

## **Asia-Africa, A New Axis of Knowledge Africa Knows! Panel B11**

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### **Discussants:**

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Dr Mathew Senga  
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### **Abstract**

A substantial number of African students and scholars are privileging connections with counterparts and their institutions not based in Western Europe or North America, but in Asia. This trend not simply results from the exponential increase in economic ties between the two world regions, it reflects a deep-seated interest among African intellectuals to break with a hitherto almost exclusive engagement with the West and the continuation of often one-sided interactions inherited from the colonial and post-independence periods (and their restrictive epistemic choices). The 'Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge' initiative led to the establishment of the African Association for Asian Studies (A-ASIA), and the organization of a triennial international conference. As such, it constitutes an original attempt at decentering and diversifying routes of collaboration in global knowledge production. For an Asia-focused European organization like the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the objective is to contribute to a more globally connected approach to the development of knowledge on and with Asia, in the world. This panel will serve to present the Africa-Asia A New Axis of Knowledge initiative in some of its local and international iterations, with perspectives from Asia, Africa, and Europe.

## **Building Asian Studies Centres in Africa: Notes from the Field**

Lloyd Amoah (University of Ghana)

Partially due to China's rise, interactions between Asia and Africa deepened in the last decades. African scholars who wanted to research Africa-Asia relations were confronted by existing models of knowledge production primed by how the West has historically regarded the world. Informed by a *power-over* mode the first wave emerged from European *Orientalism*, the second from the American *Area Studies* model and the third from *Asian Studies*, an important component of Area Studies. A fourth, more solidaristic, approach has now started to emerge due to three explanatory tropes: counter-hegemony supporting entities (individuals and organizations), serendipity (the ways in which chance uncontrollably aids the agent's purposes) and technology (information technology). This *Asian Studies in Africa* model aims to put agents on equal footing and produce knowledge for its own sake. Although this does raise the question how power is going to play out, in terms of funding for instance and epistemology.

## **Rethinking Africa in Thailand and Beyond**

Lalita Hanwong (Kasetsart University)

Kasetsart University, Thailand's first agricultural university, has a history of collaboration with African universities, NGOs and governments for several decades. However, this so-called 'exchange' is still far from reciprocal. In Thailand, little is still known about Africa, and there is a grave lack of body of knowledge on Africa. With the idea of creating a common ground for Thai and African scholars, the Faculty of Social Sciences at Kasetsart University has recently established the Kasetsart University Africa-Asia Programme (KU-AAP) to promote multidisciplinary research and collaboration on Africa. If it produces enough concrete results, then we envisage to establish a full-fledged Africa-Asia centre, as was discussed with a number of Thai, African and international experts at a roundtable in February 2020 in Bangkok. Africa-Asia studies in Thailand is currently mainly framed through an international relations angle, less so through that of trade, commerce, culture or other subjects. The Programme hopes to contribute to change this situation. One of its important aims is to promote general public awareness and knowledge of Africa by creating podcasts and having YouTube talks.

## **Rethinking 'the Global': View from an Indian Social Science University**

Rohit Negi (Ambedkar University Delhi)

At Ambedkar University Delhi the conceptualisation and creation of new degree programs in Global Studies has come from the realization that regions and localities are co-produced by intersecting processes at multiple scales. The field of Global studies has overall emerged as a powerful alternative to the dominant ways in which the world was understood as a collection of so many world regions - and studied within largely distinct 'Area Studies' departments - rather than a networked whole. We build our curriculum around four themes and what we call 'Centres of Globality', that is, the regions through which we piece together an alternative map of the world than the one we have inherited, and that we have looked to destabilize. These regions are the *Himalayan and TransHimalayan Region* and *Indian Ocean Region* as mountains or oceans are typically considered barriers to movement and interactions, while in reality they have been effective conduits that have facilitated deep relationships across disparate regions. It is through the Indian Ocean for example that we aim to build meaningful academic relations - in theory and in practice - with Africa and African institutions of higher learning.

## **Creating an Asian Study Centre in Francophone Africa: between necessity and obstacles**

Abdourahmane Seck (Université Gaston Berger)

The ambiguous title of the conference (Africa Knows) calls for the need to be precise as to from which standpoint and from which context questions are being discussed. We do not say 'Asia knows', 'America knows' or 'Europe knows'; why do we say 'Africa knows'? In Senegal, we were already trying to build a bridge between Africa and Asia when the invitation came to join the IIAS network. We thought it was important to include a Northern partner within the strategic framework upon which we could build an Asian study centre. This was primarily for educational reasons, as the process of decolonizing the African academic space must start by assuming and demanding the settings of international projects that concern them without signifying a compromise of the common agenda. At the same time we are aware that our doors to interconnection are guarded by others, as for a good part of the relation from Africa to Asia - and for a good part of Asia and Africa in itself - is mediated by knowledge developed outside Africa and Asia. The first obstacle is not the culture of international institutes per se but the problem that lays within our own African institutions: their support does not go deep enough. So, even if framed as 'South-South', our effort remains restricted by the same problem. It is important for African institutions to create spaces, without international institutions, while also being willing to engage in cooperation with outside partners.

### **Formalization of the Africa-Asia Research Platform (A-ARP) of the University of Dar es Salaam: Fostering Spirit of Unity and Integration**

Mathew Senga (University of Dar es Salaam)

Africa-Asia relations in Tanzania date back from many years, especially through the longstanding Sino-Tanzania collaboration. To date, China stands out as Tanzania's most reliable ally of all times. But irrespective of such relations ranging from political, economic and even cultural, less achievements can be documented in terms of networks emanating from collaborative research and studies. While there are existing exchange programmes and academic relations among scholars, concrete collaborative networks built on the base of unity and integration remain scarce. The University of Dar es Salaam as stated witnessed a concrete anchoring of such networks during the 2018 Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge International Conference, held in Dar es Salaam. The idea of initiating an Africa-Asia Research Platform came out of this conference. As a platform, it seeks to contribute to a novel kind of trans-regional 'Africa-Asia studies' collaborations. While historically, African and Asian countries have shown resilience to overcome their differences and found a common ground for actions leading to mutual cooperation and upholding of shared values, there is a need to continue fostering unity and integration using evidence-based research and academic relations through direct collaborative networks.

### **A New Role for a Europe-Based Institute? Facilitating an Alternative South-South Africa-Asia 'Axis of Knowledge'**

Aarti Kawlra, Philippe Peycam & Paul van der Velde (International Institute for Asian Studies)

Since 2012, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) has been engaged in the facilitation of an inclusive South-South Africa-Asia intellectual platform engaging academic institutions and individuals from the two world regions. The institute is located in the north, but is itself a marginalized institution here. This marginality was instituted from the beginning in the 90s, when the IIAS founders managed to convince the Dutch government that there was a need for an open institute operating as a facilitator and collaborative incubator. IIAS is lending its organizational capacity without trying to influence the agenda. The IIAS initiative Humanities across Borders, Asia and Africa in the World (HaB) as an example with a simple premise: twenty collaborative institutions and their civil partners in Africa, Asia, Latin and North America and Europe make up

a loose network of willing partners engaged in supporting an alternative humanistic knowledge sharing platform. The network will hopefully turn more into an institutional one. It seeks to reclaim locally situated experienced knowledge with the aim of drawing methodological points of intersection and comparison between different sites, without the imposition of an arbitrary set of categorization. In doing so, it aims to normalise the global through for instance an Asia-Africa pedagogical axis framed around everyday subjects like rice and indigo as entry points.

IIAS is also involved in supporting a series of Africa-Asia international inter-disciplinary conferences modeled after the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) which it also runs. So far, two 'Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge' conferences were organized, in Accra, Ghana, in 2015, and in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 2018. The next event of its kind is set to take place in Senegal in 2021 or 2022, depending on the COVID situation.

## Discussion

Moderator Dr Philippe Peycam introduces Dr Kea Amo (Kyoto Seika University) to talk about developments at Kyoto Seika University. Traditionally, Africa studies in Japan was very much discipline-centred. Much work on Africa was either drawn from a utilitarian interest or was tainted by Western-influenced views. In the case of Kyoto Seika University, more and more students want to work on contemporary subjects around arts, design, craft, and especially manga, one of the university's specialities. Recently, Kyoto Seika has been working on developing a Africa-Asia institute. The team involved is trying to open an office in Dakar. It seeks to send several students and staff to do research, but due to COVID these plans have slowed down. There has also been attempts to open doors to Francophone countries as well, not only English-speaking countries. Dr Kea Amo is very interested in working with other colleagues from Asia. She notes that bizarrely in Japan we have Japan studies *and* Asian studies. Both are separate. Activities like the present panel/roundtable can break the ice, and she hope all of you can join ICAS12 in Kyoto in 2021.

Dr Lalita Hanwong raises the question: what is the idea behind the Africa Knows! conference. She feels odd when she talks about Africa-Asia connections. Africa Knows? Conference organizer Ton Dietz explains that the title was meant to provoke, hence the exclamation mark. The title can also be pronounced in two ways.

Dr Abdourahmane Seck was asked about the three obstacles to knowledge decolonization which he discussed in his intervention. He clarifies that there actually are two instead of three as was hinted at earlier. One has to do with how our governments understand international collaboration; we also need to decolonize the way international projects (often devised by others) are picked up by African leaders as they are not in the best interest of Africans. Dr Kea Amo intervenes to add that we also need to discuss what decolonization means in different contexts and settings: for instance, Japan can see itself as under Western cultural colonization but it was also a colonizing country in Asia). Reverting, Dr Lloyh Amoah wonders how one creates such space without international cooperation. To which Dr Abdourahmane Seck points to what he mentioned earlier, namely that one is obliged to find a way of cooperation. And even if we are able to go without cooperation, we need to be aware and be in dialogue; the objective is not to isolate oneself but to find autonomy in agency (in laying out the terms of such international collaboration).

Then the question is raised about the model of programme or institution implantation; is the idea to have Asian studies in Africa, African studies in Asia or African-Asian/Asian-African studies centres everywhere, including at a sub-regional level? The concern is that we should avoid a scramble to create centres everywhere, a fashionable but unsustainable way of going about this in a context of scarce resources. Dr Philippe Peycam weighs in on this by arguing that there is a fundamental issue of infrastructure but that we also need to be pragmatic. He asserts that there are

always the problem of falling into new epistemological traps but there is also the need to lay some ground work. From a Western point of view we are also very much trapped by the spaces we inherited. Yet initiatives like Humanities across Borders are good example of how to also try to go beyond this.

Dr Lalita Hanwong adds that she is also quite skeptical about building centres in general since they are often not really accessible. She explains that in Thailand centres have mainly served to educate the general public rather than educate scholars ourselves . In Thailand, she asserts, we are not familiar with the term decolonization because most would say we have never been colonized by European powers. So, we do not make podcasts to decolonize but rather to educate people, to build towards the future. She also adds that the unexpected can also happen, naming the regained interest in Communism in her country.

Dr Aarti Kawlra argues that we must not forget that we can collaborate by utilizing the existing networks. They can also create new spaces and counter or subvert timetables set by universities. These can create new curricula that will normalize connections and make common sense, and this ties in with what Dr Rohit Negi argued; the idea of a trans regional but still local axis of knowledge.