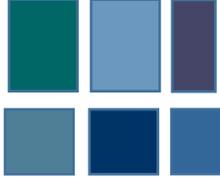




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77



**Remembering the 1987 Dakar Conference: Prospects  
for South Africa's Relations with Senegal**

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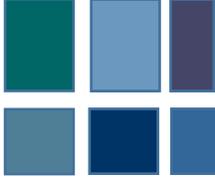
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### **About the author**

Tikam Sall is a Research Masters student in African Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Her research interests include identity, inequalities, race issues, human rights in South Africa and Sub-Saharan African countries. She holds a bachelor's degree in Political Sciences from the Free University of Berlin, in which she wrote her bachelor thesis on 'The ongoing stigmatization of the Coloureds in Post-Apartheid South Africa'.



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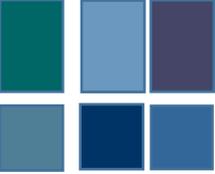
## ■ Introduction

The Dakar Conference of 1987 played an important diplomatic and supporting role for South Africa's liberation; however, today the Dakar Dialogue has almost been forgotten and does not receive much attention. Moreover, Senegal and South Africa are not known as being major cooperation partners on the African continent anymore. This is why this piece traces the historical context of the Dakar Conference, looking critically at how colonial memory is being reported and asks how relevant this conference is today.

### **The Historical Context of the Dakar Conference**

In 1962, Nelson Mandela met the Senegalese president, Leopold S. Senghor, in Dakar to get support for the armed struggle (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2019). By that time Senegal had reclaimed its independence in 1960 with Senghor at the helm, who stood strongly for Pan-Africanist values. As Diop and Dia stated, Senegal's position was undoubtedly against apartheid from its very beginning. Diop expresses how this piece of history was incorporated into the Senegalese education system and remembers learning the phrase "apartheid is a crime against humanity" and watching scenes of the inhumanity during the uprising in Soweto at elementary school level. He also confirmed that Senegal provided political leaders with access to the country and exile rights. Dia explains that Senegal's diplomatic strategy since Senghor has been oriented towards culture and education, as Senegal seeks to diversify its economic relations. To enhance its role internationally, Senegal has presented itself as a good example of African democracy and stability, as well as a peace advisor on the continent.

In 1986, Senegal hosted an anti-apartheid concert on Gorée Island to protest against the oppression of South African people. Gorée Island is particularly significant to the ongoing dialogues on the history of human rights violations as it is a highly emotional and historically charged place, being one of the largest slave trade centres in West Africa spanning over centuries. After the concert, Dia states that two white South African anti-apartheid activists, Breyten Breytenbach and Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert came to the decision to organize a necessary meeting to discuss a post-apartheid society, which manifested into the Dakar Conference. The conference took place on Gorée Island over four days, 9-12 July 1987. The Dakar Conference was one of many attempts to debate the future of a free South African nation, and Senegal welcomed a large number of African National Congress (ANC) members led by Thabo Mbeki. They engaged with the white led delegation from the South African Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (IDASA), which attended the conference in even greater numbers (Van der Heyden, 2018, p. 60). Many of the IDASA affiliates were from the intellectual and academic communities, acknowledging the imminent collapse of the apartheid regime. Foreign researchers and politicians were also present. The agenda at the Dakar talks focused on the structures for a new government and economy of a liberated South Africa, as well as the problems and strategies for bringing future national unity (Savage, 2018).



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## A critical eye on the Dakar Conference

Being one of the last countries to gain independence, it is not surprising that South Africa benefitted from international and particularly inter-continental support. However, sustained French influence and authority in Senegal and its former colonies could still be observed within the organization of the conference. Former First Lady of France, Danielle Mitterrand of the Danielle Mitterrand foundation, financed much of the costs for participants, with the rest of the expenses being funded by the German political foundation Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, governments in Scandinavia and Switzerland as well as the American private sector (Van der Heyden, 2018). The Senegalese president Abdou Diouf, 1981-2000, who held the welcoming speech of the Dakar conference, also enjoyed close ties with the French president, François Mitterrand, whom he asked for support. A one-day conference took place in Paris before the meeting in Dakar titled “South Africa-The Prospects of Peace”. Senghor, who fought for Senegal’s independence, had also stated the necessity to work with France as he believed in an African-European collaboration to develop the country (Berkday, 2010). It is however ironic that Senegal hosted an anti-colonial conference being themselves still very much embedded in colonial structures. This highlighted the strategy of European governments that were investing superficially against the apartheid regime, however still maintaining colonial structures to have Africa in a “subaltern position in global politics” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). The location of the dialogue might have been in Africa but the former colonial powers remained very much influential. This leads one to retrospectively ask how independent the conference was? And how much influence did the funders and investors have over the decision making of the conference? Especially regarding more radical political positions against the apartheid system. Its aim might have been to dismantle the apartheid as a system, however no further decolonial intent was proposed. Discussion on how to eradicate racist structures that infiltrated in every level of society should have been added, especially since abolishing the formal colonial and apartheid rule was never going to be enough to overcome the structural remnants of the colonial and racist apartheid regime.

On the other hand the Dakar conference became an important step in the fight against segregation laws and took the liberation fight further, becoming a catalyst for many other international conferences and follow up meetings. For example, the delegation in Dakar met again in Leverkusen, Burkina Faso, and in Lusaka, Zambia (Van der Heyden, 2018). Another direct consequence of the conference was the establishment of the Gorée Institute Center for Democracy, Development and Culture in Africa in 1992, which contributed to working as a diplomatic institution to promote and assure peace and cultural exchanges within Africa. The international support and involvement had a great impact on the press and gave the liberation movement greater international visibility. It has been cited often as a “massive propaganda victory for the ANC” (Savage, 2018). Unfortunately, thirty years later, the Dakar-Conference is mostly absent from South African memory and it has not been cited much in academic publications. Besides the original manuscripts



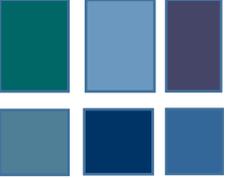
available at the ANC Archive at the Mayibuye Centre in Bellville, Cape Town and at the Stellenbosch University no more literature, specifically on the conference, has been published.

### **Towards the Future**

A twinning between Robben Island and Gorée Island, proposed during the celebration of the thirty-year anniversary in 2017, is one step forward to realize cultural partnerships between the two countries, according to Diop. As Former President Zuma declared, a twinning of these locations would also mean that these two historical sites can share “experiences and best practices and will promote the tourism route between the two countries” (South African Government, 2013). These two Islands are historical symbols for the enslavement and violent racism against African people over centuries. A twinning could foster cultural connections through exchanges and projects to fight for a common interest: the memory and common history of enslaved and oppressed Africans. Then again, the aim of memory work should be to dismantle colonial structures and to let those who struggled tell their experiences.

Diop argues that Senegal is an emerging hub in West Africa and South Africa is a leading player on the continent, and both states could profit from more collaborations. Instead, both countries are mainly engaging within Francophone and Anglophone states, respectively. Dia also stresses that Senegal and South Africa could be working on development issues together as they are confronted by similar challenges such as the high rate of youth unemployment. Besides that, he emphasises the need for youth and student exchanges to build a bridge between southern and western Africa. Reinforcing history and memory work may be a good starting point to foster African identity and further solidarity.

We should remember the Dakar Conference, especially as South Africa is still confronted with racial inequalities persisting through economically segregated populations and historical trauma. Neglecting apartheid history and memory by simplifying the liberation struggle and limiting it to South African history only will have long lasting consequences for the South African population and South Africa’s relationship with Africa. It leads to repeating the same system, forgetting those who suffered and taking for granted those who fought. More efficient work on memory intertwined in a political system needs to be continued otherwise the apartheid architecture cannot be fully dismantled. Indeed globally, more memory work about slavery, colonial oppression and the injustices inflicted towards African people should be done. This will allow countries such as Senegal and South Africa to reclaim their history, tell it from an African perspective and rethink their collaboration with former coloniser states more critically.



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