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SYMPOSIUM

Contrapuntal reading of 'Africa rising': seeing Africa in International Relations beyond the exceptional

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Abstract

How can we read International Relations from the perspective of Africa in a way that does not perpetually put the continent in a permanent state of exception vis-à-vis global politics? What strategies are available to study Africa without overhyping narratives of its rise or demise? This article contends, drawing on Edward Said, that adopting contrapuntal reading enables reading Africa's place in international politics beyond narratives and counter-narratives of Africa moving from one exceptional state of despair to an exceptional state of prosperity with nothing in between. The article uses the 'Africa Rising' narrative and its counter-narrative of Africa as a place of perpetual lack, deviance, and demise to illustrate how to practically adopt contrapuntalism as a method and as an ethos when engaging African perspectives in IR. It argues that contrapuntalism is a commitment to practicing critical thinking and questioning Eurocentric modes of thinking when approaching mainstream accounts of the history, origin, or interpretations of any political event. Contrapuntalism acknowledges that dominant narratives need to be read side-by-side with narratives of resistance and that non-Western concepts do not always need to be translated or rendered legible by creating (forced) Eurocentric equivalents for them to be legitimate or valid.

Keywords: Africa; international theory; Edward said; contrapuntal reading; Global South

Introduction

> Africa was discovered in the fifteenth century. That at least is what most history books say. Professors teach it, students accept it as truth. In any case, why doubt? The media propagate the veracity of the fact in the sagas of European explorers. That is the first meaning, this discovery (that is, this unveiling) meant and still means the primary violence signified by the word. The slave trade narrated itself accordingly,

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> and the same movement of reduction progressively guaranteed the gradual invasion of the continent.[1]

In his 2001 influential satirical essay 'How to Write about Africa,' Binyavanga Wainaina sarcastically warned that, if one were to write about Africa, one must learn to adopt a tone of spectacle. Africa, for instance, is 'Timeless,' 'Primordial,' and 'Tribal.' It is a big place with '900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating.'[2] Scorning stereotypically negative representations of Africa as a site of traumatic spectacle, Wainaina addressed many themes that were all too common not only in novels gesturing to Africa but also in songs, charity pamphlets, documentaries, and academic writings alike. Among your characters, Wainaina mockingly adds, 'you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless.' These are not unknown scenes.

Wainaina's satire echoes Mudimbe's quote in the opening epigraph of this article. It also resonates with other critiques made by intellectuals, scholars, and activists reacting to narratives that get normalized mainly in global media and popular culture, as well as in academic circles, about the African continent being a spectacularly deviant place. Themes surrounding wars, child soldiers, and famines all come to mind as the mainstream depiction of Africa in magazines as widely read as the Economist and the Times throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and well into the new century. Medical language, including associating African societies and populations with words such as the 'plague' of corruption, the 'epidemic' of poverty, 'gangrene,' 'cancer,' and like concepts, is imported to diagnose Africa's ailments, lacks, and deviance from normalcy. The discovery of Africa (by the European gaze), as Mudimbe writes in the epigraph, goes hand-in-hand with the invention of the continent in the eyes of its discoverers, interpreting difference as deviance.

A common way to rectify this Africa-as-doomed representation has been for scholars and reporters to adopt a counter-narrative showing how Africa can exceptionally exceed our expectations about safety, wealth, innovation, and so on. One such counter-narrative emerged in the 2010s around a phenomenon described as 'Africa Rising' which rapidly spread in academic journals, magazines, and beyond. The phrase 'Africa Rising' first appeared on the cover of the *Economist* magazine in 2011, noting that 'after decades of slow growth, Africa has a real chance to follow in the footsteps of Asia.'[3] The 'Africa Rising' narrative counters the dire depictions of the continent away from a place of lack to a place of abundance, away from focusing on war-torn zones to finding oases of peace and stability, and so on. The counter-narrative, therefore, emphasizes spectacular increases, such as Africa's GDP consistently outpacing the growth of other continents, including Europe's, the rapid growth of Africa's middle class, its demographics, including the youngest median age, and so on. In its most recent iteration, the framing of the spectacle of 'Africa Rising' has focused on emphasizing that by 2050, Africa's population will have doubled, most of

[1]Mudimbe 1994, 17.

[2]The full text of the article is available at https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-Africa/.

[3]The full article can be found at https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2011/01/06/Africas-impressive-growth.

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its cities will have urbanized, and with this, the world's youngest continent will witness a spectacular rise in consumption, energy demands, infrastructure, and economic growth.[4]

Despite sitting on opposite ends of the spectrum, both narratives, 'Africa Rising' as well as negative condemnations of Africa as a place of despair, have more in common than what first meets the eye. First, the two narratives emphasize a perspective of spectacle and include exaggerated generalizations about an entire continent based on simple numbers or a limited sample of observations. Second, the emphasis on spectacle in both narratives achieves little more than silencing the voices of ordinary Africans and ordinary processes of organizing life politically, socially, and economically. 'Africa rising' narratives work in favor of sweeping exaggerated perspectives rather than dissecting big trends into granular analyses that bring out African views with variance and complexity.

Indeed, by putting a premium on the spectacle, both narratives narrowly capture the extraordinary rise or the delipidating demise of the continent and nothing in between. In this case, counter-narratives that aim to prove stereotypical presentations of Africa and Africans in association with war, conflicts, diseases, famines, and so on are also contributing to spreading misrepresentations about the disparities and inequalities within African societies. At this point, the question is then how do we read International Relations from the perspective of Africa in a way that does not perpetually put the continent in a permanent state of exception vis-à-vis global politics? What strategies or pedagogies are available to include Africa without overhyping the spectacle of its rise or its demise? Can Africa and African perspectives afford to be ordinary in their place within International Relations? In pursuit of these queries, this article draws on Edward Said to contend that by adopting contrapuntal reading as a method, academics would be able to convey complex, nuanced, but also ordinary African perspectives in International Relations that go beyond essentializing Africa's plural and diverse systems of thought.

To this effect, the first section of the article expands on the state of the field of International Relations engaging Africa from the lens of spectacle. The section expands on International Relations' 'Africa malaise' and provides a gentle critique of the attempts at diversifying IR by adding national schools of IR from different regions in the Global South. The second section expands on contrapuntalism and situates it within pluralist traditions in International Relations, including Global IR and Worlding scholarships. The third section illustrates how to practically adopt contrapuntalism as a method and as an ethos when engaging African perspectives on IR. The section uses the 'Africa Rising' narrative as a main case but provides other illustrations drawing from relevant scholarship. A final section brings the discussion back to the start, reiterating that Africa is complex, African systems of thought are neither replicating mainstream IR nor creating essentialized or exceptional theories that are only parochially relevant.[5] Some concepts and theories might find their equivalents in mainstream IR organically, others that can be approximated through rough translation, and yet another set that will remain only intelligible within the confines of the knowledge community. These modalities should all be able to exist together side-by-side. They do not have to be synthesized or packaged into something

[4]See, for instance, OECD (2025).

[5]See Barnett and Zarakol (2023) on Global International Relations and the essentialism trap.

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digestible or readily recognizable within mainstream IR language and theories. A degree of non-intelligibility should be tolerable, if not desirable, within a discipline that is increasingly looking for ways to make itself relevant beyond the confines of Euro-American experiences. Contrapuntalism as an ethos and method affords us the capacity to integrate intelligible and non-intelligible experiences of the international to be part of African perspectives on IR.

Africa's challenging place within mainstream International Relations

International Relations Theory (IRT) has, of late, witnessed a proliferation of what can be referred to as 'International Relations with adjectives,' including denominations such as non-Western IR, Chinese IR, Indian IR, and Turkish IR, among others. For much of this diversified scholarship within IRT, the fear is that this approach is leading to more isolation among the various silos of this IR with its many adjectives than constructive dialogue or significant openings within the main canon of the discipline. Indeed, rather than provoking a structural overhaul of the core questions, ethos, and methods within what is considered to be conventional IR (or IR *tout court*), resorting to 'making room' for schools of International Relations that centre knowledge systems of countries other than the United States, the UK, Germany, and other Western architects of IR *tout court* is distracting from the more urgent need for a bigger change.

A growing scholarship in International Relations is problematizing the inadequacy of the discipline in its representation of Africa.[6] The extant scholarship has made much progress in showing how Eurocentric concepts and histories of International Relations have a limited explanatory purchase when put in the context of Africa. Scholars have explored the limitations of assuming the universality of concepts such as the state, and the problem of taking the European state as a reference point from which categories such as weak state, semi-state, quasi-state, fragile state, and failed state derive.[7] The problem here is not a problem of wrong categories, but it is an epistemological problem, as taking the development of the European state as a standard for how to organize and analyze political units in Africa and elsewhere at best marginalizes colonial practices and state formations during the European colonial conquests of Africa.[8]

In an article taking stock of mainstream theories of IR and their (mis)treatment of area studies, Rita Abrahamsen observes a few salient patterns in how areas outside of great power politics, Africa included, are represented. From an African perspective, IR is a Western-centric discipline where Africa is the permanent 'other' serving to reproduce and confirm the superiority and hegemony of Western knowledge, epistemologies, and methodologies.[9] Abrahamsen assesses the gap that exists between area studies and International Relations, as well as the opportunities for

[6]See, for example, Grovogui 2001; Odoom and Andrews 2017; Grant 2018; Getachew 2019; Tieku 2021; Chipato 2023; Ba 2023; and Al-Bulushi 2024.

[7]See Dunn and Shaw (2001) for a collection of perspectives on the inadequacy of mainstream International Relations theory in capturing the reality from the periphery.

[8]Niang (2016, 2) argues that mainstream social science scholarship tends to 'impute rigid homogeneity' to the entirety of the African experience.

[9]Abrahamsen 2016, 126.

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enriching both by engaging Africa seriously in the study of International Relations. For her, replacing Western IR with Chinese IR, Indian IR, African IR, or another evil twin of mainstream IR merely 'replaces one parochialism with another.'[10] Indeed, this does nothing to change the deeper assumptions about what constitutes the 'international' in 'International Relations.' Effectively, these abstractions (as stated by Krishna in 2001) are symptoms of deeply seated problems of race and willful amnesia within IR's systems of knowledge production.

International Relations with adjectives could be read as a best-case scenario as lip service to diversity and, at worst, can be seen as reifying parochialisms and exceptionalisms of the mainstream by lumping multitudes of experiences and systems of thought into digestible accounts for the consumption of the usual customers of IR *tout court*. We see that often intertwined with the quest for diversifying the discipline of International Relations is a practice to 'create more room' for IRT with adjectives rather than opening the mainstream canon to more diverse views. 'Making room' for diverse voices in IRT suggests that there are pre-made conceptions about who are the hosts, guests, and landlords of the discipline, what rules regulate what gets admitted, and what language is used as the main medium of communication.[11] These exercises of making room can lead to replicating hierarchies that permeate the discipline's knowledge production rather than flattening the differences and creating an equitable system for minoritized epistemic communities to be represented more centrally within the mainstream.

Mainstream IR as a medium of re/producing the hegemony of Western knowledge structures

Many postcolonial and decolonial scholars take issue with the separation of theory-building and theory-testing that usually occurs in North–South knowledge production dynamics. They contest practices and collaborations that assume that African countries, for example, can be treated as sites for data collection and empirical observation rather than theory-building.[12] They further lay bare the ethical quandaries of conducting data collection in such asymmetrical partnerships.[13] As we have learned from this scholarship, the false semblance of partnerships in knowledge production is costly for local researchers and assistants who end up doing 'the grunt-work of collecting data and foundational research about which the North American or European researchers will write and publish research, benefitting them and furthering their careers.'[14] Such hierarchical arrangements obscure the contributions of African researchers by reducing them to technical skills of conducting fieldwork or collecting survey data, while in reality, it is the case that knowledge is co-constituted

[10]Ibid., 127.

[11]Echoing Agathengelou and Ling's (2004) concept of the House of IR.

[12]See Bischoff et al. (2015, 4) and Tickner (2013, 631) arguing that 'the first world/North has come to be viewed as the primary producer of 'finished goods' or scientific theory, while third world/South sites constitute sources of 'data' or, in the best of cases, local expertise, while interpretation – a decisive stage in theory-building – occurs in the North, where knowledge is produced and circulated in order to be consumed worldwide.'

[13]See Jayawardane 2019; Parashar 2019; Bisoka 2020.

[14]Jayawardane 2019, 278.

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and withholding credit for conceptual authorship in these projects simply erases the agency of Africa-based research partners.

From a praxis angle, IR, as Amy Niang tells us, 'has rarely conceived of Africa as a source of valuable knowledge worth sharing with others.'[15] Instead, the gaze towards Africa is usually mostly pointed at the potential to collect data on the 'abnormal,' the 'lacking,' and the 'deviant' cases to enhance theory-testing and not as a place to learn theories from.[16] Indeed, as Abrahamsen contends, 'theory almost always has a higher symbolic capital than the empirical, and theory-building and the production of nomothetic, generalizable insights command attention and respect within the social sciences, much more so than empirical approaches centred on idiographic case studies and thick description characterized as "illustrations" and "application of theory."'[17] This is at the source of the stigmatization of African studies as empirical case applications which are viewed as less prestigious than theorization in the hierarchy of knowledge production in the field of IR. Theoretical treatments take empirical studies as a secondary exercise to theory-building, while at the same time area studies experts tend to dismiss the generality of theorizations in favour of deep and intimate knowledge of the field. This is why many scholars observe the curious phenomenon whereby Africa is 'curiously present and absent at the same time; present as a worst-case, doomsday scenario, yet absent as a serious site for empirical and theoretical investigation of the causes and implications for politics, security, and global governance.'[18]

Similarly, scholars have contested the persistent imperial nature of mainstream IRT in its assimilationist approaches and tokenism in integrating systems of political thought from Africa and elsewhere in the Global South without making structural changes to its knowledge production echo chambers. Despite the vocabulary of partnerships, equity, and calls for co-constitution of knowledge between scholars based in the African continent and those in Western institutions, the normative assumptions that undergird much of this 'partnership buzz' are still deeply hierarchical. To illustrate, one need not look too far back to find a wide array of problematic partnerships couched in equity language, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to travel restrictions and health risks associated with doing fieldwork, we saw a proliferation of research configurations which would see 'collaborations' between Global North scholars who mainly put in research funding and scholars from the Global South who carried the brunt of doing work on the ground amid safety risks. Such inequitable practices would appear on paper as they embody this ideal model of collaboration among scholars from North and South, but in reality, they replicate, if not exacerbate, the existing hierarchies. Even when scholars from Western institutions do travel to conduct fieldwork experiments and surveys in the Global South, hierarchies exist. Namely, it remains the case that as lead scholars (or Principle Investigators as is often the label in administrative language), the scholars who bring in the funding are in the driver's seat and reap most of the career accolades and prestige while their surveyed audiences and technical expert colleagues hired for navigating the local grounds might at best get *per diem* renumerations for their efforts.

[15]Niang 2016, 8.
[16]See Grovogui 2001, 2011.
[17]Abrahamsen 2016, 128.
[18]Ibid., 134. See also Kamola 2013.

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Mainstream IR as a medium of reiterating the hegemony of Western epistemologies

As explained by scholars repeatedly, the problem with IRT's treatment of the Global South in general and Africa in particular is that the *other* becomes the site of anomaly where experiences of development, human rights, and democracy are judged to have failed based on hubris assumptions that, unlike their Western counterparts, these societies are not compatible with modernity.[19] IR's malaise with/in Africa is further evidenced in the fact that instead of questioning the validity of concepts and theories applied to the African context, the discipline continuously questions the adequacy of African societies. Therefore, thinking Africa in IR requires 'an exercise of deconstruction, of the intellectual contexts of a discipline perceived as foreign and therefore removed from African concerns and configurations.'[20]

As stated by Bisoka, the quest to 'decolonize knowledge should not become a new form of humanitarianism in which researchers from the North, once again, play savior to researchers from the South.' For him, decolonizing knowledge production 'pertains to issues of alienation and requires awareness and responsibility on the part of researchers from the South as they navigate unequal power relations.'[21] Therefore, the main question to examine here is how can we raise awareness about the diverse systems of political thought and knowledge production traditions that exist and thrive across the Global South, and that scholars would need to understand and draw inspiration from without needing to save and speak for them? In other words, assuming that knowledge in the Global South is already there (not in need of saving or producing anew), the task becomes not one of telling multiple stories but excavating and rendering visible various layers of the same stories.[22] Indeed, the question becomes one of how to best bring out the diverse perspectives (often of the same global events) in our reading and writing of IRT. The next section expands on contrapuntal reading as a method and ethos for deprovincializing and globalizing IRT.

Certainly, rectifying IRT by integrating underexamined perspectives from contexts outside of the conventional canon is fundamental and urgent.[23] Yet merely 'making room' for diverse voices cannot be the end goal. Simply multiplying narratives for the sake of diversifying the field is not sufficient (and can lead to replicating the same discrepancies, as I show in my illustration below). Instead, my contention is that uncovering power relations and hierarchies should be the goal of contrapuntalism. This can be achieved not by centring Western audiences and aiming at giving them more balanced and more accurate perspectives (a fine first step which needs to be complemented) but by centring minority communities, Indigenous systems of thought, and epistemic traditions from the Global South. Doing this, I reckon, will sometimes require refraining from the need to translate and

[19]As Niang argues 'For many, Africa is a place where Marx, democracy, and modernity have failed on account of the tyranny of cultures largely incompatible with progress and civilization' (2016, 1).

[20]Niang 2016, 2.

[21]Bisoka 2020.

[22]Bilgin 2016, 138.

[23]See Benabdallah (2024), Tieku (2021), and Qobo and Nyathi (2016) for examples of the importance of drawing on non-Western concepts such as Ubuntu, Guanxi, and so on to theorize International Relations. See Werner (2023) for a discussion on the concept of indigeneity.

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find (forced) equivalents to make other epistemic traditions intelligible to Western audiences.

Here I identify two practices of epistemic violence facing Indigenous knowledge production from the Global South, which I demonstrate to be equally problematic as I see them as two sides of the same coin. The first one is straight up the omission of Indigenous systems of thought and approaches as primitive and lacking the scientific tact needed to examine modern global politics. Many scholars have written about such omissions both in the specific African context and the broader Indigenous political thought.[24] The second one, which gets less attention, is forcing intelligibility by way of translation into English Indigenous concepts that convey distinct world-views, specifically via language media other than English. The imperative to make other traditions of knowledge and thought intelligible (and digestible) to mainstream audiences centres the latter by yet again giving priority to dominant approaches and their preference sets (as in using the English language, for instance). Several scholars have written about assimilationism into mainstream IR and how IR scholars from non-Western traditions may choose to render their concepts and theories translatable for the sake of finding bigger audiences, increasing the likelihood of being published in Anglophone academic presses. Without discrediting these motives and the agency behind them, my argument is that a degree of unintelligibility should be tolerated and encouraged in the journey of decentring Western IR knowledge production.

To illustrate, for many decades, the IR community was completely oblivious to the centrality and importance of the legacy of Les Chartes de Mandé to West Africa's conceptions of human rights, entanglement between human and environmental rights, and social justice. The Chartes de Mandé offers an example of an 'early constitution, as evidence of a distinctly West African tradition of rights, or as human rights documents *avant la lettre*.'[25] In 2009, UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list inscribed the Manden Charter describing it as 'one of the oldest constitutions in the world albeit mainly in oral form, contain[ing] a preamble of seven chapters advocating social peace in diversity, the inviolability of the human being, education, the integrity of the motherland, food security, the abolition of slavery by razzia (or raid), and freedom of expression and trade.'[26] The erasure of the Chartes de Mandé from IR textbooks as an example of foundational heritage that influenced global thought and practice for some is no coincidence in that mainstream IR's coloniality is merely demonstrated in such treatment of non-Euro-American traditions. Simultaneously, the erasure is also attributed to the oral tradition, which characterized how the contents of the Chartes were passed down across generations. Due to this oral medium of knowledge sharing and the absence of a definitive document, scholars have contested the temporal sources of the Chartes with some arguing that they go back to the thirteenth century (the UNESCO inscription does so as well) while others placing them (more convincingly) in the nineteenth century which was marked by slavery raids and imperial interventions both of which heavily contested in the Mandé Charter.

[24]See Werner 2023.
[25]Mann 2021, 129.
[26]UNESCO 2009.

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In addition to leaving the Mande Chartes out of discussions acknowledging African leading contributions in norms on human rights and anti-slavery, the Chartes were made intelligible to many by placing them in temporal proximity to the Magna Carta (itself dating back to the thirteenth century).[27] This is as if to say that the recognition or visibility of the Chartes de Mandé is somehow expected to increase if made comparable to the Magna Carta. Just as the European state is made into the standard against which African statehoods are measured (and often found lacking), the Eurocentric historical timelines and milestone documents are used not only as benchmarks against which to evaluate any material that come to the surface from outside of Europe but also as a way to render this material intelligible within a repertoire of recognizable language within the Western episteme. I offer contrapuntalism as an ethos and a way to resist forcing African systems of thought into a repertoire of intelligible equivalents in Western epistemological traditions. I expand on contrapuntalism in the following section.

Contrapuntal ethos as resistance to forcing the intelligibility of African systems of thought

> Worldism aims to understand and transform the unequal social relations of colonial capitalist-patriarchy as it is manifested not just in 'the West' or 'the world economy' but in multiple worlds, economies, and subjectivities.[28]

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said suggests that 'we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others.'[29] He contends that 'there is no Archimedean point …, no vantage outside the actuality of relationships among cultures, among unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, among us and others,' and that 'no one has the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting the world free from the encumbering interest and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves.'[30] For him, borrowing from music, contrapuntal reading is necessary because it allows us to take account of narratives and counter-narratives while keeping them both independent. As Said explained, 'we must therefore read the great canonical texts with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works. The contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes – that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded.'[31] As a method, therefore, contrapuntal reading invites us to examine dominant IR narratives alongside those of resistance to them, not as a way of synthesizing them but as a way to raise awareness of the very fact that

[27]Mann 2021, 135.
[28]Agathangelou and Ling 2004, 34.
[29]Said 1993, 32.
[30]Ibid., 65.
[31]Ibid., 78–9.

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there are intertwined yet independent and parallel experiences of global events, concepts, and theories.[32]

Contrapuntalism allows us 'a simultaneous awareness of both the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.'[33] Ultimately, Said argues that by looking at different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of intertwined and overlapping histories,[34] we can perhaps 'try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility' (1993, 18). Applied to IRT, the hope would be to move beyond narrative/counter-narrative dialectics with Western/Post or Non-Western approaches and do more than simply 'make room' for *other* approaches to IR to be included as part of diversification efforts. By contrapuntally adopting a pluralist, relational, entangled, and multilayered pedagogy, both sets of narratives are validated together as necessary sides to the same coin.

Furthermore, as explained by Chowdhry, contrapuntal reading is not to be equated with plurality in the sense of advocating multiple perspectives for the sake of inclusivity. She explains that Said is not interested in making a case for multiple voices and readings to be amplified.[35] A contrapuntal reading insists on reading historical events and moments in a way that integrates what otherwise are the silent perspectives of the marginalized voices from the Global South. Here, contrapuntalism is compatible with 'worlding' texts, interrogating them, and excavating the hierarchies of power-knowledge nexus embedded in them. Agathangelou and Ling use the term 'worldism' to signal that 'we live in multiple worlds and these, in turn, live in and through us.' For them, these worlds 'stock our visions, guide our actions, underpin our institutions, and account for our interactions with Others' and taking a worlding approach necessitates understanding that no single perspective can speak in universal or definitive terms. As with worlding perspectives, pluriverse and contrapuntal approaches recognize that there are multiple 'reals' and as such the aim is not to relativize the truth but to recognize that multiple sets of truths can exist layered and connected, however different in substance.

Indeed, contrapuntal reading does not privilege 'any particular narrative but reveals the "wholeness" of the text, the intermeshed, overlapping, and mutually embedded histories of metropolitan and colonized societies and of the elite and subaltern.' Chowdhry further elaborates that 'Said's approach to the worldliness of culture destabilizes IR's understandings of sovereignty and power'; it denaturalizes IR's Eurocentric traits[36] and opens what is taken as IRT to perspectives beyond those who are taken to be conventional. By interrogating IR's Eurocentric knowledge production, which sometimes conflates Western systems of knowledge as universal, scholars recuperate Indigenous voices and Global South perspectives on events that have predominantly been studied from a Eurocentric perspective.[37] Contrapuntalism

[32]See Krishna (2001), Biswas (2007), Salter (2010), Barnard-Wills and Moore (2010), Bilgin (2016), and Morefield (2022), among others.

[33]Said 1993, 51.

[34]See Bilgin 2016.

[35]Chowdhry 2007, 105.

[36]Ibid., 111.

[37]See Barnard-Wills and Moore (2010) for a contrapuntal analysis of terrorism studies by examining India as a case study.

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weaves together the many worlds and many regions, as advocated by both Global IR and Worlding.

As ethos, contrapuntalism acknowledges the multiple origins of ideas in world politics, rather than presenting a particular system of thought as an authoritative or definitive proclamation on IR's theoretical foundations.[38] It does not aim to fix meanings or find 'the truest' theory but seeks to open dialogue and conversation about how different vantage points experience historical moments differently and what each one can learn from being exposed to the other's perspectives. Put in the context of the Mandé Chartres, a contrapuntal ethos would not only recognize that conversations about the evils of slavery and the need to abolish it were taking place in different locales including within Africa itself (as opposed to mainstream focus on abolitionist movements in Europe and the US) but would also refrain from finding a European equivalent to the constitutional format of the Chartes in order to make it recognizable within the epistemic register of the Western academe. Contrapuntalism as ethos would acknowledge the power dynamics at play that allow for the Mandé Chartes to be neglected for so long at first and then to be brought into the discussion by looking at European equivalents as its entry point. The power asymmetry also lays bare the absence of Africans (as people) and their interests and perspectives from the enterprise of knowledge production within IR. I further expand on this absence of African perspectives in my discussions of how narratives of Africa's doom and bloom have more in common than not, as they both largely ignore African perspectives and voices on these matters. Contrapuntalism has the potential to change how we theorize IR by acknowledging that multiple experiences (even contradictory at times) of the same events can exist side-by-side without having to make sense of the contradictions or translating them into intelligible stories from the vantage points of Western audiences.

Engaging Africa in IR beyond spectacle narratives of rise and ruination

The argument of this paper is that contrapuntalism can be useful for reading African perspectives and contributions to International Relations beyond narratives and counter-narratives of Africa moving from one exceptional state of despair to another exceptional state of prosperity with nothing in the middle. Indeed, just as problematic fantastical accounts of Africa as a deviant case are, many scholars cautioned against uncritically embracing the 'Africa Rising' hype.[39] Effectively, the Africa Rising narrative highlights urgent questions about 'rising' according to what standards, and judged by whom? Indeed, over the last decade, scholarship on the over-hyped 'Africa Rising' phenomenon saw a rising optimism around African agency as arguments and hopes about growing economic development in the continent gave way to arguments about an (imagined) optimized agency for Africans in navigating global relations.[40] However, as the gap between rich and poor within several African countries continued to deepen, the 'Africa rising' bubble began to burst. The disparities between rural and urban areas persist, and

[38]Bilgin 2016, 141.

[39]See Taylor (2014) for an account of the source of hope that the tides have turned on descriptions of Africa as the 'dark continent' and a hope that the times have now changed in favor of a rising continent.

[40]For several years, the enthusiasm about Africa's rise spread to academic and policy circles alike.

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the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the socio-economic inequalities that already characterized many African countries.

The focus on the spectacle of infrastructure projects and other growth metrics rising all across the continent narrows down the possibility of reading Africa through complex and multilayered lenses. It does nothing more than reinforce the status quo narrative that Africa is exceptionally different (either in a good or a bad way) and complicitly maintains the marginalization of African voices in representations about Africa. Indeed, in addition to eschewing nuance, prioritizing trendy economists' or reporters' views of Africa silences the voices of the communities and peoples who are the subject of metanarratives such as 'Africa Rising' as the emphasis is generally placed on compiling data on the average, median, and overall measures of growth rather than individual or personalized accounts. It also renders invisible acts of resistance to predatory capitalistic development projects by communities all over the continent who stood to lose land, livelihoods, or jobs to mega-infrastructure projects. In both Africa Rising and its antithetical demise accounts, the focus is taken away from Africans' agency and placed upon external factors, whether it is the competition from China lifting African economies, geopolitical rivalries, or global disruptions such as the latest pandemic.[41]

A contrapuntal reading of the Africa Rising narrative side-by-side with localized accounts of rising challenges in communities that are unable to realize as much economic profit or upward mobility as the elite, which is the focus of 'Africa Rising,' does not attempt to choose sides or prove one is more legitimate than the other. Instead, contrapuntalism shows us that both can be happening at the same time, allowing us to both recognize the positive developments while pointing out the structural inequities and power hierarchies which exacerbate the gaps within African societies. Contrapuntal reading shows how the 'Africa Rising' can be read in neo-liberal narratives as the direct result of the marketability of Africa and African products and of positive indicators of GDP growth, rising middle class size, fast urbanization trends, and other structural metrics that make the narrative attractive to corporate investments. Yet, at the same time, contrapuntalism also allows us to simultaneously read, with this optimistic outlook on the Africa Rising narrative, interrogations and critical questioning of whom Africa Rising benefits. A critical reading of Africa Rising can add to the dominant perspective (about positive economic indicators being associated with globalization and marketability) the perspective from below, including from farmers, traders, and labourers, who might be seeing their profit margins and quality of life deteriorate from the steep competition imposed by big corporations.

To be sure, parallels can be drawn between contrapuntal readings of African perspectives to IR with other regions across the Global South. For instance, Navnita Behera discusses how teaching International Relations in India requires a contrapuntal reading which shows 'ways of knowing' that go beyond Eurocentrism in order to appeal to and reflect students' own experiences, histories, and sense of place in the international.[42] For Behera, it is crucial for IR scholars teaching outside of the core, so to speak, to weave 'ways of knowing to show how creating knowledge and theorizing have evolved.' For her, contrapuntalism shows students how the discipline has

[41]See Benabdallah (2024), Zajontz et al. (2024), Soulé (2017), Grant (2018) on debates about agency.
[42]Behera 2021, 49.

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evolved over time. Likewise, Peter Vale speaks about the difficulty of presenting a firm or authoritative view of IR from conventional theories (realism and such) in a South African classroom. From his experience, students who have experienced Apartheid have a view on International Relations that is necessarily influenced by such a significant historical moment, which is frequently ignored by IR scholarship altogether. For Val and Behera, contrapuntalism is a necessity, as the only way to make canonical IR legible to these students is to put it side-by-side with histories, theories, and ways of knowing the global that acknowledge the non-Eurocentric perspectives.

Normalizing contrapuntalism in IR scholarship (theory and practice) can be achieved by broadening students' exposure to diverse ways of knowing, theorizing, and experiencing the international. Indeed, as Koomen (2019) describes, contrapuntalism is essential to her classes as she challenges students to read Black Internationalism not as a mere add-on to mainstream IR but as an entry point from which to invite students to imagine what the discipline of IR would look like if it centred scholarship such as that of W. E. B. DuBois as fundamental. Similarly, Alina Sajed invites IR scholars to imagine what IR would look like today if its orientation prioritized the Bandung Conference as a milestone or as a starting point rather than the Treaty of Westphalia, the Second World War, or the Cold War. These thought experiments are important because they serve to decentre the authoritative accounts of IR's origins and offset the danger of a single story. Contrapuntalism indeed allows for nuanced presentations of an IR discipline as a complex field where different perspectives, diverse interests, and clashing narratives all happen side-by-side instead of a dominant hegemonic narrative simplifying world events by assuming Western experiences are universal.

Additional vantage points for teaching IR from a nuanced approach would be to adopt Thakur and Vale (2020)'s argument about tracing IR's origins to the Second Anglo-Boer War in South Africa instead of the First World War. In much the same way, scholars have argued that when the Cold War is viewed from the prism of African countries, which have been the target of many proxy wars between the two superpowers, it becomes evident that the War was not as cold (or passive) as Eurocentric narratives would have it. Instead, a series of external interferences in domestic affairs across the continent, including the provisions of large amounts of armaments to various factions, have created or prolonged chaos in Mozambique, Angola, Sudan, and the DRC, among others. In the DRC, the assassination of Lumumba with the implication of Western intelligence agencies, for example, and the civil unrest that ensued from it render it difficult to present the Cold War as a celebrated global arrangement that saw the two superpowers acknowledge each other and refrain from engaging in conflict.

Conclusion

For all the progress that has been made in globalizing IR and pointing at the failures and limitations of mainstream IR in reflecting the realities on the ground from the periphery, it is important to pause for a moment and take stock of what has changed in the Global South perspectives on IR. That is to say, do Global IR and Global South perspectives on IR risk becoming new forms of hegemony and marginalization within already marginalized spaces? Whose relations are properly represented in Global South perspectives to IR? What Indigenous concepts, epistemologies, and

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methodologies of knowledge production are celebrated and taught under the guise of a globalized IR?

In an attempt to tackle these questions from a practical sense, this article has argued in favor of contrapuntalism. It represents another way of practicing critical thinking by challenging Eurocentric frameworks when engaging with mainstream narratives about the history, origins, or details of political events. Contrapuntalism acknowledges that dominant narratives need to be read side-by-side with resistance narratives and that African perspectives, concepts, or philosophies do not need to be translated or rendered legible by creating (forced) Eurocentric equivalents for them to be legitimate or valid. Contrapuntal ethos allows for a multitude of perspectives to co-exist without having to convert to the dominant narrative's lexicon, as it is a commitment to accepting pluralism, diversity, and critical thinking when approaching authoritative accounts of the history, origin, or details on any political event.[43] It acknowledges that a multitude of voices is necessary in the telling of multi-dimensional narratives. Indeed, pluriverse perspectives work hand-in-hand with scholarship on Worlding IR with contrapuntal reading because they recognize that there are multiple 'reals' and centres of power. This is indeed not about relativizing experiences of the international but about recognizing that multiple sets of truths can exist, layered and connected, however different in substance.

The article illustrated the argument for following a contrapuntal method by approaching the 'Africa Rising' narrative both by acknowledging the optimism around the meta-trends in economic growth and what this means for foreign companies and corporates interested in capitalist-driven profits as well as making way for a bottom-up approach acknowledging the challenges and negative externalities incurred by peripheral groups who suffer increasingly steep income disparities in their countries. Contrapuntalism can be applied to a variety of cases in order to allow for critical interrogations of power hierarchies to be read side-by-side with canonical IR lenses.

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[43]See Arian (2021), Ettinger (2023), Hazbun (2021), and Sajed (2016) for discussions of the ethical considerations of pluriverse pedagogies.

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