

Southeast Asia in the Eyes of Egyptians

Research >
Southeast Asia

It would not be far wrong to say that contemporary Arabs are inclined to be parochial regarding non Arabs. But regardless of this Arab-centrism, the fact remains that Southeast Asian Muslims, perhaps in marked contrast to Middle Easterners, have developed an extensive curiosity about the Middle East and its educational centres. There is a whole industry involved in producing translations from Arabic into Indonesian and Malay, as well as distributing Arabic music and films among Southeast Asian (Muslims).

By Mona Abaza

The exercise of comparing these two regions, the Islam of the so called periphery and that of the centre, leads to the impression that the dissemination of knowledge, religious or secular, has been rather a one-way relationship. In other words, the Middle East seems set to play a hegemonic role as a donor of '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 deserving of further attention. This short note is about how some Arabs perceive and produce knowledge about contemporary Southeast Asia, a regional configuration that is relatively new in their geo-political discourse and which is often blurred with a vague notion of 'Asia'.

Travel Accounts

Until today, for many Middle Eastern scholars the only 'Other' worthy of study, and with which a dialogical (yet paradoxical) discourse may be perpetuated, is still the West. Certainly, the encounter with the West in the last two centuries is best exemplified in travel accounts of Arabic speakers to Europe and the United States. The archetype of such a genre was the sojourn in France of Rifa`a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), who was among the first Egyptian Azharites to study abroad. Tahtawi's five years in Paris (1826-1831) and his description of the manners and customs of the French epitomizes crossing boundaries and the bridging between tradition and modernity.

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, a twentieth-century parallel may be found in Anees 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 Mahmud 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 anecdotal and distorted, 'Far East'. Mansur, who was sent as a journalist by the government, tells us that he had been dispatched to report on 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 passages on Bali reveal the exploits of a misogynist constantly chasing women, and he is constantly fascinated by the strange and the fantastic. Still, he conceives 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 Asia in the post-colonial period, though 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 landmark of '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 the 'Bandung effect' has been replaced by short-term, official, state-sponsored journalist 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 towards Europe or the United States. The institutionalization of research programmes for the Middle East is furthermore tied to 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 Asian '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 a body of knowledge is manifested. 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 underwritten by narratives 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 would encompass Iran, Central Asia, the whole Indian subcontinent, Southeast, 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 remain *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-Asiatism.

For example, Egypt created the league of Afro-Asian peoples solidarity 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 Chinese scholars which 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 and Southeast Asia started to gain increased prominence. The economic success of the Asian tigers triggered a curiosity to study and emulate this success story.

Of course, the affinities expressed between sections of the Middle East and Asia are not entirely novel. The Egyptian Wafd nationalist 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 al-Din. The Algerian, Malek ben Nabi's writings on the concept of Afro-Asiatism also illustrate a great admiration of Ghandi's non-violent resistance. And, of course, the writings of al-Mansur emerged out of the context of reportages 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 ideology has not been greeted with undiluted pleasure, and 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 spirit of non-alignment that the Paris-based, Egyptian intellectual Anouar Abdel Malek (who was among the first to direct a harsh critique towards orientalism) wrote an influential book titled *The Wind of the East* to remind the Arabs of the significance of 'looking East' and directing the gaze towards Asian civilizations such as China and Japan.¹ Abdel Malek argued that these ancient non-West-

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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 Civilisations', which has divided the globe into broad cultural entities. Indeed, Huntington quotes Abdel Malek extensively.²

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 1955, as representative of the Islamic conference.³ The long years he spent in Southeast Asia led him in part to write a valuable encyclopaedia 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.⁴ Unusually, he emphasized the importance of the field of comparative religions. Shalabi's analysis 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, a new trend to differentiate Southeast Asia from the rest of Asia is 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, 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 the scope of its social science 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 Studies, 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 Zaqaqiy, 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 institute. 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 centres in turn host scholars who would like to pursue research in Egypt.

With the exception of the Japanese language, there is no tradition at Egyptian universities that specialize in teaching Asian languages. Japanese has been taught at the Faculty of Letters, Cairo University, for some twenty-six years after an initiative sponsored by The Japan Foundation. Cairo and Ain Shams 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 Urdu 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 1965 as one of the main Arabic 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 Conquering under Development* in 1995, Abdel Mone'm Said states that this book is the result of a programme that attempted to supplement the serious lack of information on Asia; 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 and military in Southeast Asia. It is clear that the sources used in all these articles are largely secondary and mostly Anglo-American. Again, for any American or European specialist in 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-

en by a team of journalists in July 1998 to Asia starting with Islamabad, New Delhi, Singapore, Jakarta, and Peking. There they conducted interviews with officials. Nafe' also recently published a book on China (Cairo: *al-Ahram*, 1999), which provides a panorama of the current financial situation and discusses the problems which Chinese women face, such as the increase in cases of domestic violence and occurrence of divorces. It also addresses the issues of the Muslims of China, and the Arabs and China. Again, it is written in a journalistic style and heavily based on Western sources.

However, as mentioned earlier, the lack of institutional build-up is one of the main reasons that no tradition in the Middle East exist for the study of Southeast Asia.

To conclude, one of the paradoxes of the colonial legacy is that it created the academic institutions and scientific infrastructures which are until today dominant and effective in terms of producing knowledge from the North about Third World Societies. This is not the case regarding South-South relations. In this short essay, I attempted to show that in spite of the shortcomings in this relationship, there are other spheres such as travel accounts journalism and the impact of internationalist nationalist movements which have played an indirect role in shaping the imagination of Egyptians about something called 'Asia'. But where does Asia really start for the Egyptians? This is the question I hope to answer in a future issue. <



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¹ Anouar Abdel Malek, (Rih al-sharq) *The Wind of the East*, (Beirut: Dar al-Mus-taqbal al-'Arabi, (1983)), (in Arabic).

² Huntington, Samuel P., 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, no.3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49.

³ See his autobiography: *Ahmed Shalabi 'Rihlat hayat'*, (A Life's Journey) Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyya, (1973).

⁴ Ahmad Shalabi, *The Encyclopaedia of Islamic History. Islam and non-Arabic Speaking Muslim Countries*, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyya, (1983)). (in Arabic).