

STUDENT STUDIES DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA—THROUGH DIRECT OBSERVATION

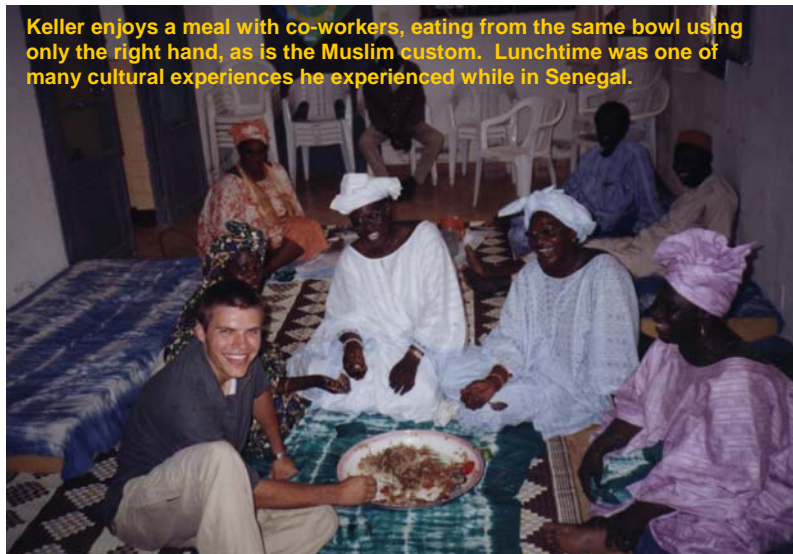
[**Editor’s Note:** Ryan was awarded a spot on the [USA TODAY's All-USA College Academic First Team](#). His final report on his research experience is located [here](#).]

The Republic of Senegal became a multiparty republic when France relinquished colonial control in 1960. During the past forty-plus years the country with a 92 percent Muslim population has steadily maintained a working democracy. BYU undergraduate, Ryan Keller, spent part of his summer studying Senegal’s government and people, seeking answers to why the nation—amidst its unstable neighbors—has managed to defy most of Africa’s political stereotypes.

“I’m here studying if Senegal’s achievement in peace, human rights and democracy is an example for other African and Muslim nations who have not faced such challenges as well,” says Keller, who observes that in such an overwhelmingly Muslim state Islam and democracy do co-exist.

Stability is not something Senegalese have attempted just in the last half century, but during many centuries before Europeans arrived with their own political ideas “Africa has faced so many challenges,” he states. “War, colonization, famine, AIDS. Peace, development and democracy have been elusive.”

From his first-hand observations Keller gives several reasons why Senegal’s relative peace has endured so long. From the moment the colony became a formal nation it was blessed with wise and benevolent leaders. The first president—a Christian—placed Muslims and other representatives alongside him in governing positions. Following the 2000 election the long-standing political party quietly and supportively stepped aside for the victorious new party. As a result, the country’s citizens have taken a lesson from their leaders.



Keller enjoys a meal with co-workers, eating from the same bowl using only the right hand, as is the Muslim custom. Lunchtime was one of many cultural experiences he experienced while in Senegal.

Another element of a successful democracy Keller notes is freedom of speech and assembly in Senegal. The people and the press are able to speak out for or against their

leaders and the way they practice politics. In a country where the government must combat persistent poverty, diminish its debt and establish a solid infrastructure, there is much room for criticism.

But the criticism is balanced by another feature of a more perfect union—education. A politically astute population surprised and pleased Keller as he spoke in French to a large group of school children one day. “A 15-year-old girl asked me if, with the war in Iraq, I thought that the UN was still a viable tool for international diplomacy,” he says. “I was really impressed.”

The philosophy student from Salt Lake City says he learned about the ORCA grant opportunity from his professors. After not getting enough funding to do AIDS prevention research in Mozambique last summer, he received an ORCA grant this year. “Thanks to ORCA I’m here right now,” Keller wrote by email from Senegal this summer. Without the grant he says the trip wouldn’t have been possible.

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He credits two mentors with aiding him on the project—political science professor, Donna Lee Bowen and French professor, Chantal Thompson. Both instructors helped him acquire the necessary skills to develop his proposal and make the most of his time in Africa.

The grant and other funding also makes it possible for Keller and his classmates to compete with students at other universities that devote large sums of money to student research. He points out that at BYU he is able to do the same research that students at ivy league schools are doing

The experience of living in Senegal has changed his approach to doing research. “I was set on learning only about the political, economic, human rights aspects of Senegal. I’ve learned so much about Islam, the culture, even the language.” He recommends that other students seeking to do research should set specific goals, but remain open about learning other things.

“What a life-changing experience,” Keller says about his own research opportunity. “I have learned things that you can only get by walking in others’ footsteps. To be at the mosque and watch a Marabout Muslim leader pray, or to talk with the homeless of Dakar. Actually standing in the jail at La Goree where millions of [Africans] were deported to the Americas as slaves. The horror, the shame you just can’t read about in a book to get the same comprehension.”

“That is real life, nothing can replace that.”

