i.e., 'food', we want to investigate broader historical, anthropological and political landscapes of Myanmar and Senegalese communities. Realizing these parallels beautifully makes unusual or not-often-thought-of collaborations possible. A joint book project on Myanmar and Senegalese food (studies) was hatched impromptu.

Cross connections between Asia and Africa, and between Asian and African scholars, are valuable because they help us learn new things, and learn new



Photos taken during panel sessions.

ways of knowing the old things. What binds us together is our implicit desire and self-imposed undertaking to transcend through coloniality of knowledge. How do we reclaim and make relevant our indigenous traditions in knowing things and producing knowledge? Asia and Africa, particularly the latter because of an even longer burden and deeper scars of imperialism, can empower each other through co-conceptualizing ways to see ourselves and each other without Orientalism or hegemonic (Western)

constructions of 'Asia' and 'Africa'. The journey ahead is long and, as we discussed during the conference, there exist many barriers – such as established and accepted ways of teaching, researching, publishing, and even organizing conferences in particular locations. But a new axis of knowledge is possible, and the conference in Dar showed us how.

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