Senegal

Culture in Crisis: the case of Casamance

by Amanda Fortier

How culture can be used as a positive force during times of war and violence is a question that is often difficult to answer. This report on five projects in Casamance, in the southwestern region of Senegal, examines some of the impacts that cultural initiatives can have in helping to restore peace in West Africa’s longest running civil war. How can culture-based projects encourage communication and foster a sense of commonality amidst violence and tension?

There is a Swahili proverb that says when elephants fight it is the grass that suffers most. In Casamance the grass has been trampled for nearly three decades. Even so, it remains one of the most forgotten wars in the region.

Over the decades, assistance has come from many big agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, USAID, Handicap International, GTZ, Senegalese Red Cross and Amnesty International, to name but a few. Their multi-disciplinary work has been integral to bringing relief to Casamance. At the same time, their commitment has been sporadic. This has raised numerous doubts over the viability and long-term benefits of such aid work. It is difficult to intervene in conflict and move towards reconciliation when the violence is ongoing.

There are some cultural festivals that have sprung up in recent times, including the ZigFest and the Kartong Festival. These initiatives have tried to bring together the various ethnic groups to celebrate the wide diversity of music, fine art, clothing, and ritual celebrations that make up the potpourri of cultures in Casamance. However, these events typically take place in urban areas. They are also carried out in an environment where tensions still linger and violence has become an everyday reality.

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For the purposes of this paper, culture will be defined using definitions from Senegal’s first President, Leopold Senghor, and the Franco-Bulgarian philosopher and cultural theorist, Tzvetan Todorov. Combining the two, culture therefore includes anything added to nature that has “shared common characteristics and mental representation for a particular human group.” Conflict will be defined, using the Local Capacity for Peace Framework’s (LCCP) definition, as: “Negative, destructive (often violent) group interactions.” The concept of peace-building will be defined from Professor Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch’s work as:

A process of social change that enables the transformation of perceptions and relations between and among opposing actors.

According to the LCPP, before peace-building can begin the context of that conflict must be understood with regard to two aspects: which actors are divided and what are the sources of tensions

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between them? The following paragraphs will provide a brief historical background to the conflict in Casamance.

**Historical overview**

Senegal gained independence from France in 1960. President Leopold Senghor became their first President and allegedly promised the Casamancais that they would be able to break free if they remained a part of the country for twenty years. But when Senghor stepped down in 1980 this understanding was not fulfilled. A struggle for independence ensued between the Movement des Forces Democratique de Casamance (MFDC) and the Government of Senegal. Over the years, several factions within the MFDC have splintered off. This has made it difficult to find a consensus among the Movement itself. Today, complacency on the part of these various MFDC groups and the Senegalese government to arrive at a compromise, which would bring peace to Casamance, has resulted in economic, social and cultural suffering for everyone.

Ata Bodian is a consultant for Les Collectifs des Casamancais, a group advocating a non-violent solution to the conflict. He works as a mediator between the MFDC and the national government. He says that the conflict initially sprung from a debate over land-rights and cultural differences:

> The people of Casamance are very attached to their land. There is a misunderstanding between two cultures at work — those who come from the north and those who are natives. In Casamance, the people have a sense of pride that has everything to do with their land. Even between villages tensions over land can arise.

Territorial issues are an important part of the conflict in Casamance. The region is geographically separated from the rest of Senegal by a tiny sliver of land that is ‘The Gambia’. According to many Casamancais, this physical barrier makes them feel disconnected and marginalised by what many consider a Dakar-centric national government.

Casamance has around 1.5 million inhabitants. This is roughly ten percent of the country’s population. There are nearly two-dozen different ethnic groups living side by side, each of which have their own language and, to a certain extent, culture. No one is entirely of one ethnic group. This makes it difficult to attach one specific ‘cultural identity’ to any individual person. The Diola (Jola), Fulani (Pulaar), Mandinke, Serer, Soninke, Bambara and Wolof (to name just a few of the primary ethnic groups in Casamance) all intermingle and may appropriate various aspects of their traditions and cultural heritage, including music, dress, religious ceremony and social outlooks. The majority of Senegalese are Wolof and Muslim. In Casamance, there is a higher percent of Diola. They are primarily Christians or animists. While it is clear that ethnicity and religion do play a role in this conflict, they are by no means the sole or primary determinants.

The conflict has severely hampered both the agricultural and tourism sectors of Casamance. Though small in landmass, Casamance forms a major part of the country’s economic backbone. Its lush and tropical environment was once considered the breadbasket of Senegal. It was an area thriving with crops — from rice, millet, sorghum and groundnuts to bountiful harvests of fruits and vegetables. It was also a popular vacation destination where tourists flocked to enjoy beaches with clear, blue water and the varied, traditional cultures. Since the war broke out, agricultural production has decreased by half and foreign embassies routinely warn against travel to Casamance.

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The result has been economic and social devastation as well as a stifling of cultural dynamism. Hundreds of villages have been abandoned. Hundreds of people have been killed by landmines or rebellious forces. Tens of thousands have been internally displaced or sought refuge in neighbouring countries. While several peace accords have been signed, none have been respected. War and tension continues to simmer beneath the surface. It dissipates temporary—sometimes for many months at a time—only to suddenly re-emerge as a painful reminder that peace in Casamance remains in limbo.

**Culture for Peace-building**

For practitioners on the ground in Casamance the concern is how to bring peace and conflict-resolution to an area that is continually unstable and to an environment in which the main actors are divided. International organisations and NGO's must work from the bottom up, starting with the local populations who are suffering the most. But restoring peace requires more than just financial aid or ensuring food and health provisions. While these basic needs are essential, sustainability also requires implementing more subtle forms of support—ones that restore a sense of humanity, trust and communal goals. This is where deeply rooted values, cultural viewpoints and historical narratives may intersect.

Culture can be used as a tool and when successfully managed, cultural activities can help foster a better understanding and prompt dialogue. While learning to accept differences comes slowly over time, it is also essential in establishing common ground. Ideally, this type of shared platform facilitates opportunities for communication—not only through words, but also through actions, symbols and emotions. In this sense, culture-based activities can become a type of “social peace-building.” They can help unite divided actors and allow culture to become a remedial rather than antagonistic force in times of crisis.

A number of cultural case studies are examined here in more detail: a community radio network, socio-educative and economic projects, exhibitions, role-play activities and photography.

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**World Education Community Radio Network**

In 2004, just before the December peace accord was signed—one of several attempts over the decades to negotiate between the MFDC and Senegalese Government—the USAID-sponsored World Education Community Radio project started in Casamance. Initially, it began with a women’s group and was started as a response to a lack of communication both within and across diverse communities.

Today, more than six years later, the project includes another ten stations. They are all run by local villagers and spread throughout the region—from Diouloulou in the northwest, to Pata along the Gambian border, down to Oussouye close to Guinea-Bissau. The format for most shows ranges from round table discussions to news bulletins and talk shows. Many radio topics relate to peace-building, though not exclusively. There are also programs with a purely entertainment focus, such as music, sports and drama series.

In peace-building projects that are focused on direct forms of communication, like radio, it is essential that certain topics be addressed with great sensitivity. According to Abdou Sarr, the director of the community radio network, based in the capital Ziguinchor, all peace-building topics are treated with “a lot of care, both in content

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and delivery.”68 This means that editorial and programming decisions are based on a preliminary assessment of the needs and interests of its listeners. Then the programs are structured to meet the network’s overarching goal: to develop sustainability and build a peaceful respect for differences, the environment and the promotion of gender equality. In practical terms, this means the shows are broadcast in local languages and provide hands-on advice and open discussions on what are otherwise elusive topics: forgiveness and reconciliation, good governance, human rights, border disputes, accident prevention, gender and health issues, and environmental protection.

As an example, Sarr talks of a station in Dioulolou that provides a platform of communication between two separated groups: refugees who fled to The Gambia and local villagers back in Casamance. In this case, the radio is used to encourage refugees to come home and to allow local villagers to express interest in their reintegration within the community. It becomes a way of offering a safe encounter and a connection that may help the former group successfully return to their community.

Providing opportunities to communicate in the context of conflict can prompt change and development. This belief lies at the core of the work of the WE Community Radio Network. Their assumption is that the Casamance conflict is rooted in a lack of communication between opposing groups and/or the transmission of misinformation. The WE stations are trying to provide a space of contact through their interactive shows, through which the particular needs of various cultural identities can be heard, acknowledged and, ideally, respected.

Sarr says that the rebels can hear of the suffering of the people and their desire for peace. The MFDC themselves are a major presence on the radio. Sarr says the success of the project depends on the will of the locals and of the MFDC to participate in the peace programs. Since the community radios started up, people (including the MFDC) have seen how radio shows can have a positive role.

Sarr uses the example of the King of Oussouye, who is a peace activist and advocate of the radio networks. Sarr says the King officially demanded that authorities repair a community radio station that had problems because every day his people were asking for him to do something about it. Sarr says that while there are cultural and artistic events taking place in cities they do not necessarily implicate everyone involved in the conflict. This means a great proportion of the population affected and the actors implicated are not necessarily involved.

Embracing diversity and facilitating cooperation

In the conflict-resolution process, it is crucial to involve as many actors as possible and to ensure they come from various backgrounds. This is an aspect espoused by the multi-track diplomacy peace-building model, originally developed by Joseph Montville in 1982 and later elaborated on by John McDonald and Louise Diamond.69

The latter authors created a “systems approach to peace,” which involves nine-categories of actors in the peace-building process. These groups range from members of government to business owners and private citizens to religious leaders, all of whom have “their own resources, values and approaches.” The goal is to get these groups working together. When this happens they produce what McDonald and Diamond call “a synergy.” This cooperative approach to conflict resolution

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69 McDonald, John W. (2003)
is something the WE radio stations try to do by encouraging a plurality of voices.

According to Sarr, all radio personnel come from the communities, which he says ensures they have the best possible understanding of the issues and how to broach them on-air. They also include the maximum amount of diversity among the guests. This includes politicians and religious leaders, local and members of international organs, local villagers and members of the MFDC who are spread across the region and may otherwise never be heard.

The American-based conflict prevention and resolution nongovernmental organisation, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), also believes in this cooperative approach, but caution against “settling for the lowest common denominator.” This means there is a risk of accepting an agreement where no one actually benefits. In the long run, taking such an approach may intensify tensions rather than alleviate them. Instead, the SFCG advocates for a higher level of compromise — something “to aspire to and work towards together.” But to arrive at this point, there must first of all be a safe place, common platform, where dialogical interactions are possible and even encouraged.

Building tolerance

The WE community stations try to achieve a neutral space by allowing different sides the opportunity to listen and to be listened to. The radio show that helped refugees in The Gambia to communicate with local Casamancais villagers is an example of how the radio can increase the likelihood that misinformation and stereotypes are overturned or at the very least questioned.

This type of program shows how the media can help build up respect and tolerance. But then tolerance should not simply be about acknowledging the presence of an ‘Other,’ because this only entails an acceptance of presence and still leaves barriers between groups. Rather, tolerance should also include notions of acceptance. This allows people the chance to speak about different needs and interests without fear or disapproval, and then hopefully move forward (and upwards) to that aspired for, higher level of compromise.

A final point worth mentioning about the radio network is the importance for programs to address common, everyday issues that are relevant to everyone. Shared topics like health, education and religion increase the chances of finding commonality among diverse groups. By discussing aspects that people have in common, those people are encouraged to focus on the issues themselves instead of highlighting the differences.

Usoforal: joining hands for peace

“Usoforal” means “let’s join hands” in Diola. It is an NGO founded in 1999 that supports a more active role for women and youth in the peace-building process. According to Renate Staudenmeyer, a sociologist and pedagogical advisor who works with Usoforal in Casamance, there are three generations of youth who have become accustomed to the conflict. There is a serious risk that a type of conflict fatigue has set in, one where violence and unrest has become commonplace and banal. Staudenmeyer has also witnessed a change in attitude towards women. Traditionally, women have been highly revered and considered sacred among the Casamancais. However, the ongoing conflict has seen an exacerbation of violence against women. This is common during times of war.
Since 2003, Usoforal has set up local conflict-resolution groups. The peace committees work in fifteen villages, while the mediation clubs works in six schools. All members are trained in intervention and reconciliation through non-violent communication. In the schools specifically, the youth meet once or twice a month. When conflicts or problems emerge between students or even teachers, members of the club intervene to promote a win-win solution. According to Staudenmeyer, Usoforal follows up on the activities with evaluation forms. This type of direct feedback serves to help monitor and evaluate their mediation work.

Socio-economic cultural projects

Usoforal also puts a lot of focus on training and empowering women in rural zones. They have developed socio-economic projects that allow them to learn entrepreneurial skills while earning an income. The construction of millet mills and the development of a line of mango-infused vinegar are two examples of cultural projects focused on traditional food preparation. They are also built on local realities. The projects consider what resources are already available and how the women can benefit from these.

In the more artistic cultural domain, Usoforal facilitated an exhibition called “Le Pagne Bandial”. It is a selection of traditional skirts made and worn by women from Bandial, a tiny village in the southwest of Senegal. The intention of this project was to promote a part of their cultural identity, as expressed through clothing. While food and clothes may not fit traditional concepts of art they remain integral parts of one’s culture. They are intrinsic parts of social and cultural heritage.

The two projects are also good examples of how Usoforal adopts an elicitive approach to their peace-building initiatives. The elicitive framework, as laid out by the authors Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch, values the participants as resources not simply as recipients. The women in Casamance become the sources and recipients of knowledge. They work together to teach and learn, thereby sharing leadership. This is a valuable way to build connections for mutual benefit.

By bringing mediation training into the schools and providing financial and cultural incentives to women, Usoforal’s work helps strengthen local capacity and build confidence. Also, by relying on local materials and tapping into pre-existing knowledge and skills, they are helping to lay the ground for sustainable peace-building practices.

Encoded messages

There are risks, however, in using artistic products in times of conflict. Shank and Schirch’s report stresses the different impact and effectiveness of using some art forms over others. According to the authors, different mediums use different symbolic references to nonverbally communicate about the real world. Various art forms have various encoded messages. They also have different impacts depending on when and how they are used.

In a culture like Casamance—which is already so varied and intertwined—and in a conflict that has been ongoing for years, the elicitive approach must be attuned to any implicit messages. Usoforal did not exhibit “Le Pagne Bandial” in Casamance, because underlying messages may have been perceived as favouring one group of women over the others. Rather, the exhibition went on display in Canada, Germany and even in Dakar. Perhaps in
the future the exhibition, or similar ones, will be ready for public display in Casamance. But this should only happen at the very latter stages of the peace-building process, at a point when they are moving closer to reconciliation and when emotions and underlying tensions are less heightened.

Women’s dual role

One other final point to make from the experience of the “Le Pagne Bandial” project is the assumption that women always play the role of peace-builders. Certainly in recent decades there has been more attention paid to the role of women as unifiers and peace-builders. The 2002 UNIFEM report argued that involving women in the peace-building process greatly improves the chances that peace agreements can be achieved. Though this is largely true it is not always the case.

As Mary B. Anderson in her “Do no harm strategies” cautions women can be either connectors or deeply committed dividers. There is the possibility that “Le Pagne Bandial” could be perceived as a legitimisation of one group over another. By carrying out a preliminary study to assess the nature and strength of conflict between groups or communities, organisations like Usoforal may decide that a well-intentioned project might actually reinforce pre-existing tensions or feelings of mistrust. This is another crucial reason why a prior needs analysis must be carried out and subsequent monitoring must continue throughout the project’s implementation.

The Karuna Center for Peace-building

Based in Massachusetts, the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding has worked in over twenty countries during the last sixteen years to help bring peace and resolution to areas of violence and conflict. Two initiatives carried out in Casamance over the last couple of years include a workshop on using role play as a peace-building mechanism and a photography project to engage local students in cultural awareness.

Adin Thayer, an associate with the Karuna Center, went to Casamance in July 2010. She worked with World Education to train 40 Casamancais on how to bring peace to their region. These 21 peace committees, similar to those organised by Usoforal, were made up of a diverse group of actors—from religious leaders and politicians to women, youth and educational advisors. Thayer explains that at the core of her work as a peace-builder she helps people “step back from conflict” so they can “consciously analyse and understand it.” She worked with the team to develop effective, culturally based methods to communicate and build understanding.

During their five-day workshop, Thayer helped the groups develop a list of messages they wanted to communicate. These messages included: respect for many different cultures, standing up to actively support marginalised people to find the advantages in differences, and the opportunity to save face when acknowledging any wrong-doing. The men and women then engaged in role-plays and skits. This allowed a high level of interactive participation where their ideas could transform into concrete behaviour. This exercise proved to be an effective way of articulating underlying tensions without the threat of engendering embarrassment.

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or hostility. In the end, the groups were able to critically reflect on what each other had enacted. This was a useful way to help create new knowledge and build understanding between the various participants.

Cultural contexts and non-verbal communication

In Shank and Schirch’s article, they discuss the importance of knowing the cultural context before implementing arts-based strategies. In a high-culture context, like Casamance, communication should be indirect, informal, relational, face-saving and collectivistic. This is in contrast to a low-culture context, which favours direct, formal, rational, explicit and individualistic communication. It is vital that practitioners adopt an approach that is sensitive to the specific cultural context. Otherwise their work may have negative consequences, exacerbating the problem or even offending or embarrassing the people involved.

The role-play technique that Thayer used was a creative approach to address otherwise touchy issues. This type of theatre-based exercise offered the participants the chance to address complex issues in a safe way. In this context, safe means a more comfortable way of projecting a real life feeling, because it is under the guise that it is only an enactment. As such, it cannot be directly attributed to the person performing the role-play, but only raised as a possible perspective or feeling that can exist ‘out there’. Individuals assumed specific roles by first imagining how they would feel and then by reaching a point of empathy whereby they could actually display the particular emotions they might feel if they were this person in this particular situation.

Even without words, non-verbal aspects can also be communicated through facial expressions, body posture or eye movement. This type of role-play exercise can be very effective precisely because it relies on the non-verbal capacities to deliver messages. This is what Shank and Schirch explain as symbolic channels. These aspects all “carry important information about emotions, ideas and feelings that words alone cannot.” When it works successfully role-play, as an example of a cultural activity, can offer new perspectives and create new frames for interpreting conflict.

Capacity Building

During the workshop, Thayer’s role was similar to that of a coach. She trained the participants, then stepped aside allowing them the space to make their own realisations and take responsibility for their own problems. This gives the individuals involved a sense of confidence and control, both of which are essential in the peace-building process. It also ensures that the resources being delivered will be transferred in a way that the local peace committee members and journalists can adapt accordingly.

The Culture and Peace Photography Project

A second type of cultural project with the Karuna Center in Casamance is “The Culture and Peace Photography Project”. It took place between March and May 2008 as a way to “highlight the culture and identity of the region” by encouraging 30 high-school students to use photography as a means of

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76 Ibid. pp. 235.
They were trained in basic photography by American professors Kerry Coppin and Peter Mark and given six digital cameras to document whatever aspect of their life, cultural community or tradition interested them. Photography was the medium of choice because the professors considered it “a democratic method” and one that “permits each to experience and share a personal sense of his or her own culture.” The end result was an exhibition of 50 photos that ranged from images of home life, family and food preparation to school, landscape and architecture.

This project is based on the precept that peace requires a foundation of mutual respect between the Casamancais and the rest of Senegal. As the project’s blog says, “mutual respect can only be based upon respect for self, which implies recognition of one’s own cultural heritage.”

Culture and identity

This idea of respect for self is interesting because one’s ‘self’ is multiple. An individual’s sense of identity is varied and constantly changing. You may at once be a student and sibling, athlete and artist, Diola and Serer, Casamancais and Senegalese. It is important to let students decide what aspects of their own lives they want to document and therefore reflect upon. This type of project allows them, somewhat unconsciously, to think about their identity and what their lives consist of. Even if the students are not fully aware of it, either during or after the project, their lives are documented through multiple facets of one’s self.

Paula Green, the founding director of the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, says that

successful mediators are able to tap into those identities that are common across the conflict divide and use them as stepping-stones to achieve a common ground.78

This photo project is yet another example of how art can help transform conflict by providing people with various opportunities to establish connections (or common ground) with one another.

Concluding remarks

This report has looked at some of the ways cultural projects can help restore peace in Casamance. It has tried to present culture as a concept with a variety of forms and guises. The intent was to explore both the implications of using particular types of culture in peace-building and what factors must be considered in this process.

The WE project shows how radio can play a crucial role in building a platform of communication. This platform targets a wide audience, who might otherwise not be in contact, and includes a diverse array of actors in the production and diffusion process. Radio also allows people to broach issues in their local languages without the potential threats that arise from face-to-face contact. This can make people more at ease and lessen the fear or hostility that may arise when discussing potentially controversial and sensitive topics. One of the aims of this radio network is to engender a ‘productive’ type of dialogue, one that cuts across ethnic, religious and even geographic barriers.

Ultimately, productive dialogical interactions used in conflict resolution and peace-building must achieve a two-fold purpose: facilitate and encourage a plurality of voices that can be heard; and

77 http://cultureandpeace.blogspot.com/2008/05/blog-post_1353.html.

move towards greater levels of compromise that first consider and then accept the different needs and interests of the ‘Other’ while not sacrificing one’s own beliefs and values. This type of transformation is no small task. It takes time, cooperation and willingness, as well as a team of individuals who are highly sensitive to the historical and cultural realities within which they work.

Usosoral’s various projects demonstrate why conducting prior needs analysis is essential and using participants as resources is beneficial. To increase the chances that a project will be successful and sustainable, it is vital to implicate the specific actors in ways that build capacity and can be empowering. But before this is done the cultural project must be considered in terms of four key factors. Is the culture high or low context? Does the project rely on local realities (i.e. does it use readily available materials and draw on pre-existing knowledge)? How might it be perceived by opposing groups (i.e. what are the underlying historical, ethnic, linguistic or religious tensions)? And, finally, what encoded, symbolic messages may lie within this medium and its mode of presentation? Once all these aspects are carefully considered, the project becomes engaged in a more elicitive, do-no-harm approach. This helps build up the confidence of its participants and allow them to become active and responsible for their own actions.

Finally, the cultural work of the Karuna Center has shown how creative approaches can help transform perspectives by giving individuals the opportunity to express themselves in safer, less-direct ways. Establishing a neutral space, through role-play and photography, allows participants to look at the perspectives of others—and sometimes even put a mirror up to themselves—in very subtle ways. This is an interesting and potent way to build empathy and understanding, and hopefully open the mind towards a broader view of how other people are affected by the conflict.

To maximise the effectiveness of any one cultural project a clear and focused goal must be defined. This is essential whether it be a radio station or mediation club, clothing exhibition or role-play. What is the ultimate purpose of the project? Then, secondly, this goal must work in accordance with the specific views and cultural knowledge of its participants, not the practitioners (who are often Westerners) parachuting in and out. The chances of a project succeeding greatly increase when the intentions are transparent and the steps taken towards those intentions are carefully matched to the cultural context, including its social, economic and historical realities.

It is also vital for peace-builders working on the ground to adopt an integrative, cooperative approach. This does not only mean including various actors involved in the conflict but also implicating other NGO’s and government-based organisations working in the same domain.

Hundreds of people are working for the same ultimate goal in Casamance: to see a final resolution to the conflict and a return to peace, as well as agricultural and social prosperity for local populations. Unfortunately, these hundreds of workers are also not always communicating with each other by sharing their thoughts, ideas and experiences. There must be more transparency between organisations. Practitioners must be held accountable for the work they have done and intend to do. This requires being honest about their real needs and interests and planning how to work together to achieve them. But once again, this is no easy feat.

The question of how cultural projects can be monitored and evaluated remains open to debate. This makes it difficult to collaborate with other organisations and individuals. How can work be shared when there is no tangible proof? Is anecdotal evidence enough? How can practitioners know

if their projects are successful, if ‘success’ means a transformation and change in the human element or in the thoughts behaviour and ideas of people?

The strength of culture often lies in its affective capacities and its ability to enable transformation. Culture cannot always be touched, measured or counted. Emotions and opinions are hard to assess. But this does not negate culture’s effectiveness or utility. This report has tried to highlight some valuable lessons that can be learned from these particular case studies. Ideally, we can move towards a better understanding of culture as a positive force that can incite development and promote change in times of crisis.

Bibliography


About the author

Amanda Fortier (born in 1978 in Edmonton, Canada) studied film, anthropology and journalism, focussing on war and reporting conflicts. In Dakar, Senegal, she worked for the Canadian NGO Journalists for Human Rights. Fortier teaches English at the British Council in Dakar and co-hosts a professional development radio series for teachers. She reports regularly for Voice of America on cultural and humanitarian issues.