

Widening boundaries

In April this year, IIAS received a visit from Prof. Webby Kalikiti, who teaches history at the University of Zambia, in Lusaka, Republic of Zambia. Prof. Kalikiti is an “Asianist”, or more specifically a “Southeast-asianist”, who did his research on the economic history of Vietnam during the colonial period. He represents a rare example of African historians who chose to focus on an Asian research topic and who, after completing his postgraduate education in Europe, returned to teach about Asia at his home university. Local economic realities and demand from his students compelled him, however, to instead teach about Europe and North-America and thus refrain from sharing his expertise and passion.

Philippe Peycam

THIS PERSONAL STORY illustrates a major imbalance that ultimately contributes to restrain the field of Asian studies into an almost exclusive *face-à-face* between Western and Asian scholars, at a time of a global shift toward a more multi-polar world.

This gets me back to Prof. Kalikiti's visit to Leiden. In keeping with its mission of serving the field of Asian studies in the global context of today, IIAS chose to take part in this historical process of an increased interaction between Asia and Africa, putting a distinctive emphasis on the promotion of the humanities and the social sciences as essential intellectual instruments of this interaction. The Asian Studies in Africa (ASA) initiative began in 2010 when IIAS, the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS), and the African Studies Centre in Leiden, convened an exploratory workshop on the issue of building capacities in the teaching of Asian studies in Africa and African studies

in Asia. What transpired from the discussion was the extent to which some major Asian countries, especially China, recently initiated a remarkable strategy of sustained intellectual and educational presence in Africa, a strategy unmatched by most African and Asian countries *vis-à-vis* the respective region. In spite of the presence of a few specialised institutions in South-Africa, Japan, India, and of course China, there is, however, little chance that a real Asia-Africa intellectual and educational space of exchange can emerge. In terms of knowledge production of the “other”, therefore, there is a risk that trans- and intra-continental unbalanced patterns perpetuate themselves. The workshop's participants recommended that solid academic infra-structures capable of delivering foundational knowledge of “the other” as an essential prerequisite for sustained socio-economic progress in African and Asian societies be supported. Another instructive conclusion of the workshop was the recognised role imparted to Europe and European institutions to operate as facilitators and contributors for a truly non-hegemonic trans-regional academic exchange model.

Based on these recommendations, and because participants insisted in the urgency to address the question of educational capacity in Africa, it was suggested that IIAS and SEPHIS (now formerly re-established in the Philippines), in partnership

with institutions from the two continents, should begin by assisting targeted African institutions to build capacities in Asian studies before a similar initiative on the teaching of Africa be followed in a number of Asian countries. The University of Zambia subsequently expressed its interest in hosting a follow-up strategic workshop on the subject, hence Prof. Kalikiti's visit to Leiden and to a number of Asian countries.

In this rather unusual initiative, IIAS works with partners from four continents, from Asia, Europe, and Africa to North America. The ASA initiative fits well with the institute's research cluster on the global projection of Asia; in this case, “Asian studies” in the global context. In doing so, IIAS contributes to widen the boundaries of the debate on “area studies”.

Philippe Peycam,
Director of IIAS



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The Newsletter #60 Summer 2012
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Digital issue editor: Thomas Voorter
Design: Paul Oram, for Bohemia Amsterdam
Printing: Wegener Grafische Groep, Apeldoorn

The Newsletter and IIAS

The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) is a post-doctoral research centre based in the Netherlands. IIAS encourages the multi-disciplinary and comparative study of Asia and promotes national and international cooperation. The Newsletter is a free quarterly publication by IIAS. As well as being a window into the institute, The Newsletter also links IIAS with the community of Asia scholars and the worldwide public interested in Asia and Asian studies. The Newsletter bridges the gap between specialist knowledge and public discourse, and continues to serve as a forum for scholars to share research, commentary and opinion with colleagues in academia and beyond.

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Submissions

Deadline for drafts:
Issue #62 – 1 September 2012
Issue #63 – 1 December 2012
Issue #64 – 1 March 2012

Please notify the editor of your intent to contribute one month prior to deadline.

Enquiries and submissions should be e-mailed to the editor (iiasnews@iias.nl)

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