



Above: AfroAsian fashion campaign for AFI (Photograph courtesy of Ingrid Alice Photography).

## The Challenge of Changing Perceptions of Africa in Thailand: The Importance of Strengthening Institutional Consolidation

Lalita Hanwong

The equator traverses Asia, Africa, and Latin America, leading to several similarities among these continents in terms of natural resources, culture, and a shared historical background characterized by colonialism, politico-economic coercion, and turmoil. Southeast Asia and Africa, united by the legacy of decolonization, have historically maintained positive relations since the Afro-Asian Conference, also known as the Bandung Conference, which took place in Indonesia in 1955, and was predominantly led by leaders from Asia and Africa.

However, the true Global South regions of Southeast Asia and Africa received limited attention after the 1960s. The planned Second Bandung Conference in 1965 never materialized due to the escalation of the Cold War, resulting in international and domestic conflicts across the Southern Hemisphere. Throughout the Cold War period, Southeast Asia was a significant theater of war. The United States, Soviet Union, and China invested substantial efforts and financial resources in Southeast Asia to secure their respective interests. Thailand became a stronghold for the United States in countering the spread of communism in the region, implementing numerous agro-economic development programs as part of its modernization and national development objectives.

Kasetsart University (KU) was established in 1941, first as an agricultural college, in response to the changing developmental landscape in Southeast Asia during the 1940s. Over the past eight decades, the

university has collaborated closely with domestic and international partners to encourage regional and inter-regional academic interactions. Thailand's International Cooperation Agency (TICA) has played a significant role in supporting such exchanges and fostering development cooperation between Thailand, Southeast Asian countries, and Africa. KU has a long-standing history of collaboration and knowledge exchange with African higher education institutions, government agencies, NGOs, and experts in fields related to agriculture, fishery, forestry, and natural sciences. The objective has been to improve people's lives and advance sustainable development.

In 2020, KU established the Africa-Asia Programme (KU-AAP), the first African Studies programme in Southeast Asia. The programme aims to promote African studies in Thailand, foster connections with African partners through interdisciplinary research and education, and to stimulate academic discussions within the country regarding the significance of the "African factor." The ambitious goal of the programme is to create a new knowledge-based community, predominantly between Africa and Thailand.

KU-AAP collaborates with various partners, including the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, TICA, and African embassies in Bangkok. In 2021, the programme initiated its first research project which examines political risks in West Africa to support the ministry's decision-making process regarding the establishment of the next Thai embassy in Africa. Additionally, the project

explores business opportunities and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of West Africa from the perspective of the Thai business community.

It's not surprising that Africa presents numerous opportunities for both large corporations and entrepreneurs. Vitamilk, Thailand's leading soymilk producer, has successfully exported soymilk products to Nigeria and Ghana. Extensive conversations with the Thai business community in Africa have revealed a significant potential for Thai products across the entire African continent. Agricultural and food products from Thailand are highly regarded for their reliability and superior quality compared to competitors. However, a major obstacle to direct investment in Africa stems from the scarcity of raw materials, resulting in higher production costs, and indeed a more 'humanistic' understanding of African societies. From the Thai perspective, Africa's strength lies in its abundant labour force, although its full economic potential remains untapped. Despite existing constraints, voices from Vitamilk and other Thai corporations operating in Africa agree that changing perceptions is necessary to facilitate greater investment and stronger connections between Thailand and African countries.

Shifting to the academic perspective, Thai society still possesses a limited understanding of Africa, despite the presence of numerous African athletes in professional and semi-professional football leagues throughout Thailand and ASEAN countries. In Eastern Thailand, where the economy relies heavily on the gem

industry and trade, a solid community of East African gem traders has been formed. There are various ways in which academia can contribute to fostering a better understanding and cultivating positive relationships, not only between Thailand and Africa but also between Southeast Asia and Africa as a whole.

Since the establishment of KU-AAP, discussions on Afro-Southeast Asian connections have been actively pursued in conferences and other initiatives. The Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroad (AIIOC) at Universitas Airlangga in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia serves as a commendable example of such activism within Southeast Asian institutions, stimulating dialogues on Africa and strengthening regional ties. Both continents have valuable lessons and experiences to share in an era that requires optimism and collective efforts. Historically, the Thai vision of investing in Africa has been characterized by a give-and-take relationship, with limited opportunities for Thais to learn from their African counterparts due to the geographical distance and alleged stark differences between the two regions. However, this notion has been challenged by the recent launch of the Collaborative Africa-South East Asia Platform (CASAP), aiming to foster cooperation within the Global South community and to reshape the knowledge landscape, which was previously dominated by the North.

By adopting a truly interdisciplinary approach, KU-AAP, AIIOC, and CASAP will serve as catalysts for a new network of collaboration between Africa and Southeast Asia. This collaborative effort will not only transform our universities but also benefit the public and extend beyond academia.

Lalita Hanwong,  
Kasetsart University, Thailand