GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Bandung Humanism

By Sarah Garrod | February 20, 2025

Bandung humanism has increasingly become an integral topic of interest within Global South studies, with various workshops, consortiums, and publications on the subject. Bandung humanism is a fundamental concept for Global South studies, as from the Cold War period onwards various articulations of this reformulated humanism have shaped the central ideological driving force of a wide range of anticolonial movements. This essay considers the distinguishing characteristics of Bandung humanism, defining and examining its four key tenets.

Named after the watershed 1955 Bandung conference (*Konferensi Asia-Afrika*)[1], Bandung humanism as an ideology was built from both the conference itself and a nexus of ideas and movements preceding and succeeding the conference. Humanism, broadly speaking, is a philosophy that places emphasis on the agency of human subjects to flourish as individuals and as a society. Bandung humanism emerged as an anticolonial ideology against the tide of European and American post-war anti-humanism—positivist, structuralist, post-structuralist, and psychoanalytic thought all tend to de-emphasize the agency and autonomy of the human subject. Bandung humanism also arose against the rise of cold war polarity; it refuses this pessimism and divisiveness, seizing instead open possibilities and the desire to break down human divisions. However, Bandung humanism is not simply a reconstruction of European Enlightenment-era humanism. It forces a reconsideration of what bonds humanity and of what constitutes the ideal human subject, departing from the framework of the European Enlightenment. From the Cold War period onwards various articulations of this reformulated humanism have shaped the central ideological driving force of a wide range of anticolonial movements and continue to inform Global South studies today. Four key tenets distinguish Bandung humanism: specificity as a route to universal humanism, cultural cooperation, a nostalgic notion of human solidarity, and an emphasis on spirituality.

Specificity

Instead of a universal humanism that disregards the particular, Bandung humanism fundamentally relies on specificity to encompass its greater humanist vision. The United Nations Charter (1945) greatly inspired the Bandung conference and much of the rhetoric in the Final Communique. However, a key distinction between the United Nations Charter and the rhetoric of the Bandung conference's Final Communique is the emphasis on context-specific examples. Whereas the United Nations Charter focuses on eliminating distinctions by seeking "human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" (UN Charter 1945, 12), the Bandung conference took a pluralistic, rather than flattening, approach to achieving human rights. For example, the Bandung Final Communique makes specific note of the Anti-Apartheid campaign in South Africa, with a particular racial distinction made to describe those involved: "The Conference extended its

warm sympathy and support for the courageous stand taken by the victims of racial discrimination, especially by the peoples of African and Indian and Pakistani origin in South Africa" (Asia-Africa Speaks 1955, 165). Rather than shying away from giving particular examples of movements and actors in its ultimately universal vision, Bandung humanism suggests that specific movements such as South African anti-Apartheid resistance could contribute to the larger goal of a shared human community. Bandung humanism thus acknowledges specificities in order to navigate the uneven terrain toward achieving its vision of all-encompassing humanism.

This pattern of taking a specific context to connect the whole of humanity reverberates throughout various anticolonial movements. As Anne Garland Mahler notes, inspired by what Richard Wright deemed the "color curtain" of Bandung, within the Tricontinental movement a metonymic aesthetic was utilized to engender a resistant political consciousness that was at once specific to the struggles of a particular group and potentially universal via solidarity between particular groups. Figures representing a specific context would come to stand for a wider movement, for example "the image of an African American protestor signifies the Tricontinental's global and transracial resistant subjectivity" (Mahler 2018, 4). In this iteration of Bandung humanism, a globally-encompassing, transracial and transnational humanism develops out of a particularized signifier. For Bandung humanism, the bonds of humanity do not rely on the flattening of specificities but rather are based on the cooperative acknowledgement and empathetic recognition of contextually specific struggles.

Cultural Cooperation

The European Enlightenment-based formulation of humanism seeks individualist freedom. However, the assumed subject is often the white European man, and such an endeavor rarely considers the contradiction of universal humanism and colonialism/slavery. Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized the importance of Man's development and individual liberation while excluding the enslaved and colonized from this narrative. Others such as John Locke emphasized the potential for non-Europeans to develop their individual potential only if they were to embrace European culture. Referring to the Native American "Virginia king Apochancana," Locke argued that he would be "a more improved Englishman" if it were not for the fact that "the exercise of his faculties was bounded within the ways, modes, and notions of his own country, and never directed to any other or further inquiries" (Locke 2001, 63).This line of thinking was influential to colonial officials such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, who aimed to uphold colonial rule by creating "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 1995, 430). As J. Brent Crosson notes, "while western ideals of Enlightened humanism tell a story of Man's liberation, it has also been the story of the violent displacement of humans in the name of capital accumulation" (Crosson 2021, 185). European Enlightenment humanism assumes that European culture is the only culture that ought to be developed and spread to facilitate humanism, leading to the violent dispossession of the colonized.

Bandung humanism, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on the importance of cultural exchange and pluralism in the development of universal humanism. The Final Communique of the Bandung conference suggests that "Asian and African cultural co-operation should be developed in the larger context of world co-operation" (Asia-Africa

Speaks 1955, 164), considering the development of cultural exchange between Asian and African nations as essential to the global humanist endeavor for "world co-operation." The Final Communique additionally encourages Asian and African nations to develop "cultural contacts with others," suggesting that this "would also help in the promotion of world peace and understanding" (164). Bandung humanism thus emphasizes the importance of cultural exchange and cooperation in order to strengthen cross-cultural bonds within the postcolonial world and beyond.

The journal *Lotus* is particularly illustrative of this tenet. Proposed at the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (AAWA) inaugural meeting in Tashkent in 1958 and first published in March 1968, the journal appeared in three languages (French, English, and Arabic) and featured authors from a range of nationalities, genres, and stances on decolonial practices, including Mahmoud Darwish, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Faiz Ahmad Faiz. *Lotus* additionally presented an annual literature prize to African and Asian authors. Influenced by the Bandung moment, the journal was particularly focused on African and Asian cultural production; however, as Hala Halim notes, *Lotus* "pushed against a strictly Afro-Asian geographical ambit, printing texts from other parts of the Third World or by members of groups in the North with affinities to its project, such as African Americans" (Halim 2017). *Lotus* and other cultural projects with the Bandung humanist tenet of cultural cooperation facilitated a new era of cultural exchange, which has become a central point of interest for Global South studies.

Nostalgia

The rhetoric of solidarity and cultural cooperation within Bandung humanism is based on re-establishing a lost humanism from previous eras. This lost humanism is often attributed to the Afro-Asian world: in Indonesian President Sukarno's opening speech at the Bandung conference, he claimed that "Asia and Africa are the classic birthplaces of faiths and ideas, which have spread all over the world" (Asia-Africa Speaks 1955, 27). The Final Communique further suggested that "Asia and Africa have been the cradle of great religions and civilisations which have enriched other cultures and civilisations while themselves being enriched in the process. Thus, the cultures of Asia and Africa are based on spiritual and universal foundations" (Asia-Africa Speaks 1955, 163). However, it was suggested that these "spiritual and universal foundations" were disrupted by colonialism. Thus, Bandung humanism endeavors to reclaim a lost era of humanism derived from the Afro-Asian world. Duncan Yoon deems this "Bandung nostalgia" (Yoon 2018), a "strategic" form of nostalgia that utilized idealized narratives of Global South history to deal with Cold War neocolonialism.

This notion of Bandung nostalgia is particularly evident in Anuar Alimzhanov's "Through the Ages and Continents" (1973), published in *Lotus* in anticipation of the Fifth Afro-Asian Writer's Conference in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan. In this essay, Alimzhanov stresses the longstanding nature of cultural exchange and peace-seeking, particularly in the Arab world, and suggests that the epoch of renewed Afro-Asian solidarity in the postcolonial era is a continuation of this humanist past. Alimzhanov urges the writers of Africa and Asia to restore the lost path of cultural cooperation that would lead to a "passionate and determined enlightenment" (Alimzhanov 1973, 51), and ultimately humanism, against the oppression of European colonialism. For Alimzhanov and other advocates of Bandung humanism, cultural exchange and cooperation is considered essential to a truly universal humanism, which would be founded on a spiritual return to a humanist past.

Spirituality

As opposed to a rationalist, science-driven notion of humanism, Bandung humanism embraces a spiritual basis in its call for a nostalgic solidarity. In the era of the Cold War arms race and threat of nuclear war, the scientific progress-driven notion of human potential—developed out of Enlightenment-era notions of humanism—was seen to be reaching a dangerous climax. This was a particular point of anxiety for those at the Bandung conference; President Sukarno, for example, stressed in his opening speech that in the era of nuclear weapons, "the unconventional has become the conventional, and who knows what other examples of misguided and diabolical scientific skill have been discovered as a plague on humanity" (Asia-Africa Speaks 1955, 23). As such, Bandung humanism seeks a spirituality that reforms humanism for the benefit of humanity, rather than aspiring toward an abstract notion of potentially destructive progress. This is not to say that Bandung humanism necessarily relied on a *divine* spirituality, but rather that it emphasized the human spirit and soul in striving toward a better world as a counterpoint to more technologically driven notions of progress.

Chinghiz Aitmatov's "Towards Genuine Humanism" (1975) is an especially notable example of this spiritually driven rearticulation of humanism. In his essay, Aitmatov stresses the importance of thinking beyond scientific rationality and progress in the creation of a "genuine" humanism, citing the "lag of moral progress behind the progress of science and technology" (Aitmatov 1975, 169). This, he argues, is due to a crisis of human spirit that arises when "the habit of rationalistic thought […] instills a certain sense of inferiority in man, a sense of his own insignificance compared with the machine which his own hands and brain have made" (169). Culture and the arts are often considered key to constructions of a genuine, spiritually-driven Bandung humanism, and Aitmatov accordingly stresses that "humanist progressive literature of our time should tirelessly remind man of his grandeur and that he is great not only in his intellect, but in […] the soul" (169). As such, cultural production is considered an essential tool of Bandung humanism and its reclaiming of the human spirit.

Like the Bandung movement itself, Bandung humanism was a powerful ideological tool of resistance and hope and has therefore been fundamental to a wide range of movements from the Cold War decolonial period onwards. Bandung humanism renews the hope of humanism but resists the Eurocentric flattening of difference, stressing the power of cultural exchange, reclaiming pre-colonial historical possibilities, and emphasizing the power of the human spirit beyond scientific progress. It gave Global South thinkers, writers, and activists the ability to think beyond the world that colonialism had shaped, and therefore continues to inform Global South studies today.

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[1] For further information on the Bandung Conference and its impact, see Richard Wright (1956), Christopher Lee (2010), Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher (2016), and Duncan Yoon (2018).

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