

**Asia Research Institute  
Working Paper Series No. 164**

**‘Diplomacy as Theatre’:  
Recasting the Bandung Conference of 1955  
as Cultural History**

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**October 2011**



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## **‘Diplomacy as Theatre’: Recasting the Bandung Conference of 1955 as Cultural History<sup>1</sup>**

As a significant ‘moment’ in twentieth-century international diplomacy, the Bandung Conference of 1955 is replete with symbolic meanings. How can we delve deeper into understanding the symbolic? To this end, ‘diplomacy as theatre’ as a conceptual framework enables us to re-interpret the Bandung Conference acts of symbolic performance, where ‘actors’ perform on the ‘stage’ to ‘audiences’. I focus primarily on the city of Bandung in Indonesia where spatially and temporally a ‘stage’ was created to enable ‘performances’ to take place not only by ‘actors’ but also between ‘actors’ and ‘audiences’. Sukarno, Nehru, Zhou Enlai and Nasser all understood the importance of the performative in their role as international statesmen, representing the collective ‘spirit’ of the post-colonial world. I argue that the success of the Bandung Conference as a theatre of diplomatic performance is central to its symbolic legacy.

**Fig.1 Kemorajan Airfield, Jakarta, the Arrival of Carlos Romulo of the Philippines  
(in a white suit with a panama in the centre), with the Flags of the Participating Twenty-nine  
Nations (*Bulletin of Asia-Africa Conference*).**



From 18 to 24 April 1955, twenty-nine nations<sup>2</sup> of Asia and Africa gathered in the city of Bandung in West Java, to convene the First Asia-Africa Conference. Within Indonesia, this conference affectionately known as the ‘A-A Conference,’ still holds monumental significance for its post-independence national narrative, by placing Indonesia and its leader Sukarno firmly on the map of

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<sup>1</sup> I first had the opportunity to present this paper at the ARI Seminar in March 2011, and would like to thank the seminar participants for a highly stimulating discussion. In addition, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the valuable comments which helped to sharpen my argument.

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, China (People’s Republic), Egypt, Ethiopia, Gold Coast, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Yemen.

the post-war world.<sup>3</sup> Outside of Indonesia, the conference gained the popular appellation of the 'Bandung Conference' and, came to represent the mythical 'moment' when the combined dynamism of the newly decolonized independent states of Asia and Africa monopolized the centre stage in international relations. Having been excluded, the dominant actors of the Cold War theatre watched anxiously from afar the exuberant Afro-Asian pageantry take place in a hitherto little known city of Bandung. The conference was the culmination of an initiative led by the five host countries – Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma, collectively known as the Colombo Powers. Apart from Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, the Sudan, and the Gold Coast, the rest of the invitees were from Asia. As the only former colonial power, Japan was included, whilst Israel, North Korea and South Korea were excluded.

The progress of the conference was by no means smooth as underlying global tensions created by the Cold War had influenced power dynamics at the Bandung Conference, where some states such as the Philippines and Thailand clearly saw themselves as unofficially 'representing' Western or, more precisely, American interests, colliding with the group of what became known as 'non-aligned' countries headed by India. The decision to invite the People's Republic of China contributed in large part to creating the tension during the conference.<sup>4</sup> Yet it was also thanks to the adept diplomacy of Zhou Enlai that the conference was saved from irreparable fracture and disintegration. Famously, the conference nearly broke up in the eleventh hour when an ad-hoc committee headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser could not agree on the wording on 'peaceful co-existence'. *LIFE* magazine's write-up of the conference almost gleefully focused on these fissures, such as in 'Sir John Tears Off Chou's False Front' or 'Nothing Good Happens to a Chagrined Nehru'.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the final communiqué published on 24 April, incorporating the Ten Bandung Principles was a miraculous feat of collective determination. In the final hour, the Afro-Asian leaders deemed it politically more expedient to demonstrate their symbolic solidarity than to let the whole undertaking fail, in full glare of the world media, over disagreements caused by the pressures of the Cold War.

After an outpouring of publications by contemporaries in the late 1950s, the Bandung Conference suffered decades of scholarly neglect until the fiftieth anniversary in 2005, when a second major wave of academic literature emerged. Notable works in this wave include Vijay Prashad's *The Darker Nations*, Kweku Ampiah's *The Political and Moral Imperatives of the Bandung Conference of 1955*, Jamie Mackie's *Bandung 1955*, as well as essay collections by Amitav Acharya and See Seng Tan (*Bandung Revisited*), Christopher Lee (*The Bandung Moment*), and Derek McDougall and Antonia Finnane (*Bandung 1955*). In the post-Cold War world, 'Bandung' is revived as a symbolic nexus in which major post-1945 historical narratives such as decolonization, the non-aligned movement, and even the civil rights movement, all converged.<sup>6</sup> References to the conference are replete with the symbolic -- 'the Spirit of Bandung', 'the Bandung Moment' to name but a few – revealing the strength of the nostalgia for that special moment in 1955. To me, these references are not simply overly 'romanticized' views of the conference but actually reveal a profound point. That is the value

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the official Indonesian celebrations surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the Asia-Africa Conference in 2005, Department of Foreign Affairs, *Asia Africa: Towards the First Century* (Jakarta: Department of Foreign Affairs, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> For discussions on inviting the PRC, consult Roeslan Abdulgani, *The Bandung Connection: The Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955* (Singapore: Gunung Agung, 1981), chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> *LIFE* (2 May 1955), pp. 29-37.

<sup>6</sup> On the effects of the Bandung Conference on the American civil rights movement, consult Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Policy, 1935-1960* (U of North Carolina Press, 1996), as well as her edited volume, *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003) for an interesting chapter on Bandung.

of the Bandung Conference lies essentially with the symbolic, especially as it produced few tangible results. Therefore, in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the conference, we must examine more critically what constituted this symbolic meaning and why we came to conceptualise it in this manner.

### **‘DIPLOMACY AS THEATRE’**

Through the framework of ‘diplomacy as theatre’ I will demonstrate how symbolic meanings were produced during the Bandung Conference through various ‘performances’ of ‘actors’. My central argument is that diplomacy gains its significance by its enactment and creates symbolic meanings through that process. Arguably, the dramatization of diplomacy through performative acts lies at the core of diplomacy, insofar as diplomacy is as much about public performance as it is about behind-the-scenes negotiations.<sup>7</sup>

The first point to be made is that the Bandung Conference is significant because it actually took place. What do I mean by this? An event can be meaningful by the very act of staging it, because it confers symbolic meaning. The most obvious case of this type of event is royal pageantry, particularly the crowning ceremony, which is entirely symbolic in nature. It is the process of pageantry or the ‘performance’ of pageantry itself that is meaningful because it lends legitimacy not only to the ‘actor’ but through the participation of the ‘audience’ to the whole event. Similarly, we can explain the symbolic meaning of the Bandung Conference as a collective ‘crowning ceremony’ or ‘inauguration ceremony’ of post-colonial Asia and Africa, represented by the twenty-nine delegations which, in turn, represented some 1400 million people worldwide. It is this collective force that made the event itself iconic, as a ‘decisive moment’ of the twentieth-century. Hence, the Bandung Conference was the greatest diplomatic pageantry performed entirely and solely by Asian and African states; and to that extent, it stands out as a unique diplomatic event in world history.

Notwithstanding the agenda of individual participating states, often conflicting and contentious, the fact of their attendance and of their determination to conclude it on a positive note, underlines the collective recognition of what was really at stake – namely to assert ‘Afro-Asian solidarity’ at a historic moment. This diplomatic performance lent legitimacy symbolically to the twenty-nine participating states as a new collective ‘actor’ in international relations. What is striking about Bandung is that it was an act of confident assertion vis-à-vis the ruling elite of international society, and not a passive act of seeking acceptance.<sup>8</sup> Symbolically, not a single ‘white’ or ‘Western’ state was present. Thus, it was a daring act, proud and defiant, borne out of the political momentum created by the global process of decolonization.

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<sup>7</sup> For a history of diplomacy more generally, consult, Jeremy Black, *A History of Diplomacy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> The idea of ‘international society’ is expounded by the English School of International Relations, the most notable work being by Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds, *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

Because much onus has been given to framing the Bandung Conference as a symbolic 'moment', it is necessary to privilege the examination of that 'moment'. To this end, I argue that we should reconsider the Bandung Conference as a case of the 'diplomacy as theatre'.<sup>9</sup> Using the 'theatre' metaphor has implications in terms of drawing out the boundary of intellectual enquiry. In principle, 'theatre' has three components: the space, performers (actors) and audience.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, our principal areas of enquiry with regards to the conference will also focus on these three components. For our purposes, let us rename 'space' as 'stage' and use it expansively and metaphorically to imply the city of Bandung as the 'stage' for the conference. By expanding the notion of 'stage' to incorporate the city itself as a theatrical space, it has a knock-on effect on our definition of 'performers'. Obviously, the first group of performers is the conference delegates, including principal actors such as Nehru, Zhou Enlai, Nasser and Sukarno. Secondly, we need to incorporate the non-delegate conference attendees, who include some well-known individuals such as the African American writers Richard Wright, Eugene Gordon as well as Malcolm X, but also the highly cosmopolitan media corps including budding photojournalists such as Lisa Larsen and Howard Sochurek contracted by *LIFE* magazine to capture the historic event.

Thirdly, I argue that the people of Bandung must be included for playing the role of the audience. Strictly speaking, the people of Bandung were actual audiences to the theatre of diplomacy taking place in their local city. However, the local audience must be re-defined as 'performers' on their own right, as their role lends credence to the whole event and, indeed, forms an integral part of the visual tapestry of the conference. This brings us to the third component of the theatre – the audience. Apart from the local audience, we have the respective national audiences of individual national leaders, eagerly watching the 'performance' of their leaders on the world stage in Bandung. Then, of course, there is an even larger and more amorphous constituency of what one might call the global audience. As Bandung was a 'world historical' event, global media descended on Bandung to offer worldwide coverage. By giving prominence to the theatrical component of the 'audience,' I intend to probe further the problem of 'reception' in the study of international diplomacy.

In the rest of the paper, I will demonstrate how Bandung was prepared as the 'stage' for the finest 'diplomatic theatre' and then proceed to explain an example of what I call 'diplomatic performance' at work. This will be done primarily through the use of Indonesian sources.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Erik Ringmar shares an interest in the idea of diplomacy as performance. I would like to thank him for allowing me access to his forthcoming article, 'Performing International Systems: Two East-Asian Alternative to the Westphalian Order,' *International Organization* 66:2 (Spring 2012). On the general theoretical level, I find Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Penguin, 1990), Clifford Geertz's oeuvre on symbolic anthropology, and Jeffrey C. Alexander's work in cultural sociology highly instructive. See Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast, eds., *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and more recently, Jeffrey C. Alexander's *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Paul Rae for insightful discussions on 'theatre' and 'performance'. For his interest in political performance, consult 'Wayang Studies?' in James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, eds., *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum Approach* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 67-84.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Pitra Narendra for his help in translating Bahasa Indonesia to English.

## BANDUNG AS A 'STAGE' IN INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY

It was clear from the beginning that the entire national pride of the newly created Republic of Indonesia was at stake in hosting the Asia-Africa Conference (hereafter 'AAC'). According to Ali Sastroamidjojo, then prime minister of Indonesia, it was at his initiative that Indonesia became host to the international conference when he broached the subject at the meeting of the Colombo Powers – Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma – in December 1954 in the Javanese city of Bogor. After the conference, one of the conferees had bad-mouthed the host in an international magazine remarking that, 'These beggars will never learn', referring to the allegedly poor standard of hospitality offered.<sup>12</sup> Quite clearly, the Indonesians had to prove their detractors wrong and recover from this humiliation. To this end, Roeslan Abdulgani, a senior Indonesian official, was appointed as Secretary-General of the Joint Secretariat to oversee the entire preparations for the April conference. Indonesians were determined to play a 'good host' to the historic event.<sup>13</sup>

Considerable amount of care and attention went into the detailed planning of the conference. Even deciding the opening day on 18 April 1955 became a diplomatic feat. There were many restrictions that the Joint Secretariat had to take into consideration: for one, Ramadan would begin on 24/25 April, which would make it difficult for most Arab countries to attend. Then, U Nu could not leave Burma until 16 April because of the Buddhist sacred days. In the event, Monday the 18<sup>th</sup> seemed the only viable day for the opening, and the Ramadan considerations had meant that it had to end on 23 April. However, there was also a symbolic meaning attached to the 18<sup>th</sup>, purely as a diplomatic gesture to 'appease' the Americans who were getting edgy about the Asia-Africa Conference. In order to remind the Americans of their colonial past, Sukarno had alluded, in his opening speech, to the famous midnight ride made by Paul Revere, a young patriot, on 18 April 1775, from Boston to Concord, 'immortalized' by Longfellow in his poem, 'Tales of a Wayside Inn'.<sup>14</sup>

Why was Bandung chosen and not Jakarta which would have been a more natural choice as the capital of Indonesia? For one, Bandung was considered to be a superior place to host an international conference of this magnitude because of the favourable climate and the beauty of the location of the city, surrounded by mountains.<sup>15</sup> Practical considerations included the ready availability of internationally acceptable standards of conference venues and accommodation in Bandung. The City of Bandung and its people felt rightly proud of their city for being chosen as the 'centre of Asia and Africa' for a week in April 1955. The local newspaper, *Pikiran Rakjat* called Bandung 'Europe in the Tropics': 'Here in this privileged mountain-city, we always have spring and summer: Bandung is in fact a combination of the splendors of Europe and the blessings of the tropics.'<sup>16</sup> On 12 April, the same paper published an 'Ode to Bandung':

Bung Karno [Sukarno] started the nationalist revolutionary fire in Bandung.  
So Bandung you are the first source of the nationalist revolutionary movement  
because in the middle of your heart, Bung Karno spread the fire of the nationalist  
revolution.  
Your garden is full of flowers so you get the name, 'Bandung City of Flowers'.  
Because your girls and women are attractive, you get the name, 'Paris of Java Island'.

<sup>12</sup> Abdulgani, *The Bandung Connection*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> 'Ibu Kota juga sibuk', *Pikiran Rakjat*, 12 April 1955.

<sup>14</sup> Abdulgani, *The Bandung Connection*, pp. 46-7.

<sup>15</sup> 'Miscellany from the Conference', *BERITA Konferensi Asia Afrika*, p.91.

<sup>16</sup> 'Bandung and Surroundings', *Pikiran Rakjat*, 16 April 1955.

Bandung tried to gain another name, a better one from the existing names. So in history, your name will be mentioned as 'Bandung the Source of Glory of Asia and Africa'.

Historically, also, Bandung was a significant city in the Dutch colonial world; the Dutch had even considered moving the capital of the Dutch East Indies from Batavia to Bandung in the 1920s. This was partly responsible for the remarkable range of Art Deco buildings that stand in Bandung as both the Dutch and colonial Dutch architects competed to turn the city into a vision of colonial modernity.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Bandung was not just any Indonesian city but a special one, even for the post-colonial Indonesian elite, many of whom had spent their formative years in Bandung as students and as political activists – the most famous being Sukarno himself.

### **'Staging' the City**

In thinking of Bandung as a 'stage' for the greatest 'diplomatic theatre' to unfold, we need to consider spatially how the 'stage' was created in the third largest city in Indonesia. As a matter of practicality, the city had to find additional spaces to absorb for one week anywhere from two to three thousand visitors, representing the twenty-nine delegations, the media, as well as a substantial number of unofficial visitors who wanted to be witnesses to the 'decisive moment' in the history of Afro-Asia.

Administratively, the Joint Secretariat created a special conference zone, referred to as the 'AAC zone' in the city-centre, with Jalan Asia Afrika (where the principal venue and hotels stood), Jalan Alun Alun (the city square where the central mosque stands) and Jalan Braga (the famous street of cafes, restaurants and nightlife) marking the southern boundary, and stretching out northward and eastward to include Jalan Lembong, Jalan Tamblong, Jalan Taman Sari, Jalan Diponegoro and Jalan Ciembuluit, as residences of heads of delegations were located. The primary venue, Gedung Merdeka (Freedom Building of which there will be a detailed discussion in the next section) was situated on Jalan Asia Afrika, whilst the secondary venue, Dwi-Warna, as well as the Office of the Governor of West Java affectionately known as Gedung Sate (the spire of the roof looked like a big satay as in skewered grilled meat dish) were situated on Jalan Diponegoro, a good fifteen minutes away by car. In this way, the AAC zone ended up occupying an extensive area of central Bandung, giving the Joint Secretariat a major headache. Most significantly, the official designation of the AAC zone had the effect of creating a spatial separation between the city as it was and the temporary 'stage' that was being specially prepared at its core.

Having carved out a special AAC zone, the next step was to spruce up this area, particularly along the main roads that the delegates would pass in their limousines. For a period of four months before the conference, the city of Bandung underwent a major 'face-lift'. Swift renovations were carried out to the conference venues, fourteen major hotels including Savoy Homann with its stunning, curvaceous Art Deco front by the Dutch architect, A. A. Albers, Grand Preanger, Astoria, Orient, individual residences allocated to the heads of delegations, the central mosque, airport, and railway station. M. Sadak, the director of Hotel Savoy Homann, got into the spirit of things and had even put forth a major extension plan to turn his hotel into the second largest and 'the most beautiful hotel in the whole of Southeast Asia'.<sup>18</sup> What made Bandung particularly striking visually was the prominence of

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<sup>17</sup> For an interesting study of Dutch colonial architecture in Indonesia, consult Helen Jessup, 'Netherlands architecture in Indonesia, 1900-1924', (PhD Dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, London 1988).

<sup>18</sup> 'Concordia djadi "Gedung Constituant"', *Pikiran Rakjat*, 2 April 1955.

European-style architecture, such as the extensive array of Art Deco and the earlier Empire-style houses and buildings throughout the city, giving it a 'European feel'.<sup>19</sup>

Nobody was left unscathed by the intense preparatory work under way. The rich were particularly affected as they were asked to give up their residences to host the heads of delegations, as well as the delivery of their brand new luxury cars effectively 'confiscated' by the Joint Secretariat to be used to ferry conference delegates around the city. The transportation committee of the Joint Secretariat had tallied the total number of vehicles necessary for the conference: 143 sedan cars, thirty taxis and twenty buses, altogether requiring 230 drivers including standbys. Journalists who could not afford car rentals had to resort to renting *becap* (local tricycle) with a driver. All this required at least thirty-five tons of petrol per day, with a reserve of 175 tons.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the authorities colour-coded the cars to distinguish heads of delegations from the rest, as they were provided with bright yellow, orange and red Mercury cars, whilst others were allocated Plymouth Belvederes in sea green. Clearly, the heads of delegations were meant to stand out and be seen by making them easily identifiable. The attention to detail included a vocabulary card that each local chauffeur was given listing ten key translated words – 'driver (*bung sopir*), go (*djalan*), back (*mundur*), stop (*berhenti*), wait (*tunggu*), to the right (*kekanan*), to the left (*kekiri*), return to (*kembali ke*), slow (*pelan pelan*), thank you (*terima kasih*)' – to facilitate communication with their foreign passengers.<sup>21</sup>

**Fig. 2 Fleet of Yellow Mercury Cars, *Buku Peringatan Konperensi Asia-Afrika* (1955).**



<sup>19</sup> On architecture in colonial Indonesia, see the collection of essays by Peter J.M. Nas, ed., *The Past in the Present: Architecture in Indonesia* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> 'Tinjauan dalam negeri', *Sunday Courier*, no. 18, year 7 (20 May 1955).

<sup>21</sup> 'Suasana A.A. meliputi Bandung', *Star Weekly*, no 486 (23 April 1955).

Main AAC thoroughfares such as Jalan Asia Afrika were literally scrubbed with workers on their hands and knees, and given a lick of fresh white paint. As one weekly magazine wrote, 'Reader, have you seen the main road scrubbed so clean? This kind of strange happening is occurring... precisely on the main road in front of Homann and Preanger.'<sup>22</sup> Having cleaned ungainly sights of messy small vendors off the streets in the AAC zone, as well as kicking out long-term hotel dwellers to make room for the visitors, Bandung was truly becoming 'super de lux', as clean as the brand of Indonesian soap, Lux, opined a Chinese Indonesian weekly magazine.<sup>23</sup> The short preparation period as well as the mounting cost (some estimates of up to twenty million rupiahs) meant that most of sprucing-up consisted of giving everything a lick of fresh white paint to give the appearance of cleanliness and preparedness.<sup>24</sup> Hence, 'whiteness' acted as a signifier not only for order and hygiene but, also the very freshness of the paint accounted for the effort made by the host to welcome guests.

Another significant dimension to 'staging' Bandung was the question of security. At the time of the conference, West Java generally was under constant threat from Darul Islam (House of Islam) which was an influential revolutionary group aiming to create an Islamic Indonesia. For the Indonesian government, this group would have constituted the single most serious security threat to the conference. However, this was one subject that was hardly mentioned in the press. Nothing untoward happened during the conference (or even if there had been an incident, it would probably not have been reported). Instead, the largest security issue that loomed in the pages of the local press was the concern over traffic control during the conference. The obsession shown with the traffic was such that it worked as a metaphor for the general sense of law and order prevailing in Bandung during the conference.

Traffic restrictions were applied to all vehicles except for those used by delegates and committee members which needed special permits. This was announced by the Security Section of the Joint Secretariat more than two weeks before the conference. These restrictions would be in place for twenty-four hours every day during the conference week in the AAC zone including Jalan Asia Afrika and other main thoroughfares.<sup>25</sup> During the conference, 2,064 special traffic permits were issued to vehicles (1,800 cars and 264 motorcycles) to enable them to go to the 'closed streets' in the conference zone.<sup>26</sup> For pedestrians, ID cards were introduced to control their movement. The mayor of Bandung authorized ID cards for the citizens of Bandung, whereas for those from outside of Bandung, they needed to have ID cards issued by respective local offices. People were warned not to leave them at home, and also not to argue with state officials dealing with security and traffic control during the conference.

In the light of the seriousness of the security threat from Darul Islam, it was extraordinary that pedestrians did not require special permission to meet the AAC guests, but simply to report to the guards at the hotels.<sup>27</sup> In this way, pedestrians could enter the conference zone unhindered as long as they did not obstruct the delegates and the working of the conference. This gesture of 'public spiritedness' on the part of officialdom afforded once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to the people of

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<sup>22</sup> 'Gambang Kromong,' *Star Weekly* no.486 (23 April 1955).

<sup>23</sup> 'Gambang Kromong,' *Star Weekly* no.486 (23 April 1955).

<sup>24</sup> 'Apa jang ditelan Konperensi Asia-Afrika,' *Almanak Umum Nasional 1956* (Jakarta: N.V., Pustaka & Punerbit "Endang", 1956). These numbers vary according to different reports.

<sup>25</sup> 'Pas Lalu Lintas untuk Kendaraan,' *Pikiran Rakjat*, 2 April 1955.

<sup>26</sup> 'Lalu-Lintas,' *Pikiran Rakjat*, 28 April 1955.

<sup>27</sup> 'The President Opens the Asia-Africa Conference: Gives Birth to New Asia and Africa!: Words Which Will Echo Through the Age,' *Pikiran Rakjat*, 18 April 1955.

Bandung to approach conference delegates as close as possible, and even ask for autographs. In front of the conference buildings, specially designated waiting areas were created for the public to catch glimpses of delegates.<sup>28</sup>

**Fig. 3 The People of Bandung in Front of Hotel Savoy Homann**



Courtesy of Bidakara Savoy Homann Hotel

Even though the special consideration made for public access in Bandung fell short of the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in 1947 when a huge marquee had been erected to accommodate the public as participants of the conference, yet the fact that the people of Bandung were allowed close physical proximity not just to ordinary delegates but also to high-profile statesmen, did lend a special atmosphere to the whole occasion. It allowed for a continuous interaction between conference delegates and the people, almost as though a week-long street theatre was being staged. In this respect, everyone metamorphosed into an actor, as they played their respective roles with much enthusiasm and relish. One local weekly reported a typical scene during the conference with the palpable sense of popular excitement:

But as soon as the siren from the police motorcycle was heard, people ran out of the shops and, in restaurants, waitress bringing out the food ordered by the guests, consciously or unconsciously put down the food on one of the tables and ran outside. People who want to eat have to wait and but they also ran outside. It was crowded outside, people who ride bicycle they stopped as well as those who used other kinds of vehicles. Everyone stopped. Because the blaring siren means that one of the delegations is about to pass.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 'Miscellany from the Conference', *BERITA Konferensi Asia Afrika*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>29</sup> 'Suasana A.A. meliputi Bandung', *Star Weekly*, no. 486 (23 April 1955).

In the latter part of the twentieth-century, international conferences became increasingly defined by the sense of distance imposed between the people and the delegates, due to the ever-growing concern for total security, as was evident in the visual images of the Belgrade Conference only six years later in 1961.<sup>30</sup>

In the end, a large number of police officers from the Traffic Police, City Police, and especially mobilised traffic units from outside of Bandung, namely the sub-provincial level administrative districts (Keresidenen) of Priangan, Jakarta, Bantam, Bogor and Cirebon, were mobilised to provide cover for the conference. Even local high school student units such as the BKLL (Badan Keamanan Lalu-lintas, ie. traffic safety bodies) helped out with the historic event. A proud student representative reported that his group had enlisted the help of seventy-five male and female students who performed their duties in freshly crisp white cotton uniforms. These boys and girls became the butt of popular mockery, presumably for their prissiness.<sup>31</sup> When the conference ended, the local broadsheet *Pikiran Rakjat* reported that the head of the Traffic Police of the Municipal Government of Bandung (Kota-Besar Bandung) hosted a special farewell event for the police and volunteers, reminding them that the success of the conference was a source of pride for all concerned.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of all the seriousness of the Joint Secretariat, however, for the people of Bandung the AAC was like a big '*tjapgoméh*' (Chinese party). A popular Indonesian magazine, *Minggu Pagi*, suggested that it was grand and unparalleled like a magnificent wedding party, of someone like the daughter of Prime Minister Ali Sastrodarmasuro. To be sure, it was as good as a party hosted by the Agha Khan on the marriage of his son to Rita Hayworth.<sup>33</sup>

### **Gedung Merdeka (Freedom Building)**

President Sukarno who studied civil engineering at the Bandung Institute of Technology in 1921 understood the power of architecture, and wanted it to work as an integral part of the stage set for the most significant international conference to ever take place in Indonesia. Under his rule of 'guided democracy', he launched a number of monumental constructions (what the historian of architecture, Lai Chee Kien has aptly called '*merdeka* architecture' or independence/freedom architecture)<sup>34</sup> in Jakarta to create a post-colonial capital in the 1960s, the most famous being the National Monument starting in 1961. It should be noted that '*merdeka*' in Bahasa Indonesia (the language of Indonesia) can mean both 'independence' and 'freedom' (as in freedom from oppression). In 1955, we see an early inkling of Sukarno's 'vision' for a new Indonesia.

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<sup>30</sup> According to the visual materials shown by Jürgen Dinkel at 'The Cold War and the Postcolonial Moment: Prehistory, Aims and Achievements of the Non-Aligned Movement 50 Years after Belgrade', held jointly at ETH and the University of Zurich, 3-4 June 2011.

<sup>31</sup> 'Lalu-Lintas', *Pikiran Rakjat*, 28 April 1955.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Minggu Pagi*, no.3 year 8 (17 April 1955).

<sup>34</sup> Lai Chee Kien, *BUILDING MERDEKA: Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, 1957-1966* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2007).

**Fig. 4 Gedung Merdeka (Freedom Building)**

For one, the choice of Gedung Merdeka (Freedom Building) as the principal venue of the conference has some significance worth mentioning. Originally, it was built in 1895 as the Concordia Society Club, an elite Dutch social club. When Sukarno visited Bandung to inspect the conference preparations on 7 April 1955, he suddenly announced his decision to rename the venues of the conference to better reflect the spirit of the conference and of the newly independent Indonesia as the host country. Hence, the old Concordia Society Club was rechristened as Gedung Merdeka to be used as the principal venue where the plenary sessions took place; whilst the second venue, Dana Pension Fund Building was renamed Dwi-Warna ('Two Colours', signifying the red and the white of the Indonesian national flag) where political, economic and cultural committees sat in session. Sukarno's vision for creating a post-colonial Bandung extended to renaming the streets. In this way, Jalan Raya Timur became Jalan Asia Afrika and Jalan Alun Alun Barat became Jalan Masjid Agung (the town square – *alun alun* – where the main mosque of Bandung, that is, Masjid Agung, stood).<sup>35</sup> Of course, his grand vision was not appreciated by everyone, as the Municipal Government of Bandung grumbled that these decisions had been taken single-handedly by Sukarno who had failed to consult the city beforehand.<sup>36</sup> In any case, Sukarno was dissatisfied with the poor standard of what he considered as a 'slap-dash' effort at renovations of the key conference sites. His idea of building an 'Asia-Afrika Restaurant' to commemorate the conference was vetoed due to lack of time and funding.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> 'Nama baru', *Pikiran Rakyat*, 9 April 1955; 'Bandung Council Meets on Conference Matters,' *Indonesian Observer*, 15 April 1955.

<sup>36</sup> 'Bandung Council Meets on Conference Matters,' *Indonesian Observer*, 15 April 1955.

<sup>37</sup> Abdulgani, *The Bandung Connection*, pp. 46-7.

As part of the process of 'rebirth' of Bandung, a big sign in strong capital letters 'GEDUNG MERDEKA' was placed above the imposing front entrance to the building. This gave the building a theatrical appearance, its visual impact even more dramatic in the evenings, when it was lit up. The Indonesian government had purchased this building for eight million rupiahs a few weeks before the conference, explaining that it would serve as a venue for future international gatherings in Indonesia.<sup>38</sup> It was made clear that newly renamed Gedung Merdeka was going to be an architectural symbol of Indonesia, as a symbolic act of 'deconsecrating' the building from its Dutch colonial past. This symbolic act in 1955 had immortalized the building as one of the key monuments contributing to the national narrative of post-colonial Indonesia. It was converted into the Museum of the Asian-African Conference in 1980 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the conference.<sup>39</sup> In 2005, it received a major overhaul to mark the Golden Anniversary of the Bandung Conference.<sup>40</sup>

The positioning of Gedung Merdeka as an iconic post-colonial national monument tells only one side of the story, however, as the building has a more complex history than first meets the eye. The Concordia Society Club as it was then known underwent a major renovation in 1921 by the Dutch colonial architect, Charles Prosper Wolff Schoemaker who taught Sukarno as a student. C.J. van Dullemen who recently published a comprehensive work on Schoemaker's oeuvre, noted that there was a special bond between Schoemaker the teacher and Sukarno the student.<sup>41</sup> Schoemaker got Sukarno involved also in the renovation of the Grand Hotel Preanger in 1927-9, the hotel which betrays very strongly the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright with a stylistic reference to the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Although Gedung Merdeka looks at a glance like an uncompromisingly modern 'western-style' building, Schoemaker who was an aficionado of Balinese art and culture, did not forget to leave his signature stamp on the building which was a *Kala*, the 'stylised head of a monster which is common in the traditional architecture of Java and Bali',<sup>42</sup> right on the top front of the building at both sides. As a notable building in Bandung, it was occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War, and renamed temporarily as Yamato Kaikan (Yamato Hall).<sup>43</sup> Therefore, tempting though it is to 'read' metaphorically a narrative of the decolonization of Indonesia in the symbolic selection of Gedung Merdeka by Sukarno, Sukarno's personal relationship with the building as evidenced through his intimate relationship with his architect-mentor, Schoemaker, till the latter's death in 1949, coupled with his professional involvement in some of the iconic colonial architecture in Bandung, reveals a more nuanced background, and complicates the picture altogether. In some sense, this underlying complexity was characteristic of the Bandung experience generally.

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<sup>38</sup> 'Rombongan Pemerintah busat Menindjau persiapan Konp. A.A.,' *Pikiran Rakjat*, 10 April 1955.

<sup>39</sup> See the pamphlet, 'Museum of the Asian-African Conference' (Jakarta: Directorate of Public Diplomacy Department of Foreign Affairs, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.asianafrican-museum.org/themuseum.php?language=eng&page=themuseum>

<sup>41</sup> C.J. van Dullemen, *Tropical Modernity: Life and Work of C.P. Wolff Schoemaker* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2010), p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> 'Konp. A.A. ujtuk damai dan hidup bersama: Tantangan Rakjat Asia-Afrika kepada semangat perang', *Pikiran Rakjat*, 12 April 1955.

### THE 'MERDEKA WALK' (FREEDOM WALK)

World statesmen as key diplomatic actors are often perceived by audiences to be personifications of the states they represent; hence, the giving of a strong stage performance becomes even more critical to creating a positive national image in international politics. Such accoutrements as speech-delivery, dress, and bodily comportment such as posture and gesture, are all part and parcel of creating a demeanor appropriate to a 'person in power' and 'person of power'. According to Erving Goffman, '[a] "performance" may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.'<sup>44</sup> Needless to say, non-verbal communication plays a substantial part in creating these images. Indeed, it is most often the 'performative' aspect of diplomacy that gives any meaning to diplomacy as far as the 'public' is concerned because it is the only aspect which is visible to non-participants.

We now turn to examine an example of what I call a theatrical performance that left a lasting impact on the popular reception of the conference. As we have already seen above, one characteristic of the way in which the 'stage' was set in Bandung was the official provision made to allow for close physical access of the people of Bandung to conference delegates. This became a critical factor in contributing to a certain 'festival' like atmosphere during the conference, as there was a continual spatial interaction taking place between the people and the delegates in the AAC zone. The key AAC streets such as Jalan Asia Afrika and Jalan Diponegoro where the conference venues were situated, remained busy with school children, housewives, and the general public at large, as they eagerly waited for world statesmen to emerge from meetings to catch a glimpse of them, but also to enjoy watching foreigners going about busily 'conferencing' in Bandung. Everyone was fair game as far as the people were concerned, especially if they looked obviously 'foreign'. A young American photographer, Lisa Larsen, who was contracted by LIFE Magazine to cover the conference together with Howard Sochurek, was often mentioned in the local press as an object of popular admiration.<sup>45</sup>

In the midst of this generally festive atmosphere, the most memorable instance of 'ritual citation' emerged from the conference -- the famous 'Walk' which delegates made to Gedung Merdeka along Jalan Asia Afrika. It all came about because the Joint Secretariat had asked the delegates to walk from Hotel Savoy Homann (fifty metres away) or Grand Hotel Preanger (one hundred metres away) to attend the plenary session to avoid traffic congestion around Gedung Merdeka at the opening ceremony of the conference. Those key leaders who were given individual residences further north in the conference zone, on Jalan Taman Sari (Zhou) or Jalan Lembong (Nehru, Ali Sastroamidjojo, Nasser, Sir John Kotelawala) would arrive in their Mercury cars to Jalan Asia Afrika, and got out to walk the final few yards to Gedung Merdeka.<sup>46</sup> As if on queue, delegates emerged out of the hotels in separate national units -- so the audience could watch the spontaneous procession of different national groups, akin to watching the procession of national teams into the stadium for the opening ceremony of the Olympics. To the delight of the crowd, some delegations were decked out in national dresses. It is this brief walk that became the most iconic 'site/sight of interaction' between the Afro-Asian leaders and the people of Bandung, when the latter could enjoy the sight of these famous statesmen at close quarters, wave at them, take photos of them and, if very lucky, get their autographs and even a handshake. The spontaneity of the occasion produced powerful visual imagery as the great men of Asia-Africa striding purposefully towards Gedung Merdeka amidst

<sup>44</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> 'Suasana A.A. meliputi Bandung', *Star Weekly*, no 486 (23 April 1955); 'Varia Afro-Asia,' *Wanita* no.10, year 7 (20 May 1955); 'Konperensi Asia-Afrika djadi pusat perhatian dunia', *Lukisan Dunia*, no. 17, year 3 (28 April 1955).

<sup>46</sup> 'Konperensi Asia-Afrika djadi pusat perhatian dunia', *Lukisan Dunia*, no.17, year 3 (28 April 1955).

cheering local crowds, and came to represent the iconography of the Bandung Conference in later years.

The local newspaper, *Pikiran Rakjat*, described the scene:

In the early morning, they [the people of Bandung] gathered in the street in front of Homann and Preanger, the traffic is not a problem because only cars with the special sign can pass through Jalan Asia Afrika. But on this special day, there is no car in front of Gedung Merdeka. A file of military personnel and the military band lined up neatly in front of the conference building, and kept the road open for the state representatives. Representatives... go from Hotel Homann to Gedung Merdeka, and they walk like dignitaries. Both on the left and right side, policemen in uniform accompany them. Delegations wear a variety of clothes, each according to their national dress. Cambodia and Vietnam attracted a lot of attention because we rarely, if not never, see their national dress. Cambodia with the white jacket and black long pants and long shoes, and Vietnam wore some kind of a robe in yellow colour. But the most unique is the clothes of ...the Minister from the Gold Coast. His black skin is covered by yellow and green cloth, which gives a contrast.<sup>47</sup>

**Fig. 5 The Liberian Delegation Leaving Hotel Savoy Homann.**



Courtesy of Bidakara Savoy Homann Hotel

Nehru, Nasser and Zhou Enlai easily won the popularity poll – they were the biggest crowd pullers and crowd pleasers. No doubt part of their charisma can be explained by the fact that these very men embodied the power and the spirit of a nationalist or revolutionary struggle. One Chinese-Indonesian woman exclaimed excitedly, ‘I want to see Zhou Enlai!’ Although she was standing in the

<sup>47</sup> *Pikiran Rakjat*, 19 April 1955.

glaring midday sun, she looked contented to have secured a place at the front in order to get a good view of the handsome leader from China. On the visual impact of Zhou, *Star Weekly* (a Chinese-Indonesian magazine) wrote excitedly, 'people could not stop talking about Zhou's eyebrows which were thick and black.'<sup>48</sup> Nor could the people stop talking about his light grey jacket. Zhou wore the Mao suit when he was conferencing, but when invited to meet the local Chinese-Indonesians, he dressed in a Western suit.<sup>49</sup> Thus, Zhou consciously manipulated his 'dress' according to different political audiences, underlining the importance of the politics of dress.<sup>50</sup>

An interesting example of the power of communication can be seen in the case of the ritual created spontaneously between Nehru and the crowd. Every time Nehru waved at the crowd, the latter would respond with a chorus of '*merdeka pa!*' (freedom, sir!).<sup>51</sup> In fact, the word, '*merdeka*' became a bonding call during the AAC because in many other occasions, the crowd took to respond enthusiastically to statesmen with '*merdeka!*' On the opening day, Zhou had not quite realized that he had to 'perform' to the crowd as he promptly went inside Gedung Merdeka without waving at the crowd. Upon realizing his mistake, he quickly did a retake of this entry, by immediately reappearing at the top of the steps of the building and waved at the crowd, so that the crowd could see his face.

On the other hand, Gamal Abdel Nasser elicited an adoring gaze from the crowd of a different order. Nasser was a young revolutionary icon of the time, 'with his virile appearance and his military uniform, he received special attention. His kind face and his smile and his hand which was always waving, make him very popular, and he is only thirty-seven years old...'<sup>52</sup> His infectious smile was a potent diplomatic weapon, with which he won over the crowd time and time again. A gushing fan said, 'No wonder he can start a revolution in Egypt...his body is so virile, his hand is so strong that it can destroy steel.'<sup>53</sup> Thus, somehow the very body of Nasser is seen to symbolize the 'virility' of the new Egypt. Indeed, Nasser's stature as a leading statesman of the Arab world was consolidated, no doubt in part due to the strong stage performance he gave at Bandung.<sup>54</sup> Thereafter, he becomes arguably the most highly recognizable Arab leader in the world.

<sup>48</sup> 'Suasana A.A. meliputi Bandung,' *Star Weekly*, no.486 (23 April 1955).

<sup>49</sup> *Buku Peringatan Konperensi Asia-Afrika* (Jakarta: Inhua, 1955), p.30.

<sup>50</sup> For works on the significance of dress in political and diplomatic events, consult Jean Allman, ed., *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, eds., *Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas* (Lewis: Sussex Academic Press, 2008)..

<sup>51</sup> 'Suasana A.A. meliputi Bandung,' *Star Weekly*, no.486 (23 April 1955). For a most recent study of Nehru at Bandung, consult Sinderpal Singh, 'From Delhi to Bandung: Nehru, "Indian-ness" and "Pan-Asian-ness"', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 34:1 (2011): 51-64.

<sup>52</sup> 'Bandung that lovely city,' *Wanita*, no.9, year 7 (5 May 1955).

<sup>53</sup> *Minggu Pagi*, no.5, year 8 (1 May 1955).

<sup>54</sup> 'Nasser on Social Justice,' From Amembassy (Cairo) to the Department of State, 1 June 1955, RG59, Central Decimal Files, 1955-1959, Box 3681, NARA; see also, 'Domestic Scene Characterized by Indecision and Inactivity,' Amembassy (Cairo) to Department of State, 7 October 1955, RG 59, Central Decimal Files, 1955-1959, Box 3681, NARA.

**Fig. 6 Nasser on the 'Merdeka Walk', waving with King Feisal of Saudi Arabia, *Buku Peringatan Konperensi Asia-Afrika (1955)*.**



Therefore, the 'Walk' which can be named more appropriately as the 'Merdeka Walk' (Freedom Walk) is significant for our purpose of understanding the power of 'performance' in international diplomacy. It acted as a crucial form of non-verbal communication between the leaders and the crowd, its symbolic meaning reaching out even to audiences globally who observed this 'performance' through the media. 'Walk', 'wave', 'smile' are all integral components of non-verbal communication.<sup>55</sup> According to Michael Braddick, 'gestures can be a powerful means of communicating affirmation and solidarity...'. Moreover, 'gesture serves as a means of assertion for individuals in themselves, or as embodiments of a group – the gentry, the godly, or the nation, for example.'<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, these physical movements 'speak out' to the people as non-verbal forms of communication, and create a spontaneous shared space between the leaders and the people. Indeed, charismatic leaders like Nasser well-understood the value of communicating and reaching to the public in this manner. Creating a rapport with the local audience was an extremely effective way of creating a rapport by proxy with national and international audiences.

One final point to make about the 'Walk' is that it acted as 'a parade of nations'. Just as the still photograph of the twenty-nine flags of the participating nations flying at Jakarta's Kemorajan Airfield symbolized the birth of Afro-Asia, the 'Merdeka Walk' of twenty-nine national delegations represented the ever-expanding group of nations that made up Afro-Asia. The fact that the Sudan and the Gold Coast attained independence in 1956 and 1957 respectively makes this walk even more poignant. Hence, the walk was replete with symbolic weight: on the one level, it can be seen as a walk to freedom for the participating nations, the attaining of freedom symbolized by Gedung

<sup>55</sup> Michael J. Braddick, ed., *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives* (London: Past and Present, 2009), p.10.

<sup>56</sup> William Roosen, 'Early Modern Diplomatic Ceremonial: A Systems Approach,' *Journal of Modern History* 52 (1980), p. 31.

Merdeka; on another level, those nations still fighting to attain independence, it was a 'visual performance' of the political process of decolonization that they were going through at present. Because many of these delegations decided to emphasize their national identity by wearing their national dress for the Opening Ceremony, the 'Merdeka Walk' turned into a striking theatrical 'parade of nations' capturing public fascination. This is why a Japanese broadsheet hailed the conference as the 'festival of the century' (*seiki no saiten*). It should be mentioned that this iconic 'Merdeka Walk' was re-enacted by Kofi Anan and other participants of the Golden Anniversary of the AAC in 2005.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

No one would deny that there is a significant element of theatricality in international diplomacy. Why then has this dimension been largely neglected in the existing literature? Much of the neglect comes from the lack of a viable methodological framework from which questions of performativity in diplomacy can be interpreted. 'Diplomacy as theatre', therefore, has been presented here as an alternative approach to exploring the production and reproduction of symbolic meanings generated by acts of diplomatic performance. After all, the theatre metaphor must be the most empowering approach to a critical reappraisal of the Bandung Conference of 1955 – memorable for so many precisely for its symbolic value in twentieth-century international diplomacy.