

**Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference**  
**Panel B11: "Asia-africa, a New Axis of Knowledge"**

Dr Lalita Hanwong  
Assistant Professor  
History Department, Faculty of Social Sciences  
Kasetsart University  
Ngamwongwan Road, Chatuchak District  
Bangkok 10230, THAILAND  
<http://www.soc.ku.ac.th/>

**Abstract**

**Rethinking Africa in Thailand and Beyond**

Kasetsart University, Thailand's first agricultural university, has widely collaborated with African universities, NGOs and governments for several decades. This partnership has been forged through technical assistance, exchange programmes and postgraduate scholarships. However, the 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 in Thailand. Despite long-term commitment through development cooperation with African countries and institutions, a holistic approach has not been implemented to forge even greater relations between Thailand and Africa.

With the idea of creating a common ground for Thai and African scholars, the Faculty of Social Sciences at Kasetsart University is establishing a centre known as Kasetsart University Africa-Asia Centre (KU-AAC) to promote multidisciplinary research on Africa. The centre aims at providing research grants for new and mid-career researchers who wish to conduct comparative research on Asia-Africa. It also wishes to act as a bridge between faculties within Kasetsart University, government ministries and other Africa-related partners and create a new interactive platform. In future, the centre plans to implement a new multidisciplinary postgraduate curriculum where Africans can learn about Thailand as much as Thailand can learn from Africa.

Currently, the Centre has gone through the brainstorming phase where a group of scholars from different parts of Africa and Southeast Asia gave their ideas on how the centre can be organized and implemented in a sustainable way. We hope that we can start accepting research proposals at the beginning of 2021.

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

In September 2018 at the Africa-Asia conference in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Kasetsart University organized a panel titled "Three Decades of Thai-African Relations through Agricultural Exchange Programme: Towards Sustainable Development". Four participants from the faculties of agriculture, fishery and social sciences presented their papers on their first-hand experience with working in sustainable development programmes in African countries. For decades, Kasetsart University has undertaken many programmes with Africa, mostly with financial aid from Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other funders. One remarkable achievement was presented by Dr Suchart Inghamjitr, an expert on aquaculture from Kasetsart University, Kampongsean Campus, who has done extensive research on Tilapia fish in Mozambique and several other African countries. The panel attracted a diverse group of people with interests in Africa-Asia connections and development.

It was agreed at the end of the panel that Kasetsart University should take greater part in strengthening academic partnerships with African university and other organizations, playing the leading role in re-thinking African-Southeast Asian connections among universities in Southeast Asia. Thailand has decade-long ties with Africa. Since the 1980s, Thailand gradually established embassies and consulates in Africa, starting from the Royal Thai Consulate in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1992. As one of the world's leading tropical agricultural countries, Thailand has forged agricultural exchange programme with many countries across continents. With diplomatic assistance from Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), Kasetsart University, the oldest agriculture university in Thailand, has had partnerships with African countries.

In Mozambique, for instance, such partnership began back in 2005-2007 where the Thai government together with rice and fishery experts from Kasetsart University and the Ministry of Agriculture implemented two initiatives where new rice growing techniques and small fishery management system were introduced. Many other Thai-African agricultural exchange programmes followed. It is pivotal to stress that these are exchange, two-way, programmes meaning that Kasetsart University and partner institutions also learn from African delegates. Since the advent of China's String of Pearls initiative in the mid-2000s, Africa has not only become increasingly important as strategic partners for Asian countries, but the continent is also an crucial place from where Asia needs to learn to create sustainable development that will equally benefit Thailand, Africa and the wider world. In these programmes, Kasetsart University have been taking an active part in forging greater partnerships with African governments, universities, NGOs as well as individual farmers.

In Dar es Salaam, alongside the panel hosted by Kasetsart University, a roundtable titled "Africa-Southeast Asia: Relations, Connections, and Comparisons" attracted experts on the two regions. The outcome of this roundtable meeting is a common agreement that there is a legitimate case in framing a trans-regional intellectual exchange platform between Southeast Asia

and Africa. This includes the existence of a long historical thread of connections from the pre-historic period to the present day with the perpetuation of a shared commerce of ideas and values through the Indian Ocean trade, ranging from Islam to the interactions of Chinese, Indian, Arabic and European merchants, etc. It also includes shared experiences of European colonialism and decolonization processes, Cold War alignments in one of the two blocs, relations with external hegemonic powers – US, Europe and China – and the forced inclusion of the two regions in the global capitalist system and its extreme expression, neoliberalism. All these constitute a set of historical and contemporary connections and embedments that need to be more systematically studied.

Tantamount to this rationale, there is that of singular methodological and theoretical parallels ranging from the colonial and post-colonial experiences, the rise of post-colonial nation states, the importance of trans-national languages like Malay, Swahili and so on. The parallels also include the current exposure of middle-sized young countries to the geo-political designs of outside large powers; e.g. US, China, Europe and Japan, the entanglement of the two regions in larger global economic systems, their susceptibility to major environmental threats, a shared experience of exploding demography with the rise of mega cities, experience of mass migration and conflict, as well as discrepancy in post-colonial economic development within the two world regions. Both share an acute range of inequalities – between nations, social strata, of ethnic and religious character, urban-rural divide phenomenon and risks of sub-regional internal supremacies (e.g. South Africa over many countries of southern Africa; the dominant role of the Singaporean financial centre in Southeast Asia). Both Southeast Asia and Africa are characterized by relatively weak states, often led by authoritarian politico-economic elite systems. At the same time, they share the vibrancy of young civic societies opened to creative new forms of social agency, often aided by new technologies. One can nonetheless consider that the rise of South East Asia in the world economic system has been more successfully tangible in comparison with that of African states.

As a subsequent response to the Dar conference, in July 2019, Kasetsart University, together with University of Zambia and International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) co-hosted an institutional panel named “Southeast Asian-African Connections and Parallels: An Alternative Platform for Knowledge Sharing” during the ICAS-11 Conference in Leiden, the Netherlands. This panel focused on a big debate about who we are. It looks at African-Southeast Asian connections, similarities, parallels, and platforms for knowledge-sharing. It aims to bridge the gaps between SEA and Africa through academic exchanges. As mentioned above, the panel was a follow-up from the roundtable as part of the Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge 2 conference.

The Global South has become a popular topic of conversation. It is important to challenge its hierarchies governing the exchange of knowledge and ideas. The West should no longer have a hegemonic position in the academic interactions between Africa and Southeast Asia, which have much more in common with each other than with the West. For all these reasons, there is a solid argument to be made for the establishment of a new platform of trans-regional

intellectual and academic collaboration between the two world regions. Scholars and intellectuals from Africa and Southeast Asia are bound to gain much in the comprehension of their region and its inclusion in the larger global spectrum. We believe a better understanding of the connections and comparisons of the two southern regions may prove at the end as beneficial, if not more so, than those more traditionally exerted in international academia between Africa and Europe, Southeast Asia and China, Japan or the US, or as the trend goes, between Africa and China or Southeast Asia and the European Union.

A new South-South Africa-Southeast Asia intellectual platform should also be good for the scholarly practice of area studies: to engage the two regions with a common and simultaneous set of comparisons and connections, empirically woven together, can help scholars transcend the narrow expertise they acquired and usually apply to one particular country (or more rarely region or sub-region), by engaging this narrowly focused expertise within broader interdisciplinary and/or trans-regional research frameworks. The new Africa-Southeast Asia platform should therefore contribute to the disentanglement of Cold War-era area studies paradigms, often disconnected from larger regional and global trends. As such, it should not only benefit scholars from the two regions, but also from countries, mostly in the North, where area studies has long been institutionalized as an autonomous field.

Discussing the area studies fields of "Southeast Asian studies" and "African studies", we must emphasize how there is an urgent need for new approaches that can actually salvage these traditional areas of expertise by moving beyond their current narrow disciplinary and country-based configurations while avoiding simplistic epistemologies on "Asia" or "Africa", or their equation to dominant parts of them (e.g. the trend to study Africa-Asia today tends essentially to look at Africa-China), and the recognition of the diversity and inter-connection of the two world regions.

In order to structure and sustain the new Africa-Southeast Asia axis of knowledge, Kasetsart University has attempted to create an alternative platform, currently known as Kasetsart University Africa-Asia Programme (KU-AAP), to act as a research hub for researchers working on issues relating to Africa-Southeast Asian connections. The Programme aims at creating a consortium to collaborate in a set of joint educational initiatives with universities and other institutions in both Africa, Southeast Asia and beyond to reinforce and develop collaborative pedagogical and research activities with KU-AAP partners. This could crystalize into institution-specific educational components on Southeast Asia-Africa comparative studies to be offered to students in future.

Following this framework, representatives of KU-AAP partners including IIAS, University of Ghana, University of Zambia, University of Gaston Berger in Senegal, University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Singapore University of Social Sciences met again in Bangkok in March 2020 (just before the global outbreak of COVID-19!) to brainstorm objectives and activities of KU-AAP. It was agreed that the Programme would act as a hub to promote interdisciplinary and comparative research, education and community-focused activities with and on Africa and Asia. It would be the first programme in Thailand and Southeast Asia

to offer a unique Southeast Asian perspective for a new mode of South-South Academic collaboration acting as an open space for initiatives to understand the place of Africa-Asia connections with the world. The centre promotes collaborative intellectual exchanges of the Global South through Africa-Asia programmes. As a tailored intervention platform, the emphasis of KU-AAP is not only on knowledge production and analysis of trends and debates of connections between Africa and Africa, but it also seeks to act as a state-of-the-art knowledge hub for the public and a platform to share its initiatives with universities, private sector, government agencies and NGOs in Thailand, Asia, Africa and beyond. Established within one of the most well-known agriculture-specialised university, KU-AAP wants to act as an innovative space for alternative pedagogies and methodologies, exploring new approaches that integrate humanistic social sciences with the sciences of nature.

The programme operates under the Faculty of Social Sciences, Kasetsart University, with its autonomous agenda and budget. In its formative period, it will be operated through the guidance of the steering committee composed of the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Vice-Deans for International Affairs, Research and Academic Services, together with other appointed faculty members. An advisory committee will also be key in driving the Centre forward and will be made up of those outside Kasetsart University including TICA, the Royal Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, IIAS and IDE-JETRO. The new programme will develop on a step by step basis from ad-hoc activities to more regular established programmes. The plan for the initial phase is for 5 years. The programme, as an entity, will sign MoUs with university and institutions across Southeast Asia and Africa and will see the development of its activities on an incremental basis, notably for its physical space, budget, staffing with future planning.

## **Activities and Programmes**

KU-AAP will need to engage in a concomitant range of activities including:

- Participation in ongoing and future events relating to Africa/Asia
- Organisation of events by KU-AAP (meetings, conferences)
- Africa-Asia graduate schools (or summer schools) with speakers from different regions, i.e. one from KU, one from Southeast Asia and two from Africa (co-sponsored by IIAS)
- Development an undergraduate programme, i.e. BA in Southeast Asia and the World
- Development of a postgraduate programme in Africa/Asia for Sustainable Development
- Two-week training programme (co-sponsored by TICA and IDE-JETRO)



**Dr Suchart Ingthamjitr from Kasetsart University, Kamphangsaen Campus, during his presentation on tilapia seed production training in Mozambique (Dar es Salaam, September 2018)**



**Representatives from African and Southeast Asian universities during a brainstorming meeting to establish KU-AAP  
(Kasetsart University, March 2020)**