

## **Symposium “L’Etat des lieux”**

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**January 19, 2012, 2:15pm**

**Douta Seck Cultural Center**

*(As prepared)*

### **Who We Are**

- (I am the Director of the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy)
- PAS is cultural/education, media, information resources (library), RELO, each of these four areas led by a U.S. diplomat.
- Formerly a separate U.S. government agency called the U.S. Information Agency, or “USIS” – usually outside of U.S. Embassies, often in “American Cultural Centers”
- Those who have lived in Dakar have seen our evolution from a location on the Place d’Independence, to the Mbacke Building (which we still have a part of) to an annex building of our Embassy in Plateau where the sign says, “Public Affairs Section.”
- (Some people still call us the American Cultural Center, others refer to library – whatever works!)
- Because we do not have a large central place to do programming like one might see at Institut Francais, Goethe Institutes, or even some British Councils around the world, in Dakar we do stay active on the cultural front.
- We are part of the U.S. State Department, so everything we do must be tied into our Mission’s objectives here: why the U.S. government is in Senegal. That being said, in Senegal, there is a flourishing arts and cultural scene, so everybody recognizes that it is important to work in these fields.

### **Who Do We Reach**

- We bring performing arts and educational programs directly to the various cultural centers and schools all over Senegal, like the Douta Seck or Blaise Senghor Cultural Center in this neighborhood.
- We try and reach beyond the elite, and beyond major cities. Our greatest resource is our staff: the 5 American diplomats + 15 locally-employed staff, highly skilled. We travel regularly outside of Dakar and often to small towns and communities.
- Our target audience is always Senegalese. In other words, if a program will only attract other Americans and ex-patriots, we do not do it.
- In many ways, and especially over the past decade or two, we strive to help marginalized people, who would not otherwise get a chance to participate in such programs, to gain exposure to American culture.
- Nearly all of our programs are free and include a strong educational component.
- Worldwide, and including in Senegal, we target youth and we target women and girls.

## What We Do

- The overall goal of the Public Affairs Section of a U.S. Embassy is to increase mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States and of Senegal. (Simple)
- Increasing mutual understanding through arts and culture is a fantastic way to bring our peoples together – much more long-lasting and often more effective than a foreign policy speech, a press release, or even a press conference – all of which my office does.
- Almost always an element of exchange: sometimes here in Senegal, sometimes in the United States, sometimes a back-and-forth program where institutions send their representatives between the two countries. But always exchange: American artists and performers thrive when they learn from Senegalese counterparts.

## Arts/Culture

- This symposium is particularly about art. Frankly put, and I'll get to the reason for this later, the U.S. *government* is not known for necessarily being a leader on the arts and cultural scene, but we are in fact quite active. For example:
  - We sent a large delegation to the first FESMAN in 1966 with names like xxx (I have a great film of that festival if anybody is interested); and in 2010 we supported FESMAN once again
  - We run a program called the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation which has helped restore museum spaces and collections at IFAN and the Henriette Bathily Women's Museum on Goree. We are applying for two Senegalese institutions this year to receive funding.
  - ICAAN?
  - We brought a top U.S. researcher and museum curator to do a residency at IFAN, to provide insight on issues ranging from conservation to administration and exhibits at the Theodore Monod museum.
  - We look at art and culture in a broad view, including music and sports, too. We are known for our Jazz Ambassadors program: Some of you may have seen the Ari Roland Jazz Quartet here in November. And sports is a deep part of what Americans and Senegalese alike hold as a critical part of their culture. Because of that, we engage on sports exchanges and support basketball camps and the like.

## Why we work the way we do

- As I mentioned, everything we do is supportive of the U.S. government's overall mission in Senegal: encouraging its strong democracy, helping its economic development, supporting its agricultural needs, improving health and education.
- So we often look at how art can educate youth and promote development. Today, we helped inaugurate West Africa's first Hip Hop Akademy: It's located in Pikine at the Leopold Sedar Senghor Cultural Center, and our Ambassador will visit it tomorrow. Hip Hop, like sports, is something that deeply ties Americans and Senegalese together. But that is not the only reason we gave the group a \$25,000 grant to open it up: We believe

that youth expressing themselves through Hip Hop helps strengthen and even organize Senegal's civil society and then in effect its democracy.

- The United States has never had a Ministry of Culture. Our strong attachment to individualism and entrepreneurship means that we prefer to allow private sector initiatives lead in the world of arts.
- Does this mean that Hollywood ends up shaping the world view of America? To some extent, yes. I was at a lovely tribute concert to Cesaria Evora last Friday at the Institut Francais. There was a line-up of different Cape Verdian singers and groups. The final group broke out into a Michael Jackson piece at one point, reminding all of us the influence that American popular culture has even in far away places when one might least expect it.
- There is an incredible amount of film, exhibits and performing art that comes out of the United States and while much of it is excellent, a lot of what reaches other countries is not necessarily what I or the U.S. Embassy would like to show. But beyond our personal tastes, we believe even more in the idea that the art market has to be a free one.
- This does not mean that the U.S. government does not support art at all. We have national institutions like the Kennedy Center which puts on a free concert each and every single evening 365 days a year for hundreds of visitors each of those days. Many of you might know not only the Kennedy Center, but also our Smithsonian Museums that are totally free. The U.S. government supports a National Endowment for the Arts, awarding millions of dollars each year to support artists who may not be able to continue their work on their own. The NEA, however, is not without controversy in the United States, and the awarding of grants is something that we strive to keep as independent from politics as possible.
- In general, Americans generally prefer *not* to have the government dictate what is, or what isn't, art or culture. In almost every small town across America, you will find privately run, outdoor summer artisan fairs, schools with active art and theatre programs, and private art galleries.
- If we were to try and adopt a system of government-sponsored art spaces in the United States, art in America would probably be weaker, not stronger. Competition, and galleries' ability to freely exhibit whatever an artist creates, without going through the government, keeps our arts scene fresh and vibrant.

### **Future plans**

- Increasingly, our cultural programs are moving to cyber-space. We've had a FaceBook page since 2010 which receives hundreds of visits a week.

- Every February we celebrate African-American History Month. This year, we are doing a paper-less essay contest on prominent Senegalese and African-American women -- taking only e-mail submissions and advertising via FaceBook.
- Our Ambassador just unveiled his ART in Embassies collection of 22 pieces from the Low Country in South Carolina. This collection was previewed online, and the images and artist information will stay up on our Embassy website through the duration of the collection's residency in Dakar.
- We will never abandon actual audiences in favor of virtual ones. Internet penetration in Senegal is relatively high but still limited when considering that this country is 12 million residents. So this is just another facet of what we do – and I'd be interested in hearing others' thoughts on this topic.

Thank you again for the opportunity to serve on this distinguished panel.