

## An intellectual place of liberation and liberalization of intellectual discourses

Jimmy Harmon

I was made aware of the 'Africa-Asia: a New Axis of Knowledge' conference through Vijaya Teelock, Director of the Centre for Research on Slavery and Indenture (CRSI), based at the University of Mauritius. Due to my passion for history, memory and heritage I am an independent part time researcher at CRSI. I am also an 'engaged scholar' in public advocacy for cultural empowerment of the Creole minority ethnic group, which comprises people of African, Malagasy and mixed origins. The title 'Africa-Asia' was striking as it resonates with my research field and interests as an engaged scholar on issues related to the relationship between people of African descent and those of Indian ancestry in contemporary Mauritius, situated in the South West Indian Ocean. It was, for my particular research interests, added value that the conference took place at the University of Dar es Salaam, providing me with a unique opportunity to encounter East Africa, home to the iconic African leader Julius Nyerere, and key player in the history of the Indian Ocean's slave trade. Participating in such a conference was a must for me.

My conference presentation was titled 'The Bandung Conference (1955) and the All African People Conference (1958): Understanding Asia-Africa intercultural dialogue in the Republic of Mauritius', and would examine the race relations between Creoles and Indians. My discussion was located in the legacy of the Africa-Asia intellectual decolonisation movement of the 1960s. The Bandung conference's aims were to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism or neocolonialism. However, when I received the programme book for the 2nd edition of the 'Africa-Asia' conference, I was surprised to find my presentation appearing in the panel: 'Epistemological Questions in Africa-Asia context'. I had not realised that my work could be considered as an 'epistemological question'! Coincidentally, after completing my PhD (Language and Education) in 2015 at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, one of the Professors encouraged me to pursue research in epistemology of languages. My research work focused on heritage language and identity construction. I studied the evolution of the debates on Creole language in Mauritius as contested knowledge. The conference came in a way as

pleasant confirmation and encouragement.

During the opening ceremony of the conference, I was a bit lost amongst so many participants, yet luckily I quickly made contact with two participants (a couple) from Indonesia. We introduced ourselves and inquired about each other's presentations. They told me with amazement that they had read my abstract with great interest and were extremely happy to meet me. We talked about the historical link between Mauritius and Indonesia with regard to Malaysian seafarers exploring the Indian Ocean. From that moment on I became fully engaged intellectually with the venue, the conference and the people coming from all over the world. The University of Dar es Salaam is a place rich with the history of the African liberation movement. It was exciting to be on the campus, an intellectual place of liberation and liberalization of intellectual discourses.

I also greatly appreciated the organisers of this conference - hats off to them! Although they were all outstanding, one of the university student volunteers deserves a special mention: Oggu Nanyarro. An undergraduate student Sociology; self-composed and always caring for the needs and queries of the participants. We had many exchanges about Africa's struggles and leadership and societal issues, and the intellectual activism in my country. We continue our discussions now through social media!

The conference spanned an array of issues, across multiple disciplines, that are salient within the African continent. The diversity in the delivery included conventional academic presentations, video projections, free talks, which were in some instances hard talks, and open discussions by academics, professionals and activists. The whole process nurtured cross-fertilisation of knowledge. It was a two-day immersion in issues with which Africa is constantly coming to grips with. I was amazed by the academic freedom with which issues were discussed openly and freely, even those relating to the role of China as the emerging new superpower in Africa. It was also interesting to understand the geostrategic positioning of India with some countries like Mauritius. This helped to give a balanced view and avoided the conference from falling into the trap of ideological rhetoric, which I must confess is unfortunately very often the case with African conferences where debates are restricted to rehearsed discourse on colonialism and

it turns out is also a shoestring enterprise despite big institutional names attached. I got a sense in various conversations that theoretico-political discord (or ideological differences in old school terms) was seen as something to be put aside, because it divides and stalls rather than allows for action, planning, forging.

Indeed, the Bandung Conference that brought together Asian and African political leaders in 1953 was invoked at the conference opening ceremony and during the rest of the conference proceedings. This was interesting at first, but upon hearing it on repeat, I realized that of course I should have known this would be the theme: building on heroic legacies to forge new relations is a common practice. Oddly, it was not during research panels on such historic events or linkages where I saw critical engagements with the optimism about Afro-Asia as an axis and claims to the continuity of Bandung to this initiative; surprisingly, it was in a roundtable titled 'Toward resilient societies: comparison and cooperation across regional borders?' where Itty Abraham, a leading international relations researcher on this topic (NUS, Singapore), reminded us how the historic event of Bandung was also fraught with misunderstandings and viability. But what

I appreciated most about this roundtable discussion was less the well-considered academic insight on why Africa-Asia relations are not innocent, and more the presentation by the only woman on the esteemed panel, and the only non-academic, Zaida Mgalla (Uwezo Tanzania). Madame Mgalla bellowed her world into the room, first slowly like she was presenting in a classroom, focusing on the meticulous and trivial, and then slowly in her own way explaining how the literacy programme works, in the Tanzanian and East African context, with global implications. The chair gave her extra time, the room first seemed unsure, but with time her optimism about the international collaboration and new initiatives trumped the well-considered academic concerns on the panel. It wasn't the specificities of her argument, but the unexpected juxtapositions of positions, aspirations, and level of thinking that energized the room. I learned a lot about broader aspects of how ideas move, analytics fail, disruptions occur. I appreciated the ethos of the unexpected that seemed to structure some of the sessions at the conference, again more plentiful than one would expect for a conference of this size.

One final observation. Reverberating in the many sessions was the question of

neo-colonialism. In this case, it was mutually enriching for both Africa and Asia. It is promising as it augurs new avenues for research and policies for sustainable development in Africa. It is like treading new paths. I consider this the most exciting take-away of the conference.

The format of the parallel sessions gave immense possibilities to discuss different issues of paramount importance. It was an *intellectual délice*, engaging, thought-provoking and giving new insights into Africa and Asia from an African and Asian standpoint. This is for me the originality of this conference. Engrossed in our disciplines, we academics, we lose sight at times of the multifocal perspectives of any topic being

researched. We might be misled by our own research paradigms. The parallel sessions help to see how things must be looked at from different angles. They help us especially to stay grounded and come down from our academic towers. This conference fully responded to my philosophy of the role of the researcher on societal issues: I firmly believe that research can only be meaningful when it leads to social transformation. I can't wait for the 3rd edition of the 'Africa-Asia: a New Axis of Knowledge' conference!

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Conference participants.



inequity in resources along continental lines to do the very work that brings us together – research. We cannot increase the axis of knowledge by simply inviting more diverse participants to present their papers through income-calibrated conference fees or even by funding conference travel expenses on a needs basis. These do help and they are a must, but what I saw was that at a minimum, we have to rethink how conference sessions are structured so that we do not assume that all researchers have the same resources (not just funds, but also time) to do the kind of research they want to be doing and how they want to contribute to knowledge production as researchers. If 'the best' presentations and research findings are those coming from the well-resourced universities, what kind of intellectual conversation is possible across various axes of differences? Short of longing for a more equal global world, what must we do, at minimum, to create conference meetings of radical equality and exchange? How do we fail Africa-Asia as a new axis of knowledge when we do not experiment with how we come together, how we share resource, how we listen, invite, create spaces for new entrants to Africa-Asia studies?

The more I navigate this terrain, the more I sense that Africa-Asia is less about

connection and more about discord, impossibility, artifice. In short, the Africa-Asia axis is actually about how difficult it is to establish, because of the history of colonialism, imperialism, raced hierarchies, capitalism, exploitation, parochialism, etc. Further, in this context, it is even harder to forge relations alone with no real network or solid academic grounding to do this work, but only with a faint notion that I follow a politics of going beyond the colonial and thus predictable linkages (e.g., francophone is a French colonial connection so linking Cambodia or Vietnam with Senegal or 'Africa' would be following colonial linkages). In short, it is not surprising that research in this terrain is difficult, fraught, and often just weird. Whatever those with institutional backing and depth of knowledge to use in support of one's vision/belief, this Asia-Africa, or Africa-Asia thing hits many walls of sanity and reason, and training. I think it is important to embrace the insanity of this project. Funding permitting, see you all at the third instalment!

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