

Africa-Asia, South-South Partnerships, and New Collaborations

Ibrahima Niang

I was born and grew up in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal that is well known as a gateway in West Africa. Dakar has a large seaport, and its population is extremely cosmopolitan. First of all, I would like to briefly introduce myself as an academician, then I will discuss my role in ICAS as a member of the organization and scientific committee of the Africa-Asia conference and what we intend to do for the coming Dakar Con-Fest 2025.



Fig. 1 (left): International partners (including Ibrahima Niang) convene in Leiden for a public roundtable entitled "Decolonizing Area Studies: An Open Conversation" in October 2023. (Photo courtesy of IIAS, 2023)

Fig. 2 (above right): The entrance of the campus of the Université de Dakar (now Université Cheikh-Anta-Diop) in 1962. (Photo courtesy of Nederlands studenten Afrika Gezelschap, via Wikimedia Commons)

In 2022, after many years as a non-permanent assistant lecturer, I became a permanent lecturer-researcher in the Department of Sociology at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, where I completed all of my courses. My research and teaching specialization is in economic sociology, geopolitics of emerging countries in Africa, and digital silks roads. Very early, I became interested in the presence of Chinese communities in Africa, with the initial research focusing on the nature of this presence, its motivations, and the resistance of employer organizations and Senegalese trade unions.

Working on these topics has enabled me to participate in Asia-Africa conferences organized on the continent, from Accra 2015 to Dar Es Salaam 2018, with presentations on discourses of the Chinese presence in Africa and on the history of Senegalese-Vietnamese descended from Vietnamese immigrants. For many years, I received *The Newsletter* and calls for proposals from IIAS and ICAS. This was the bridge between ICAS and myself until I met Stacey Links and Philippe Peycam in Dakar. Links played a key role in my involvement, as she contacted me first via LinkedIn to have a meeting when the ICAS team visited Dakar in May-June 2023. From that point, I began playing an important role in ICAS, joining its organizational board even when it was complicated at that time because of my busy personal agenda. In June 2024, through a discussion with Stacey Links and Philippe Peycam, I was co-opted to bring my young touch and expertise to Africa-Asia relations, and to share my experience as a participant and organizer of scientific events.

In October 2024, I was one of the speakers at the "Decolonizing Area Studies: An Open Conversation" roundtable organized in Leiden on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the International Institute of Asian Studies. I was also a member of the very rigorous review committee tasked with selecting participants for the upcoming ICAS 13 conference in Surabaya, Indonesia. After the meeting in

Surabaya, which includes many initiatives to build a great South-South-North network, Dakar has been chosen to host the next Asia-Africa conference. In 1987, Dakar University changed its name to honor the Senegalese physician, philosopher, and anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop. The education system follows the French model: all courses are taught in French, except those in language departments other than French. Cheikh Anta Diop University is one of Africa's most prestigious institutions. Many Senegalese leaders of the post-independence generation are graduates of the university, and its alumni teach in universities around the world. Many African heads of state and leaders studied there, including the new Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye.

Cheikh Anta Diop University is located near the residential area of Fann-Residence and Point E, and the West Gate of the campus offers a beautiful view on the sea. As readers may know, Dakar is a coastal city with three ways to the sea (West, North, and South). The Corniche, which is near the West Gate of the University, offers you a wonderful space of leisure for walking, doing sports, and gathering before the sun goes down. You can imagine, then, how the conference to be held there in 2025 will be a great moment of academic, social, and artistic exchange.

Having very early understood the importance of culture in exchanges between peoples and culture's role in economic activity, Senegal was one of the first African countries to adopt a cultural policy after independence. Its guidelines were drawn by the President and poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, who made culture into an ideological instrument. Senegal has become a cultural show-case in Africa thanks to the actions of its various heads of state. Dakar is the cultural hub of Senegal, boasting an array of museums, nightlife, and music that will enrich participants' conference experience.

The university has no fewer than 70,000 students enrolled from many countries. The large amphitheater at Ucad 2 will be the venue for the opening of the Conference-

Festival. The hall of the main library with its beautiful architecture has been chosen as the site for photos exhibition, musical performances, and the publisher's expo. The new building of the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences will host the parallel workshops and sessions in its multiple classrooms. This Conference-Festival is high on the agenda of Cheikh Anta Diop University, as we hope to welcome no less than 500 attendees from all around the world.

I am working with Professor Mamadou Fall and Philippe Peycam to bring academics together with filmmakers, musicians, designers, grassroots activists, and artists. Our intention is to make this the most beautiful Asia-Africa conference ever organized on the African continent. From its scientific inception to the production of the Con-Fest launch film, I am working to involve academics, activists, artists, creators, and authorities in an innovative event that will showcase the cultural dimensions of Dakar and Senegal.

Participants will discover the long-standing relations between Senegal and Asian countries. Such connections have been strong since the Bandung Conference, where Jean Roux, political advisor to President Senghor, represented Senegal in 1955. Senegal has always had very close relations with Asian countries, particularly those in the Middle East, because of its religious ties with the Gulf states. These strong relations with Asian countries were initiated by President Senghor, who always defended the Non-Aligned Movement and supported the countries of Southeast Asia. This diplomatic tradition has been strengthened by his successors, who have increased the number of partnerships between Asian countries and Senegal in a number of areas, to the point where giants of the Asian car industry (e.g., Tata and Senlran) have set up operations in Senegal. India's cinema has entered every household in Senegal, especially during its golden age: There is no Senegalese from the 1960s-1980s who

did not know any Indian music, particularly music films from Bombay/Mumbai.

Moreover, an Asia-Africa meeting without mentioning the city of "Pikine" would be a great mistake. Pikine is a suburb in Dakar, and it is well known among fans and dance bands as the heart of Indian music and films in the city. Today, China has become Senegal's major trading and infrastructure partner, with China building major cultural infrastructures like The Grand Theatre and The Museum of Black Civilizations. In 2022, as part of the Dakar Contemporary Arts Biennial, which is one of the largest cultural events in Senegal, the Chinese pavilion received 12 Chinese artists around the theme of *Active Transition*.

Korea and Japan are supporting Senegal in education and vocational training. We cannot talk about the Asian influence in Senegal without mentioning the practice of martial arts, which has created links between Senegalese practitioners of the sport and the countries of origin for these martial arts. The first encounters between Senegal and Asia took place through Senegalese veterans returning from the Indochinese war (1946-1954) with Indochinese and Vietnamese wives. Senegalese of Asian descent are among the oldest "Métis" communities in Senegal.

The Dakar Con-Fest will be an opportunity for us to show the exchanges that have existed – and that continue to exist – between Asian countries and Senegal in many domains: cuisine, sports, clothing, cinema, religious practices, the arts, health and wellness practices, languages, and more. The 2025 Africa-Asia conference in Dakar will be a great celebration of art and knowledge for a new South-South axis of disobedience thinking.

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