

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Afro-Asian Futures Past

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Case Study: Afro-Asian Futures Past

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The Afro-Asian Futures Past (AAFP) research project at the American University in Beirut (AUB) was established in 2019.¹ The AAFP, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, is a research program between AUB's Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies, AUB's Department of English, the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana, the Department of Sociology at Cape Town University, and the Department of Political Studies at the University of Witwatersrand.

Postcolonial, decolonial, and other paradigms across disciplines ranging from sociology to comparative literature to history have documented the cultural and intellectual ramifications of colonial rule in the past and present. The effort to revisit and explore the histories of African and Asian thinkers, activists, and leaders outside the academic lenses of the Global North is a space where scholars, students, and practitioners have turned their attention to questioning and examining South-South relations and knowledge production outside Eurocentric metropolises and in opposition to framings of Europe as the originator of high theory or intellectual thought. In revisiting the histories of the African Asian pasts of the decolonization era, AAFP aims to “explore the transnational flows of south-south political and social ideas, movements, and literary cultures horizontally across the Global South that this past enabled.”² The purpose of the program is to revisit this era and generate a social and political theory relevant for today that derives from the moment African and Asian states were gaining independence and imagining a world and a future otherwise. Through historical, genealogical, and theoretical research on African and Asian political and intellectual movements, AAFP scholars ask how Asian and African anticolonialist intellectuals and activists “imagined and articulated their connections, convergences and divergences”³ in relation to this “anti-colonial imaginary.” Their attention to the failures of the Bandung era allows for the excavation of

¹ See <https://www.aub.edu.lb/aafp/Pages/default.aspx>.

² Afro-Asian Futures Past (AAFP), responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

³ AAFP, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey, 2020.

the “unrealized hopes for better futures that it embodied.”⁴ By highlighting the futures envisioned and articulated by these thinkers and activists, AAFP hopes to resurrect and reformulate old questions “for a changed present as futures past.”

The broader aims of the program, according to their response to the World Humanities Report survey, include strengthening “a robust scholarly network in the Global South.” They also hope to “translate south-south humanities and humanistic social science research programs into long-term postgraduate research at the partner universities” and to “build wider institutional capacities.”⁵ In addition to these broader aims, they hope to create and provide access to sources and archives that feed into their vision of a more nuanced education and knowledge production, and they are keen to see these narratives and resources incorporated into postgraduate curricula.

It is worth noting that the principal investigator of AAFP, Anaheed Al-Hardan, has cautioned about an overwhelming notion of epistemic justice in the production of social theory. She argues that the notion of “decolonizing knowledge” tends to have an almost exclusive “focus on epistemology,” and that there has been a recent

appearance of an intellectual decolonization “craze” that has led to a “decolonial bandwagon” in the Global North, and that this bandwagon can also reinscribe the power relations it sets out to deconstruct, not least through overlooking the Global South as a site for the production of social theory . . . decolonizing does indeed run the risk of not only becoming metaphor . . . but also another intellectual trend.⁶

AAFP’s research and contributions go beyond trendy buzzwords, as evidenced by their activities such as hosting conferences and workshops that question the sociological canon (e.g., their 2020 workshop “Colonialism, Anti-Colonialism and Dissident Sociology Traditions”⁷), as well as aiming to create an archive of “literature and primary source documents,” as they said in the survey, to help advance South-South collaborations and knowledge production in the humanities and social sciences.

⁴ The 1955 Bandung Conference, a meeting of newly independent African and Asian states, aimed to promote self-determination and oppose colonialism. It ushered in an era of nonalignment with Cold War powers.

⁵ AAFP, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey, 2020.

⁶ Anaheed Al-Hardan, “Empires, Colonialism, and the Global South in Sociology,” *Contemporary Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2022): 5.

⁷ See Afro-Asian Futures Past Research Program, “Workshop Program,” November 3–5, 2020, https://www.aub.edu.lb/aafp/Documents/AAFP_events-2020.pdf.

The importance of this kind of work, particularly archives, has been echoed by several authors in the Arab Region World Humanities Report. For example, Esmat Elhalaby points out, “the specific lessons of this past can best be understood by attending to the sources and archives, the sites and platforms, where Arab links with the world were performed, enacted, and examined.”⁸ Elhalaby continues to highlight the contributions of Arab and Indian scholars to unearthing their relationship with each other beyond the confines of the Anglo-phone academy. Not only were there Indian and Arab scholars publishing their research in journals they established, they were also constructing libraries and archives—much like what the AAFP seeks to do today—beyond the archives in Great Britain. Building on this, Hossam Aboul-Ela highlights the contributions of Arab scholars on anticolonial thought:

this intellectual tradition has left its mark on the work of scholars from institutions on both sides of the Global North / Global South divide, many of whom are creatively adapting and expanding categories like uneven development, Eurocentrism, contrapuntal reading, and transnational feminism to address contemporary concerns.⁹

Even more interesting is the exploration of some of the major publications of the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of these South-South anticolonial movements and knowledge production. This is also part of AAFP’s mandate as they work with other colleagues at AUB to collect and research the journal *Lotus*, which “was published by the Afro-Asian Writers’ Association from the late 1960s until the early 1990s.”¹⁰ The journal covers issues of pedagogy and culture, race, and South-South knowledge production outside imperial centers, among other themes. This is crucial because it counteracts El Halaby’s critique of the West: “the printed matter of the modern Arab or Indian or Chinese mind was simply the bearer of sedition and rebellion or a vehicle for propaganda and profit, never an arena of theory or thinking.”¹¹ *Lotus* was by no means the only journal of its kind at the time. Neither were anticolonial thinkers’ arguments about cultural

⁸ Esmat Elhalaby, *Arab Archives and Asian Histories* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 2.

⁹ Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Deimperialization and Arab Thought* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 8.

¹⁰ Hala Halim, “*Lotus*, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparatism,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 3 (2012): 563–83.

¹¹ Elhalaby, *Arab Archives and Asian Histories*, 7.

and academic knowledge production unique to them.¹²

Ultimately, AAFP represents an exciting foray into critical knowledge production from the Global South.

¹² For a discussion on colonialism and contemporary Arab philosophy, see Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Philosophy: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); for a discussion on knowledge production beyond debates on colonialism and anticolonialism, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Humanities in Translation in the Arab World* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

Hana Shaltout graduated from the American University in Cairo in 2014 with a BA from the Political Science Honours Programme with a specialization in international relations. She completed her MSc in gender, media, and culture at the London School of Economics in 2015. After being a researcher at the Arab Council for Social Sciences working on the World Humanities Report, she is currently doing her PhD in cultural studies at the University of Sussex, on feminist activism in Egypt post-2011. Her research interests include alternative knowledge production, gender studies, cultural studies, and women's participation in the political arena.