

Africa and the unmasking of Asia

Masking has a long and rich history on the continents of Africa and Asia. In Africa the notable masking tradition of the Yorubas of West Africa comes to mind. In Asia the dexterity and speed of China's face mask artists have intrigued and entertained theatre lovers for centuries.¹ Merged, intertwined and entangled with ontology, epistemology and even meta-physics, masking has played cultural, philosophical and moral roles in these ancient societies. To be sure, in both societies and civilizations, to mask is temporally and temporarily transmutative; the masked take on another identity that only unmasking can reverse. As Africa and Asia interact far more intensely today I will argue that a Kierkegaardian unmasking moment, of an existential quality, has been reached: "Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when everyone has to throw off his mask?"² I will show that 'a midnight hour' has struck for contemporary Africa-Asia relations and why for Africa an unmasked Asia that reveals an authentic self (to borrow Kierkegaard's word) is critical for Africa.

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Long connections

It is often mistakenly believed that current Africa-Asia relations were initiated during the Cold-War or better still, post-America world. However, Africa-Asia relations have deep roots going back into antiquity. The Chinese may have reached Alexandria (Egypt) overland in Han times and evidence of early Africa-China contacts in the medieval period is reflected in Chinese porcelain and coins found in and around the eastern coast of Africa.³ With regard to Africa's eastern coast, the Indian Ocean in particular has proved the vital waterway linking Africa and Asia "melding ... ideas, peoples and material objects that became the basis for conceptualizing the Indian Ocean as one of flows and fluidity."⁴

More recently, what has become known rather debatably as the East Asian Miracle,⁵ which has been followed by the increasing importance of China and India in the global economy, has concentrated attention on Africa-Asia relations. In the trajectory of interactions, traced albeit briefly here, it can be argued that a midnight hour of urgency has struck the path, on both continents, that has been marked by imperialist subjugation and the fight for self determination and freedom. To be precise, Western imperialist subjugation was to have a particularly telling impact in the way in which Africa has come to view and therefore engage Asia. The West's cultural (and therefore ideational) imprints (however superficial) on modern Africa erected a glass wall through which Asia was viewed darkly, hazily and from a safe distance. This orientation was to be reinforced by the diplomatic, trade, economic, educational, informational, migratory and other ties that bound former colonial entities to the former metropolitan centers, long after the years of independence and liberation struggles. To overturn this historical intermediation implies a conscious, sustained, systematic and organic engagement with Asia in all its varied manifestations directly by Africans, as a matter of necessity and urgency.

Below: Kwame Nkrumah with Mao, photo courtesy of the Chinese Embassy in Accra.



Unmasking: from haziness to clarity

One of Africa's leading thinkers of the 20th century, the Ghanaian Dr. J.B. Danquah, provides a useful (if not exhaustive) insight into understandings Africans held about Asia in his day and even now. There seems to have always been a quest for deeper knowledge about Asia and its people, beyond the facile. It is important to quote Danquah in full here:

Many years ago, at the court of Nana Sir Ofori Atta I, during the Second Great War, a party of British Information officers called on the late Okyenhene,⁶ and I was there with them. He asked me this question: "Tell me," he said, "any time I take a photograph of some of your people, the negatives come out with a Chinese slant of eyes. But when the negatives are printed, the slant disappears. Why? Have you had any Chinese contacts in these parts?" All I could say was that I did not know. But who can deceive or conceal nature from nature? Ghana and China, have they ever had organic, or cultural or biological connection through the ages? If so how and when?⁷

If the circumstances that brought China into the dialogue above seem simplistic and even tasteless, Danquah's retort and subsequent reflection showed that Asia, and just what to make of it, weighed on the consciousness of Africa's educated elites. In Danquah's vast world of thinkery as a linguist, philosopher and culturalist, Asia loomed large, even if mysterious. He drew comparisons, however furtive, between the matrilineal Abusua system of the Akan and those of south India.⁸ Danquah tried to unravel the complexity of the Akan seven day calendar in his research by positing links to China's own. In the field of public policy, politics, economics and social organization Asia was also a constant reference point for Danquah. Japan was the best example of a world beater for Africa to emulate with its "consumer-oriented society" underpinned by a liberal economic and political system.⁹ In his view, small Japan had upstaged China economically because the latter was Marxian and state-led, and therefore undermined individual initiative, liberties and freedom. This last point manifests rather vividly all the signs of the ideological struggles that came to define the Cold War and marked Ghanaian and African politics and policy formation right up to the 1980s. It is worth noting here that Danquah's political contemporary, Joe Appiah (father of the noted literary scholar and philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah) had visited China in 1972, and based on what he saw surmised almost presciently that "China's best is yet to come."¹⁰ In addition to the politics, economics and policy reflections, we must add the active conversion to and practice of Asian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, in 20th century Africa.

In the deliberately selected lucubration above a set of pertinent questions force themselves upon us. In Danquah's cultural disquisitions on Asia, would his analysis have been sharper if there was a long tradition of Asian studies by Africans from which he could draw? If Danquah had been exposed to Asian values, ideas, history and culture more intimately and directly (he had to conduct some of his research in the British Museum and therefore deal with all the Euro-centric biases that the curation and organization of documents and artefacts will bear), would his almost Manichaeic view of Japan and China have been tempered? To be sure these are questions that are all too simplistically counterfactually

derived. 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 luxury. For one, Africa was trying to understand itself and reconstruct its past; both projects though still ongoing, have largely been successful. Today, blinding technological changes and altered geo-political and economic realities (inspired in the main by Asia's ascendancy), make it possible for Africa to begin building its own tradition of Asian studies.

Unmasking : towards greater clarity

How (and why) should Africa at this juncture in history approach the study of Asia? Undoubtedly, this question has been reflected on by some of Africa's leading minds, among them Chinweizu and Ayi Kwei Armah, long before Asia became ascendant in the last half of the 20th century. In one of Armah's fictional works, *Osiris Rising*, the pursuit of a new Africa involves drawing up a curriculum that features a deliberate collection of courses connected with Asian studies. Presently, two issues are pertinent for Asian studies in Africa: institution building, and with it, making it possible for the emergence and sustainability of African Asianists. There have been some attempts at institution building, albeit of very recent provenance. South Africa's Stellenbosch University's Centre for China Studies (set up in 2004) is one such example. Strategy3 (established in 2010), a private research firm based in Accra (Ghana), is the first and only think tank in the West African country explicitly founded with a clear focus on fostering and promoting Asian studies. Recently, Confucian Institutes (promoted in the main by the Chinese Government) have sprouted across the campuses of Africa's universities. The Japanese Government, through the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA), has been promoting the study of Japan's culture and language in Africa. I will not attempt a comprehensive survey here. It is clear, however, that in the last three decades attempts have been made in Africa to understand Asia via institutionalized entities. Two approaches seem evident. There are new institutions (private/state or a combination), purpose-built to follow, track and unpack Asia interactions with Africa, and there are existing institutions (private/state or a combination), which have added an Asian focus to their portfolios, as Africa-Asia relations deepened and expanded in the timeframe in question.¹¹ A third approach may be added, which would include the Confucian Institutes, among others: public diplomacy entities actively initiated, funded and supported by some Asian governments. The first two approaches have tended to be mostly directed at the political-economy of Asia-Africa relations and have thus focused on the the evolving patterns in trade and economic interactions, development assistance, governance, migration, and the like. The third approach has focused on cultural matters, such as promoting the study of Japanese, Mandarin or Asian cuisine, fashion and creative work.

While all the above are useful, the institution building contemplated here should move Asian studies in Africa to higher levels of intensity, coverage and depth. Asian studies should therefore extend beyond the policy-political-economy themes (without abandoning them) and tenaciously engage Asia in its diversity and complexity: art, language, literature, history, philosophy, religion, etc. Here must be noted the inordinate focus on the materially rich regions of Asia, to the exclusion of other very important parts of the continent such as the borderland areas of Southeast Asia and Central Asia; a new focus is definitely called for. This new frontier of Asian studies should therefore aim to actively build expertise in these areas, from the undergraduate to graduate levels. This undertaking should open up a new vital axis of intellectual and cultural connections that would unmask fresh insights into the human experience, hitherto unjustifiably marginalized or totally ignored.

From 24-26 September 2015, the University of Ghana (Legon) hosted (with the support of the Association for Asian Studies in Africa, the International Convention of Asian Scholars, the International Institute for Asian Studies, and other organizations around the world) the first ever 'Asian Studies in Africa Conference'. This should offer fresh beginnings for sustained Africa-Asia intellectual dialogue. Under the aegis of the Association for Asian Studies in Africa (A-ASIA), the plan is to institutionalize this conference so it will serve as a flagship event on Asian Studies in Africa, to be held in different parts of Africa and Asia every two or three years. Publication on Africa-Asia is also being encouraged through this conference with the initiation of the Africa-Asia Book Prize in 2014. Adam Lifshey of GeorgeTown University won the first Africa-Asia Book Prize (see page 6 of this issue). In addition, an Africa-Asia Book Series is planned from the many insightful presentations made at the Accra Conference.

The first step to learning

Chinese sages have said that 'a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step'. Of course, Africa is increasingly coming to the realization that an in-depth understanding

Asian Studies in the Arab states of the Gulf: challenges and potential

This is a preliminary exploration into the state of Asian Studies in the Arab states of the Gulf. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are the six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): a regional bloc formed in 1981 on the basis of geographical contiguity for economic, technical, social and cultural cooperation. They share not only a common religious and linguistic heritage, they are also endowed with hydrocarbon resources that have fueled rapid economic growth and modernization.

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EDUCATION ESPECIALLY HIGHER EDUCATION as an important aspect of modernization, though relatively new in this region, has received considerable state patronage. The first university in this area, King Saud University, was set up in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1957. Kuwait University was founded in 1966. University education began in Qatar in 1973, with gender-segregated faculties. The first university in the UAE, the United Arab Emirates University, was initiated in 1976, in Al Ain. The first public university in Oman, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), opened in 1986. And in the same year, the University of Bahrain was established to combine the existing College of Arts, Sciences, and Education (1978) and the Gulf Technical College (1968).

Meeting the demands of a modernizing world

Most of these universities were public institutions created to meet the challenges of the human resource requirements of the modernizing countries of the region: social sciences were not given a priority. In fact, throughout the Arab world the modern universities are relatively young. A recent report observed: 97 percent of Arab Universities 491 out of 508 were created after 1950 70 percent did not exist before 1991.¹ One of the challenges faced by these universities is the singular focus on technical and skill developments, accompanied by a penetration of market ideology, which affects both the curricula as well as the structure of the higher educational institutions. In all, the corporatization of the universities takes a toll on liberal education. Yet, it is interesting to observe that social science education is likely to receive more attention with growing interest in East Asia, which has become a dynamic economic region. With growing trade relations between the Arab Gulf states and China, Chinese soft power is being felt.

Soft power

The first Confucius Institute to be established on the Arabian Peninsula was in Dubai, in 2011. The second opened at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, in 2012. The third Confucius Institute to come to the region is situated at the University of Bahrain, set up in 2014. Of the total 437 Confucius

Institutes worldwide (as of June 2015), there are only three in the Arab Gulf states, and a total of nine in the Middle East (two each in Egypt and Jordan, one each in Lebanon and Iran). In Russia alone there are twice as many Confucius Institutes than in the entire Middle East. The US, of course, is its main destination, with a presence at 96 universities.

The Confucius Institute was created following President Hu Jintao's 2005 call for enhancing soft power of Chinese culture. Joseph Nye, among others, is skeptical about the success of the soft power offensive, since China applies oppressive policies against its own civil society.² Nye's analysis may be appropriate insofar as the United States, and other democracies with a vibrant civil society are concerned, but for the rest of the Global South, China's cultural diplomacy may prove to yield positive outcomes.

The Confucius Institute at Zayed University, as it does elsewhere, offers Chinese language courses, which have in recent years grown in popularity. The University of Dubai (established in 1997) offers Chinese language training for various governmental departments of the UAE. The University of Bahrain is a mature university with a Japanese studies program alongside French, German and American programs. Zayed University has also hosted the King Sejong Institute of Korea since 2010, which offers Korean language courses. In 2015, Sultan Qaboos University of Oman (SQU) became part of the Silk Road Universities Network (SUN), which was formed at Hankuk University in Jeonju, Republic of Korea. These are important steps that promise research cooperation and an exchange of students promoting interests in East Asian Studies.

Popular culture

In the GCC universities, the initial focus was to train students for the rapid modernization taking place in their societies. Humanities and social sciences did not receive much attention. In recent years, however, that lacunae is being addressed. General education courses at a number of UAE universities are going global and now deal with not only western civilizations, but also include Asian civilizations. At Zayed University, a full course is offered within the Masters in Diplomacy program

on East Asia, covering China, Japan and Korea and the Newly Industrializing economies. The UAE University in Al Ain also offers a minor in Korean language. Following the course structure of North American universities, many of the public universities in the region have introduced general education programs, designed to generate a higher global awareness. Many of these programs involve Asia, but more specialized courses on Asian regions are still rather limited.

The absence of advanced courses or programs on East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia in the Gulf universities does not indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of the emergence or re-emergence of (specific parts of) Asia. Japan and the Republic of Korea have already made significant impressions insofar as their popular cultures are concerned. Many academic institutions in the region celebrate Japan day. At Zayed University, there are Japanese Clubs and Korean Clubs initiated by the students who partake in various Japanese cultural activities. The Japanese cartoon genre *manga* has won the hearts and minds of many young Emiratis and has made an impact on Gulf culture.³ The availability of Arabic versions of *manga* is proof of the popularity of East Asian pop-culture. There is also a growing number of fans of Korean drama and K-pop among the Gulf youth.

Insofar as South Asia is concerned, the influence of Bollywood as the purveyor of soft power has also played an important role. Indian cinema has an appeal in the Gulf region beyond the expatriate South Asian audience. Many Gulf citizens are enamored by the dazzle of Indian cinema. The younger Emiratis, however, do not necessarily share the same degree of enthusiasm of their parent's generation, and prefer to divide their attention between the Hollywood-generated and East Asian popular cultures.

Looking east

In this exploratory paper, by no means an exhaustive survey, some challenges, i.e., an excessive emphasis on the corporatization of higher education is discernible, yet the changing politico-economic realities of the world, and the recent Look East tendency in the Gulf, may portend a bright future for Asian Studies in the region. But this is not going to happen on its own, a change of vision at the top decision-making levels, infused by an understanding of the changing global realities, would be needed.

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- 3 Good, O. 2009a. Gold Ring: The UAE's First Manga, *The National* (Abu Dhabi) July 20; Good, O. 2009b. Mad About Manga, *The National* (Abu Dhabi) September 22; Johnston, E. 2011. East Meets West, *Vision* (Dubai) August.



Left: Kwame Nkrumah with Zhou Enlai, photo courtesy of the Chinese Embassy in Accra.

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of Asia has an existential value in a rapidly changing world. That is a crucial first step. Turning this realization into concrete measures revolving around institutions, training and research programmes, backed by dependable sources of funding over a long period, should define the next vital steps; steps that the Accra conference hopes to inspire. The African sages intone that if you learn you will know. That should be inspiration enough, as Africa begins the process of bridging the unacceptable intellectual gap that has existed between the two continents; this is a critical move for the mutual unmasking of both sides.

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References

- 1 Most notably expressed in what has come to be known as the Peking Opera.
- 2 Kierkegaard, S. 2004. *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, Penguin Classics
- 3 Files, T. 1972. *China and Africa in the Middle Ages*, London, England: CASS, p.4.
- 4 Gupta, P. 2010. Introduction, in Pamela Gupta, et al. (eds.) *Eyes across the water: navigating the Indian Ocean*, Pretoria: University of South Africa (UNISA) Press, p.3.
- 5 The writings of Asian thinkers like Kaoru Sugihara show

that the economic transformation of leading Asian countries like Japan was wrought from painstaking, incremental socio-technological changes driven by state led policy over decades rather than from a sudden miraculous turn of events. See for example, Sugihara, K. 2004. *The State and the Industrious Revolution in Japan*, Working Paper 02/04, London: London School of Economics.

- 6 Refers (in a loose and imprecise rendering in English) to the King of the Akyem people, one of the sub-groups of the Akans of Ghana and West Africa. It must be noted here that Danquah worked closely under Okyenhene Nana Ofori-Atta I (his paternal brother) from 1915-1921.
- 7 Danquah, J.B. 1997. *The Ghanaian Establishment: Its Constitutions, its Detentions, its Traditions, its Justice and Statecraft, and its Heritage of Ghanaism*, Accra: Ghana Universities Press, p. 304.
- 8 Loosely translated in English as clan. To paraphrase Danquah's words, Akan society is divided into clans and the clans into smaller families, based on the matrilineal system; *ibid* note 8, p.298.
- 9 *Ibid.* note 8, p.122
- 10 Appiah, J. 1996. *Joe Appiah: The Autobiography of an African Patriot*, Accra: Asempa Publishers, p.288.
- 11 The Dakar-based African Center for Trade, Integration and Development's programme on Globalization, Emerging Markets and South-South Trade and the Pretoria-based Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute's (TMALI) emerging focus on China, are typical examples.