

Africa-Asia Relations: Forging Stronger Ties Building on Common Grounds of History, Economy and Culture.

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ABSTRACT. The collapse of the colonial system and independence struggles of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America and other regions of the world led to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). At inception, NAM's actions were important in the decolonization process, leading to the attainment of independence by many countries. History reveals the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries has played a vital role in the preservation of world peace and security. The Bandung Asian-African Conference is seen by historians as the most immediate antecedent to the creation of Non-Aligned Movement. In its over 50 years of existence, the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries brought together of a growing number of states and liberation movements which, in spite of their diversity ideologically, politically, economically and otherwise, have accepted its founding principles and primary objectives and shown their readiness to realize them. Historically, non-aligned countries have shown resilience to overcome their differences and found a common ground for actions leading to mutual cooperation and upholding of shared values. However, studies find that though Asia and Africa share a not-so-tenuous historical, cultural, and linguistic relation, interaction/cooperation between the two largest continents as compared to between these continents and other parts of the world, is very limited. This paper aims to highlight the relations: history, culture, economy- between Asia and Africa, focusing on Indonesia and Nigeria and how stronger ties can be forged building on these common grounds. I draw from my experiences and observations during my time in Indonesia while corroborating with secondary data. It was discovered that the bond between Indonesia and Africa is deeply rooted in the shared historic solidarity against colonialism. Conclusions include the fact that the first step towards strengthening African-Asian relations is for Asians to adopt a global, rather than an East-West dichotomous, approach to world culture. Asians must see Africa in a new light in their minds. To do this, they must not see relations between them and the rest of the world as one of East and West alone.

Keywords: *Asia; Africa; Culture; Language; International Relations*

Introduction

With the collapse of the colonial system and subsequent independence struggles of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America and other regions of the world, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was born. At inception, NAM's actions were important in the decolonization process, leading to the attainment of independence by many countries. History reveals the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries has played a vital role in the preservation of world peace and security (<http://mea.gov.in>).

The Asian-African Conference, also referred to as the Spirit of Bandung, was the first gathering of Asian and African countries that were newly independent of centuries of colonial rule. They organized the event without the involvement of external powers. Delegates from 29 Asian and African countries attended. At the end of the conference, a final communique was issued which laid out the direction of cooperation between Asian and African countries. The United States and its allies watched the developments in Bandung closely, as they feared that countries of Asia and Africa would side with the Communist bloc.

In the communique, countries pledged to build and foster economic cooperation among themselves. They agreed to the struggle for self-determination by calling for an end to racism, as they viewed racism connected strongly to colonialism. They also unanimously adopted a declaration of the ten principles of Bandung:

- 1) Respect of fundamental human rights and of the objectives and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.
 - 2) Respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations.
 - 3) Recognition of the equality among all races and of the equality among all nations, both large and small.
 - 4) Non-intervention or non-interference into the internal affairs of another -country.
 - 5) Respect of the right of every nation to defend itself, either individually or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
 - 6) Non-use of collective defense pacts to benefit the specific interests of any of the great powers.
- Non-use of pressures by any country against other countries.
- 7) Refraining from carrying out or threatening to carry out aggression, or from using force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country.
 - 8) A peaceful solution of all international conflicts in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
 - 9) Promotion of mutual interests and of cooperation.
 - 10) Respect for justice and international obligations.

The conference was intended to bring about a radical shift in the relationship between developing and developed countries. During the conference, the term, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was conceived. It also coined the term “Third World”. The “Third World” made reference to Asian, African as well as developing countries in Latin America that refused to side with one of the Cold War blocs. The term also described an emerging community of nations that shared a colonial experience. The new coalition employed its uniqueness as developing countries to resist the exploitation of former colonies under the new architecture of global politics that emerged post-colonization.

The idea of the “right to development” was introduced by this concept. The Bretton Woods monetary system didn’t sit well with developing countries, hence, they pushed for the New International Economic Order (NIEO). Through their efforts, the UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) was birthed, a UN body charged with the responsibility of dealing with development issues through trade.

Furthermore, developing nations agitated for the adoption of the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties in 1974. The charter, among others, acknowledged the need to restructure the world’s economy to allow developing countries greater participation.

The South-South Cooperation was also set up, a UN framework for collaboration between developing countries. This was to ensure that developing countries were able to escape the fate of “dependency” in “North-South” economic relations (Shofwan, 2015).

Statement of Problem

With African and Asian countries dominantly featuring in the struggles for independence following the collapse of the colonial system, eventually culminating in the conception of the

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), one would only expect that relations between both parties would be nothing but rock solid. However, research reveals that though Asia and Africa share a not-so-tenuous historical, cultural, and linguistic relation, interaction and cooperation between the two largest continents, when compared to between these continents and other parts of the world, is very limited. This paper, therefore, aims to highlight the relations: history, culture, economy- between Asia and Africa, focusing on Indonesia and Nigeria and suggest ways in which stronger ties can be forged between them by building on these common grounds.

Objectives of Study

This study is to review the historical, economic and cultural relations which Asia and Africa shares, while zeroing in on Indonesia and Nigeria. It intends to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) See how far Africa and Asia have come in their relations by reviewing what they both share in common.
- 2) Suggest possible ways by which stronger ties can be forged between Africa and Asia by building on common grounds they share together.

Research Questions

This review intends to proffer answers to the following questions:

- 1) What does Africa and Asia, especially Nigeria and Indonesia have in common and share together?
- 2) In what ways can the ties between both continents be strengthened by building on their common grounds?

Significance of Study

This study will promote the general understanding of the relationship between Africa and Asia, especially Nigeria and Indonesia. Also, it will help educate both Africans and Asians on the things we share in common, even though both continents are miles apart, all would come to see and appreciate the common grounds. In the same vein, possible further studies will develop to examine the gap created in the study. Furthermore, the study will generate data that could promote productive policy on forging and strengthening already existing ties between parties concerned.

Scope of Study

The review focuses on the things shared in common, especially regarding history, economy, and culture between Africa and Asia. The study focuses largely on Nigeria and Indonesia while references are made to some other African and Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Africa, and Egypt among others.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this paper, in the main is a content analysis of books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and online articles. The review is based on information collected from secondary sources which include published books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and online articles.

Operational Definition of Terms

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): this is a group of states that are neutral and not formally aligned with, in support of or against any major power bloc.

Common Ground: A basis of mutual interest or agreement shared by each of two or more parties.

Historical/Genetic Common Ground

Rashidi and van Sertima 1995 (in Adams, 2001) notes that the dominant view is that the history of mankind and humanity began in Africa, particularly in East Africa and the Nile Valley. 35000 years ago, Homo erectus or the first man migrated out of Africa into Asia before proceeding to other parts of the world. It has been debated and settled that the earliest humankind found in China known as Peking Man, and Java Man are just regional kinds of the early Africans.

Adams, (2001) points out that in an article titled, *Human race emerged 'from Africa'*, in the *Financial Times of London* (May 10, 2001), Victoria Griffith wrote that the strongest evidence yet that humans share a single African ancestor has been uncovered by scientists and the notion that the entire world is African is supported by a powerful genetic analysis of the Y chromosome.

Adams (2001) went on to state that “the idea that the first Africans chose Asia when they decided to migrate provides the first non-tenuous link between Africans and Asians.”

Partha (2010) corroborates this noting that “contemporary humans have spread over the entire globe. This dispersal started in Africa. About a hundred thousand years ago...It has been speculated that after evolving in Africa, population sizes of humans grew rapidly, eventually outgrowing their natural resources. They initiated an exploration of new territories in search of food... From various types of data — in particular, archaeological and genetic — it is now evident that the descendants of those who migrated out of Africa expanded in number to form most contemporary human populations. The early out-of-Africa migrants colonized South Asia, dominated by India, and including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and parts of South-East Asia, especially Myanmar.”

A research conducted on human genome revealed that all Indonesians are migrants. Indonesian people, according to this research, are a mix of different genetic groups of *Homo sapiens* who journeyed from Africa in waves spanning tens of thousands years through varied routes to the archipelago (Herawati, 2017). From the foregoing, it is clear that Africa and Asia share a common ground historically and genetically.

Economic Common Ground

According to data from the International Trade Centre, from 2006 until 2016, trade between Africa and Asia saw a massive increase from US\$167bn to \$292.9bn, a 75.4% increase. This increase comes against the backdrop that the Africa-Asia trade experienced a downward turn from its peak of \$423bn in 2014 as a result of the fall of commodity prices. Goods being exported from Africa comprise hard and soft commodities, while Asia exports machinery and manufactured goods to the African continent.

In 2016, Africa exported approximately \$108.1bn to Asia; in the top-three African exporter countries are South Africa (\$22.3bn), Angola (\$18bn) and Egypt (\$11bn). The three countries exports combined represented 47.5% of the total African exports. As for imports from Asia, the

top-three African import countries are South Africa (\$32.4bn), Egypt (\$24.7bn) and Algeria (\$15.6bn). Combined, they represent 39.4% of the total African imports.

The top-three Asian countries in 2016 who engaged in trade with Africa were China (\$144.6bn), India (\$47.9bn) and South Korea (\$18.4bn). Trade with these three Asian countries made up 72% of the total Africa-Asia trade. In a turn of events, Japan dropped out from the top-three positions and now behind South Korea. This is not unconnected with the significant 45% decline Japan-Africa trade suffered from \$27.1bn in 2014 to \$14.9bn in 2016 (Richard Li, 2017).

In Africa, Nigeria is Indonesia's second largest trade partner only after South Africa, in 2011 the trade value reached US\$2.09 billion and accounted for 21.66 percent of Indonesia's total trade with Africa. In 2012, bilateral trade volume experienced an increase of 50 percent between both countries, amounting to \$3.18 billion. In Nigeria, there are over 15 Indonesian owned companies currently operating, including Indorama, Indofood, Kalbe Farma and Sayap Mas Utama. Indofood is renowned for establishing the popular instant noodle factory in Nigeria since 1995, thereby making Indomie a household name, having the largest instant noodles manufacturing plant in Africa. Both countries are working on a US\$2.5 billion gas methanol and fertilizer plant in Nigeria with Pertamina of Indonesia and NNPC of Nigeria collaborating on the project with Eurochem Indonesia and Viva Methanol of Nigeria. Indonesia mainly exports include oils, paper products, pharmaceuticals, automotive parts, soaps, and electronic products to Nigeria while Nigeria on the other hand exports petroleum products, cotton as well as leather raw materials to Indonesia (www.kemlu.go.id).

Since 2014, trade relations between both Nigeria and Indonesia have been fluctuating. In 2014 trade relations accounted for almost 4 billion dollars (\$3.9billion). However, trade relations have seen declines since then to \$1.75 billion and \$1.6 billion in 2015 and 2016 respectively. The implication of this is that between 2014 and 2015 trade volume experienced a 56% decrease. This decline was mainly attributed to slopping crude oil prices in the global market. This is coupled with the fact that Indonesia buys crude from middlemen and not directly from Nigeria government. The downward turn in trade relations between both countries has been an issue of concern as both countries have continued high-level meetings to improve trade relations. This is corroborated by Indonesia's Foreign Minister and Minister of Trade and Investments visit Nigeria in July 2017. They led a delegation of business interest from Indonesia to Nigeria to attend the Indonesia-Nigeria Business Forum. As a follow-up, another meeting between Nigeria's Minister of National Planning and Indonesia's Ambassador to Nigeria took place (Ismail; Kabir; Asma'u & Muktar, 2017).

With regards to economic relations in Africa generally, trade value between Indonesia and Africa multiplied more than five times to \$11.7 billion. Africa today is a major non-traditional market for Indonesia. Amidst the global economic meltdown, slow demand and low prices of commodities, Indonesia's exports to its African market bucked the trend, with Indonesian non-oil and gas exports to South Africa increasing 9 percent in 2016 alone (Retno 2017).

Cultural Common Ground

Ancestors Worship

The reference for the dead is based on the belief that dead people have a continuous life, and that they possess the ability to determine the luck of the living. Some groups profoundly admire

their familial descendants, some faith-based groups, such as the Catholic Church, venerate saints as intermediaries with God.

The importance of ancestors as a focus of worship is common in many parts of the world. In Asia, Europe and in some African cultures, the main purpose of ancestor worship is to ensure the ancestors' continuous well-being and favorable outlook towards the living, as well as sometimes to request for exceptional favors or help. The non-religious or social objective of ancestor worship is to develop relationship values, such as family allegiance, filial piety, and family relationship continuity. Ancestor veneration takes place in cultures having every degree of technological, political and social complication, and it remains an important part of different religious practices even today (www.asiasworld.net).

In Africa, families have specific periods in the year in which they worship their ancestors, sometimes in the form of a remembrance ceremony. The Chinese on the other hand, have gone further to conduct a special festival, known as the Ching Ming festival, for ancestor worship (Adam, 2001)

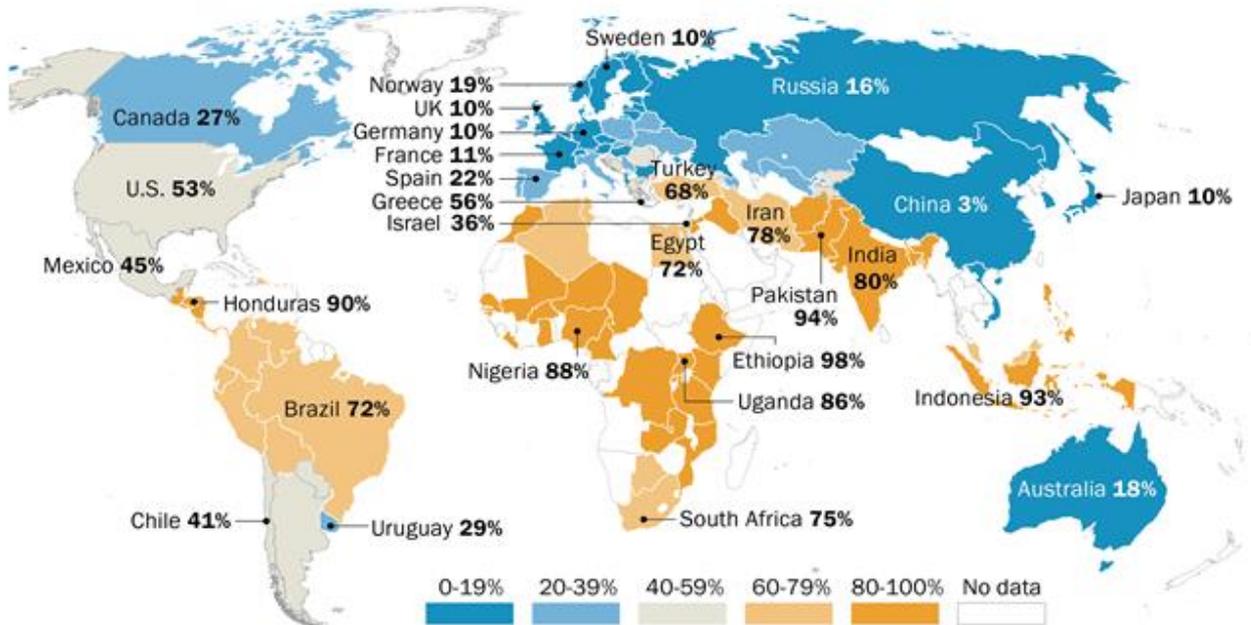
Glen (2017) opined that ancestor worship was a common custom throughout all of Asia. According to Glen, traditional households in Japan often had altars dedicated to ancestors; and even though many households don't have space for altars today, they still celebrate Bon, a yearly festival devoted to welcome family spirits home for many days in the summer. In Korea, a ritual memorial service called Jesa is held in honor of a family's ancestors. It is performed with special offerings and festivities. In Africa, especially in the west and southeastern cultures, ancestor worship is prevalent; as a matter of fact, ancestor worship forms the backbone of many religions found on the African continent. For instance, the Yoruba tribe is found in present-day Nigeria. The Yoruba practice one of the oldest known traditional religions called Ifa worship. Ifa forms the basis for almost all of the Afro-Caribbean religions such as Santeria in Cuba, Voodoo in Haiti, Candomble in Brazil, and Lucumi in Colombia. When the slaves were brought to the new world, history tells us they were usually baptized on ship or shore and from then on prohibited from practicing their religion. However, the slaves disguised their gods, known as Orisha. The story of Ifa illustrates one way a specific form of ancestor worship spread throughout the world (Glen, 2017).

Religiosity: Strong religious feeling or belief

The Pew Research Center in a recent survey stated that the most religious countries are in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America. What this implies is that religion is a vital aspect of the lives of people in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. In the Asia-Pacific region, the percentage of those who say religion is very important in their daily lives is highest in Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia, and Afghanistan; in these countries, more than 90% say religion is very important. Check the figure1 sourced from Pew Research Center (2018).

People in Europe and East Asia say religion is not very important to them

% who say religion is very important in their lives



Source: Pew Research Center surveys, 2008 to 2017.
"The Age Gap in Religion Around the World"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1. Map showing the level of religiosity in different parts of the world.

Ghosts

Africans and Asians on the whole, seem to be very superstitious in their beliefs. The belief in ghosts is a major recurring theme in both African and Asian belief systems. On both continents there exist cultural communities which believe that unless dead people are given a fitting and decent burial, their souls will not depart this world to rest but will keep roaming among the living as ghosts to hound people (Adams, 2001). There were so many stories I heard about ghosts in Indonesia that made me draw the conclusion that Africa and Asia are on the same page on this, even though miles apart. An American friend teaching in a city in East Java told me of an incidence where the school had to be closed because ghosts from the nearby grave were disturbing the pupils as well as her landlord's young son who is believed to have a rare gift of seeing and sensing ghosts when present. Back in Nigeria, I have heard of families who had to vacate their homes until special cleansing rituals were carried out by priests to purge their homes of ghosts.

Indonesians Perception of Black People.

Having spent over a year in Indonesia already, I discovered by observation and from my research that the average, typical Indonesian has some perception (positive and negative, especially based on the level of exposure) about black people in general. Thea Olivia (2015) summarized these perceptions as follow: The positive stereotypes about black people in

Indonesia:

- 1) They are easygoing and strong. Many Indonesians find themselves intimidated with and admiring of black peoples' stature.
- 2) They are naturally good singers, musicians, dancers and athletes (many people ask me on our first meeting if I'm a footballer, some ask if I have six packs. A friend would not let me be until I gave a rendition at his wedding, another asked me to dance at a festival in Pekalongan).
- 3) They are devout religious practitioners and Indonesians look up to them because of that. Religion is very important in Indonesia. Especially Indonesian Christians. Many Indonesians Christian leaders admire the spirituality of black people (the pastor of a big church in Central Java has visited Nigeria twice with a number of Nigerian and African ministers also invited over to Indonesia, a number of people asked me about a Nigerian prophet too).
- 4) They are funny, expressive and look happy. Black American actors/comedians such as Chris Tucker, Will Smith, and Chris Rock are quite popular here.

As for the negative stereotypes, Thea (2015) notes that these stereotypes are not so prominent in Indonesian society, but exists especially in big cities. They include:

- 1) The belief that people of black origin are drug peddlers/abusers. There is news on television that Africans sell weed and marijuana in Jakarta. But of course, not all black people do drugs.
- 2) They are criminals. Hollywood movies which happen to be popular in Indonesia reinforce this stereotypes. I recollect inviting two Indonesian friends over for lunch and the lady began to reinforce this stereotype based on what she had been watching on the screen as she had never really come in contact with people of black origin.

I really came to understand the impact of the screen in shaping and reinforcing stereotypes when Marvel's Production released its award-winning movie- Black Panther- that gave a different notion of black people generally.

The neutral stereotype is that black people are exotic to most Indonesians. This is because most Indonesians rarely meet a black person all of their lives. Indonesians are still accustomed to using the 'N' word to describe a black person, and they don't know that the N-word is offensive. (I had firsthand experience of this and the lady was actually oblivious of the fact that it's offensive. I had to take time to explain to her).

However, Indonesians basically are nice people, especially when they are also treated nicely. Once you get to know and relate with them over a period of time, I am sure they will overlook racial judgments. Some other things we (Nigeria-Indonesia) share in common include:

- Marriage tradition. Especially, the part where one has to visit extended family members- such as aunties and uncles- in person just to introduce your spouse to be and also inform them about wedding plans as well as get wedding date approval. A close Indonesian friend whose wedding I attended narrated her experience to me. It was then I saw how closely related we are on issues such as marriage tradition.
- Hospitality
- Strong family ties
- A strong sense of community/communal living.

The Way Forward in Forging Stronger Africa-Asia Ties

Borrowing from the words of Dr. Adams Bodomo, during his lecture at Ansted University Penang, Malaysia on Africa-Asia relations, he said:

“The first step towards strengthening African-Asian relations is for Asians to adopt a global, rather than an East-West dichotomous, approach to world culture. Asians must accord Africa new conceptual spaces in their mindsets. To do this they must dispel and desist from constructing a bi-polar view of the world, they must not see relations between them and the rest of the world as one of East and West. Asians must embrace a more global view of the world to give more conceptual spaces to non-Western parts of the world like Africa, the Carribean islands, and South America.”

Africans in Indonesia and Asia as a whole, must play a role and serve as catalysts to sell Africa to Asia and other parts of the world. This is what we are doing through CeritAfrika Initiative which the African Students Association in Surakarta, Indonesia, initiated in January 2018. The aim is to share a more accurate geographical, cultural and historical story of Africa. Who better than an African can tell Africa’s story? For more about this do check their IG handle: @ceritafrika.

Finally, I encourage Asians, Indonesians in particular and Africans to broaden their scope and knowledge of the world by engaging in self-development using technology at our reach. Asian governments are investing a lot to improve beyond social towards building trusted economic, one-on-one relations with their African counterparts (the Asia-Africa week which held in April 2018 is a testament to this). But this efforts risk being jeopardized if the people don’t have a proper working knowledge of Africa, its history, culture, geography, economics etc. this is where an initiative like CeritAfrika as well as cultural and educational exchange programs such as KNB and Darmasiswa play an important role in educating each other about our respective culture, history, etc. and come to know what opportunities abound which we can avail ourselves of.

Conclusion

Time and space would not permit me to recount all the experiences captured in my chronicle of Indonesia. However, I do hope that this prompts Asians and Indonesians, in particular, to see Nigeria and Africa in a new light especially based on what we share in common and stir everyone concerned to do all they can in their own little way to forge stronger ties between the largest continents of the world.

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