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

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Abstract

This work explores the establishment of Centres for Asian Studies in Africa as institutional actors in the counter-hegemonic project of decolonization. The processes that led to the setting up of the Centre for Asian Studies (the first in Black Africa excepting South Africa) at the University of Ghana serve as a case study. The article utilizes information gathered through the author’s ongoing participation over the last eight years in the ideational, organizational, logistical, financial and institution building moves that are aiding the establishment of an ultimately emancipatory Asian Studies in Africa research framework. At its core this work points out how African Asianist scholars with their partners elsewhere decided to take counterhegemonic action, and how their approach differs from the status quo as a prefigurative politics of the power-with society they seek. The work rounds off with some of the needling challenges that still remain to be surmounted.

Key words: Asian Studies in Africa, Centres for Asian Studies, power-with, hegemony, counterhegemony

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Introduction

China's phenomenal economic transformation in the last three decades of the 20th century has generated interesting responses. One critical response has been the rise of interest in understanding not just China but Asia for pragmatic reasons (to guide say bureaucrats in negotiations with their Chinese, Japanese or Korean counterparts) and for intellectual and cultural motives. But vexing questions have arisen on how to engage Asia for the reasons adduced on a continent that had not built any systematic knowledge base on Asia : where to start?, which models to follow ?, and how to go about it?

The US Area Studies model deployed after World War II and bankrolled by financially endowed foundations like Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford(through a vast network of universities and think tanks) seemed both an alluring and easy fit for an Africa that came to adopt neoliberalism as her foremost socio-economic mode of organization in the 1980s.This is precisely because neoliberalism succeeded in drawing Africa ever more intimately into the Euro-American space and thus generated increasing intimacy with the educational ideas, experiences, values and processes of this world region. This work concerns itself with this power-over process and how this can be overcome via a power-with approach by tapping into the author's ongoing participation in the ideational, organizational, logistical, financial and institution building processes that are aiding the establishment of an authentic, ground up, participatory and ultimately emancipatory Asian Studies in Africa framework. This highlights in particular the agential, solidaristic and even serendipitous processes that made all this possible in record time

as a contribution towards navigating and overcoming *power-over*¹ strictures in the African academy and elsewhere in neoliberal times.

Orientalism, Area Studies, Asian Studies and Africa -Three Waves and Inventing a Fourth

In our view, at this particular historical juncture, the *power-over* mode dominates knowledge production in one of the most critical spaces for such processes, the African Academy. The pervasiveness of this mode of power and its portends weighed heavily on the minds of African scholars who wanted to research on Africa-Asia relations as the interactions between the two continents deepened in recent times. This angst was aggravated by the well documented histories of Area Studies and Asian Studies and their suffusion with *power-overness*.

Imperialism (and its modern paradigm case, Empire) has always been spatial; it sought territories to conquer and dominate. But this spatiality must be understood in a dual sense, the corporeal and the incorporeal. The latter is the intellectual part which allows the former to reproduce itself infinitely if possible. Orientalism (as a discourse²) will lay the basis (in the nineteenth century) or better still, inspire, Area Studies to play this reproduction role as the West dealt with the other. Orientalism sought insights about the non-Western world that were static and non-generalizable; “frozen structures that have been hanging there for centuries”(Kolluoglu-Kirli 2003: p. 96) in order to understand, predict and ultimately make malleable that world for domination and control. Edward W. Said’s (1978:2-3) describes Orientalism as:

¹ The formidable apparatus of the Folletian(2003:78) notion of power over(“So far as my observation has gone, it seems to me that power usually means power-over, the power of some person or group over some other person or group....”), is palpable and forces us to muse over the profound limits neoliberalism sets on African intellectual pursuits in the Academy.

² As a discourse we mean here following Said (1978) that Orientalism had its peculiar ontology and epistemology that distinguished the essentially White Western world from the non-White non-Western. On these Mills(1997) provides fascinating but sobering insights.

the corporate institution dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, *ruling over it*: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for *dominating*, restructuring, and having *authority* over the Orient”(emphasis added).

If Orientalism as an academic discipline was more inclined initially toward theological ambitions, this will all change with the Western colonial onslaught following Napoleon’s Egyptian Campaign (Fück 1962). The central value in this particular stage of the evolution of Orientalism was its role as the cerebral handmaiden of the political, economic and cultural exploitation of the colonies. The emergence of liberation movements in the colonized world stopped Orientalism in its tracks for the rise of new sovereign states turned the colonized into subjects (Fanon 1963; Abdel-Malek 1963) not static objects of study for the economic and other goals of imperialism. Area studies will fill up the vacuum that Orientalism left as it was pressed into the supreme service of American hegemony in the twentieth century. The hegemonic interests that marked Orientalism’s hey days found expression in the rationale for the emergence of Area Studies during World War II and its aftermath in its : “originating in specialized military training programs to train soldiers and civilians assigned to administer occupied territories in Europe and the “Far East;” Area Studies was constituted as a field of enquiry on the U.S. ascension to a position of global hegemony” (Palat 1996 : 270-271). Lambert(1973: 13) corroborates this : “in recent years language and area studies, however defined, have been one of the most remarkable growth industries on American campuses.....” Knowledge and *power-over* were thus fused; an old combine in a new expression :

Orientalism was a distinctively European enterprise. It emerged with the European capitalist expansion and reached its maturity at the point when Europe’s expansion was being consolidated with colonialism. It lost its ground with the loss of Europe’s

hegemonic position. Area studies is a distinctively American enterprise. It emerged with the Second World War, which witnessed the United States' ascent to a hegemonic position in the world-system..... (Kolluoglu-Kirli 2003:107)

Asian studies emerged as an important component of area studies in the U.S. Indeed as at 1970 of the 312 area programmes on U.S. colleges and universities (Lambert 1973:15) 36.54% were linked to the Asian continent. The U.S. model for building Area Studies and with it Asian Studies was, at the risk of sounding simplistic, marked by the following(Kolluoglu-Kirli, 2003; Pye, 1975; Lambert, 1973) : state funding(through the National Defense Education Act's, Title VI), support from leading foundations especially Rockefeller, Ford and Carnegie and de-emphasizing of the humanities in favour of the social sciences. This was the model (especially the last two elements) that given the prevailing hegemonic mode of knowledge production in the African Academy and in the absence of any compelling alternative was going to be normed. Fanon(1963:148) had presciently pointed out the hegemonic conditions of knowledge production: "it so happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, their laziness, and, let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps." To borrow Fanon's description following such a norm will be an example of "nauseating mimicry" (1963:311). Could an alternative be forged as a fourth but novel link in the inescapable necessity to understand and engage other cultures and regions with less instrumental discursive concerns and ontological and epistemological premises?

Here I want to make a distinction between positive and negative instrumentality. Negative instrumentality to borrow a Millsian term is about exploitation of the non-West; exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources/ and the denial of equal socioeconomie

opportunities...(Mills1997:11). This is what hegemonic Asian Studies was concerned with. Positive instrumentality is about mutual nurturance wherein the study of Asia benefits both Africa and Asia and the world at large. A dedicated collection of Asianists working on the five continents decided that this alternative was possible, anchored in true mutual learning and exchange between Africa and Asia that will take into account both parties' historical and contemporary experiences and intellectual traditions in all their complex and diverse facets.

THE FOURTH WAVE (FW) IN THE MAKING: ASIAN STUDIES IN AFRICA

How did a collection of Asianists in Africa and other continents set in motion a fresh approach (FW) to Asian Studies with different logics? This question is made the more pertinent because the historical, material and technological conditions in Africa in particular (and the world generally) in the last two hundred years (at the very least), had conspired to make a pointed focus on Asian studies in many ways a virtual impossibility. Historically, Africa's intellectual compass was rigidly and firmly orientated Northwards; Asia was not even a peripheral consideration. Too few potential African scholars ventured into Asian Studies even though the Bandung Conference of 1955 had come to symbolize and herald Africa-Asia connections in all its facets including that linked to knowledge production(Ampiah 2007; Vitalis 2013; Wood 2012) It was uncharted territory given the palpable absence of a tradition, physical facilities, programmes, clear research foci, language training, mentors, funding and journals; indeed all the works necessary for a decent intellectual career. These stark realities on balance completely precluded any possibilities for the emergence of Asian Studies in Africa. The irony though is that in many Asian countries, there are local African studies associations or groupings. The reality though has begun to change.

We will postulate here three explanatory tropes (tied to agency) which reveal what we will describe as the vulnerabilities of Empire: counter-hegemony supporting entities (individuals and organizations), serendipity and technology (information technology). These, in our view, are critical weapons, in the arsenal of the forces of counter-Empire as they work towards “autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges”(Hardt and Negri: xv). These vulnerabilities point to the perceptive claim (Hardt and Negri: xv) that:

The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself—indeed; such new struggles have already begun to emerge. Through these struggles and many more like them, the multitude will have to invent new democratic forms and a new constituent power that will one day take us through and beyond Empire.

By serendipity (Quayson 2014:9) it is meant here the ways in which chance uncontrollably aids the agent’s purposes. In spite of the dire Asian Studies infrastructure some Africans still trained their scholarly interests on Asia. A Ghanaian scholar, Professor Kweku Ampiah, now currently at Leeds University and one of Africa’s foremost experts on Japan is a typical example. He informed this author that when he decided to go to Japan to have his undergraduate studies, the Scholarship Panel in Ghana were in utter disbelief. They considered him wayward and urged him to go study in the West. He, however, persisted and went to Japan where he mastered the Japan Language and has been one of the foremost scholars of Africa-Japan interactions. Dr. Webby Kalikiti(native of Zambia) comes in to the picture here as one of such Africans who proved a key link in the chain that has proved critical in the ongoing establishment of Asian Studies in Africa. Kalikiti went to Vietnam to pursue his doctorate in the 1990s and there serendipitously met

the Frenchman Philippe Peycam who was also working on his doctorate there. The two forged a friendship and discussed with other friends the need for Asian Studies in Africa; this idea will begin to be realized decades later. Kalikiti returned to the University of Zambia to teach while Peycam stayed in the region (Cambodia) to build, over a decade, the Center for Khmer Studies as its founding director. This was obviously a period in which Peycam built up his knowledge on the financial, logistical and other perquisites for building Asian Studies in the non-Western world. And not just these but the fresh intellectual directions that such an undertaking must necessarily take as an exercise in counter-hegemony. Commenting in a foreword in a book that examines this vexing question in Eastern Europe Peycam(2018:viii) lucidly characterized this reframing project as “aimed at reconfiguring the “area studies” paradigm — and the inherent danger of an imbalanced approach or “gaze” that characterizes it — to create a new mechanism in which “Eastern” and “Western” academic milieus, as agents and “ecologies” of knowledge production, are placed on equal footing so as to enable truly culturally cross-connected research projects.” At the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden, the Netherlands, where he moved to from Cambodia, he set about with like-minded colleagues including Kalikiti and Paul van der Velde to explore the possibility of realizing this in Africa.

Key Moves for Asian Studies in Africa-Lusaka, Accra and Dar es Salaam

Technology proved a critical facilitator in the moves to build a decolonial Asian Studies in Africa showing in the process what agency can do in counter-hegemony undertakings. This is clearly counter-intuitive given that technology is at the hub of the informational economy. According to Castells (2010, p.41)

The informational economy opens up an extraordinary potential for solving our problems, but, because of its dynamism and creativity, it is potentially more exclusionary than the industrial economy if social controls do not check the unfettered market logic. (emphasis added)

Through email, the African Asianists and their counterparts decided to harness the “extraordinary potential for solving our problems” inherent in information technology. The author did not know Kalikiti or Peycam. He was in his little corner researching and writing on Africa-Asia relations. The internet allowed them to find his work and then make contact through email which in recent times tends to go with journal publications in particular. That is how they participated in the first “strategic workshop” (Invitation Letter hereafter IL) on Asian Studies which was held in Lusaka, Zambia. The rationale was clear (IL): “The aim of this two-day brainstorming event will be to discuss concrete strategic steps toward developing coordinated educational capacity building activities in Asian studies in a number of African universities in partnership with Asian and other international institutions.....”

This Lusaka (Chisamba) Workshop (November 9-11, 2012) attempted to provide a roadmap for two pertinent issues for Asian studies in Africa: institution building, and with it,

making it possible for the emergence and sustainability of African Asianists. As part of the process it was decided that the first Conference on Asian Studies in Africa should be held at the University of Ghana (UG), Legon in Ghana's capital, Accra. The workshop in Lusaka and the University of Ghana Conference was aided by counter-hegemony supporting entities (to the extent that they supported the vision for Asian Studies in Africa) on five continents. These included research focused organizations such as the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden, the South-South Exchange Programme (SEPHIS), Amsterdam and the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Programme (SEASREP), Manila, and funding ones notably the Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation in Taiwan, the Toyota Foundation in Japan, the Social Sciences Research Council, New York, the International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS), Leiden, the Mellon Foundation, New York and the Japan Foundation. Professor Ernest Aryeetey, then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, could be described as a counter-hegemony supporting individual as far as the conference at UG was concerned. The Committee working on the conference canvassed him and he provided ample support including the superb facilities of the UG.

The conference, which took almost three years of planning, was held over three days, September 24-26, 2015 with a theme that spoke to the guiding vision of Lusaka, *Africa-Asia-A New Axis of Knowledge*. The Conference proved a resounding success in three key ways. Firstly it brought together, as never before, in intellectual conversation African and Asian scholars and they in turn dialogued with their counterparts from the other continents on Asia (Amoah and Peycam 2015). In this vein the conference organizers made sure not to privilege the social sciences in this multilogue and therefore made an effort to make ample room for humanistic papers, roundtables and panels. Thus a paper with the title *Provoking a 'Conscious Reality'*:

Uncovering Shared Histories between Asia and Africa through contemporary Art was as welcome as one entitled *Policy-Making of Korean Aid to Africa*. Secondly the Accra Conference through a network of academics, foundations, research institutes and universities institutionalized the Asia Studies in Africa conferences. The second of such conferences was held at the University of Dar es Salaam in September (20-22) 2018.

The value of these conferences lies in catalyzing critical networking between scholars and organizations in this emerging field and, for the former in particular, makes necessary and feasible generating long term research projects the findings of which can be presented at such conferences. The Accra conference coincided (serendipity at work here) with UG's own internal efforts at setting up a Centre for Asian studies which were far advanced by then. The Centre for Asian Studies was subsequently set up the following year in 2016 making it the very first such centre in Africa below the Sahara. This showcased the third way in which the Accra Conference had proved successful and in particular setting of the process of institutionalizing Asian Studies in Africa. This institutionalization process has been expressed in other ways as well. The Africa-Asia Book Prize was set up in 2013 in close collaboration with ICAS which has been running its book awards schemes for many years. Two recipients have received the Africa-Asia Book Prize for 2015 and 2018. The Association for Asian Studies in Africa(A-ASIA) has also been set up as the coordinating body working with partners across the world on Africa-Asia research. It is clear that where there was nothing before through agency and solidarity a group of scholars and organizations have built novel ways of countering hegemony in knowledge production.

CONCLUSION

In the last 5 years a triennial conference on Asian Studies in Africa has been established; transcontinental networks of institutions and scholars forged; innovative *power-over* skirting funding mechanisms and sources have been tapped; an Asian Studies Centre has been set up at one of Africa's leading and world famous universities; and a new generation of young African Asianist scholars are being nurtured. These are historic and unprecedented developments. It has been shown in this work that in contemporary times hegemony is at its most pervasive is reflected also in the knowledge production sphere. In Africa this hegemony is routed through the neoliberalization project which has deployed its apparatus on the African Academy. How to effectively respond and overcome this is important because it has existential effects.

The means by which Asian Studies in Africa is emerging as a viable career option for young African scholars in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds has been reflected on showing that hegemony can be challenged. These means we have described as the vulnerabilities of Empire and reckoned as well as the assets (ideational, financial and physical which are usually downplayed or even not recognized at all) which counter-hegemonic agents of change can draw on once they set upon their mission. To be sure such solidaristic and agency exercising moves come with formidable questions. For example as scholars and institutions from the North and South interact how does power play out? Should the partners be alert to this? Does power play out in old hegemonic tones but under fresh guises? How can this be identified and further countered? We leave these questions now for subsequent research. Overall the attempt here has sought to provide some useful guide-posts (drawing from close to a decade of field work on setting up Asian Studies in Africa from scratch) for other prefigurative political undertakings elsewhere.

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