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

Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference Panel & Roundtable:

*Asia-Africa: A New Axis of Knowledge*

**Abstract**

For the first time in modern history, a substantial number of African students and scholars are privileging connections with counterparts and their institutions other than in Western Europe or North America. This trend does not simply result from the increase of economic ties with global Asian and Latin American partners such as China, Japan, India, Turkey and Brazil. 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 period (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, first in Ghana (2015), in Tanzania (2018), in Senegal (2021?). As such, it constitutes an original attempt at decentering and diversifying routes of collaboration in global knowledge production. The A-A platform, involving a number of institutions in Africa and Asia also includes partners from Europe, North (and Latin) America. It also ensures that Asian and African multiple realities are represented, beyond a few countries or subjects of interest in an historically and culturally contextualized fashion. For an Asia-focused European organization like the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the objective is to contribute to a more inclusive, globally connected process of knowledge development 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 institutional iterations, with perspectives from Asia, Africa, and Europe.

**Keywords:** Africa-Asia, Institution building, Event Organisation

(Abstract and Introduction?)

Since 2012, 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 process began with an exploratory programmatic workshop in Chisanba, Zambia, in 2012, which laid the ground for the establishment of a pan-African African Association for Asian Studies (A-ASIA) and the running of triennial Asia-Africa open conferences in Africa. The first of these major historical events was organized in Accra, Ghana, in 2015, in collaboration with the University of Ghana, Legon. A second such event was held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 2018. The next event is scheduled to take place, in 2022 in Saint-Louis, Senegal, (with one-year delay because of the Covid pandemic). All these activities are built on close collaborations involving multiple actors (academic, arts and civil society), with the objective of supporting an inclusive, non-hegemonic, humanistic space of intellectual interactions between the two continents, that is not limited to geo-economic or political considerations. Partners from the other world regions, including Europe, are of course welcome to participate in the A-A platform.

Thanks to its wide global multi-sector network and its post-colonial institutional standing, IIAS plays an important role as logistical facilitator, especially by incorporating the know-how it acquired in running the world renown biennial International Convention for Asia Scholars (ICAS). The institute supports the activities of the A-ASIA network and it works closely with Asia-Africa conference host institutions.

In addition, IIAS supports the development of an alternative transregional knowledge production and dissemination initiative through the ‘Humanities Across Borders (HaB), Africa and Asia in the World’ programme. HaB is not only set to re-imagine a truly multi-centered collaborative educational academic effort. The programme is also characterised by its revolutionary ‘de-colonial’ pedagogical approach in which knowledge is shaped, and shared, from the stand-point of local communities (vis-à-vis the state) around themes drawn from the lived experiences of making (craft), speaking (language), eating (food), and dwelling (space). Supported by the Mellon Foundation, New York, and built around a consortium of 20 institutions in Africa, Asia, North and Latin America and Europe, the HaB programme is primarily built on an active Africa-Asia ‘axis of knowledge’.

- **IIAS: the institutional foundations of a decentered, postcolonial European organization working in, on and with Asia (-ian partners).**

IIAS is a European area studies institute. Yet, from the start, it was as an organization that sought to define and design itself in a way that its activities would be shaped by collaborations and partnerships; a platform addressing the ‘Asia factor’ globally, through shared, multi-centered initiatives capable of performing unusual projects for an always refined mission. This is why, though a national institute, the organization was from the start named “international”. In its origins lies the fundamental intellectual and institutional compromise between two academic traditions in the Netherlands: that of ‘cultural’, contextualized knowledge of a world region, rooted in the philological (protestant) and administrative (colonial) historical legacies carried by Leiden University; that of a social sciences comparative and globalizing approach focusing on transnational long term trends, such as migrations, economic development, as embodied by post-WW2 University of Amsterdam.

To this original ‘DNA’ was added an emphasis on social and cultural inclusion, and an effort to project a functional framework that not only focuses on inter-disciplinary academic research but also on research-inspired pedagogy, institution and network building, South-South-North collaboration, community-based policies, and a more general effort to shape the intellectual and institutional agenda of a changing academic landscape in which universities as public civic agents, are closely entangled with other social activities, and are embedded in their communities.

Needless to say that the subject of Africa-Asia interactions became central in the strategy of IIAS. But its approach drastically differed from that of other Western area studies institutions. From the start, IIAS recognized that its role would mainly be that of a facilitator or incubator, and not of a single-handed knowledge production agent.

It was important to recognize, as discussed collectively at the Chisanba meeting (2012) that a Western institution like IIAS should serve more as an ‘accompanying’ mechanism (not a ‘mediator’). This is why the ranges of its involvement were from the start limited as those of logistically facilitating the development of coalition of partners from Asia, Africa and elsewhere. IIAS could do so by making use of two of its recognized know-how: network building and conference organization.

The epistemological and institutional ‘modesty’ of IIAS’s approach is compounded by its emphasis on collaboration and de-centering efforts. No decision, no plan, have been determined without an inclusive, inductive mode of discussion. As a result, and without trying to minimize the logistical difficulties that went with it, the institute’s involvement is one that has sought to draw a thin line between providing the optimal ‘conditions for action’ without seeking to determine these actions.

Concretely, IIAS has helped in two ways: facilitating the development of a pan-African-yet-Asian-and-international platform of institutions, the African Association for Asian Studies (A-ASIA); enabling the

development of ad-hoc coalitions in view of organizing, every three years, a major Africa-based international conference ‘Africa-Asia, a New Axis of Knowledge’.

The constitution of A-ASIA is still an ongoing, difficult process. From the start, participants sought to avoid to see any one single partner or state take over. The difficulty of running a platform without institutional funding has been a major impediment. The association is nonetheless registered in Ghana. A A-ASIA committee meeting is planned in the near future (already postponed because of Covid) to assess future next steps.

Where IIAS was better able to have an impact was in convening all-inclusive international conferences such as the two A-A ‘A New Axis of Knowledge’ events of Accra and Dar es Salaam, and the one planned in Saint-Louis, on African soil.

- **The Accra (2015) and Dar es Salaam (2019) conferences, and the creation of A-A open platforms at ICAS events, as experienced catharsis for a new ‘axis of knowledge’**
  - Conference Accra, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana, 24-26 September 2015

A factual description of the Accra event (or that of Dar Es Salaam), may not convey what took place there. We can say, though, that IIAS, in collaboration with the Association for Asian Studies in Africa (A-ASIA) and their local and international partners, achieved what was perhaps one of the most daring initiatives the Institute ever organised. With nearly 300 participants originating from 39 countries, mainly from Africa and Asia, and 55 panels and roundtables running in parallel or in succession for three days, each focusing on specific themes or subjects of Asia-Africa interests, the conference was the largest in its field of study ever organised on the continent.

These numbers could not express the unique experience most participants shared in Accra. Unique in that during three days, people from very different intellectual and cultural horizons learned about each other’s work, approaches and ideas; unique for the intellectual significance in ‘Area Studies’ such an event represented, as well as its geopolitical dimension, sixty years after the Bandung Afro-Asiatic conference; unique also, for the well-choreographed range of activities, from the launch of the first Africa-Asia Book Prize to a number of specific side events meant to introduce Ghana’s social and cultural realities to outside visitors; lastly, unique for the historically significant location in which the conference was held on the campus of the University of Ghana at Legon. This last point was particularly important because, in accordance with the initial vision of anchoring an inclusive Asia-Africa academic platform, the combination of a good host environment and efficient organisation was imperative. Most participants, and the members of the organisational team, described the event as much more than the regular academic get-togethers they were used to. An ‘Epiphany’ was how one of the Ghanaian hosts described it.

#### Preparation and Organisation of the Event

*Genesis and Sequences of Preparation of the Project* -- Preparation and organisation work for the Accra event stretched for almost three years, starting with a ground-breaking roundtable on Asian Studies in Africa held in Chisamba, Zambia, in collaboration with the University of Zambia (October 2012). In Chisamba, the institutional groundworks that led to the establishment of the African Association for Asian Studies (A-ASIA) were laid, and with them, recommendations for how Asian Studies in Africa could effectively take shape. One recommendation was to regularly hold an Africa-Asia conference, possibly on a biennial or triennial basis, somewhere on the African continent. Accra and the University of Ghana were chosen to host A-ASIA’s maiden conference.

In the run up to Accra, a number of interim meetings were held, most of which were financially and logistically supported by IAS. In Macau, the A-ASIA steering committee agreed that the process of selecting participants, panels and thematic sessions, would be managed in collaboration with ICAS, whose Secretary is based at IAS in Leiden. In fact, most of the international coordination and fiduciary actions were handled in Leiden using the ICAS model. Throughout the preparation process, partners from the A-ASIA steering committee and network, as well as the Ghana co-hosts, were involved in all the executive tasks, including the preparation of the conference's programme, the selection of participants and panel abstracts, the Book Prize programme and the identification of keynote speakers. Specific tasks such as abstract handling, electronic coordination with participants, construction of the Conference website ([www.africas.asia](http://www.africas.asia)), air ticket reservations, and international sponsors as well as institutional international fundraising activities were managed from the IAS office.

*Fundraising campaign* -- Fundraising for the event was essentially carried out by IAS, led by its Director. At the end of the campaign, IAS succeeded in collecting the equivalent of Euros 200,000 mainly from six sources: Japan Foundation, Seoul National University (South Korea), Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation (Taiwan), Henry Luce Foundation and Andrew Mellon Foundation (US), IAS (The Netherlands). Funding was necessary to cover organisational costs such as a local event organiser, venue, catering, etc. The bulk of the money raised was however devoted to support travel and accommodation costs. About one third of the participants received full or partial funding support. This achievement must be considered in the context of an African country, Ghana, where average hotel and transport costs are among the highest in the world, and the very high costs of inter-African flights. To these 'hard' amounts must be added in-kind contributions made by IAS in the form of staff time and cost devoted to work on the preparation of the event over a period of three years.

The fundraising campaign proved arduous and time-consuming, largely due to the unprecedented character of the Accra event. The fact that IAS was acting on behalf of the A-ASIA organisation somewhat complicated the fundraising campaign. A-ASIA did not have the capacity to raise and handle funds from international institutional sources. In the case of the Accra event, the near total reliance of the A-ASIA network and the host institutions in Ghana on external (re)sources, in particular their dependency on an external institution like IAS, represented a major challenge.

*Local preparation and Logistical Challenges* -- In May 2014, IAS Director Philippe Peycam and ICAS Secretary Paul van der Velde travelled to Accra to investigate the conditions on the ground and to assist the nominated host, A-ASIA Steering Committee Member Prof. Amoah, to meet with major institutions and leaders to assess their interests in the idea of an Africa-Asia event in Ghana. Some strategic Asian embassy missions were contacted (India, China, Japan). Everywhere, especially among Ghanaian scholars, the response was very positive. The then Director of the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies, Prof. Akosua Adomako, saw the A-A initiative as vital for her university which, she believed, ought to play a leading role in promoting the objectives of A-ASIA. The idea of 'Asia in Africa', as a knowledge focus within the African realities, just waiting to be brought to the wider academic public, was defended by numerous local intellectuals. A concrete outcome of this preliminary visit was the confirmation that the University of Ghana should serve as the main host of the event and that Mr. Akunu Dake, upon an introduction made by Prof. Adomako, could serve as the local event organiser, capable of coordinating the whole logistical aspect of the event on the ground.

Given the lack of institutional support likely to be mobilised at the University, IAS provided funding allowances to both Prof. Amoah and Mr. Dake to compensate for their time spent on the preparation of the event. In August 2015, Van der Velde again travelled to Accra to finalise the preparation process. Finally, an IAS team made up of Peycam, Van der Velde, Martina van den Haak (events coordinator), Titia van der Maas (coordinator of the IAS-Mellon programme) and Erika van Bentem (IAS Finance Controller)

arrived four days before the formal beginning of the conference, to help the local organisers to complete numerous preparatory tasks, and, once the conference began, to provide logistical support to the local organisers in terms of participants' reception and registration, booth keeping, panels and roundtables management, etc.

#### Approaches, Themes, Issues Raised

It is not possible to draw too detailed conclusions or even comprehensive generalisations of what was discussed in the fifty-five panels and roundtables held during three intensive days of exchanges. Given the diversity of subjects and approaches to the Africa-Asia axis subject (and their division into specific sub-topics: e.g., Japan and Africa), the organisers framed the discussions into a number of broad thematic sessions under which panels and roundtables could be held. Six thematic sessions were decided upon:

- Transcontinental Connections and Interactions
- Economics, Aid and Development
- Intellectual Encounters
- Arts and Culture
- Migration and Diasporas
- Asian Studies in Africa, African Studies in Asia

In hindsight, a few remarks can be made. First, what was apparent in Accra was the extent to which contemporary topics were overwhelmingly present in all the discussions. For instance, issues associated with China's economic and political impacts within the African socio-economic landscape dominated as a rather ubiquitous theme, underlying mainly African concerns pertaining to long term economic and geopolitical dynamics. The distribution of meetings into inclusive thematic sessions encouraged the integration of these topics into a more complex and richer weave of interacting factors, helping to avoid the risk of 'silo thinking'. Likewise, though with primarily a contemporary focus, many of these debates benefitted from a programme that allowed for a number of historically framed discussions, stressing the importance of embracing Asia-Africa in its totality in time and space.

Another point of thought is the extent to which 'Western'/'Northern' theoretical and institutional 'questions' remained central in most of debates; this owed it much to a still high number of scholars of African or Asian backgrounds operating in Western institutions. To avoid such entrapments, a number of discussions, including the IAS (Mellon)-sponsored ones ('Asia through an African Lens: Rethinking the Discourse on Asian Studies'; 'Towards a Sustainable Model of Asian Studies in Africa'), and many others, chose to directly address the question of Western dominance through its theoretical and methodological engagements, but also by concretely concentrating on the economic and institutional aspects of this domination, in both the Asian and African contexts.

A third remark has to do with the complementarity of academic and intellectual approaches that was perceptible among the participants at the conference, with a combination of people already specialised in Africa-Asia-related issues and others, versed in a knowledge located within one of the two regions, whose presence in Accra signified the shared desire to engage in comparative and connected studies. This combination was what guaranteed the vitality of the conference and what should ensure the sustainability of an autonomous Africa-Asia 'axis of knowledge', as envisioned by the organisers of the conference. For instance, the two Leiden University-sponsored panels on 'Political Agencies in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Global: Convergences and Contrasts of African and Asian Contexts' saw – mostly historian – participants confronting their experiences and methodologies over the connected subject of colonialism as experienced in the two continents. In the end, and sometimes thanks to the mediation of those who had already 'taken the leap' with an Asia-Africa approach, a number of intellectual parallel points, as well as

connected ones, or ‘bridges’, were identified. Such a process will take a long time to soak into the mainstream academic discourse. Convening a large-scale event like that of the Accra conference was precisely aimed at accelerating such development.

A special note should be added on the importance of the keynotes. In Accra, more than in other traditional academic events where keynotes have become a ritual, the importance of path-opening inspirational speeches could not be underestimated. Here, the intellectual and institutional efforts deployed by the organisers saw the limits of what was possible at that time. Out of the three keynotes especially, Prof. Engseng Ho (“Turning and Thinking China-Africa Through Other Regional Axes”), sought to seriously engage with the methodological ambitions of the Accra conference. In what was a real *tour de force*, Ho succeeded in harnessing ideas from the previous days’ discussions by creatively engaging with the multiplicity of connections and inter-dependencies linking the two world regions. He did so by looking through the prism of a number of historical ‘axes’ “acting in concert to give density to the emotional charge of China-Africa”, thereby giving consistence to the relations between Asia and Africa.

Overall, the Africa-Asia Accra Conference was an event in which a real desire to seek commonalities of comparison and connections is what was all the participants shared. Commonalities (and subsequently comparisons), can allow for the identification of hidden connections, while they can help to better inform our understandings of social phenomena in our different societies. Yet, affirming the importance of commonalities and interconnectivities must be mitigated by an effort to depart from creating new stereotypes or essentializations. Sophistication rather than generalisations, and a reasoned reliance on original sources and archives are the key first steps in this process.

#### Significance of the Event

The Africa-Asia Accra conference was a historic event, with great symbolic representation: the sixtieth anniversary of the first Afro-Asian conference in Bandung (Indonesia in 1955), and the critical role played there by Ghana under President Kwame Nkrumah. These two points had been decisive at the Chisamba meeting for the selection of Accra as the host of the A-ASIA maiden conference.

In hindsight, the significance of this conference lies first and foremost in the anticipation of the A-ASIA’s Steering Committee members and their determination, with the support of IIAS/ICAS, to organise such an event in Africa, regardless of all the practical and logistical challenges likely to be faced. Ultimately, the organisers were proven right. Throughout the preparation phase of the event, and despite the numerous obstacles encountered, they experienced a sustained flow of interest on the part of scholars from all over the world who shared the same view that such an event *should* and *had to* take place in Africa. At the end, the presence and contribution of nearly 300 individuals in Accra from over 39 nations in Asia, Africa and the rest of the world, many of whom travelled from faraway countries for the first time, in spite of multiple technical hurdles (Ebola scare, flight routing, visas, vaccination requirements, etc.), is testimony to the overwhelming support the Africa-Asia Accra conference received from a substantial fraction of the academic communities in Asia, Africa and elsewhere.

By converging to the University of Ghana at Legon, for many Africans a temple of emancipation through knowledge, to engage with one another and give life to the idea of a multifaceted multi-disciplinary space of intellectual exchanges between scholars from the two continents and their colleagues from the rest of the world, the participants in the event ‘made history’. Moreover, what the organisers had sought from the beginning, was to establish this channel of intellectual and academic interaction in a truly humanistic perspective, one that recognised cultural, linguistic and historical complexities, free from past assumptions or conventions or from narrow contemporary economic and geopolitical concerns. In that, the conditions were fulfilled for a new ‘axis’ of intellectual interactions to grow, unrestricted from circumscribed

perceptions and categories, including the conventional ‘area studies’ of Africa or Asia inherited from the Western imperial pasts, which somewhat continue to persist in most of the Africa-Asia studies initiatives currently underway in the ‘North’. What became new, thanks to the Accra conference, is that exchanges between intellectuals from the two continents could for the first time develop on the basis of a newly common history of shared experiences and expectations and the promises such an ‘alternative’ axis could offer for the future.

#### Potentials for Institutionalisation of Trans-regional and Pan-African/Asian networks

What the Accra conference demonstrated is the need for national and pan-African institutions, particularly in Africa, but also in many parts of Asia, to invest in the development of centres of knowledge and education devoted to the comprehensive study of the other world region. In the host country of this A-ASIA maiden conference, and in other African countries, this means that national institutions like the University of Ghana must capitalise on the achievements represented by the Accra conference and the existence of the A-ASIA network by building long term educational and research programmes devoted to the study of Asia, Asian languages and societies.

On the conference’s opening ceremony, on 25 September 2015, the University of Ghana’s Vice Chancellor Prof. Ernest Aryeetey officially announced the establishment of a new Asian Studies Centre, the first such structure independently set up on the continent. For other African higher learning institutions and their governments, this move could be seen as an important precedent calling for its emulation. For non-African institutions, in Asia and elsewhere, the decision of the University of Ghana should open a new phase in which Ghanaian and African colleagues can work alongside their colleagues from Asia, the United States, Australia, Latin America.

- Conference ‘Asia-Africa, A New Axis of Knowledge’ 2, University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 20-22 September 2019

Three years after Accra, IIAS and ICAS served once again as facilitators of the second edition of the international conference ‘Asia-Africa, A New Axis of Knowledge’ that took place in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 20-22 September 2018. The other key partners in this endeavour were the host, the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), and A-Asia.

As three years before in Accra, the Dar es Salaam event celebrated the existence of alternative circuits of exchanges in which the usual ‘periphery’ became the dynamic vector of new knowledge. 380 participants joined 92 panels and roundtables that were held, for most of them, at the UDSM Business School. Institutions from 56 nationalities were represented. The events were preceded by two keynotes, by Prof. Zulfiqarali Premji, Senior Economist from Tanzania and Prof. Oussouby Sacko, Malian-Japanese, President of Kyoto-Seika University, Japan, in the university’s Nkrumah Hall.

The event benefited from the involvement of our colleagues from UDSM, especially Dr. Mathew Senga, our main counterpart from the College of Social Sciences. He was aided by a number of organizational committees made up of young UDSM faculty and graduate students. They delivered one of the smoothest and heartfelt events we at IIAS have ever been involved in. Throughout the preparation of the event, Senga and his teams received the support of the UDSM Vice-Chancellor, Prof. William Anangisye.

IIAS’s collaboration with UDSM was not limited to organizational and logistical matters. Like IIAS, they sought to raise awareness among scholars, especially within the Tanzanian and East African academic community. And like IIAS, they did their utmost to raise resources to ensure that the event would be as open and inclusive as possible. Together with the IIAS/ICAS team, the UDSM colleagues worked in unison

to shape the program, to organize the panels along nine broad themes, to choose the keynotes, etc. It was a real partnership.

The result was an increase in the number and quality of contributions from participants coming from a wide variety of horizons. A number of the new participants came from regions that were not present in Accra: North Africa and the Maghreb, Central and Eastern Europe, Middle-East, Southeast, Western and Central Asia. There were more participants from francophone African countries – though still almost none from Lusophone regions. A growing number came from Latin America and Oceania, and of course, South and East Asia, North America and Western Europe. This Africa-Asia axis of knowledge has become a truly global space, an original platform that inspired beyond the spatiality of the two continents.

Another special feature of the conference in Dar es Salaam was the number of universities, institutes and even academic journals that agreed to support the event in its plurality by funding individuals in need of assistance. Among them were University of Dar es Salaam, Calicut University, University of Ghana, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Michigan University, National University of Singapore, Social Sciences Research Council, Leiden University, IIAS, Andrew Mellon Foundation, the academic publisher Taylor and Francis, *Itinerario* journal, and of course, the Henry Luce Foundation. This was an important development because it showed how the A-A conference platform that was initiated three years earlier in Accra was now included in the global landscape of academic conferences, and that the need for this alternative South-South ‘axis of knowledge’ was now institutionally recognized, even though it was implanted in Africa rather than in mainstream ‘northern’ university circuits.

There were other organizations whose members worked hard to get their presidents, deans or heads of department, often against tight financial constraints, to sponsor or contribute to the cost of a panel or a roundtable. They cannot all be named here. Among them were University Gaston Berger (Senegal), Airlangga University (Indonesia), Ibadan University (Nigeria), University of Memphis (US), Vietnam National University, University of Zambia, and Kasetsart University (Thailand). In this list of supporting institutions, we saw African, Indian, American, Pakistani, Chinese, European, Japanese, Central or Southeast Asian universities working *together* to ensure a maximum plurality of participants regardless of institutional, disciplinary or national backgrounds.

It is not possible to draw too detailed conclusions or even comprehensive generalizations of what was discussed in the 92 panels and roundtables, held during three intensive days of exchanges. Given the diversity of subjects and approaches to the Africa-Asia axis subject (and their division into specific sub-topics: e.g., Japan and Africa), the organizers chose to frame the discussions into a number of broad thematic sessions under which panels and roundtables could be held. Emphasizing an inclusive approach, the conference was organized around a series of broad thematic multi-disciplinary and multi-sectorial groupings that highlight multiple flows and mobilities linking the two continents:

- Transcontinental Connections and Interactions; Historical Dimensions;
- The Indian Ocean World; Economy and Development;
- Intellectual and Educational Encounters;
- (Im)Migration, Diaspora, Refugees, and Identities;
- Knowledge Sharing between Africa and Asia;
- Architecture, the Urban, and the Neighbourhood;
- Arts, Culture, and Experiments.

Specifically, the central unifying theme for the conference was a call to understand the histories and futures of Africa-Asia as a simultaneous unfolding; and to rethink the methodologies and knowledge practices



through which we view Africa in Asia and Asia in Africa and, beyond Africa, Asia and other world regions, as ‘fields of study’.

For the reasons exposed above, the conference in Dar es Salaam undeniably constitutes another academic landmark that held the potential to not only reframe the field of Asian Studies by further decentring its modes of engagement, but more generally, to recast the scholarly practice of area studies by combining multi-polarity and multi-sectorial analysis as an approach more adapted to today’s interrelated global reality.

Judging by the number and quality of the participants and institutions involved, the success of the enterprise calls nonetheless for a reflection on its sustainability. Until now, academic area studies endeavours were the privileges of economically affluent countries. Originally confined to North American, West European, Oceanian (Australia and New Zealand) and Japan, the geopolitical environment that emerged in the wake of the new millennium, especially with China and its single-handed strategic deployment of area studies covering all the regions of the world, with a number of countries following suit (India, Brazil, South Korea, Singapore, South Africa), calls for a more balanced and reciprocated model capable of mitigating risks of new hegemonic configurations.

Nowadays there is a growing unbalance in the Africa-Asia academic axis as a result of Chinese expansion. 30 Chinese universities now operate African studies centres whose terms of exchanges are largely dependent on (Chinese) state funding mechanisms with no chances for African counterparts to reciprocate them. This phenomenon is also found in the relations China exerts toward Southeast Asia in which, Singapore apart, a very few locally-run area or Chinese studies programs are no match to the massive Chinese investments. This risk of structural imbalance can be confronted by facilitating the running of inclusive spaces of exchanges like the Dar es Salaam conference. Such kind of initiative must be encouraged and made long-standing by seeking a multiplicity of institutional and financial supports, a number of which should originate from Africa and or South and Southeast Asia. For this balancing process to occur, it is critical that established area studies institutions from regions like the United States, Western Europe and Japan contribute more, and decisively, toward the development of sustained area studies centres in those southern regions. This process is rooted in the long term. It will require a number of priority-shifts to occur. In the shorter term, and before area studies academic programs incorporate in their mission the task of contributing to build local capacities in the regions they study, it is critical that initiatives such as the *Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge* conferences be supported and institutionalized. The reinforcement of the A-ASIA secretariat and the organization of regular meetings of its steering committee is one pending issue that emerged out of the discussions in Dar es Salaam.

As exposed in detail above, the Dar es Salaam conference did more than achieve its stated goals, something we could not be sure before the event took place. Most of the registered participants were present, with a substantial number from underprivileged backgrounds receiving funding support. Also mentioned before, it is the sheer diversity of backgrounds and origins of the participants, and the increased quality of the papers presented (compared to the Accra conference) that made the Dar conference an outstanding success. The fact that a critical mass of participants from Southeast Asia, Central Asia and other hitherto unrepresented regions of Africa, Asia and beyond were present, rendered the conference all the more meaningful.

The Africa-Asia conference in Dar es Salaam had many unanticipated outcomes. One of them was the level of involvement of the host institution UDSM, and their willingness to not only contribute to the costs of the event, but also their commitment to anchor its legacy into their institutional and programmatic activities, like before them the University of Ghana and their subsequent establishment of a Centre for Asian Studies. A first step has been USDMM’s engagement to produce a two-copy edited volume out of the conference.

Discussions are underway within the institution and in relation with international partners over the establishment of a Centre for Indian Ocean Studies at UDSM.

Another unexpected outcome of the conference was the desire expressed by institutions in Africa and Asia to host follow-up events. For instance, Vietnam National University wants to organize a conference on Africa-Southeast Asia in 2021; likewise, with Kasertart University in Bangkok. In both cases, a prelude to the establishment of centres or facilities devoted to Africa is the exploration of collaborations with African institutions. Another example: University Gaston Berger of Senegal wants to open a Center entitled 'Africa and the World', with Asia and Asia-Africa relations becoming its first theme of investigation. Scholars from other regions (e.g. Middle East and Latin America) also expressed an interest in organizing similar inter-regional events (in relation to Asia).

The Dar es Salaam Africa-Asia conference, like the Accra one before, must be seen as pertaining to a novel kind of trans-regional 'area studies' platform. Those scholars who participated in one (or both) of these conferences can testify to their transformative appeal. A sentiment, shared by many during the events, is that something new and critically important happened there. They experienced first-hand the exhilarating feeling one encounters when one steps out of our comfort zone and is forced to reach out to counterparts from totally different backgrounds, and how this experience can be extremely rewarding, especially when one is confronted with an all-different historical, cultural and geographical reality.

This exercise not only helps to better situate one's scholarship by testing ideas on new grounds. It also inspires to draw new, hitherto unseen comparisons, to search for otherwise hidden connections, or simply to fine-tune narratives or argumentations so that they attain the kind of resonance that transcends particularities. A subtly subversive displacement thereby occurs that can help humanities scholars embrace realities in a decentred-yet-connected manner and allow them to shift paradigms. With it, is the possibility of forging new intellectual alignments, of apprehending new sensibilities, of testing new analytical approaches, of transcending hierarchies or categories we had long thought immune to changes. These may be rooted in deep-seated beliefs and mental – ideological – constructions delineated by value systems often imposed by institutions, national narratives, or the fragmentation of knowledge into disciplines.

What came out of these periphery-turned-centre events, is that new agencies only emerge if they emanate from truly inclusive trans-regional forums, and that for them to arise free from existing constraints, they need to do so *outside* the mainstream circuits. Indeed, by moving away from the traditionally confined and located 'academic territories' usually populated by self-defined 'specialists' of the two regions, the Africa-Asia events of Accra and Dar es Salaam openly disrupted the implicit restrictive function presiding over academia in the global order and its hierarchized division of labour. It is in fact at a time when we are all experiencing a deep crisis of the Western-dominated 'grand narrative', with human, ecological but also epistemological impasses everyday clearer, that this kind of Africa-Asia fora, by mobilizing multiple ways to 'be in the world', can prove their full worth. Not only can they engage critically with the relations of power at the heart of old epistemologies, but they can offer new angles to apprehend the world through a shared, kaleidoscopic language.

A-ASIA and its partner institutes, including IIAS, are keen to continue to support a process that was first engaged in Chisamba and in Accra. In fact, since these pioneering meetings, more institutions and people have expressed the desire to partake in the enterprise. As opposed to Accra, where IIAS undertook to directly raise funds on behalf of the whole event, the Dar es Salaam event set a new modus operandi by seeing a number of institutions join forces to offset the cost of bringing individuals from regions of Africa and Asia and beyond deserving to participate. Moving forward, we expect this example of collaboration to continue whilst hopefully more African resources will be mobilized. The plan for a third edition of the

meeting was arrested in Dar es Salaam. In spite of the recent COVID crisis, we still hope that the third AA event will take place in Senegal, at the end of 2021 or 2022. This will of course depend on the general health and travel situation, but also on the capacity of the organizing partners and potential new ones to make it happen.

- **Humanities Across Borders (HaB) (2017-2025): A decolonial pedagogical model for a sustained Africa-Asia academic collaborative framework**

Humanities across Borders is a network-based program at IAS that commenced in 2017 with a broad objective to implement a decolonial pedagogical model built and sustained across an Africa-Asia framework of academic collaborations. HaB's methodological and curricular interventions in higher education aim to shift academic dialogue towards an Africa-Asia-in-the-world axis through intra- and inter-regional collaborations amongst its 20 member consortium of institutions in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and Central America. Thus, for instance, University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, an HaB consortium member, can look forward to working with African colleagues such as the University of Ghana, University of Gaston Berger, Saint-Louis, Senegal and social science and humanities research institutions like INSS-CNRS, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso and Institut des Sciences Humaines, Bamako, Mali. Beyond Africa, they can forge long term ties with Kyoto Seika University, Chiang Mai University in Thailand, Ambedkar University Delhi, India, Leiden University, Northern Illinois University, and El Colegio de México, to enhance their own capacity building efforts through faculty and student exchanges in the course of implementing HaB's inter-institutional objectives.

HaB's collaborative education model involves co-creating situated knowledge in a global context by providing sustained spaces for *thinking together* across national, geographic, linguistic, cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Ours is an inter-cultural approach to scholarship that transcends 'borders-of-the-mind' that exist between academic work and community work; between the so-called 'soft' arts and humanities subjects and the 'hard' sciences; between wealthier universities and those that are under-resourced; and finally, between established, encyclopedic institutions and those that are more agile, embracing a socially/environmentally embedded approach to their curricula. It is for this reason that HaB's trans-regional network, committed to building humanist capacities at the inter-institutional level, stands at the heart of the HaB approach and in fact draws from the capacities, experience and innovations of its partners. .

The HaB consortium promotes uncommon collaborative arrangements—intra-regional partnerships and multi-university thematic clusters—for teaching and learning across the Africa-Asia-in-the-world axis of knowledge. The need for vitalising Africa-Asia connections and collaborations cannot be reiterated enough; Especially now as we are witness to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic which has exposed the unsustainable and inequitable infrastructures of global North purporting to benefit many but only advancing the interests of the few. Meanwhile, African and Asian countries such as Senegal and Taiwan with strong investments in public healthcare and education systems have emerged as public champions whose models the world has yet to emulate. Our idea is to facilitate, over a sustained period of time, a number of educational nodes among the HaB network of committed institutions, so that their diverse pedagogical innovations and contributions are, not only recognised but also, disseminated among academe across the world.

HaB pedagogies allow universities to build bridges with their local milieu, be pro-active players in the region's development, and mutually strengthen each other's role in building a public humanist value-based education for the rising generations. HaB's place-based or situated methodologies have demonstrated that linkages with local community actors, offer opportunities for civic engagement and learning for

students, using experiential, out-of-classroom pedagogies. Speaking of the consultative workshops he has conducted with local community elders in small towns and villages outside Legon since 2018, Kojo Aidoo, of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, an HaB partner institution, had this to say: “I have, during field stints, encountered griot-like figures (migrants in Ghana, Togo, and Benin), who are regarded for their reflective philosophical knowledge, as ‘walking libraries’ with up-to-date knowledge and histories of their communities. They demonstrate illimitable possibilities for the formal educational establishment. They tell their stories from memory extemporaneously, elaborating actions/events at length. These experiences challenge the conventional pedagogical paradigm and call for alternative frameworks.”

HaB methodologies involve Africa-Asia conversations around themes drawn from the lived experiences of making (craft, cultivation), speaking (language and words), eating (food and well-being), and dwelling (space/place). The goal of the program is to provide access to all its participating members with shared thematic projects, syllabi, and classrooms. This means that partners from Africa can collaborate at the level of teaching and curricula-development with colleagues in Asia and vice versa. The themes or ‘sites of knowledge and meaning’ allow for a de-colonial perspective, beyond the Area Studies research framework, and encourage consortium members to freely build their own collaborative arrangements for teaching and learning within the network. According to Tharaphi Than, from Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, an HaB participating member, “Using rice, indigo, words and food, as a research lens for instance, scholars and students are empowered to document, narrate, and share their intimate and familiar worlds to the rest of the world. When they are writing about food—be it a chewing betel leaf or common tea leaf salad, students are freed from ‘getting the history right’, as one of my students in Myanmar, put it. Such new methods should be welcomed and in fact institutionalized by the global North. Decolonizing curricula and Area Studies can start from small steps and one such step is lifting the burden of mastering the canons or mimicking the West.”

HaB’s approach of combining ‘situated knowledge’ - people’s narratives, experiences and knowledge-practices - with conventional education in a global collaborative milieu, is an original way to implement an inter-cultural model of scholarship, and encourage teaching and research that is sensitive to local environmental, social and economic urgencies, whilst situating findings in a broader global context. At the International Convention of Asia Scholars in Leiden, ICAS 11 (15-19 July 2019), the HaB roundtable ‘Place, Practice and Nature: Indigo’ shed light on the versatility of indigo for its uses in Asia and Africa. While in both continents the plant has a long history of use in dyeing, it was evident that state narratives and policy trajectories were vastly different in each of the cases presented. The Roundtable meeting illustrated the need to collaborate at the regional and trans-regional levels for a shared academic forum that would surpass disciplinary compartmentalisation in the study of indigo. For instance, HaB partners at Mali, at the ISH in Bamako, who had so far primarily studied the indigo plant through geographical surveys, discovered potentially far reaching ramifications for their activities. Quite unlike in Mali, nation-states have played a central role in promoting traditional textile and dye sectors elsewhere. In neighboring Burkina Faso, for example, after three decades of a consistent policy of protecting the national *faso danfani*, the artisanal textile has become a value-added product sustaining many families and communities. The role of public universities in India, Taiwan and Thailand in supporting artisans was particularly eye opening for them, since such university outreach work is possible in Mali too, if only there is sufficient awareness and commitment. All these lessons from HaB meetings have triggered questions about a shift in orientation in ISH’s research on Malian indigo and artisanal textiles.

Similarly, discussing rice as a staple of Asia and Africa, at a number of workshops and panels facilitated by the HaB program, has led to a growing repository of cultural narratives, linguistic terms, images and practices of rice-growing communities in parts of Asia and Africa. The ecologies and methods of rice cultivation, varieties extant and extinct, associated conflicts and commodification across the two continents, gesture towards rice – its cultivation and consumption – as a shared methodological point of departure for

teaching and research. Going forward, African and Asian members of the HaB consortium intend to discuss how to archive memories, biographies and narratives around rice - techniques, seed conservation, varieties, irrigation, crop cycle, riots, rituals - towards a repository of agro-ecological cartographies where community-based knowledge of rice and other staples forms the basis for a humanities-grounded syllabi across participating institutions. The idea is to explore rice related legacies, resiliencies and revivals in a trans-regional context.

These are some of the ways in which HaB's decolonizing and localizing knowledge approach, to indigo and rice for instance, has the potential of generating an alternate public discourse; it will be particularly significant as it gains purchase with institutions of higher education both in the North and South.