

The Political Economy of Dignity

On the New Asia-Africa Dynamics

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1. A Strangely Confident Idea of Africa

A long time ago a friend sent me *A Personal Matter* by Kenzaburo Oe, with a laconic short note: “You may want to read this intriguing piece,” she simply scribbled on the package. Indeed it was. Despite being a voracious reader, it took me a long time to finish that rather short novel. Not that the prose and style were hermetic—to the contrary. The story was poignant and often truly unbearable. To this day, that book still resonates deeply with me, but not for the usual reasons why it is considered a masterpiece.

A Personal Matter chronicles the complex emotional journey of the main character through the ethical labyrinth of family, responsibility, and guilt. As the novel begins, a 27-year old Japanese man named Bird is in a bookstore, having just purchased some maps of Africa, a continent he has long dreamed of visiting. He is also about to face the most excruciating of life’s challenges: the birth of his brain-damaged child, which unravels the many painful memories of his own meaningless life. Much of the novel is about the intense personal struggle of having fathered an infant-monster while coping with the emotional chaos of a failed family life and a constant sense of inadequacy and helplessness. Before he makes his final decision as to whether to let the child live, Bird must confront his own demons and reflect, even unwillingly, about his humanity. His conscience is then submerged by his entire past, a nightmare of lies and self-deceit.

Critics have celebrated in unison the many facets of the novel, from its dark, hunting atmosphere to its sparkling yet simple and even minimalistic style. I took from the book something even more important: an elevation of the idea of Africa, from traditional exoticism and failure, to a new, ethical frontier. The suggestion that the so-called Dark Continent would appear to a Japanese man going through the challenges of fear, depression, and self-examination, as a place of comfort and self-reinvention, and as a beacon for emotional renewal, made that book one of my all-time favorites. Yes, *A Personal Matter* portrayed Africa indirectly not as a place of empty and superficial exoticism and intellectual safaris, but rather as a place of dreams and dignity. Oe’s silent ethical statement about Africa was all the more powerful as it was done not in a knee-jerk manner, not as in an advocacy piece, but naturally, indirectly, in a matter-of-fact tone. I read Bird’s dreams of escaping to Africa as the acknowledgment by Kenzaburo Oe that my continent could be represented in a premier work of world fiction as a place where a tormented mind aspires to find peace. Africa as a glimmer of hope: what a provocative idea!

Fast forward to the wonderful event that brings us here tonight, the launch of the AFRASO program. The German government and the good people who made possible such a timely and ambitious initiative deserve our thanks and admiration. This unusual multi-year program of interdisciplinary research, which promises to carry out in-depth analyses of the Africa-Asia dynamics, promises to deliver wonders not only for Africanist knowledge or comparative cultural studies but for knowledge in general.

Why? For the obvious reasons that it is being conceived, led, and implemented by some of the finest scholars in the academia today. Indeed, the findings of that research are likely to enlighten all of us on the reasons Kenzaburo Oe’s character may have taken Africa so seriously; or why the Asian people who are traveling to Africa these days are much more than smugglers of rhinoceros horns and oil-thirsty politicians.

Two questions, at least, arise with such an important initiative: first, is the Africa-Asia dynamics that seems intriguing enough to deserve such an ambitious program something new and meaningful, or just a new intellectual fashion motivated by the new “scramble for Africa and its natural resources” led by Asian countries—and therefore comparable to the previous one that was codified at the 1884 Berlin Conference? In other words, is Africa at risk of a new “invasion” that is only meant to mimic the previous ones? Second, whether that is the case or not, what may be unique in the ways in which Asian business people and development stakeholders seem to approach the notion of African dignity? Let me try to address these questions in turn and perhaps say a few words on the foundations of the intellectual agenda ahead.

2. A New (Asian) Scramble for Africa?

The loud warnings can be heard almost everywhere: “The yellow devils are coming! Beware of these Chinese, Indians, Pakistani, Malaysians and other Koreans who are grabbing the continent’s natural resources to feed their voracious economies and over-populated countries. Be careful not to be fooled by their fake humility, which only hides their cynical and brutal desire for revenge on the West to the expense of naïve Africans! The Chinese are grabbing land! They are building Confucius institutes all over the place to brainwash people! Asia really has no interest in Africa...”

Every African leader has heard those severe warnings. Are they credible?

They are certainly valid at some level but much too simplistic to be believed, and too self-serving to those who advance them—people who generally fall into two categories: First, some anxious Westerners who may feel guilty about their own African past, and resent the idea that strong competition is coming from exotic, faraway places that used to be dominated by the West; and, second, some Africans elites, business people, and disenchanted and disenfranchised citizens who see the new Asian scramble for Africa as the biggest threat yet to the continent. Even when the status quo is sub-optimal, the fear of the unknown or of *déjà-vu* is too burdensome to be contemplated.

Yet, even if they wanted to re-colonize the continent as it is being alleged, the truth is Asians would have a hard time doing so these days. For once, they would need to convene their own version of the Berlin Conference (even secretly), and expect that the Africans and the world would go along with it. Yes, they are trying their hands at cultural diplomacy and funding Confucius institutes to attract young people who are either unemployed or dancing the *ndombolo* on the streets of Kinshasa or Nairobi. I can only wish them good luck!...

As for the important land grabbing issue, a recent World Bank report notes that “many countries have suitable land available that is either not cultivated or produces well below its potential. This was a development challenge even before the food price rise of 2008. Seventy-five percent of the world’s poor are rural, and most are engaged in farming. The need for more and better investment in agriculture to reduce poverty, increase economic growth, and promote environmental sustainability was already clear when there were “only” 830 million hungry people before the food price rise. The case is even clearer today when, for the first time in human

history, over a billion people go to bed hungry each night.” The so-called “land grabbing” phenomenon may therefore not be so threatening or even real if it refers to a new dynamics that improves smallholder agricultural productivity in Africa, and if it does not deprive peasants from their land. After all, the Chinese are not yet exporting pieces of land from Africa to Shanghai or Beijing.

One African head of state told me that when he received these admonitions from a European Prime Minister, he angrily replied: “Westerners arrived in Africa at the end of the 15th century and basically established themselves there. They subsequently ‘created’ countries out of their colonial ‘possessions’, ruled them, opposed liberation movements, and when forced to accept freedom, manufactured independence, or generally made sure that the post-independence leadership be picked from pro-Western political groups. After nearly six centuries of domination or semi-official management of Africa, what does the West have to show for it?” An unfair question perhaps, and an embarrassing one, which led the African head of state to conclude: “We very well understand that all the Asian politicians and businessmen who are currently crisscrossing our continent are not Mother Teresas trying to do good and secure nice places in heaven for their souls. Most of them don’t even believe in God! They are ordinary if not ruthless fellow human beings in pursuit of their own benefits and interests. But at least, they are not pretending to do otherwise. They are not wrapping their materialistic ambitions with the flags of morality. They treat us as adult partners—and often even as partners in crime.”

It seems unlikely indeed that Asian politicians would propose another six-century sentimental pact to their African counterparts, or pretend to be settling in Africa simply to establish a new humanism—as Western explorers, missionaries and colonialists always said of their travails across the continent. By being so upfront in their naked desires, these Asians may be elevating their discourses on and practices of Africa to surprising levels of morality. True, one should not be naïve about this: many Chinese, Indians and other new visitors are not coming to Africa without some belief of their own moral and political superiority but by avoiding hiding their ambitions behind treachery ethics, they are actually acknowledging the dignity of their African counterparts. Even when it is disturbing, their approach of business and political relations seems refreshingly honest and often mutually rewarding. The main question is whether Africans can counter this with a strong, indigenous sense of self that they can bring to the negotiating table. For instance, if a Chinese company settling in in Congo or Ghana proposes to mine some areas that have symbolic value would there be an African civic discourse to force a public conversation about it or would decisions be made clandestinely by agents of government acting in their individual self-interest?

For now, it appears that contrary to Rudyard Kipling who lamented the “White Man’s burden,” Asians do not appear to dread some “Yellow Man responsibility.” They do not pretend to some sort of moral superiority that would justify the concealment of some unpleasant truths. They do not feel accountable for our psychological welfare: they bluntly mean business, with no phony emotions.

Without giving in to any form of essentialism that would be misplaced and unjustified, I would contend that the peculiar approach to Africa that has been adopted by Asian politicians and

business leaders' is consistent with an old philosophical tradition that reveals a distinctly non-Western view of dignity. It may sound like a bold claim. Let me try to clarify and explain.

Kenzaburo Oe's novel had the same type of quiet dignity about Africa that many Asians traveling today across its various corners also seem to carry. In other words—and this is one of the main points I would like to make here tonight—the new Africa-Asia dynamics is often viewed mostly through the lenses of economic interests and political and diplomatic influence. Yet its main determinants may be much deeper than politics or economics, and mostly philosophical.

3. Two Contrasting Approaches to Dignity

While it is always risky to make sweeping generalizations, there seems to be a pattern in the public discourse and practices of many of the Asian players who deal with Africa. One way to summarize it, perhaps a bit provocatively, is to say that they tend to emphasize what I would call “practical dignity”, as opposed to the “rhetorical” forms of dignity that many Westerners have displayed towards Africa over centuries.

The most noble goals of Western engagement and presence in Africa, as often stated by its good-faith advocates, usually revolve around the notions of exploration, the desire to “discover” and respect other people and cultures, and eventually the goal of promoting human dignity—mainly as conceptualized by Kant. The general idea (let's call it, for the sake of simplicity and perhaps abusively, the Western approach), is elegant but somewhat abstract. It is the notion that human beings have “an intrinsic worth, i.e., **dignity**,” which makes them valuable for who they are, “above all price.” Great. But what exactly is dignity?

In a recent book, Michael Rosen illustrates some of the confusion surrounding the Western approach to dignity. He discusses the story of Mr. Wackenheim, a dwarf whose proposed dwarf-tossing competition in a small French town was banned as a “violation of respect for the dignity of the human person,” even though Wackenheim had offered himself knowingly and willingly for the tossing. Angered by the judge's decision, the dwarf pursued his cause to the highest court in France, and then to the U.N. Human Rights Committee, both of which agreed with the lower court: Dwarf tossing is a violation of public order in its “infringing the dignity of the human person.”

That story is a bit creepy, I concede. But I use it because it opens some questions: who decides what one's dignity is? What societal institution has the legal and moral authority to validate and legitimize dignity? Beyond dwarf-tossing, can anyone willingly submit to humiliation, exploitation, violence, torture and rape and still claim his/her dignity? Who has the right to decide?

Contrast that old, Western-originated approach to dignity to the radically different public discourse and practice by Asians. In their new interactions with the continent, the political and business leaders of China, India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, or Pakistan, seem to work hard to avoid the semantic fuzziness of dignity in favor of the practical realities of everyday life. They

avoid moralistic prescriptions on how African countries should organize their institutions or run their affairs.

Listen to any Asian President or Prime Minister or Minister of Foreign Affairs speak about current events in Africa, and you would perceive the difference in tone and substance with their Western counterparts: there is never any sort of strongly-held view of the “appropriate” course of action for African countries: no publicly stated opinion as whether African countries should move towards a particular form of democratic government; no political instruction to what the “acceptable” Constitutional order should be in Côte d’Ivoire or the Democratic Republic of Congo; no moral crusade to fight the Jihadist terrorists across the Sahara desert; no threat of sanctions against any political leader who may be seen as not fitting the “right” profile; no lecture of any sort on the art of governing oneself...

For better or worse, Chinese, Indians, or Japanese are not sending aircraft and soldiers to bombard rebels in Northern Mali. For better or worse, they are not telling the International Criminal Court to indict any political leader they profoundly dislike. For better or worse, they are not offering any policy prescription on budget management, the privatization of public enterprises, trade, financial and exchange rate policies, to any African country. There is no doubt that the Chinese, Indians, and others are going to Africa with their own theories of development—as do the Brazilians or the Russians. But despite the recent proliferation of Confucius institutes across the continent, these “new” partners are well aware of the main lesson from the failure of the Western strategy in Africa: a business strategy predicated on proactively exporting their cultural products without concrete results in terms of economic growth and job creation has little chance of success.

Asian leaders and business people constantly traveling to Africa seem obsessed with the need to ensure that their actions lead to economic gains but also to results. They quietly want to distinguish themselves from their Western competitors, with the hope that the people of Africa would quickly see the difference. They insist on building visible infrastructure—even when these are convention halls or football stadiums. They want the people of Africa to associate their presence with new buildings, new roads, or new airports. The Chinese ambassador in Tanzania told me with pride how his country was committed to Africa’s economic development even when it was a very poor communist nation. He provided as evidence the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia railway in the early 1970s, a major project that could only be launched with an interest-free loan from China. He also pointed out, with a half-smile and speaking *mezza voce*, that the income per capita in China at the time was much lower than in Tanzania or Zambia.

In a recent paper in the *Wall Street Journal*, Bill Gates recounts how Ethiopia made spectacular progress on the Millennium Development Goals by learning from Asia. He writes: “With help from the Indian state of Kerala, which had built a successful network of community health-care posts, Ethiopia launched its own program in 2004 and today has more than 15,000 health posts staffed by 34,000 workers.”

Asian countries are not big supporters of the traditional forms of development aid, which they suspect only perpetuates century-old humiliations of poor countries. Asian leaders would rather try to make good of the famous Chinese proverb: “Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Teach me

to fish and I eat for a lifetime.” In a new, multi-polar world, in which the rise in incomes in large middle-income countries such as China, Brazil, India, Russia, or Indonesia, is opening new sources of demand for African products while freeing up low-skilled manufacturing employment for poor countries, Asian leaders want to distinguish themselves from their Western counterparts. They only want to discuss business deals—not to lecture anyone on governing.

That cautionary approach to international relations, which some may say is extra realism bordering cynicism, is likely to yield good results. Asians can easily construe it as a form of respect—and thus an elegant acknowledgement of the dignity of Africa. They can appear humble, and assert that their interactions with Africans stem from a shared past. After all, Asia and Africa suffered from slavery and colonialism—even though not on the same magnitude; they experienced brutal forms of authoritarianism, even in recent times; they have been victims of deep contempt and have been dismissed for their perceived negligible contribution to the human legacy. Yet Asia somehow managed to quickly overcome the dark side of its history, and emerged to write its own destiny. Learning from its own heavy past, Asia wants to position itself as a major player on the global scene and also as global do-gooder. But unlike the West, it is neither blind to the tremendous amount of suffering that overflows the continent of Africa, nor does it ignore the large amount of greatness underneath such pain.

Mocking the West’s scramble for Africa, Chinua Achebe once wrote: “I can’t imagine the Igbos traveling five thousand miles to tell anyone their worship was wrong.” He could have said the same thing about Asia: It is difficult to imagine the Japanese, Vietnamese, or Indonesians crossing the Indian Ocean in ships to forcefully convert Tanzanians or Ghanaians to Buddhism or Shintoism. Japanese engineers are working in Algeria while their Indian counterparts are in Tanzania and Chinese in Ethiopia. They are all claiming to be there to execute business deals, make profits, and create employment. They consider their candid search for win-win opportunities as the most credible way of addressing the dignity of the African people. The public discourse of Asian leaders and business elites about Africa reveals a more concrete approach to the subject: it shamelessly acknowledges their need for natural resources. They seem to believe that African dignity can only express itself through the economic empowerment of African citizens.

No African leader that I know is idealizing Asia. No Asian politician or businessman travels to Africa with a copy of Kenzaburo Oe’s novel in his pocket. As a matter of fact, Asians too had more than their fair share of grotesque and ruthless political characters. One of the most legendary political figures there, Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who became king by the age of 13, started early on the path to meanness: he removed all possible threats to his throne by sending his mother into exile and having her lover executed, along with his entire clan. Jorge Luis Borges noted that his actions were reminiscent of that of King Herod, who initiated a murder of all the infants in Bethlehem in an attempt to get rid of the baby Jesus—at least according to the Bible. Qin Shi Huang also defeated neighboring states, swallowed their territory into his growing empire and enslaved and castrated their citizens. In a country that had already produced such luminaries as Confucius or Lao Tse, he decided that history should start only with him, and tried to abolish the past by ordering the burning of all books.

The moral of the new Africa-Asia interaction may still be fuzzy. A legitimate remaining question about the new Africa-Asia dynamics is whether this new "economism" is itself a radical reduction of Africa as a space of material resources whose internal affairs are of no interest to the Asian powers. In this way Asians would appear like the Arab slave-traders who had no interest in African morals or politics and in fact benefited from what Igor Kopytoff called Africa's internal slavery. That remains to be seen. In any case, it is the responsibility of African leaders to take concrete steps to avoid getting trapped into exploitative contracts that reflect unequal power relations with Asia or any other part of the world.

For now, the shared experience of pain, suffering and failure between Asia and Africa make people there acutely aware of their still largely untapped capacity for good and greatness. That is why I am not yet too worried about the fact that some disenfranchised people in Kinshasa, Lagos, or Douala, resent unfair competition from Chinese merchants in retail trade. I am not too worried either by the ugly racist attitudes often displayed towards African migrants in Asia. In July 2012, President Hu Jintao said his country would forever be a "good friend, a good partner and a good brother" to Africa. If these words are kept and the main engine of the new Africa-Asia dynamics remains the quest for a narrowly but clearly defined "economic" form of dignity, there should be more than enough good opportunities for all sides to enjoy the relationship.

4. On the Intellectual Journey Ahead

To speak in public can be an exhilarating and even intoxicating experience. That is why the good Bantu people of Africa warn public speakers to always feel pity for those listening to them. Listening to a keynote speaker can indeed be painful. I have already been too long and may have exhausted your patience. But I could not end without briefly commenting on the intellectual agenda ahead and the way the search for and understanding of dignity may help drive and strengthen it. So let me conclude by touching upon the proposed research program of the AFRASO program.

Its stated objectives are to describe and analyze the increasingly more complex relations between Africa and Asia in a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective; and to come up with new knowledge and innovative theoretical frameworks that could help further research and support policies. As you embark upon this important research program, I think a good compass would be the use of the widest frames of analysis, and the focus on the broad idea of *Gnosis*, which Congolese thinker Valentin Mudimbe defines as "seeking to know, inquiry, methods of knowing, investigation, and even acquaintance with someone".

Finally, let's not forget the piece of advice that legendary French newspaper man Hubert Beuve-Mery and the founder of the daily *Le Monde* often gave his journalists when they asked for advice. He often told them: Just be nasty! ("*Soyez emmerdants !*") I would not go that far. But in a similarly inquisitive vein, I would humbly suggest that you think deeply about the mental boundaries and prejudices that we all carry—often unwittingly—and avoid the politically correct. As a practical matter, this would require at least:

- Going beyond Africanism—whether defined simply as the larger body of existing knowledge on Africa, or as the long-held philosophical attitude that consists of

approaching the continent of Africa either by comparison or opposition to the Western world, or as a fragile entity that must be protected from an invasion of new Barbarians from Asia;

- Challenging the existing epistemological order and its arbitrary categorizations, presuppositions, and hypotheses, and being genuinely open to a new range of theoretical alternatives; designing new policy paradigms that reflect a new understanding of the world; and
- Looking holistically at the issues of power, subjugation, self-respect, self-affirmation, and otherness from all angles, and examining whether the new Africa-Asia dynamics is likely to stimulate the dream of a global rendezvous of giving and receiving (*“le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir”*), as Léopold Sédar Senghor aptly put it.

Let's all aim for that.

Thank you.