The Global South and Cultural Struggles: On the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization

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You, brothers from Asia, invite us to defeat the historical mystification that aims to present certain culture as the peak of universal culture.

And through your work, through your research and by means of your triumphs, you have proved that universal culture, the conception of a man to the size of the world, have only just started.

We say: This is exactly what we wanted to affirm.

(Speech at the Closing Session Second Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization Conference Conakry, Guinea April 15 1960)

- Frantz Fanon

I would like to begin by juxtaposing this little-known speech given by Frantz Fanon in my epigraph with Satya P. Mohanty’s statement in the Frontline interview (6 April) concerning the importance of excavating “alternative modernities”:

If it is likely that there are various forms of modernity, the concept of modernity can be disaggregated—that is, its constituent features can be taken apart and imaginatively re-examined in new combinations in different social and cultural contexts.

Mohanty’s notion that the components of modernity may be reformulated within spaces outside of the Western capitalist framework is no better embodied than in the goals of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO). Formed after the Bandung Conference of 1955 in Indonesia, the AAPSO became one of the most vibrant and contentious forums for the creation of solidarity links—economic, political, and cultural—within a rapidly decolonizing Global South. Alternative modernities, understood as intricately connected to questions of alternative paths of development, became one of the main issues during these conferences. In what follows, I would like to take up and help expand Mohanty’s notion of a “disaggregated modernity” through a brief examination of Fanon, the cultural policies of the AAPSO, and its accompanying Writers Bureau. These cultural policies gave rise to the publication of a number of poetry and fiction anthologies, as well as Lotus Magazine, in which questions of modernity, development, culture, and ultimately, of recuperating humanism, took center stage.

Fanon’s involvement in the AAPSO with the Algerian delegation in both 1958 and 1960 provides a unique lens with which to understand not only the
transnationalism of the organization, but also the environment within which he wrote his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). While specifically grounded in the Algerian war for independence, this important text’s vast scope marks it as one of the first theorizations of a Global South. As such, Fanon’s involvement with the AAPSO during the period meant his own writings on national culture can be read against the backdrop of the transnational solidarity of the organization. I would like to return to his epigraph, in particular where he addresses the peoples of Asia: “[Y]ou have proved that universal culture, [and] the conception of a man to [the] size of the world, have only just started” (AAPSO 121). Here, Fanon not only addresses Asia as “you“—both South and East—as well as its complicated relationship with discourses of universal culture, but he also echoes a famous line from Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955): “a humanism made to the measure of the world“ (Césaire 73). What is intriguing about these statements is that rather than reject Western categories of universalism—especially as they pertain to the human and culture—Fanon is, in fact, an advocate for the retention of these categories. He sees value in holding on to ethical universals, to the philosophical and cultural efforts to define humanism.

However, for Fanon it is the *scale* of this definition that must be disaggregated and reimagined— that is, humanism must include definitions that emerge from not just French or other European categories that buttress the apparatus of colonialism, but rather, that emerge from an Afro-Asian “wretched of the earth.“

One of the consequences of such a disaggregation of humanism and its accompanying claims on universalism and modernity, means that for Fanon the cultural realm holds a central place in a reimagining of alternative modernities. The AAPSO’s cultural policies embodied just such an effort. In the preamble to “Cultural Resolutions and Recommendations“ from the Conakry conference, they write:

Our politics is cultural because it does not mean to us a simple conflict between two opponents anxious to conquer and dominate; but we struggle to create a new order the setting up of which is inspired by the suffering of all those who have known slavery, racial discrimination, colonialism and imperialism. Our cultural aspirations are far more fundamental for our political actions than the power of the West, which has depersonalized us and so altered our institutions. (AAPSO 83)

For the AAPSO, the cultural realm is the space within which the disaggregation of an imperial modernity and its accompanying colonizing consciousness must take place. The endorsement of a shift in perspective, namely, the perspective from which a “new order“ must arise, embodies the shift in the defining perspective of humanism, and by extension, modernity. Like Fanon, the AAPSO’s emphasis on the cultural aspects of the anti-imperial front meant that rather than totally reject Western categories, they sought to “deoccidentalize“ their institutions as a way to
imagine an alternative modernity based on transnational solidarity and an affirmation of a non-exploitative global consciousness.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the cultural realm’s influence on politics highlights the tendency for many writers and artists involved in national liberation movements across the Global South during the period to connect their work to a revolutionary and anti-imperialist aesthetic. The rise of socialist realism and a militant poetics sought to embody the reimagining of a national consciousness within the transnational framework of solidarity. However, the sacrificing of aesthetic quality for blatant political goals proved problematic in its ramifications for national consciousness in many contexts—in particular states like Maoist China or Congo-Brazzaville, which adopted a Marxist-Leninist style government. The spectrum of realism within the AAPSO context thus could be understood as negotiating many forms of realism—from a harder line socialist realism, to what Mohanty defines as analytical realism.

Mohanty’s distinction between descriptive and analytical realism, while used in a reading of Fakir Mohan Senapati’s *Six Acres and a Third* first serialized in Oriya in 1897-99, is also useful in understanding the transnational aesthetic context of the AAPSO and its cultural policies. Mohanty writes: “[... ] it is Senapati’s narrative mode that enables him to create a deeper form of realism than would be possible through mere mimesis, through faithful description of the changing surfaces of social phenomena.” The aesthetics endorsed by the AAPSO were largely committed to this epistemic understanding of literature’s relationship to a particular historical context and its ordering of knowledge. Part of the disaggregation of Western modernity meant delving into social phenomena specific to emerging cultures within the Global South. The creation of the AAPSO Writers Bureau provided a forum for debates over what kind of literature and aesthetics was appropriate in this anti-imperialist context, and allowed for transnational cultural negotiations that, while sometimes overly dependent on political exigencies, also sought to challenge the epistemic assumptions of Western modernism.

Although initially conceived of as a united cultural front against imperialism, the Writers Bureau soon embodied the growing rift between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). After its founding in 1958, the Bureau had its headquarters in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The first Writers Bureau meeting in Tashkent, also in 1958, was initially less divisive and resolutions were made to create an anthology of poems and short stories that would embody the Afro-Asian personality and what had been defined as the “Tashkent spirit” that was committed to the unity of all countries, peace, and the development of all world culture. This commitment to peace would later be decried by the PRC as Soviet revisionism and capitulation to US interests concerning nuclear power and
proliferation. Indeed, the Sino-Soviet split hinged in many ways on Nikita
Khrushchev’s refusal to share nuclear capabilities with the PRC. As a result, the
AAPSO and, increasingly, its Writers Bureau would become a public forum for
the virulent exchanges between the two countries.

After the second meeting of the Writers Bureau in 1962 in Cairo, the first
anthology of poems was published in Colombo in 1963. I would like to argue that
this anthology, and the ones that would follow embody what Mohanty and U.R.
Anathamurthy call “textual clusters that define socio-cultural movements across
linguistic regions.” They refer to the heterogeneous linguistic and cultural histories
of the Indian subcontinent and the necessity to interrogate the monolingualism that
ultimately produces an essentialized cultural chauvinism. I would like to propose
that the Writers Bureau’s attempts to forge cultural alliances within a transnational
context embody an earlier moment that identified colonialism and the imperial
West as the primary source of cultural chauvinism. Consequently, the beginnings
of an attempt to define a national literature in many Third World countries was
filtered through the transnationalism of the AAPSO.

The Writers Bureau anthologies dealt with socio-cultural movements both across
linguistic and national boundaries. In this immediately post- independence
movement, national consciousness and identity became the primary rubric for
understanding modernity. Unfortunately such a nationalized conception of culture
ultimately led to a reductionist vision of literary history—at the expense of
minorities, whether ethnic, gendered or linguistic—within many countries in the
postcolonial period. However, what ostensibly knit these disparate national spaces
and histories together was the necessity to recuperate, on a cultural front, basic
ethical imperatives like human dignity and economic development. Fanon’s
humanism at the “size of the world” was part of the initial inspiration for such a
national consciousness. Fanon urged against the chauvinism and jingoism of not
tempering this nationalism with a strong internationalism: “But if nationalism is
not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation
into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it
leads up a blind alley“ (Fanon 204). Humanism, for Fanon, means to move past
the national context—both in the sense of an active transnationalism, but also, in an
inverse movement, to validate minority cultures, histories and languages within a
national context.

The first volume of poetry from the AAPSO is the least divisive in that there are
contributions from the PRC and the Soviet Union. Other nations represented
include Ceylon, Congo, India, Indonesia, Korea, Sudan, Tanganyika and Vietnam.
Sino-Soviet relations had not deteriorated enough at this point to produce the split
in the organization that led to a Beijing led Writers Bureau to form in 1966 as a
counter to the Indian and Soviet led third meeting in Beirut in 1967. The Soviet
and Indian led faction of the Writers Bureau would continue for many years, founding the *Lotus* magazine and honoring writers with the Lotus prize, which Alex Laguma, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and Chinua Achebe, among others, would receive. However, I would like to focus on the first anthology of Afro-Asian poems, since it provides a unique moment in the history of transnational cultural solidarity, a moment when the idealism of the AAPSO had not yet foundered on the realities of various national interests.

In the preface to the volume the Writers Bureau’s Secretary-General, Ratne Deshapriya Senanayake writes:

The peoples of Africa and Asia have taken a gigantic and courageous step to rehabilitate the traditions of their cultures which were very rich with human values, although they were suppressed, robbed of and poisoned by the imperialists for hundreds of years. We the peoples of Africa and Asia, will create our own progressive cultures to promote and reflect our revolutionary struggles. (Poems xvii)

This project of rehabilitation meant the selection of poems in the volume were not only representative of particular national contexts, but also of a larger consciousness of global humanism. The list of poets included in the volume is striking for its range from revolutionary leaders such as Patrice Lumumba, Ho Chi Minh, and Guo Moruo but also of writers who were not known on such an international scale. The poems take multiple contexts as their themes. They range from nationalistic praise for the motherland, anti-American rants against the imperial west, but perhaps most interestingly are often focused on visions of other countries from within the AAPSO and the Global South.

For example two poems, one from the PRC and one from the Soviet Union, are addressed to the African continent. The first, written by Han Pei-ping is entitled “Drums at Night,” while the other, written by Mirzo Tursun-Zade is entitled “My Sister, Africa!” The inclusion of both a Chinese and a Soviet appeal to an abstract African continent is not only telling in terms of how the region would be come a battle ground for their competing interests during the 1960s and into the 70s, but it is also indicative of a larger shift in terms of cross cultural dialogue. So much of postcolonial studies is focused on the vertical relationship between colonizer and colonized; however this volume of poetry published in 1963, while somewhat reductive in their own conceptions of the “other,” includes horizontal cultural affiliations that obviate the vertical colonial power dynamic. Here, for perhaps the first time, the margins are writing to each other, rather than strictly against the colonial metropole in favor of some abstract national essence.

Tursun-Zade’s poem differs from Han’s in its initial inspiration. The Soviet poem is written from the perspective of the poet looking across a map down at Africa: “O my sister, how clearly I pictured you, / far to the South, / With an agonied
death-cry distorting your sensitive mouth“ (Poems 141). Most of the poem uses essentialized and effeminized images of Africa as an “ebony-skinned virgin“ which has been rent “limb from limb [...] by the / pale-featured mob“ (Poems 141). The trope of rape and colonialism in regards to the African continent is not groundbreaking; however in the sense that this is a Soviet articulation of the process of colonialism on the African continent, the recognition of a common dignity denied by Western imperialism is an attempt to recuperate a humanism within a non-Western context. Interestingly, the use of the “pale-featured mob“ or the “villainous white,“ while intended to depict the colonial dynamic as also a racial one, is paradoxical in its Soviet source (Poems 141). Indeed, Soviet “whiteness“ would later be used by the PRC to decry the USSR’s inability to understand Third World issues.

In contrast to Tursun-Zade, Han Pei-ping’s poem begins with the speaker walking through the night in Guinea, where he suddenly encounters the sound of drums: “African drums, African drums / creation of the highest / human genius; their beating / expressing deep emotion / then the joy of the people / in so complete a way“ (Poems 47). This focus on drums and rhythm as emblematic of some African essence is reminiscent (and equally problematic) of Aimé Césaire’s invocation of rhythm and emotion in his valorization of négritude. However, in contrast with the Soviet poem, Han is not writing from a geographic distance. He is writing from his first-hand experience in Ahmed Sékou Touré’s Guinea. The poem emerges from a sensory empiricism of an individual’s encounters within the landscape of the country itself. While Tursun-Zade’s voice could be a stand-in for a larger, abstract Soviet vision of the African continent, Han’s voice is particularized to his experience. The drums are literally speaking to the poet, explaining the cultural logic: “Drum beats can express / welcome to guests; entertaining / them with notes of happiness; / Drum beats can praise a woman’s / beauty, in front of all“ (Poems 47). While indicative of the language barrier Han is in the midst of encountering, it is also an attempt to articulate an understanding and affirmation of basic human values—that which Senanayake describes in the preface.

Both poems focus on some stereotypically exotic aspect of African society— the black body or the rhythm produced from drums. However, they also are interested in extrapolating from the African circumstance into a larger, global context. Tursun-Zade concludes: “Cheers for Africa’s freedom re-echo through nations and lands / To New Africa gladly extending in / friendship their hands“ (Poems 143). Han’s is equally as effusive and generalized: “Drums that now beat for freedom / and independence; in their / throbbing is the deep note of / indignation, while sounds / of joy rise to the clouds“ (Poems 49). The movement from a more specific geographic context into the realm of transnational solidarity enacts the Writers Bureau’s commitment to forging cultural links outside of colonial power dynamics. The fact that there are both Soviet and Chinese poetic imaginaries of
African spaces within one anthology demonstrates an attempt to create an alternative form of modernism that is outside of a Western, capitalist framework. The affirmation of freedom and independence as global phenomena does remind the reader of the tendency of many of these works to be read strictly as propaganda. Furthermore, the idealism of the period was also undermined by the national interests of China and the USSR, as well as by burgeoning neocolonial structures in various Afro-Asian contexts. However, deeper readings of these anthologies should provide a more nuanced view of the socio-cultural issues at stake within the Global South during the period.

The disaggregation of Western modernity by the AAPSO and the attempt to reimage alternatives within a socialist context was one of the major socio-cultural movements of the sixties and seventies. While I have only briefly discussed two poems from the AAPSO Writers Bureau’s first publication, I hoped to have shown how this transnational organization was actively engaged in the creation of a space for a humanism defined for and by the Global South’s “wretched of the earth.“ In this sense, the Writers Bureau was ahead of its time in its an attempt to move beyond national categories in its conception of literature and the world. It also was a precursor to current initiatives, which includes our own Global South Cultural Dialogue Project. Understanding previous models of transnational solidarity will not only historicize the current project, but also help reimagine the cross-cultural lines of communication in this contemporary moment.

References


