General Introduction: “40 Years of Ghana–Korea Relations”

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Africa-Asia relations entered upon a particularly feisty and crucial phase in the last two decades of the twentieth century; this process continues apace in this century. As Amoah (2016) has argued, it is important not to be seduced by the turbo-charged quality of contemporary Africa-Asia relations and thereby forget the long provenance of this interaction. To be sure, it is only recently that vigorous academic studies of the varied historical and contemporary links between Africa and Asia has taken off. This new research interest has been driven in the main by China’s meteoric economic rise and its designs in Africa which have become a virtual cottage research industry (Ampiah and Naidu, 2008; Brautigam, 2011; Edoho, 2011; Monson, 2009; Prah and Gumede, 2018; Bodomo, 2013). A positive spin-off of this is the emergence of research centres in African academies (Amoah, 2015) dedicated to the study of the political-economy of Asia as well as and crucially “its … art, language, literature, history, philosophy, religion, etc.” (Amoah, 2015, 38). The Centre for Asian Studies (CAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon, is one of such centres.

CAS’s establishment in August, 2016, could not have occurred at a more auspicious time given that the following year (2017) marked two happy coincidences: the 60th anniversary of Ghana’s independence and 40 years of Ghana-South Korea (hereafter Korea) relations. This had to occasion some serious and sober stock taking. At independence Ghana came to embody the hopes and aspirations of Africans on the continent and all over the world. This pressed upon Nkrumah’s (1957, 4) mind: “Never has this been truer than today. How we conduct ourselves when we become independent will affect not only Ghana but the whole of Africa. We have a duty not only to this country, but to the peoples everywhere in Africa who are striving towards independence. If we can make a success of our independence, we shall have made an incalculable
contribution towards freedom and progress throughout Africa.” To reflect on how Ghana has fared and especially in comparison with countries with which she embarked on the journey of national transformation CAS organized a three day conference (April 11-13, 2017) at the University of Ghana, Legon. The theme of the conference was “40 years of Ghana-Korea Relations: Retrospectives and Prospects.”

This special edition draws on the papers presented at the conference which focused on the analyses of Ghana's development trajectory (in all its facets) set against Korea's within the framework of the diplomatic relations between the two nations. The value of this lies in the pressing need for more detailed and nuanced comparative studies of the development trajectory of African and Asian nations especially by African scholars.

Ayee concerns himself with a critical task in this volume: mapping out the nature of research that has been undertaken in the last forty years on Ghana-Korea relations. He relies in this enterprise mainly on a painstaking critical examination of the literature churned out on Ghana-Korea relations. This is a valuable lay of the research terrain undertaking (arguably the first ever) the value of which lies in providing a useful sense of what has been written thus far by academics on Ghana-Korea relations. This effort should aid academics in determining where to train their research focus in what promises to be a potentially active area in the coming decades. Kuditchar takes us on a necessary theoretical detour centered on the ways in which institution building (and the ways in which democratization is infused into it) and elite consensus or otherwise shaped the trajectory of economic policy outcomes in Ghana and Korea. In doing this he draws attention to the deliberately crafted political context (the theoretical claims of North et al, 2009, are used to make his case) that framed and undergirded Korea’s rapid economic transformation.

In his article “The Quest for Democratic Stability in Two Limited Access Order Systems: Ghana and South Korea in Perspective,” Kuditchar argues that too often Korea has been compared economically with countries like Ghana without taking full and critical cognizance of the ways in which a peculiar democratic order was forged and utilized to build if not demand elite consensus for difficult but necessary economic decisions and stave off potentially violent resistance from these elites. Kuditchar is worried that “while South Korean elites seem to have successfully engineered a fusion of democratic stability and economic structural transformation, their Ghanaian counterparts are yet to come up with an appropriate political framework with which to weld democratic stability with transformative economic innovations beyond rent generation and distribution” and points therefore to the often blithely neglected centrality of politics to the process of rapid national
economic transformation for developing polities. Beyond Kuditchar’s politics Khoo-Dzisi brings to the discussion the value of cultural exchanges as a necessary condition for grounding Ghana-Korea relations in all its different facets in the coming decades.

A close watcher of Korea for decades Khoo-Dzisi draws on her keen observations of Africa and Asia in this case study aimed at proffering new ways of, in her view, productive engagement between Ghana and Korea beyond just trade and commerce. In particular Khoo-Dzisi is concerned about more vigorous and active people to people interactions in order to forge “inter-cultural exchanges between Ghana and Korea” which “can take numerous creative forms that range from education/scholarship exchanges to collaboration in art and cultural endeavours…”

Four articles in this volume engage a vexing question that has dogged Ghanaian policymakers since independence and is captured succinctly by Aryeetey and Kanbur (2017, vii) as the inability of the Ghanaian economy to achieve the “structural transformation to a more diversified production base.” How to pull this off was a sore point of contention (leading to an epic falling out) between Nkrumah and his key economic advisor Arthur Lewis, the Trinidadian Nobel economics prize laureate. While Arthur Lewis insisted on the agriculture sector as a primary prop for transforming a hitherto colonial extractive economy Nkrumah was besotted with industrialization cast in the Rostovian (1959) mode. Ghana’s rural development strategy is implicated in the Nkrumah-Lewis disagreement which Amoah and Mills examine in this volume through the Korean rural development initiative Saemaül Undong which serves as a case study for comparison. Amoah and Asante revisit Ghana’s industrialization aspirations within the scope of her four decades economic relations with Korea. They utilize economic, historical and policy data drawn from primary (including archival material) and secondary sources for their work which attempts to prescribe ways in which Ghana can benefit far more than ever before from her economic co-operation with Korea.

In a putative post-industrial world the digital economy looms large and has intimate links with Ghana’s economic quandary and potential solutions for this. By 2003, the Government of Ghana (GoG) had drawn up its Information and Communication Technology for Accelerated Development (ICT4AD) policy (Amoah, 2013) document. The document signaled (GoG) realization that the Ghanaian economy had many fresh frontiers to traipse if it were to transform in response to new global economic realities. Barfi-Adomako Owusu et al offer a compelling case study of how Ghana and Korea co-operation attempted to deal with the so-called digital divide through the construction of the Ghana-Korea Information Access Centre located in the University of Ghana’s main
library, the Balme Library. The study draws on project data from the inception, completion and use of the centre to date. In their rendering they point out, in this case inchoate, the critical institution anchored approach for sustainable, results oriented economic relations and critical technology transfer that has yet to fully play out in Africa-Asia relations.

The work by Mawuko-Yevugah and Ayelazuno broadens this economic debate to a comparative analysis of the “Asian Miracle” and “Africa Rising” discourses. It is important to recall here that it took Japan’s own ideational effort and funding to nudge the World Bank to write the story of the East Asian Miracle (The World Bank, 1993). Stiglitz (2002, 91) argues and correctly that the report will point up the central role that governments played in that miracle in direct contradistinction to “the minimalist roles beloved of the Washington Consensus.” Using the discourses of the East Asian Miracle and Africa Rising as critical vignettes (via the critical international political economy theoretical framework) Mawuko-Yevugah and Ayelazuno contemplate the necessity for Ghana and other African nations to revisit the developmental state idea inherent in the former discourse that is sorely missing in the soporifying claims of the latter discourse (because it ignores the warning signals that dependency theory provides).

The articles in this special edition share a common theme: that Ghana-Korea relations over the four decades could have been better calibrated for the mutual benefit of both countries. One hopes though that the well thought through cogitations here can inspire this concretely in the coming years.

References


