

Catalysing Africa-Asia Exchanges

Webby S. Kalikiti

I consider it a great honour to have been asked to write something on my long and fruitful relationship with IIAS, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. I was a fellow at IIAS in 2006, courtesy of the International Institute for Social History (IISH), which funded my three-month stay in The Netherlands. Before that year, I was one of the SEPHIS PhD research recipients in 1997. The award allowed me to carry out fieldwork in Vietnam for six months. However, my introduction to Asia started way back in the late 1980's, when a French government scholarship allowed me to work under French experts of Vietnam at the Université Paris 7.

Over the years, that initial contact with IIAS led to a number of critical initiatives that aimed to build academic bridges between Africa and Asia and more recently, linkages between academic institutions in Africa and Southeast Asia.

In 2010, under IIAS's direction, partners in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States started working together on an attempt to conceptualise a capacity-building initiative aimed at promoting the teaching, study, and research on Asia in African universities.

In 2012 and for the first time ever in Africa, IIAS was instrumental in organising a roundtable on 'Asian Studies in Africa' in Chisamba, near Lusaka, Zambia. This meeting discussed how ideas on Asia and Africa, which at the time were somewhat abstract and inchoate, could provide a basis for building capacities in African and Asian Studies in the two continents. Over 30 participants from Africa, America, Asia, and Europe attended the roundtable. IIAS played the most important roles of financing, organising, assisting with logistics, and identifying potential participants. This first meeting resulted in the creation of the Association of Asian Studies in Africa (A-ASIA).

In 2015, the University of Ghana (in close collaboration with IIAS), organised the first major conference on Asian Studies in Africa. This meeting was attended by over 250 academics, researchers, publishers, and other interested parties. Its great success was largely due to the efforts of IIAS staff and local participants. In 2018, IIAS was once again the key player in yet another A-ASIA conference held in Tanzania, at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. Over 300 academics attended this gathering of Asia scholars.

Meetings in 2020 and 2023 brought academics and researchers together from the Universities of Kasetsart in Bangkok, Thailand; the University of Airlangga (UNAIR) in Surabaya, Indonesia; the University of Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal; the University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania; and the University of Zambia. All of these are a result of the instrumental role that IIAS, through its global reach and highly

experienced staff, has played and continues to play in fostering innovative ways of constructing a new architecture of academic contacts and knowledge production through South-South collaborative efforts. The setting up of new centres focused on Africa and the Indian Ocean at Kasetsart and UNAIR, respectively, the establishment of a Centre for Asian Studies at the University of Ghana, and ongoing efforts to set up similar centres in East-Central and West Africa are some of the tangible results of IIAS's catalytic role.

At personal level, my long interaction with IIAS and its staff has resulted in a very fruitful and productive relationship. IIAS has given me opportunities to not only travel but promote A-ASIA in Africa and Asia through participation in conferences and attendance of meetings aimed at promoting academic and research linkages between Africa and Asia, and more recently, between Africa and Southeast Asia.

In 2012, IIAS facilitated my tour of Asia, where I discussed the objectives of A-ASIA, possible areas of collaboration in teaching Africa and Asia, staff and student exchange programmes, and possible research agendas with academic staff and researchers in Singapore and Taiwan. All interactions aimed to seek prospects for the establishment of academic partnerships, postgraduate training for African students, as well as possible signing of MOU's between African and Asian universities. Later in 2012, IIAS made it possible for me to attend the ICAS conference in Macao where, along with other members of A-ASIA, we were able to once more present and discuss A-ASIA's aspirations with eminent scholars of Africa and Asia.

In 2018, I attended ICAS 11 in Leiden, where I participated in a number of panels on Africa and Asia. Later that year, I attended the conference in Tanzania that IIAS and the University of Dar-es-Salaam organised. This conference was very important to me. I presented a paper on Vietnam and Africa, and participated in other panels on Vietnam. As a result of the conference in Dar-es-Salaam and thanks once more to IIAS, later in 2018, I was invited to attend a conference on Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City and Phan Thiet.

From all of these instances, it is clear that IIAS has not only been a major driver of initiatives, but has over the years also acted as a catalyst for the emerging academic interest in Asia on Africa. Personally, IIAS has greatly contributed to my work as an academic and has afforded me opportunities to interact with and establish networks with Asia scholars within and beyond Africa.

Webby S. Kalikiti,
University of Zambia, Zambia

As Untitled As We Are (2009)

I cannot be categorized by the simplistic labels you know
Confusion overwhelms you at the sight of me
I find pleasure in your intrigue
At me, the product of the lesser

I am the descendant of the downtrodden
A mixed masala of all that you oppressed
The great-great grand daughter of the not so important
The spawn of the good enough only to labour, to harvest,
To clean, to exploit
To lust and rape but not love

I am a striking exotic flower
Cultivated from seeds of India
Of St Helena
Of Malaysia
Of the Namib Desert
And natives of the Cape
And shamefully, of the colonialist seed,
Forced, as was their nature
This unspoken piece of history
I reject

Eons have passed since my people were lowly
Now I celebrate our innate rhythm
Our musical talents, our spices
I celebrate the Arab bump on my nose
My San stature, my Indian locks
You stare at my bursting lips
And lose yourself as my Khoi behind sashays past you

In this world, Pride only exists
For pedigree and purity
And royal lineages backdated
Each privileged generation, under their feet,
the solidity of a castle, preconstructed.
Climbing strength unnecessary,
Their lives' trials effortlessly imagined.

Was it not a greater task and more admirable
for those whose castles were demolished
To unyieldingly hold onto the foundation
And consistently build up, by generations, reconstructed
Till the zenith is reached

I am a masterpiece
A mosaic mystery
Of incense and rain dances and clicks
Of breyani at funerals and bredies and gemmerbier
Of Ghoema and Cape Jazz
And talkap and gutties speel

By your thinking, your mind cannot fathom us
You oversimplify into conceivable terms
Naively dismissive, are you
Intellect, exotic beauty, sensuality, have I

Fittingly, I emerge from the meeting waters
of Indian and Atlantic
And rise to the peak of Lions Head
Not by my own merits
I have been lifted by those who have gone before me

I stand here
For me, for my orphaned half-caste grandmother
For whomever of my tribe are made to feel culturally inferior
For my people's pride, and yes, are we not an African tribe?

And despite my early life's disadvantage
I rule, I take, and I conquer
With you, I smile, but my fighting slave spirit flames
within my soul
The rise is inevitable

Jeanine Benjamin,
South Africa



Above: Participants at the first "Africa-Asia, a New Axis of Knowledge" conference, held in Ghana in 2015.