

Invoking Senghor

Universal Healthcare Coverage and the Place of Culture in Senegal

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Abstract

Senegal introduced Couverture Maladie Universelle (CMU), its version of universal health coverage (UHC), in 2013, basing it on the establishment of mutual health insurance. Mutual health organisations (*mutuelles de santé*) manage the pooling of funds, including member enrolment fees and government subsidies; in an effort to extend the reach of UHC, the Senegalese cultural sector created a *mutuelle* of its own. As part of ethnographic fieldwork focused on CMU, I attended a ceremony at the Grand Théâtre National de Dakar on the occasion of this *mutuelle* receiving a large cheque from the government. In this Field Note I examine the centring of Senegalese culture during this event to reflect on the national project of development itself. The event's celebration of the arts sector coupled with its emphasis on mutualism and solidarity invoked Senegal's post-colonial developmentalist visions and aspirations that were motivated by *négritude* and African socialism under its first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Engaging with renewed calls for African values and morality to be put at the centre of development, I argue that ambitious endeavours like CMU present such an attempt and help buoy it, but that, in the context of continued healthcare underfunding, one-off gifts like that presented during the ceremony are unsustainable.

Keywords

Universal health coverage, Community-based health insurance (CBHI), African socialism, Négritude, Patronage.

The National Health Mutuelle of Cultural Actors of Senegal (*Mutuelle nationale de santé des acteurs culturels du Sénégal*, MNSAC) held a ceremony in March 2018 at the Grand Théâtre National de Dakar to celebrate a large donation from the government. Actor Lamine Ndiaye was among the speakers. Introduced as a ‘Senegalese icon’ by the event chair, he was met with loud applause as he made his way to the microphone to speak.¹ One audience member stood and hailed ‘the founder of Jamonoy Tey!’—Ndiaye’s popular theatre troupe from the 1980s—and the actor continued to be interrupted, with song, with dance, throughout his speech. At one point a griot² seized the mic. The griot praised Ndiaye’s family for its generosity and sang to the bravery of his grandfather, a lion tamer and hunter from the Waalo region.³

Opening his short speech, Lamine Ndiaye said:

With this gift/donation [*don*], I think the President of the Republic has spoken to us. And what did he want to say? It’s not simply the fact of receiving a *don*. It’s not the money that counts. But that the artists, themselves, are standing [*debout*], that they participate in the development of the country

. . . We don’t hold out our hands [*nous tendons pas la main*] . . . we are not people who go out into the streets to make demands. But with our dignity, we remain peaceful and without complaint [*sombre et pacifique*]. Peaceful in our intelligence. Because we know that culture is what creates the human . . . Senghor said, and I cite him, ‘Culture is at the beginning and at the end of development’ [*la culture est au début et à la fin de tout développent*].

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I attended the event as part of ethnographic fieldwork (2017–18) focused on Couverture Maladie Universelle (CMU), the Senegalese version of universal health coverage (UHC), which was introduced in 2013 as a ‘*grand projet*’ at the heart of Senegal’s development plan. Of the many ‘pathways’ to UHC (WHO 2010), Senegal has opted for the establishment of mutual health insurance. Mutual health organisations (*mutuelles de santé*) manage the pooling of funds, and while there has been a strong tradition of them in Senegal, with the first founded in the 1980s (Deville et al. 2018, 18), hundreds of new ones have been established since the creation of CMU, so that there now exists at least one in every municipality nationwide. Members enrol at *mutuelles* by paying an annual contribution fee (*cotisation* 7,000 CFA, equivalent to £9) and the government promised to subsidise the *mutuelles* by paying half the fee for regular members and the full cost of enrolment for recipients of the *bourse familiale* social welfare cash payments, also

1 Abdou Rahmane Sarr, a language instructor at the Baobab Centre in Dakar, assisted the translation of parts of Lamine Ndiaye’s speech. Otherwise, all translations from French and Wolof into English are the author’s own.

2 Across West Africa, griots serve as oral historians, genealogists, storytellers, praise singers, poets, and musicians.

3 The Ndiaye surname totem is a lion.

introduced in 2013 (Ibid., 23). This promise of state funds is ambitious, and a significant step up from earlier state efforts to improve financial access to health. The creation of socioprofessional mutuelles, whose members share a profession rather than a geographic area, is an initiative of the *Agence de la Couverture Maladie Universelle*, which oversees the implementation of CMU, in an attempt to extend its reach, or coverage. The cultural sector was the first to create such a mutuelle, the MNSAC.

The centring of Senegalese culture during the ceremony held at the Grand Theatre invites reflection on the project of development itself. The famous quotation that Ndiaye cites in his speech by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president, encapsulated the broader state vision and ambition for a post-colonial Senegal, one that emphasises the primacy of culture in Africa's development. It is a commitment made plain in Senghor's essay 'The Theory and Practice of Senegalese Socialism':

For the objectives of economic growth and social development, a good plan must fix and find means of realisation: financial means and cultural means. I shall not dwell on the financial means. In the twentieth century, when aid to underdeveloped countries is in fashion - for reasons of human solidarity and also for political strategy - it is relatively easy to locate capital. Senegal finds it without great difficulty (1964, 158).

Invoked today, historical ambitions help buoy renewed efforts to establish forms of welfare like CMU in the early twenty-first century.

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Senghor was a founding figure of the *négritude* movement, a political, philosophical, and literary movement that began in the 1930s among francophone intellectuals in Paris. Négritude, literally the quality or fact of being Black, sought to affirm Black values and challenge colonial and racist assumptions about Black inferiority. Under Senghor's rule (1960–80), *négritude* placed a particular emphasis on the importance of culture in Africa's development. The arts came to be central to the newly independent Senegal and in the 'early, heady days of Senghorian patronage' the ministry of culture received up to thirty percent of the national budget (Harney 2004, 12). Numerous cultural institutions were opened—a theatre, a fine arts school, a museum—and, in April 1966, Senegal hosted the First World Festival of Negro Arts.⁴

In addition to the presence of Lamine Ndiaye as a guest speaker that afternoon at the Grand Theatre in Dakar, the importance of the arts was a prominent feature

⁴ The festival is still held in Africa today, now called the World Festival of Black Arts (*Festival Mondial des Arts Noirs*, FESMAN).

throughout the ceremony. Songs by well-known West African musicians—like ‘Tadieu Bone’ by Ismaël Lô, and ‘Kuma’ and ‘Calculer’ by Salif Keita—played as people filled the room. The location itself was highly symbolic. Opened in 2011 by Abdoulaye Wade (president between 2000–12), the Grand Theatre was among large infrastructure projects which helped reinforce Wade’s promise of change, or *sopi* as it was known in Wolof, following a period of austerity in the late twentieth century. Wade referred to the theatre as a ‘majestic jewel’, and it was in many ways his answer to the Daniel Sorano National Theatre that Senghor established (and named after a French actor who had spent his childhood in Senegal) in Dakar in the 1960s (Valente-Quinn 2021, 137).

The very occasion of the cheque-giving ceremony itself seemed at least in part to be prompted by musician Youssou N’Dour’s personal contribution to the mutuelle a few months previously, a contribution which was repeatedly referred to throughout the speeches. N’Dour, now 64, is a globally famous singer (his biggest international hit was the song ‘7 Seconds’, recorded with Swedish singer Neneh Cherry in 1994) and in Senegal he’s a ‘living legend’ (Job 2017, 18). In addition to being a musician, he is a businessman with a media empire who served as minister of culture between 2012 and 2013, after nearly running for the presidency. The government cheque to the MNSAC for 100 million CFA francs (equivalent to £130,000), topped N’Dour’s 75 million CFA francs (£100,000), a gesture which at once demonstrates the sway of the influential N’Dour and points to the salience of such acts of generosity in Senegal.



Figure 1: Presentation of the cheque by the government. Image by the author, 2018.

Alongside the arts, Senghor's formulation of African socialism was equally important to how he saw the place of culture in development. Here, the importance of culture was found in African realities which prioritised the community over the individual. During the ceremony, cultural values of mutuality and solidarity which underpin the ethos of CMU were apparent. The MNSAC slogan, for instance, written on a large banner behind the panel read: '*Notre force: la solidarité, notre devoir: le conseil, notre objectif: votre satisfaction*' (Our strength: solidarity; Our duty: advice; Our goal: your satisfaction). Attendees were encouraged to enrol in the MNSAC—or *bokk*, the Wolof for being a part of, belonging, participating, sharing, or having in common—at desks set up in the hallway following the ceremony.

The MNSAC sought to find its footing in Senghorian and Senegalese values and commitments extending back decades. The turn back towards Senghor resonates with a renewed scholarly interest in him and his ideas. It is a move that has sought to reconsider common critiques of Senghorian thought as essentialist and idealist (Diagne 2023; Elgas 2015; Mbembe 2023; Thiam 2014; Wilder 2015), one that brought into the sphere of development, calls for African values and morality to be put at the centre (Sarr 2016). Ambitions like CMU certainly present such an attempt to imbue the current moment with core tenets of an African-centred vision, one particularly brought to the fore by the case of the cultural actors. I end, however, by reflecting on how one-off cheques like that celebrated on this occasion also expose the challenges of establishing a highly costly healthcare system based on mutual contributions.

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Then-minister of culture Abdou Latif Coulibaly was last to speak at the ceremony. He spoke, first in French, then in Wolof, about the creation of the cultural actors' *mutuelle*, the government cheque payment that was being celebrated that day, as well as that already given by Youssou N'Dour. He drew his speech to a close by saying, 'I am tempted to say that the ball is now in your court' (*je suis tenté de dire que la balle est maintenant dans votre champ*). It was now up to the cultural actors themselves to reach out to their community and seek enrolment.

One of the findings of my research has been that health *mutuelles* often struggle to operate through the large-scale enrolment of the population and government match-funding. Low enrolment rates, together with too-little-too-late government subsidies, have meant that most *mutuelles* are forced to look elsewhere for resources (Wood 2023). Large cheques such as the one presented at the Grand Theatre for the MNSAC help get *mutuelles* off to a good start or tide them over while they wait on government subsidies to materialise. But relying on these *dons*, these gifts, alone is arguably unsustainable. Many *mutuelles* I visited during the

time of my fieldwork had stopped paying for their members' healthcare costs or halted membership from individuals receiving *bourse familiale* payments, whose enrolments should have been fully subsidised by the government. Moreover, *mutualists*, the voluntary workers who run the *mutuelles*, and were often the ones tirelessly mobilising the donations, became increasingly discouraged.

Invoking Senghor placed emphasis on the importance of culture in the establishment of this *mutuelle*. The gathering of cultural actors at the Grand Theatre echoed a long history of the prominence of the arts in Senegal. The encouragement to enrol at the MNSAC aligns with principles of mutuality and solidarity in a way that Senghor would recognise. Leaning too heavily on culture, however, runs a risk. The money counts too.

Authorship statement

I am the sole author of this work.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for the research from which this publication draws was obtained from the National Ethics Committee for Health Research (*Comité National d'Éthique de la Recherche pour la Santé*, CNEERS) in Senegal, the Couverture Maladie Universelle Agency (*Agence de la Couverture Maladie Universelle*) the Senegalese Interior Ministry and the Ethics Committee in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

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About the author

Anna Wood is an anthropologist studying poverty, politics and social policy in Dakar, Senegal, and recently took up a Research Associate position in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Her doctoral thesis focuses on the study of two flagship social protection policies in Senegal, the *bourse familiale* cash transfer and Couverture Maladie Universelle. It examines these policies by drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with recipients living in a small informal settlement in the capital, Dakar, as well as those involved in the implementation of these policies. Her new research arises from the ongoing resettlement/eviction of the site of her doctoral fieldwork. It will continue to follow her interlocutors as they establish new lives in new social homes and expand to examine a broader set of aspirations to make affordable social housing available.

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