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KEYWORD

Afro-Asianism

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Abstract

This article addresses the term "Afro-Asianism" and its uses for scholars of Africa. Drawing on Pan-Africanism as an initial point of orientation, three aspects of Afro-Asianism are discussed: first, its emergence as a political concept during the period of global decolonization after the Second World War; second, its use as an analytic framework for situating historical and presentist trends across the Indian Ocean; and third, its role and function for rethinking African identities. Taken together, Afro-Asianism holds the potential for reconsidering the contours of African studies and Asian studies, thus decolonizing area studies more generally in new and productive ways.

Résumé

Cet article aborde la notion d'« afro-asiatisme » et ses implications pour les experts africains. En se fondant sur le panafricanisme en tant que référence initiale, trois dimensions de l'afro-asiatisme sont examinées : tout d'abord, son émergence en tant que concept politique durant la période de décolonisation mondiale qui a suivi la Seconde Guerre mondiale ; ensuite, son utilisation en tant que cadre analytique permettant de contextualiser les tendances historiques et contemporaines dans l'océan Indien ; et enfin, son rôle et sa fonction dans la réflexion sur les identités africaines. Dans son ensemble, l'afro-asiatisme constitue une opportunité de reconsidérer les contours des études africaines et asiatiques, permettant ainsi une décolonisation plus générale des études régionales, grâce à des approches novatrices et fructueuses.

Resumo

Neste artigo, explora-se o termo "afro-asianismo" e as suas aplicações no trabalho dos académicos que estudam África. Tomando o pan-africanismo como ponto de partida, são debatidas três vertentes do afro-asianismo: em primeiro lugar, a sua emergência enquanto conceito político, ocorrida durante o período de descolonização global, após a Segunda Guerra Mundial; em segundo lugar, a sua utilização como referente analítico para situar as tendências históricas e atuais nos territórios do Oceano Índico; em terceiro lugar, o papel e a função que este conceito desempenha no exercício de

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repensar as identidades africanas. No seu conjunto, o afro-asianismo tem o potencial de reequacionar os contornos dos estudos africanos e dos estudos asiáticos, contribuindo para descolonizar mais genericamente os estudos destas regiões através de abordagens inovadoras e produtivas.

Keywords: Afro-Asianism; Pan-Africanism; Africa-China relations; decolonization; area studies; Indian Ocean; Bandung Conference; transnationalism

In February 1959, the great Pan-Africanist and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois visited China, where he delivered a speech at Peking University, an address entitled, "China and Africa." Taking place on his ninety-first birthday, his remarks touched upon that milestone while celebrating much more. "By courtesy of the government of the 680 million people of the Chinese Republic, I am permitted on my ninety-first birthday to speak to the people of China and Africa and through them to the world," he began. "Hail, then, and farewell, dwelling places of the yellow and black races. Hail human kind [*sic*]!"[1] Du Bois went on to describe how "China after long centuries has risen to her feet and leapt forward," and he beseeched Africa to take notice and learn from China's example:

> Africa arise, and stand straight, speak and think! Act! Turn from the West and your slavery and humiliation for the last 500 years and face the rising sun. Behold a people, the most populous nation on this ancient earth which has burst its shackles, not by boasting and strutting, not by lying about its history and its conquests, but by patience and long suffering, by hard, backbreaking labour and with bowed head and blind struggle, moved up and on toward the crimson sky. (Du Bois 1959, 1)

Du Bois went on to implore his Chinese audience to "tell your truth to Africa and the world," to "[l]et Chinese visit Africa, send their scientists there and their artists and writers," and to have "Africa send its students to China and its seekers after knowledge" (1959, 2 and 3). Returning to a familiar theme in his intellectual career, he asserted that China, too, was "coloured and knows to what a coloured skin in this modern world subjects its owner" (1959, 3–4).

From the vantage point of the present, these remarks by Du Bois toward the end of his life—he died four years later in 1963—appear prescient given the rise of Africa-China relations since the end of the Cold War, which has become a defining global trend of the twenty-first century. Yet Du Bois had an inclination and talent for making prophetic statements, as well as a long-standing interest in China and Asia generally. His famous remark from *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903), how "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," appears twice in that book—first in the Forethought and a second time in Chapter Two, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," where he elaborates the line as "the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (Du Bois [1903] 1909, vii, 13). Thirty-five years old at the time of its publication, Du Bois's scholarship and political



Figure 1. Mao Tse-tung welcoming W.E.B. Du Bois at his villa in south central China, April 1959. *Source:* W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

imagination would continue to navigate this shifting line, more famously with regard to Pan-Africanism but with Asia never entirely absent. His experimental novel *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928) notably depicted a love affair between an African American man and an Indian princess, while also providing a political commentary on the international dimensions of race and its potential solidarities (Du Bois [1928] 2014). Du Bois later devoted a chapter to Asian-African historical connections in his pioneering work of global history, *The World and Africa* (1947). Titled "Asia in Africa," his chapter covered one thousand years of history from 500 AD to 1500 AD and included discussions of India, China, the Arabian Peninsula, coastal East Africa, Islam, and slavery, among many topics (Du Bois [1947] 2007). In summary, these elaborations and others accrued over a number of decades, supplemented by personal trips to Japan and China, clearly demonstrate that his thinking on race, imperialism, and political friendship was never parochial but was planetary in scope, a perspective summarized in 1959 (Figure 1).

Beyond his individual engagement with Asia, why begin a keyword essay on Afro-Asianism with Du Bois? This article does not provide a one-to-one comparison between Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asianism, nor does it necessarily place Du Bois as representative of Pan-African thought writ large, given his uncommon credentials and the longevity of his career.[2] Rather, it identifies him as an important envoy between both historical phenomena through his roles as an

observer, scholar, and active participant in their formation. Unique in this respect, Du Bois provides a useful entry point for considering how Afro-Asianism—still an emergent topic among scholars of Africa—might correspond with a more established subject long familiar with readers of this journal. Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asianism were intercontinental developments that defined twentieth-century politics and history in different ways. Both materialized as after-effects of revolutionary change, whether the nineteenth-century abolition of slavery in the case of Pan-Africanism or twentieth-century decolonization in the case of Afro-Asianism. In this regard, each sought to reconfigure and continue projects of liberation in the face of ongoing patterns of racism, imperialism, and Western cultural hegemony. These endeavors for greater freedom involved international organizations, recurrent conferences, state patrons, political and personal travel, overseas education, books, newspapers, and other publications.[3]

Yet, Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asianism also claimed deeper histories, often diasporic by nature and civilizational in scale, that preceded these turning points of emancipation and anti-colonial self-determination. These *longue durée* histories provided a means of intellectual resistance and legitimation in the face of European imperial chauvinism, thus serving as sources of heritage and identity from which these movements drew strength.[4] In defining themselves as fundamentally anti-imperial and anti-racist in orientation, Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asianism positioned the politics of knowledge as a principal front against modern empires and their dehumanization of peoples and communities beyond Europe—at their core, both are forms of radical humanism in pursuit of historical justice. In these ways, Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asianism have also retained elements of nostalgia, mythmaking, and ideas of greatness through the promotion of heroic figures and utopian narratives of struggling for a better world. Critics have subsequently pointed to the tenuousness of these transnational solidarities, how they have been riven with internal ideological differences, forms of internal discrimination and racism, and how such factional competition and conflicts have compromised their collective ideals. For these reasons, scholars have approached Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asianism through a variety of frameworks—political, cultural, and historical—that have questioned their meanings and uses. They remain sources of research interest, scholarly debate, and popular attention precisely because of the challenge they pose to conventional nation-state narratives, area studies paradigms, and the normative continental geographies that have shaped how the world is commonly understood.

Pan-Africanism and Afro-Asianism are also on an uneven footing. As noted, the former has garnered far more attention over time, especially among scholars of Africa, and for good reason, reflecting historical longevity, the development of conceptual terminology, and the centrality of affective diasporic ties contributing to socio-political meaning.[5] The subsequent intention of this article is to introduce and rethink Afro-Asianism in several ways that may be useful to students, scholars, and teachers of Africa. George Shepperson, an early historian of Pan-Africanism, provided a long-ago assessment in which he described "pan-Africanism" (lower case in his usage) as "a group of movements, many very ephemeral" in which "the cultural element often predominates" (Shepperson 1962, 346). The same perspective can apply to Afro-Asianism: "Afro-Asianism" is

not a singular idea, history, or political consensus, but instead an evolving, conceptually flexible, and geographically mobile term that can be understood both broadly and narrowly and used in multiple ways. As a result, this article provides neither a complete history nor a comprehensive literature review. Rather, it delineates three interconnected approaches: first, Afro-Asianism as a distinct political concept that emerged during the period of global decolonization; second, Afro-Asianism as an analytic term and framework for referencing and situating historical phenomena that reflect ongoing intercontinental linkages and trends between Africa and Asia; and third, Afro-Asianism as a social fact and experience involving the agency of ordinary people in its construction and meaning. Taken together, these dimensions hold the potential to redefine what is meant by "Africa" and "Asia" and the identities that follow from these categories, thus posing a critical challenge to an enduring colonial logic of racial homogeneity for both continents that still informs popular and academic views alike.

Afro-Asianism as a political concept

Intercontinental projects are not unusual. A host of such endeavors were launched after the Second World War as part of a world then abandoning formal empires but not forsaking the possibilities of global power through new institutional structures and international political arrangements. The founding of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 set the tone, marking a departure from the failed League of Nations and, more distantly, the Concert of Europe during the nineteenth century. All three embraced ambitions of peace following catastrophic conflict—the Napoleonic Wars and the First and Second World Wars—though the UN promised a diplomatic venue more global, more equitable, and less sympathetic to imperial ambitions (Mazower 2009; 2012). Postcolonial nations and liberation movements would soon hold it accountable to its principles regarding the right to self-determination and its universal declaration of human rights (e.g., Terretta 2013; O'Malley 2018; Getachew 2019). That said, the UN remained under the influence of Europe and especially emergent great powers like the United States and the Soviet Union, reinforcing a hierarchical status quo in international politics. The postwar period subsequently witnessed the development of alternative networks and diplomatic venues that gathered social and political capital among newly independent states—a situation of facing weakness individually versus finding strength collectively—resulting in institutions like the Organisation of African Unity, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Grilli and Gerits 2021; Dinkel 2018; Mišković et al. 2014; Mahler 2018; Rakove 2012).

The 1955 Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, contributed to this emergent postcolonial landscape that not only sought greater autonomy from the West but also aspired toward new ways of imagining how international politics might be conducted after empire. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have recently revisited three different efforts to reimagine political space and belonging in their book *Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia* (2023). A follow-up to their earlier work on the endurance of empire as a political model

(Burbank and Cooper 2010), these three projects that materialized before and after the Second World War had geographically dissimilar, though politically proximate, intentions with Eurasia reimagining a more expansive Russian identity during the Soviet period, Eurafrica redefining a pre-existing political and economic relationship between France and Francophone Africa, and Afroasia attempting a more radical Third World undertaking against the Euro-American order. All three faced a common challenge of reinventing the terms of political community beyond empire and beyond the nation-state—a task that required considerable intellectual and imaginative effort, in addition to facing questions of legality and diplomatic recognition. As described by Burbank and Cooper, all three argued for and ultimately depended on ideas of shared history, even nostalgia, as being central to their ambitions by granting a sense of identity for each of these configurations. Yet, even though conventional nations and continents themselves retain fictional aspects (Anderson [1983] 2016; Lewis and Wigen 1997), these new entities experienced difficulty in proving themselves as viable and meaningful in the long term.

As a distinct political concept, Afro-Asianism crystallized at the 1955 Asian-African Conference. It arguably peaked by the mid-1960s, after which assessments vary as to its continuing vitality and influence. On the diplomatic front, Afro-Asianism went into decline in the purview of some scholars due to ideological differences and Cold War competition (Jansen 1966; Lüthi 2016). However, in cultural and intellectual ways, Afro-Asianism went on to evolve through new and different iterations, especially in relation to organizations like the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization and the Afro-Asian Writers Association, both of which hosted numerous events in the decades ahead (Yoon 2015; Azeb 2019; Djagalov 2020; Kalliney 2022). The Bandung Conference itself reflected the fast-changing trajectory of an unstable world in transformation, being the outcome of regional diplomacy, the escalation of Cold War tensions in Southeast Asia, and the anxious sentiment that global politics was still being determined by Western powers, especially after the 1954 Geneva Accords, which divided Vietnam into provisional North and South entities (Ewing 2019). The Bandung meeting exposed the geographic and symbolic limits of the UN at the time with the magnitude of the Indonesian meeting—ostensibly representing 1.4 billion people, or almost two-thirds of the world's population by some estimates—being only surpassed by its more established peer in the Global North.

The Asian-African Conference has received a revival of attention in scholarship published over the past two decades (Jones 2005; Parker 2006; Ampiah 2007; Prashad 2007; Abraham 2008; Tan and Acharya 2008; Vitalis 2013; Lee [2010] 2019; McDougall and Finnane 2010; Gerits 2016; Utama 2025). Perceived as a pivotal moment during the high point of decolonization after the Second World War, the Bandung meeting—or simply Bandung in its acquired shorthand—has garnered notice due to its historical timing, its intercontinental character, its political promise, as well as its political ambiguities that have generated competing interpretations of its significance. Co-sponsored by Indonesia, Burma (present-day Myanmar), Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), India, and Pakistan, delegations from twenty-nine countries met from April 18 to 24 to address pressing issues their continents faced during the early Cold War period.[6] Though the countries

present were not all independent—Sudan would achieve its independence in 1956 and the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1957—the meeting has been recognized as an initiation point for postcolonial diplomacy and Third World internationalism. Indeed, the Asian-African Conference became a source of inspiration through the so-called "Bandung Spirit," a term that referred to the political feeling of solidarity at the meeting as well as its emblematic reflection of a Hegelian zeitgeist of the time, involving national self-determination and the end of Western empires.

This celebratory perspective also obscures a more complex history. The event hosted a number of prominent individuals lending it an air of theatrical spectacle (Shimazu 2014). Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India was among the more senior leaders present. His attendance nearly three decades earlier at the 1927 League Against Imperialism meeting in Brussels provided a sense of continuity between a preceding era of interwar anti-colonial nationalism and the period of independence then unfolding. These unique credentials granted him an intergenerational perspective and charismatic flair seen in the conference's significant visual archive—press photographers were omnipresent (Lee 2020)—with younger leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, who was only thirty-seven years old at the time, undoubtedly seeing the sixty-five-year-old Nehru and Bandung as opportunities for validation on the world stage, especially given the former's recent rise to power in 1952 through the Free Officers Movement (Figure 2).[7] A third figure that defined the Bandung Conference was Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC), who garnered attention for representing China's communist regime under Mao Zedong, established in 1949 and which still remained precarious at the time.[8] Zhou survived an assassination attempt on his way to Bandung, orchestrated by the Taiwanese Kuomintang, when the flight he was originally scheduled to be on exploded (Tsang 1994). Still, Bandung afforded the PRC an opportunity to position itself in a friendly manner among its Asian neighbors and globally, given its tensions with Taiwan, the ambiguities of the unresolved Korean War, and the recent Panchsheel Treaty (1954), which eased strains with India following the PRC's annexation of Tibet starting in 1950.

This "great man" version of Bandung overshadows the presence of other constituents who had a stake in the conference's outcome (Huei 2009). That said, the meeting centered on the achievement of a diplomatic outcome, even if that result and definition of success remained elusive. For host President Sukarno of Indonesia, as outlined in his opening address, the main purpose of the conference was to renew an anti-imperial stance: Asian and African countries needed to organize their collective interests against the remaining vestiges of British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese control, as well as the escalating encroachment of the United States. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization had already formed in September 1954 as well as the Central Treaty Organization, better known as the Baghdad Pact, in February 1955, both of which had member states in attendance at Bandung, leaving a degree of uncertainty. In making his case for Afro-Asian solidarity, Sukarno called upon the common history shared by Asia and Africa as continents that had experienced the destruction of European imperialism, yet had also overcome it. In many ways, Sukarno's opening speech is the urtext for Afro-Asianism as a political concept with its invocation of past



Figure 2. Jawaharlal Nehru and Gamal Abdel Nassar at the Bandung Conference. *Source:* Museum of the Asian-African Conference, Bandung, Indonesia.

Western aggression, present threats of militarism, and a language of family through his repeated refrain of "sisters and brothers." Sukarno imbued the political idea of Afro-Asianism with features of kinship, history, nostalgia, futurism, and militant anti-imperialism focused on the present—a configuration of elements not unlike those intrinsic to Pan-Africanism.[9]

The tangible outcome of the Bandung meeting proved to be its Final Communiqué, a document that had no binding agreement but asserted a set of principles involving respect for national sovereignty, nonaggression between countries, and the foundational importance of human rights. It drew upon the Panchsheel Treaty and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and it notably acknowledged continuing struggles in apartheid South Africa and Palestine. It also set forth ideals of demilitarization and world peace—in short, a diplomatic summation of the observations and principles set forth by Sukarno. However, the political charisma of the Bandung Spirit and its concomitant complexities are better captured in accounts that followed (Malik 1955; Romulo 1956). *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* ([1956] 1994) by the African American writer Richard Wright remains the most influential account of the event, capturing both its day-to-day details as well as depicting its historical importance. Wright had already visited the emergent Third World as recounted in his earlier book on the Gold Coast, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), a work that is more circumspect about postcolonial independence.

His trip to Bandung expanded his sense of decolonization and its varied meanings. Though Wright's attendance had ambiguities, among them being that his trip was funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a CIA-supported organization, *The Color Curtain* retains an abiding interpretive power due to Wright's prominence, his critical political sensibility, and how the conference's themes touched upon deeper issues that Wright had grappled with for decades, including the function of racial identity in the modern world and the possibilities and limits of freedom at individual, community, and global levels. The occasion of Third World self-determination intersected with Wright's own attempts at individual self-determination.[10]

Like Du Bois, Wright perceived a shared purpose between Africa and Asia, even if he was less politically committed than the elder Pan-Africanist.[11] Indeed, a latent affinity between the two comes through in Wright's conception of *The Color Curtain.* As the title of his book emphasized, the group of nations assembled at Bandung constituted a "Color Curtain" in world affairs beyond the better known "Iron Curtain" that stretched across Europe, separating Western liberal democracies from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Though informed by the Cold War in its orientation, Wright's phrasing echoed Du Bois's earlier declaration from *The Souls of Black Folk* cited earlier. Bandung rejected white supremacy and asserted the dignity of Asian and African peoples. *The Color Curtain* therefore situated the Bandung Conference against the dominant American foreign policy framework at the time as well as within a genealogy of Black American thought. The anti-racism of Bandung and its stance against historical injustice would continue to be referenced by Black American intellectuals. In his well-known speech "Message to the Grass Roots" from November 1963, Malcolm X cited the Bandung conference as an occasion when Asian and African nations came together against "the white man" (X 1994, 5).[12] A politics of Afro-Asianism, especially through Maoism, would make further inroads among radical Black activists in the years ahead (Kelley and Esch 1999; Prashad 2001; Ho and Mullen 2008; Slate 2012; Wu 2013; Gao 2021).

This recurrent citation of Bandung demonstrates how Afro-Asianism as a political concept spanned geographies and generations. Yet the importance of Bandung and Afro-Asianism was not limited to American activists. The symbolism of the conference quickly spread elsewhere, enabled initially by those who observed the meeting firsthand like Wright. Moses Kotane, the secretary general of the South African Communist Party (SACP), attended Bandung as an unofficial delegate and returned to apartheid South Africa enthusiastic about the support the anti-apartheid struggle had garnered (Bunting [1975] 1998, chap. 12). Bandung assisted in globalizing the anti-apartheid cause, in addition to impacting how Chief Albert Luthuli and other African National Congress (ANC) leaders approached multiracial organizing in South Africa (Vinson 2018, 62–63). At the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris in September 1956, Alioune Diop, editor of *Présence africaine*, referred to the French meeting as a "second Bandung," while Léopold Senghor invoked the "spirit of Bandung" to inspire a Black cultural "renaissance" as reported by James Baldwin, who attended the event (Baldwin [1961] 1993, 14, 23). Two years later, Frantz Fanon argued in a November 1958 essay for *El Moudjahid*, a periodical of Algeria's *Front de libération*

nationale (FLN), that the "Bandung pact"—akin to the Warsaw Pact—marked "the historic commitment of the oppressed to help one another and to impose a definitive setback upon the forces of exploitation" (Fanon [1964] 1988, 146).

Afro-Asianism as a political concept continued to reach new audiences and inform a number of events and organizations—what Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte have called "other Bandungs" (Lewis and Stolte 2019; Stolte and Lewis 2022). Conferences that promoted different versions of Afro-Asianism include the 1958 Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent, the 1961 Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo, and the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana. Drawing on the momentum he gained at Bandung, Nasser established the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) in Cairo in December 1957 and January 1958. As a historical crossroads between Africa and Asia, Egypt remained committed to the idea of Afro-Asianism with AAPSO being central to this aim through numerous meetings, as cited earlier. Among the most important endeavors in the wake of Bandung was the founding of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1961. Though clearly drawing from the initiative of Bandung, it also marked a break from its predecessor's political configuration due to the exclusion of the PRC (Lüthi 2016). During the intervening period, tensions had resurfaced between India and China, exacerbated by the Sino-Soviet split and, later, the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Such divisions spurred acrimony that ultimately sabotaged a proposed "Second Bandung" to be held outside of Algiers in 1965, cancelled only days before its scheduled occurrence (Byrne 2016). As *Time Magazine* reported, quoting a disappointed leader, "There is simply no such thing any more as Afro-Asianism. It has been taken over by the big nations like China, who exploit it for their own personal, political ends. I expect there will never be another Afro-Asian conference worthy of the name" (Time 1965). A decade after its manifestation, Afro-Asianism as a political concept that drew upon the energies of anti-colonial liberation appeared to be over.

Afro-Asianism as a historical subject

If the Asian-African Conference represented the key political moment for Afro-Asianism, it was paralleled by an intellectual moment: the publication of *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498–1945* by K.M. (Kavalam Madhava) Panikkar in 1953. Born in 1895 and educated at Oxford, Panikkar pursued a career as an academic, journalist, and later a diplomat, including posts in China, Egypt, and France. He witnessed the PRC's communist revolution, recounted in his memoir *In Two Chinas* (1955). Similar to Du Bois, he was an intellectual engaged with his time, becoming a prolific writer and political observer, especially with regard to the postcolonial world then emerging and the challenges it faced vis-à-vis the long history of imperial rule. In an approach proximate to *Annales* school historian Fernand Braudel and his masterwork, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip* ([1949] 1996), Panikkar undertook an expansive view in *Asia and Western Dominance* that dispensed with modern political boundaries to understand the workings of global imperial power. As he wrote in his shorter study, *India and the Indian*

Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History (1945), which served as a prelude to his later history, "the future of India has been determined not on the land frontiers, but on the oceanic expanse which washes the three sides of India" (Panikkar 1945, 7).

Panikkar's invocation of the frontier recalls Frederick Jackson Turner's usage in the American context (Turner [1893] 1920) with both seeking to identify the unique, immutable features that shaped and even determined a country's historical fate. The Indian Ocean was that feature for India in Panikkar's purview. Yet, like Braudel and Du Bois in *The World and Africa*, Panikkar sought a grander vision of the past that was less interested in writing postcolonial history in a nationalist mode and more attuned to grasping commonalities among nations, regions, and continents—an unusual choice during the era of decolonization, but one that Sukarno would appreciate. Though *Asia and Western Dominance* does not engage with Africa, it set the stage for Indian Ocean history as a postcolonial subject of study that had both intellectual importance and political meaning. It helped establish the basis for reconsidering the historical connections between Africa and Asia—Afro-Asianism as a historical subject—with the Indian Ocean as an *enabler* rather than *barrier* between continental worlds and civilizations. Furthermore, by recounting the age of European empire in a single book, Panikkar tacitly minimized its import by putting forth the idea that the history of Western dominance in Asia, despite its longevity of nearly five centuries, comprised a mere episode in Asian history, echoing a well-known argument by Nigerian historian J.F.A. Ajayi (1969) in relation to Africa's past.

Approached in this way, Afro-Asianism as a historical subject both precedes and extends beyond the Bandung moment. Like Pan-Africanism, which did not simply designate an assemblage of political movements but equally a multifaceted collection of diasporic histories, Afro-Asianism can also refer to multiple historical formations—events, communities, social histories—that point to intercontinental connections and affinities. By the same stroke, like Pan-Africanism, it also provides scholars a provisional way of seeing the past—a schema—to conduct, frame, and interpret research. Afro-Asianism in this sense demands a broader understanding of the term that opens interdisciplinary perspectives and enables more capacious methodologies than the diplomatic definition of the term circa 1955. Certainly, Sukarno touched upon the uses and importance of history for political identity and the novel possibilities of a mutual Afro-Asian history in his speech as noted earlier, as did Du Bois on repeated academic occasions. However, as stressed here, the opportunities presented by Afro-Asianism as a historical phenomenon and a consequent interpretive approach go beyond political uses and mobilization, residing instead in its ability to identify, restore, and examine alternative patterns of history, political community, cultural and economic exchange, and global humanism more generally.

Over the past several decades, the intellectual legacy of Panikkar has been elaborated in extensive and imaginative ways, whether consciously or unconsciously. Indian Ocean history has become a prominent academic field comparable to scholarship on the Atlantic world and, in contrast to Panikkar, with greater attention paid to Africa's role in shaping this context (e.g. Bose 2006; Alpers 2013; Campbell 2019). Themes of slavery (e.g. Harris 1971; Larson 2000;

Allen 2015; Hopper 2015), political economy (e.g. Chaudhuri 1985; Prestholdt 2008; Machado 2014; Bishara 2017; McDow 2018), migration (e.g. Ho 2006; Metcalf, 2008; Ward 2008; Leichtman 2015), and social relations (e.g. Fair 2001; Glassman 2011; Brennan 2012; Hofmeyr 2013; Shankar 2021) from the premodern period to the present have underscored the long-standing historical presence and influence of intercontinental connections, whether through the movement of people, religion, commodities, or cultural practices. Concurrent to this scholarship has been more focused attention on addressing and historicizing the political present—specifically, the emergence of Africa-China relations—that fall more directly within the shadow of Bandung. Historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and journalists have written about the construction of the TAZARA railway during the 1960s and 1970s (Monson 2009), postcolonial Cold War diplomacy (Sun 2023), commercial relations (Benabdallah 2020; Huang 2024), as well as more general analyses of Chinese investment and Asian interest in Africa (Taylor 2008; Brautigam 2010; Mazrui and Adem 2013; French 2014).

To be clear, this scholarship and the authors involved are not necessarily working under the rubric of "Afro-Asianism" in a self-declared manner. That said, in the same way that many regional case studies and social histories in Africa and the Atlantic world are placed within categories of "Africana Studies" or "African Diasporic Studies," so too might this assorted and growing body of research be placed within a broader framework of "Afro-Asian Studies." The strength of this approach is how it can challenge pre-existing area studies paradigms and their epistemological limitations. Not only has the area studies model been bound by geographies that are overdetermined in their historical influence (Lewis and Wigen 1997), but the area studies model has sustained an imperial view of the world (Rafael 1999; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002; Szanton 2004; Lockman 2016; Macharia 2016). Indeed, the best of this recent scholarship has not only restored histories of connection between Asia and Africa but underscored the normativity of Indian Africans, Chinese Africans, and similar categories of joint identity: the possibility to be Asian and African at once. In an important critique of the conformities of how African histories are written, Achille Mbembe has shown how understandings of African identity remain fixed in colonial definitions, nativist in orientation. In his words, "[t]he idea of an Africanity that is not black is simply unthinkable. Whence the impossibility of conceiving, for example, the existence of Africans of European, Arab, or Asian origin—or that Africans might have multiple ancestries" (Mbembe 2002, 256). The last section of this essay addresses the surmounting of this impossibility.

Afro-Asianism as social fact and experience

Anti-Asian xenophobia has been a feature of Africa's past, whether the Durban Riots of 1949 or the expulsion of South Asian citizens of Uganda under Idi Amin (Shankar 2021; Mamdani 2025; Hundle 2025). Likewise, anti-Black racist views have also been held by prominent figures like Mohandas Gandhi (Desai and Vahed 2015, chaps. 2 and 8; see also Burton 2016). Such tensions and conflict should not be ignored. Still, the engrained outlook identified by Mbembe reflects not only popular attitudes that have caused social and political marginalization,

but it has resulted in research agendas that remain unreconstructed, rendering deep and complex histories invisible. Beyond established accounts of contact between China and Africa in the fifteenth century and after (e.g. Snow 1988), the more recent, wider phenomenon of Indian, Chinese, and Lebanese immigrants settling in East, West, and Southern Africa demonstrates the multigenerational nature of *citizenship* within these communities, not simply their *presence* (e.g. Arsan 2014; Aiyar 2015). Similar to African diasporic histories that have attended to the dispersal of communities and networks beyond the nation-state and its narratives, these Afro-Asian histories speak to transnational histories of mobility and settlement, displacement and indigenization, with dynamic elements of "home" and "exile" generating flexible forms of cultural citizenship in addition to legal ones. Existing scholarship in countries like South Africa has addressed the varying dimensions of these Asian diasporic histories in depth (e.g. Freund 1994; Hansen 2012; Desai and Vahed 2015; Chari 2024). Recent research, especially in literature and art history, has further addressed how Asia has figured into the African cultural imagination, specifically among writers, artists, and intellectuals, but also popular audiences, whether they be in Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Cameroon, or South Africa (Desai 2013; Ojwang 2013; Popescu 2021; Du Toit et al. 2023; Yoon 2023). The role and importance of such imaginative practices for rethinking consensus, whether artistic, political, or academic alike, should not be underestimated.

Indeed, Afro-Asianism in its different forms—as a political movement, an ongoing historical phenomenon, and a way of reimagining transnational identities—has depended on the agency of individual people. This engagement at the personal level resituates Afro-Asianism as a subjective ethos and practice. In the same way that Pan-Africanism depended on the decisions, actions, and imaginations of individual intellectuals, activists, writers, and leaders, Afro-Asianism has equally depended on the conscious and unconscious actions of certain figures and ordinary people, even if articulating "Afro-Asianism" per se was not at the forefront of their minds. In her memoir, *Paper Sons and Daughters* (2011), South African journalist Ufrieda Ho illustrates this condition of intentional and unintentional representation through her family's multigenerational history before, during, and after apartheid. The word "paper" refers to the documentation involved in Chinese immigration to South Africa—a situation similar to the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and the flexible cultural citizenship that she and her family subsequently embraced. Ho's narrative is not one that fits neatly (or at all) within the trope of "China-Africa relations" that has become overused. Her emotional attachment to South Africa and her South African citizenship are unmistakable and immutable, underlining what it means to be African and Asian at once.

Further examples of this commingling of identities can be pointed to. Initially a member of the Natal Indian Congress, the activist Fatima Meer became a supporter of Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement during the 1970s, establishing the Institute of Black Research in 1972 and the Black Women's Federation with Winnie Mandela in 1975. Meer argued for a definition of "Blackness" that included Indian, Coloured, and Black South Africans alike (Hassim 2019) (Figure 3). A comrade of Meer, the Durban photographer Omar

Badsha is equally well known for his involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle, which informed collections of his work like *Imperial Ghetto: Ways of Seeing a South African City* (2001) (Lee 2023a; Magaziner 2024). As an Indian South African, Badsha's photography has been deeply influenced by his country's history with themes of migrancy, indigeneity, Indianness, and Africanness being prominent in his subject matter (Zegeye and Ahluwalia 2002). Born in 1945, his childhood was defined by the anti-Indian riots in Durban in January 1949, during which over one hundred people were killed. Yet, he also witnessed the rise of radical political figures like Yusuf Dadoo, a leader of the South African Indian Congress and the SACP, who sought to establish solidarity among Indian and Black South Africans. Badsha's politically calibrated photography has focused on everyday life in Durban and, more specifically, the day-to-day conviviality he witnessed on his daily walks to his darkroom studio via Grey Street, a route cohabitated by Indian and Black South Africans. Reflecting the multiracial platform of the ANC and the United Democratic Front, his work like the activism of Meer disrupted and critiqued social, historical, and political narratives that stressed an apartheid political grammar of division rather than a common humanism.

Other activists were more directly involved in the political movement of Afro-Asianism. The South African novelist Alex La Guma became secretary general of the Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA) in 1979, serving as its leader until his death in 1985 while living in exile in Havana, Cuba. Born in Cape Town in 1925, La Guma grew up in a political family with his father, James (Jimmy) La Guma, being an early leader of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA).[13] After leaving with his family for exile in 1966, which followed periods of detainment, solitary



Figure 3. South African activist and intellectual Fatima Meer addressing a meeting of the United Democratic Front in Durban, 1983. *Source:* Permission granted by Omar Badsha.

confinement, and house arrest for his activism with the SACP and ANC, the younger La Guma became involved with the AAWA in 1967, demonstrating how involvement with national liberation struggles could flow into Afro-Asianism and Third Worldism more generally (Lee 2022). His final residence in Cuba underscored this tricontinental political geography shaped by activists. He was not alone. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was similarly active in the AAWA, receiving its Lotus Prize for Literature—La Guma was a previous recipient—in 1973 and contributing to its flagship journal, *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings*, which promoted both national literatures and cultures in Africa and Asia as well as the broader idea of an Afro-Asian literature. In his acceptance speech for the Lotus Prize, entitled "Afric-Asian Writers: The Links that Bind Us," Ngũgĩ drew the expression "the links that bind us" from Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn* ([1940] 2011), but in this instance not to speak of Pan-Africanism, as Du Bois did, but of Afro-Asianism and its histories. "The ties of geography are easier to see," he remarked. "Africa and Asia, two great continents, shake hands across the Suez Canal. The Indian Ocean ... has never been [a] barrier, and for centuries East Africa peacefully traded with China, India and Arabia before the arrival of the Portuguese, who turned this creative trade into a traffic of destroyed cities, cultures and human beings for a little silver to fill up the coffers of bourgeois Europe." "This is an African story," he concluded, "it is also an Asian story" (Ngũgĩ [1981] 1997, 116).

Conclusion

To offer a tentative summary, some readers will no doubt be scandalized by the brevity of treatment here regarding certain topics and the quick manner in which entire bodies of scholarly literature have been handled. Nonetheless, it should be clear that this keyword essay has not defined Afro-Asianism along conventional lines of race and culture, but instead with emphasis placed on politics, history, personal agency, and imagination. While race and culture are not insignificant, it is important to stress Afro-Asianism as a historical formation and a historical dynamic, not simply a passive condition reflecting racial or geographic descent, which are the constituent elements of colonialism's identity politics. Furthermore, this article has highlighted the shifting scale of Afro-Asianism from individual to global levels as well as the space of Afro-Asianism from intercontinental relations of diplomacy and trade to local circumstances and individual journeys—what might be called Afro-Asianism in tight corners (Lonsdale 2000; Mohan and Lampert 2013). Afro-Asianism has not solely been an effect of state projects and political alignments; it has also been articulated by ordinary people. Similar to Pan-Africanism, which has been a point of reference throughout this discussion, Afro-Asianism cannot be treated reductively. It must be granted flexibility in terms of understanding its past iterations as well as considering its present analytic uses. Like Pan-Africanism, Afro-Asianism's internal tensions, frictions, and conflicts must also be recognized. Among many examples, Chinua Achebe called out V.S. Naipaul for being a "modern Conrad" following the latter's racist judgment that "Africa has no future" (Achebe [1988] 2019, 28). Furthermore,

returning to Du Bois, to what extent did the imaginative possibilities of solidarity gloss over, or entirely obfuscate, situations of authoritarianism and internal oppression within African and Asian countries? Concurrent to Du Bois's visit, the mass collectivization project of Mao's Great Leap Forward policy (1959–61), which is touched upon in his speech, would result in catastrophic famine with an estimated death toll approaching as high as 50 million people.

Despite these limitations, new concepts are needed for a field to evolve. Mahood Mamdani, himself an example of this history of South–South connection, has written at length about the structural and categorical legacies of colonialism (Mamdani 1996; 2012; 2020). And what, might we ask, of the categorical legacies of anti-colonialism? Afro-Asianism is certainly among them. In the parlance of the political present, and drawing from Ngũgĩ once more, Afro-Asianism in its anti-colonial visage presents a means of "decolonizing" the imagination (Ngũgĩ 1986) by addressing entangled histories and political solidarities that defied colonial taxonomies, imperial geographies, and academic categories of knowledge more generally (Lee 2021). Though diplomatic in scope, the 1955 Asian-African Conference first articulated the possibilities of Afro-Asianism as a political concept and identity for inter-continental solidarity with the attendant notion of "Afro-Asia" as a new representational space—political, historical, and cultural—to materialize this ideology (Lee 2023b). In the same way that movements of Pan-Africanism, Pan-Asianism, and Pan-Arabism reimagined political and historical space along racial, religious, historical, and cultural lines, Afro-Asianism argued for a geographic reorientation, informed by an ambition to rethink the terrain of postcolonial histories and futures in the aftermath of receding empires. Yet, like these other transnational formations, Afro-Asia encountered the firm entrenchment of a pre-existing political geography fashioned by centuries of colonial rule. The post-colonial nation-state as a territory and its continental contexts have remained indentured to the prerogatives of imperial cartography. Though Third Worldism, its (arguable) successor the Global South, and newer concepts of Global Asias and Global Africa have challenged the power and conformities of the Euro-American West, the work of reimagining the world along lines of Afro-Asianism and other transnational, intercontinental formations is still incomplete (e.g. Hodgson and Byfield 2017; Chen and Eubanks 2024).[14] It requires a sense of intellectual solidarity and commitment, not solely a political one. In this way and others, decolonizing the mind has proven far more difficult than achieving political independence.

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Notes

1. This speech is included among the papers of W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, 1868–1963, held at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, which are available digitally. For this speech, see Du Bois (1959).

2. Given that this article is not about Pan-Africanism, a complete accounting of its history and participants cannot be provided. That said, some key figures, who compare and contrast with Du Bois in numerous ways in relation to politics, geographies, and personal histories, may include Edward Wilmot Blyden, J.E. Casely Hayford, Marcus Garvey, Henry Sylvester Williams, George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, Aimé Césaire, C.L.R. James, and Walter Rodney. Among these (notably all men), Du Bois stands out for his engagement with Asia.
3. These aspects of Afro-Asianism will be discussed later in the article. For Pan-Africanism, see, for example, Gilroy (1993); Plummer (1996); Von Eschen (1997); Makalani (2011); Vinson (2012); Matera (2015); Ahlman (2017); Bedasse (2017); Markle (2017); James (2025).
4. Examples for Afro-Asianism will be discussed later. For Pan-Africanism, consider, for example, James ([1938a] 1989; [1938b] 2012), Rodney ([1972] 1974), Diop ([1974] 1989), and Mazrui (1995).
5. For overviews of Pan-Africanism including the African diaspora, see, *inter alia*, Geiss (1974), Harris (1983), Manning (2009), Olaniyan and Sweet (2010), and Adi (2018).
6. The countries in attendance, including the hosts, were: Indonesia, Burma, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Ethiopia, Egypt, the Gold Coast, Turkey, Japan, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Jordan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nepal, Laos, Cambodia, Sudan, Thailand, North and South Vietnam, and the Philippines. Notably, the majority of countries were Asian.
7. Nehru and Nasser had met prior to attending the Bandung meeting.
8. The First Taiwan Strait Crisis, which lasted from September 1954 to May 1955, was ongoing at the time.
9. Sukarno's speech has been republished in a variety of books and can be found online. For one book, see Asian-African Conference (1955).
10. For an account of Wright's visit to Indonesia, including its ambiguities, see Roberts and Foulcher (2016).
11. Du Bois tried to attend the Bandung Conference but was denied a visa by the US government. He did prepare a speech and wrote a memo on his thoughts about the event. See Du Bois (1955a, 1955b).
12. It should be noted that X incorrectly cited 1954 as the year of the meeting.
13. The CPSA was disbanded in 1950 following the Suppression of Communism Act passed that year. The SACP reformed underground several years later in 1953.
14. Furthermore, it is not always clear if the term "global" by itself does the critical work of deconstructing descent-based understandings of geography, which is the hallmark of colonial cartography and its determinism.

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