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Interview with Alioune Dème | Uniting Riverine Cultures through the Regional Water Museum in Senegal

Interview with Alioune Dème
By Carlien Donkor

Abstract
In March 2022, the Ninth World Water Forum, focusing on the theme of "Water Security for Peace and Development," was held in Dakar, Senegal. Responding to the recommendations of the Forum and sanctioned by the Dakar Declaration, "A Blue Deal for Water and Sanitation Security for Peace and Development," Senegal's Ministry of Water and Sanitation, Minister of Culture and Communication, the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar and the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River (OMVS), in partnership with the UNESCO Regional Office for West Africa in Dakar, met twice to consult and reflect. Through this process, they decided to combine their efforts to create a regional water museum in Senegal. This initiative is the result of the recommendations of the World Water Forum, several sessions of Action Group 4E "Increasing Water Efficiency and Sustainable Management through Science, Technology, Innovation and Education," and various activities of UNESCO, one of the Forum's strategic partners.

Policy Recommendations

- A strong and smooth cooperation among national institutions and countries combined with an approach that gives voice to Indigenous groups is the way forward for the whole of humanity.

KEYWORDS

Senegal River
Water museum
Hydro-technology
Hydro-diplomacy
Anthropology of water

WATER ICONS

CLIMATE

BSh: Hot semi-arid climate

< Fig. 1 Water as an economic and a liminal space in the Salum Delta of Senegal (Source: Moussa Wele, Layepro/UNESCO Dakar).

Introduction

INTERVIEWER | Carlien Donkor: Good morning, Dr. Alioune Dème, professor at Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Senegal. Can you tell us about what is tentatively called the West Africa Museum of Water?

INTERVIEWEE | Alioune Dème: It is a pleasure to discuss the regional West Africa Museum of Water. This was an effort by the Secretary of Hydrology and Water Sanitation of the Senegalese Government, undertaken through a regional organization called Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du Fleuve Sénégal (OMVS; Senegal River Basin Authority). This organization included all the countries crossed by the Senegal River: Guinea, Mauritania, Mali and Senegal. These countries share an interest in better management of the water coming from the Senegal River in terms of hydrotechnology and irrigation and in addressing issues related to water policy, hydrology and technology. And then there is UNESCO, which is the technical arm of this endeavor. OMVS and UNESCO started discussions after the World Water Forum (WWF) in Dakar in March 2022, and the idea to have a regional water museum emerged. After many discussions, they both decided that it was time to go beyond talk and try to make it happen, and that is when I was contacted by UNESCO to lead the effort.

This regional water museum is very important and different from other museums because it is not a museum for one country. This is really a museum for five to seven countries, and it may eventually include all the members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which would amount to more than 15 countries. In fact, the museum is a contribution Senegal is making to all of West Africa in terms of water anthropology, policy, technology and diplomacy. It is also a way to educate the public on water preservation, conservation and sanitation.

Institutional Partnerships and Museum Development

Carlien Donkor: Can you name the West African countries that are involved in the West Africa Museum of Water?

Alioune Dème: Currently, it's Senegal with input from Guinea, Mali, Mauritania (through OMVS) and OMVG (Gambia River Basin Authority).

Carlien Donkor: How are you funding this initiative? You mentioned the Senegalese government, UNESCO and possibly ECOWAS. Are they your main donors, or do you have other sources?

Alioune Dème: So far, the main donors are the Senegalese government and UNESCO, which has a small budget for these kinds of programs. However, when we go from just an exhibition to opening the space, we have to find additional donors. We are considering the Senegal River Basin Development Authority (OMVS), cooperation with other countries and funding agencies, so that's where I think the main funding will come from.

Carlien Donkor: To follow up on the 2022 WWF event, I wanted to ask how you found out about the Global Network of Water Museums (WAMU-NET) and how you became a member.

Alioune Dème: When I was chosen to lead the regional water museum project, UNESCO put me in contact with WAMU-NET. During the 10th World Water Forum in Bali, I met the director, Eriberto Eulisse, and that's when he invited

me to their Porto conference and also invited the Regional Museum of Water to become a member of WAMU-NET.

Carlien Donkor: Why did you chose to join WAMU-NET, besides being recommended by UNESCO? Do you see it aligning with some of the objectives of the regional water museum?

Alioune Dème: WAMU-NET is the "place to be" in this field. It is a benchmarking space for all these world museums to come together to share experiences and ideas. There are so many ways that we will benefit by being a member of WAMU-NET, so that's why I fought hard for us to join. For example, the organization can help us understand how to design an online museum, how to use new technology and how, in a broad comparative approach, water is constructed in other cultural settings.

Water Heritage and the Role of Community

Carlien Donkor: And as a new member, what are some of your expectations?

Alioune Dème: Because our museum is in progress, it's always good to share experiences and expertise, discuss and innovate and incorporate new ideas while still ensuring that each water museum is different from the other. Networking events like conferences and potential international collaborations will be helpful. Of course there are things that all water museums share, and by having these kinds of interactions, we go through these shared processes more easily and can have a better institution.

Carlien Donkor: You haven't started operation yet, but there are some heritage elements you identified as very important to protect in the West African region. Can you mention some of these initial submissions that will be showcased in your museum, including heritage sites, systems or practices? Can you also talk about some of the threats to water heritage and the potential challenges the new institution may be facing?

Alioune Dème: You know West Africa has a lot of waterways and around those, you have a lot of fishing communities. These fishermen and shell collectors don't use water only for economic and food-related activities but they also have cultural relationships with the water and with the aquatic fauna. That is why the ethnographic side of this water museum is very important; it exhibits what West Africa will bring to the world (fig. 1).

We have started an inventory of all these "people of water." In French, we call them *peuple de l'eau*. So, there are fishermen and shell collectors with a lot of symbolism and a cultural memory of water. We have made a unique survey of each culture and group, but the challenge now is that for some countries, it will be very difficult to go there. For countries like Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the violence and warfare going on there causes us to think twice before going. That's the biggest threat. But we already have a lot of information and can rely on some native colleagues who are there to help us gather information about those parts of the region. It would have been easier or better for us to be there, but because of the political situation now, we cannot do that.

And of course, the second challenge is mobilizing money. We might rely more on some countries than on others, but that's how we can deal with the economic situation in West Africa.

Carlien Donkor: You mentioned how connected people are to their water in West Africa, espe-

^ Fig. 2 Manatali Dam as source of water sharing among OMVS member states (Source: OMVS, 2014).

cially in non-urbanized areas. You also made some very valid points about the political tensions within some West African states, hindering access to these heritage communities, and you also mentioned the problem of funding.

How can the water heritage that you plan to protect and exhibit in the museum be activated on the ground to address these challenges and others within the different participating countries, for instance, in Senegal?

Alioune Dème: We hope that the water museum will boost tourism and economic development in all participating countries. The idea is to get museum visitors excited enough to say, "Okay, I will go and see this place for myself." Also, such challenges can be solved using diplomacy. Through OMVS and ECOWAS, this museum can bring more peace and solidarity across the region and more cooperation among countries. Topics such as water and cooperation, water and peace, water and inclusion, water and diversity, and hydro-diplomacy will be highlighted. OMVS has a lot to showcase. In areas such as East Africa, water is a cause of conflict. In West Africa, OMVS has used water to strengthen peace and cooperation among member states (fig. 2).

Innovation, Inclusion, and the Museum's Future

Carlien Donkor: Using museums for water diplomacy and advocacy is an inspiring idea. Earlier, we discussed innovations you want to introduce in your museum. You spoke about artificial intelligence (AI) and how you are targeting the younger generation using this tool.

Can you say a bit more about how AI forms a part of the museum? And what are some difficulties you're facing introducing and funding that aspect of the museum, if any? Have you already identified some partners?

Alioune Dème: Actually, we don't have partners yet. But the good thing about being poor is that it makes you more innovative and better at finding solutions. I have colleagues in the computer science department who specialize in AI, so they help me in this endeavor.

When I was thinking about education, my question was, "For whom is this museum?" And I said, "More than 60 per cent of the African population is less than 25 years old. To be a successful museum, you have to target this age group." Then the question became, "How can we communicate with them? By which means?" Well, this is a very savvy generation, and their time is about high-speed communication. They are all very excited about AI, so let's use generative AI to reach and attract them to come so they can learn and spread it elsewhere. I think this tool and strategy is more important than staying with the ways we are used to seeing museums — as walls, paintings, boats and so on.

Carlien Donkor: This integration of advanced technology with traditional knowledge sounds very promising. However, people sometimes talk about how the digital era threatens the continuity of Indigenous knowledge. How do you

plan to keep the use of new technologies from interfering with, let's say, the integrity of whatever water heritage you're protecting?

Alioune Dème: Well, the way I see it, all the data we have is a result of co-construction. I talk with local people, and I'm always being guided by them to get the information that we want. We tell them why it is important, but when we need to spread that information to a broader audience, we use technology. So I don't see a conflict between local culture and technology. Rather I see them as complementary. The information remains local but to squeeze and speed that information, we use technology. In terms of public education, technology allows us to reach a wider audience. It allows Africa to have a voice in this digital age.

Carlien Donkor: Can you elaborate on the impact you're trying to have on Africa and beyond through this water museum?

Alioune Dème: I've been outside of Africa for 20 years and that has shaped my conception of Africa today. Africa is not just the continent. You have the diaspora of Africa, the friends of Africa and the public who want to learn about Africa. So, you have to take all these people into consideration and see what strategies you can use to teach them, and that is how I plan my activities. Everybody wants to learn, and new technology is so important in addressing this broad need for education because it allows us to do a lot of work with less money.

Carlien Donkor: Coming back to the topic of technology and cultural communities, how do you plan to relay this digital interface to people who perhaps don't know how to handle it?

Alioune Dème: I question this notion that (local) people don't know how to handle technology. Look at how smartphones have changed Africa. Africans have not rejected technology but have always embraced it to fit their own needs. What is important for us as curators is to investigate the kinds of technology available and how to use them to fit the contextual needs. And it's not that local people don't want to learn about new technologies; instead, there are situations where they have not been exposed to it. Once they are, if they see that it's important for them, they'll adopt it. That's my philosophy, and that's how I've been doing this so far.

Carlien Donkor: How does the West Africa Museum of Water align with the UN SDGs?

Alioune Dème: As I mentioned earlier, this idea started with the UN at the 2022 World Water Forum. Everything related to the protection of culture, to inclusion, to development, to diversity and to the protection of cultural minorities is connected with the work of the West Africa Museum of Water. So, it is really part of the UN agenda to #leavenoonebehind.

Carlien Donkor: Are there other specific SDGs that your museum will also help achieve besides SDG 4 on education, which you have highlighted a lot?

Alioune Dème: Local development is a priority because we hope that this museum will help the cultural communities in terms of revenue generation. We also deal with diplomacy between and within West African countries.

Carlien Donkor: What would you like to see in the future of your museum after it opens?

Alioune Dème: This is really up to the government, but when we open, I would like people to see it as their own museum and not as a museum of the elite nor as a museum of the gov-

ernment. That's why I said it has to be a product of co-construction: a museum created in collaboration with the local population for the general public because it's the local population who are going to tell the story, and I'm here just to help make the connection. If the local population see themselves in the museum and members of the public enjoy the museum, if the museum helps OMVS and the Senegalese government advance their public education objectives, then, yes, I would be happy and will be able to say "mission accomplished."

Conclusion

Carlien Donkor: Last question. If you could send a message to any leader, policymaker or relevant stakeholder, whom would you choose? And what would you say?

Alioune Dème: If I had the power, my message would be addressed to the UN, but I'm sure that they already know and that's why we have WAMU-NET. Then I would address the African Union and the European Union.

We have to think about water, or water will make us think about it. We see what is happening all around the world. Climate change is destroying a lot, and not just lands. Cultures and memories related to water have been destroyed. So, it's really important to salvage all these ideas and cultures for the sake of humankind. Stories from a particular culture are not just for their people; they hold some cultural values that are relevant to all of us, and it's important to tell these stories.

Carlien Donkor: Thank you for taking time to talk with me.

Alioune Dème: Thank you for giving me that opportunity.

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Useful Links
https://www.omvs.org/

Alioune Dème is Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Cheikh Anta Diop University (Senegal). He earned his PhD from Rice University in Houston, Texas, in 2004. His dissertation is entitled "Archeological Investigations of Settlement and Emerging Complexity in the Middle Senegal Valley." A member of the World Water Academy, Dème has authored many published works including "Ancient Developments in the Middle Senegal Valley and the Inland Niger Delta," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2018); "Pêche et interactions entre la Moyenne Vallée du fleuve Sénégal et le littoral atlantique Sénégalo-Mauritanien durant le dernier millénaire BC," in *La mer dans l'Histoire: l'Antiquité* (2017).

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Carlien Donkor is a PhD candidate at the African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL), interested in traditional ingenuity and historical practices of living on and with water, and their positioning in inclusive development frameworks. Her experience as an architect and project manager, combines research, design and construction for climate-resilient and context-sensitive solutions. She was among the winners of the EU Sparks hackathon in which The Nettuniani proposal was awarded the best solution for climate adaptation. Other interests include community collaborations and multimedia installations.

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