Southeast Asia in the Eyes of Egyptians

Preparing the Catalogue

Our colleague professor Yasuhiko Nagano has a genius for organizing our work. He came to Tritan Norbutse Monastery with four portable computers already installed with a Tibetan programme as a gift for the monastery. It was in March 2000 that we began to prepare the work on the catalogue with four monks led by Tenpa Yundrung. The monks learned how to use the computers within a week. However, to deal with such a mass of texts that has no obvious regular numbering was rather daunting. It took us a whole week simply to sort them out and put them in a kind of order. We did not rearrange the texts in any order since this would upset the already partially numbered parts of the collection and would also lead to confusion when other libraries obtain the same set of texts and try to use our catalogue. We therefore decided to follow the numeration of the volumes although, as mentioned earlier, this numeration is not always consistent. One of the problems the users of this catalogue may face is that the publisher has not set any limit to a conclusive edition so that there is no one ‘set of the Bonpo Tenjun’ with a definitive number of volumes. In the present case the collection contains 300 volumes.

Martyr in China

Hamer became a martyr in China. In the letters that Hamer wrote to his family, it is easy to perceive here everything is as barren as in mid-winter. The wind in June 1900 he reported, ‘Still no rain. What is going to happen here? Everything is as barren as in mid-winter. The wind is dry and full of desert sand. It is impossible to work on the fields. The people have nothing to eat and, unless we have heavy showers very soon, they will have no hope again for this year’. This time, Ferdinand Hamer had no money to buy any additional food, which could have turned the drought to his advantage. Only a few weeks later, the ‘heathens’ invaded the village where the Bishop, now almost sixty years old, had invited the Tshiung to stay. They killed Tshiung, hundreds of converts and sold the women to Muslim traders. The invaders also seized Hamer and took him to a Chinese magistracy for trial, after which they burned him alive. Ferdinand Hamer became a martyr in China.

By Mona Abaza

T he exercise of comparing these two regions, the Islam of Southeast Asia and the so-called ‘authentic’ culture and religious supremacy, while Southeast Asians remain cast as its syncretistic recipients. Still, this statement disregards the fact that there exists a contemporary Middle Eastern gaze towards Southeast Asia, which is also characterized by the limited sense of awareness of the whole Middle East and the ‘Bandung effect’ has been replaced by short-term, certainly the Middle East seems set to play a hegemonic role as ‘Other’ worthy of study, and with which a dialogical (yet parochial) discourse may be perpetuated, is still the West. Consequently, the encounter with the West in the last two centuries is best exemplified in travel accounts of Arab speakers to Europe and the United States. The archetype of such a genre was the sojourn in France of Rifa‘a al ‘Alawite (1801-1873), who was among the first Egyptian Azharites to study abroad. Tahtawi’s five years in Paris (1855-1860) and his description of the manners and customs of the French epitomizes creating boundaries and the bridging between tradition and modernity.

Far East

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, a twentieth-century parallel may be found in Annes Mansur’s Around the World in 200 Days. This remains one of the most popular Egyptian travel accounts, having been re-printed some twenty times. Having first appeared in 1962, the third edition was even introduced by the then Dean of Arabic culture at Cairo University, Taha Husayn, whilst the fourth was given a foreword by Mahmoud Taymur.

Mansur travelled during the effervescent period of the Bandung conference. It is an account embedded in the 1960s middle-class Cairene constructions of an imagined, and perhaps anecdotaled, ‘Far East’. Mansur, who was sent as a journalist by the government, tells us that he had been dispatched ‘to the Indian state of Kerala, where the communist party had won local elections. Mansur started his trip in India (Bombay) before going on to Tibet to interview the Dalai Lama, to the Maldives, Singapore, Indonesia (Jakarta and Bali), Australia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan, Hawaii, and, lastly, to the United States.

Mansur’s style shifts between formal Arabic and a colloquial Egyptian which often verges on vulgar slang. It is filled with catchy, and perhaps racist, jokes and is frequently disrespectful towards the local populations and their customs – and even to the Dalai Lama. So while Mansur originates from the ‘South’, he reproduces the same stereotypes about ‘Asians’ found in colonial accounts. For example, his pas sages on Bali reveal the exploits of a misogynist constantly chasing women, and he is constantly fascinated by the strange and the fantastic. Still, he becomes of himself as a superior observer, remarking, for example, that the Indians speak an esoteric form of English with an awful accent. Still, it seems that what made this work popular is that it is among the first accounts of the post-colonial period. Moreover, it was paradoxically full of both non-alignment jargon and racial stereotypes, with photos of women in ‘exotic’ dresses. While Mansur’s travel account could be understood as a last resort for popular literature produced in the time of South-South non-alignment interaction, not much has been published on Asia in the literary Egyptian circles since Mansur’s account. The so-called ‘revolutionary’ journalist and author of a number of books was succeeded by short-term, official, state-sponsored journal missions which I will mention below.

Institutions and Research in Asia

Currently, the overseas research priorities of Middle Eastern scholars are dominated by a North-South dimension, be it regional or European. The implementation of research programmes for the Middle East is furthermore more focused on a North-South dynamic whereby funding is effectively restricted to facilitate either American or European interaction.

However, while there is no institutional backing that has led to the enhancement of Southeast Asia’s area studies in the Middle East, this does not mean that there is no indigenous production of knowledge concerning other regions of the developing world. Indeed, whereas the academic field has not generated a significant accumulation of knowledge, it is in other domains, such as journalism or what falls under the rubric of travel literature, that some knowledge is manifest ed. There is indeed a range of accounts by contemporary Arab speakers who have travelled to India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, which has sometimes – like the work of Mansur – been used as a rubric of national liberation, or Third World internationalism.

I have already mentioned that there is a blurring of the notion of ‘Asia’ for Egyptians and Arabs in general, and more specifically ‘Southeast Asia as a part of the wider ‘East’. Indeed, the term Southeast Asia is hardly ever utilized by Middle Eastern scholars. It seems that Egyptians have most probably inherited and perpetuated an orientalist legacy about Asia which centralizes the whole Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, Japan, and China. In other words, anything eastwards of the Middle East and, moreover, non-Arabic-speaking is considered to be ‘Asia’. Certainly the world of Asia and Southeast Asia remains terra incognita for the majority of the Middle East and Middle Eastern research institutes and universities. Many would then wonder if it is even worth speaking of area studies on Southeast Asia. But, as I mentioned previously, there are South-South dialogues and interactions taking place and exchanges worthy of attention, though these are primarily directed towards Africa, despite the rhetoric of Afro-Asianism.

For example, Egypt created the league of Afro-Asian peoples solidary in the sixties. Then, in 1963, the Organization of African unity was created. Today, the organization for Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity has launched a series of dialogues with Japanese and African academics, but the results have resulted in exchanges of scholars from those countries. With the economic take-off in the seventies and eighties, ‘Asia’ for the Arab World, in particular Japan, China, India and Southeast Asia started to gain increased prominence. The economic success of the Asian tigers triggered a curiosity to study and emulate this success study.

Of course, the affinities expressed between sections of the Middle East and Asia are not entirely novel. The Egyptian Waf Premium national party maintained contacts with Indian nationalists in the 1920s. Jawarhalal Nehru’s letters to his daughter were translated into Arabic by the late Ahmed Bahaa El-Din. The Algerian, Malek ben Nabi’s writings on the concept of Afro-Asiaticism also illustrate a great admiration of Ghandi’s non-violent resistance. And, of course, the writings of Al-Matar emerged out of the content of reports by Nasserite journalists on India in the sixties following up on the Bandung Conference of April 1955. Still, the image of a non-aligned East connected to Nasserite ide ology has not been well received. Ghandi’s philosophy also inspired Nasser’s critics, like the prominent feminist Doria Shafiq, who went on a hunger strike during Nasser’s regime.

It was also in the 1960s that the term non-alignment, which the Paris-based, Egyptian intellectual Anouar Abdel Malek (who was among the first to direct a harsh critique towards oriental- ism) wrote an influential book titled The Wind of the East to respond to the Arab–Middle Eastern gaze towards Asian civilizations such as China and Japan. Malek argued that these ancient non-Western

posted on page 19
ern civilizations had a lot in common with the Arabs and could be strategic allies against the hegemonic West. Certainly this seems to accord with Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the ‘ Clash of Civilizations’, which has divided the globe into broad cultural entities. Indeed, Huntington quotes Abdel Malek extensively.

It is also worth mentioning the valuable work of Ahmed Shalabi, a Cambridge-trained Egyptian who spent many years in Southeast Asia during the Nasser period as a preacher and academic. Shalabi was first sent to Indonesia in 1953 as a representative of the Islamic conference. The long years he spent in Southeast Asia led him to join in writing a valuable encyclopedia of the Muslim world consisting of nineteen volumes. He dedicated a whole volume for the non-Arabic speaking Muslim world – comprising of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Muslim minorities in India, China, Russia, and the Philippines. Unusually, he emphasized the importance of non-Arabic Muslim religious studies. Shalabi’s study of Southeast Asian Islam provides a rich insight and a deep knowledge of the history and politics of the region. He also reveals an interesting approach towards the history of Hindu-Buddhist influences and details about religious education and institutions.

New Research

Only recently has a new trend to differentiate Southeast Asia from the rest of Asia to be noticed in the political writings, press coverage, and research institutes. Institutionally, the most prominent one is the Centre for Asian Studies at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University, which was founded in 1994 as a policy-oriented research organization. It reflects both Egyptian interest in Asia, and a response to an awareness that Asia provides the Egyptian academic community with opportunities to widen their scope of contemporary research by testing its theories in the Asian domain, and by generating new social science research that investigates its rich cultural diversity. The Centre’s main research areas are International Studies, Economic, Korean Studies, and Japanese Studies. Its publications are in Arabic and English.

There also exists a second Centre for Asian Studies at the University of Zagazig, which offers Masters and doctoral degrees in Asian studies under the rubric of Asian civilizations, such as Chinese, Indian, Persian, Turkish, and Japanese civilizations. However, these centres are still embryonic and lack institutional backing. A glance at their output tells us that they could hardly compete with any Western research institution. Still, such centres are important for networking and exchanging scholars. Egyptian academics are then sent to various regions in Central Asia, Japan, or Malaysia and the like in turn to host scholars who would like to pursue research in Egypt.

With the exception of the Japanese language, there is no trade at Egyptian universities that specialize in teaching Asian studies. Egyptian universities have Departments of Oriental languages, as well. For example, the Department of Oriental Languages at Cairo University is divided into two sections: Islamic and Semitic languages. Al-Azhar University, the oldest university-Mosque in the Middle East, has a department of Islamic civilizations where Turkish, Persian, and Arabic are taught under the rubric of Islamic cultures and civilizations.

Al-Siyasa al-Duwaliyya (International Politics) was a prominent Arabic journal which started to appear in 1961, as one of the main Arab international political journals. Its outlook started as an anti-imperialist journal disseminating information about liberation movements. Southeast Asia was among the topics of concern. The journal is still in circulation today, though its Third Worldist outlook has been replaced by summaries of international events derived heavily from Western sources.

The al-Ahram centre for Strategic Studies recently published two important works. In the introduction from edited volume entitled The Asian Tigers, Experiences in Coupering Under Development in 1995, Abdel Mone in Sadat states that this book is the result of a programme that attempted to supplement serious literature on Southeast Asia, in particular. The research was launched in 1993. The articles dealt with the following topics: South Korea and transformations from authoritarianism to democracy; the Indonesian political system from authoritarianism to democracy; Thailand; the process of democratization; the cultural and religious dimensions of the Asian experience; the cultural identities of ASEAN; economic dimensions of the Asian experience; the lessons to be learned from the Asian experience and security in Southeast Asia. It is clear that the sources used in all these articles are largely secondarily and mostly Anglo-American. Again, for any American or European specialist on the field, this work would hardly count as original, but for the Arab reader, it may be considered as an extensive review of literature.

Another pertinent book, edited by Ibrahim Nafe, the Chief editor of al-Ahram, bears the title What is Happening in Asia (Cairo: al-Ahram, 1998), and was a result of a trip undertak-