Urban Arts and the Youth of Morocco

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Urban Arts and the Youth of Morocco

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I. The Pitch.

Three thousand six hundred miles away from Washington D.C., the United States Embassy is using U.S. taxpayer dollars to fund urban arts programs for youths in Morocco. In a country where arts are not promoted and youth unemployment is high, there are not many options for self-expression and youths to learn leadership skills. Local associations, funded by the U.S. Embassy, are attempting to provide youths with the space and tools needed to facilitate growth and development in life skills and the arts. These urban arts programs include workshops, exhibitions, and competitions in street art, music, painting, dancing, skateboarding, and BMX biking. Leadership workshops are also conducted throughout the country to encourage youths in kick starting their careers. Through these programs, the U.S. Embassy hopes to promote a positive image of America to Moroccans while providing a service to the youths of this developing nation.

II. Development & Evolution of the Story Idea.

I am interested in the forms of expression of youths in different countries and am particularly partial to film and art. As a student of media, I usually pursue film related topics and thus decided to go with the art side of my interest. Classical art in Morocco is covered fairly well in terms of research and discussion and thus I did not want to pursue a topic that had already been written about extensively. Therefore, I came to the decision to research and develop a story on street art in Morocco. This began with graffiti and expanded out to other forms of arts such as stencil, painting, and even music throughout Morocco as they are all intertwined tightly.

Urban Art became my final area of desired research. As I conducted interviews with street artists and youths, I accidentally happened across the knowledge that urban arts were being used as a tool to engage youths and promote youth leadership in Morocco, which was all happening at the hands of the American embassy. I was very pleased and decided to change my story into an article about these programs, covering aspects such as the pros and cons and reasons for these events/workshops. Thus my final story idea was born. I decided to produce a written piece as this is the form of expression I have most experience with.

III. Sources, Interviews, Scenes.

I was able to find most of my sources and interviewees through communication and connectivity. I began with Cristina Almeida, a PhD student of Hip Hop culture and expanded by contact list through her networking. Thus, I was able to meet many of the urban artists I interviewed to get background information on Morocco’s outlook on this form of expression. I was able to meet with freelance artists such as Mouad Aboulhana and Rabie, who are well-known graffiti artists in Morocco. I was also able to interview
the U.S. Embassy cultural ambassador Sam Werberg and founder of a youth cultural association in south Morocco, Rachid Serhane. My elements for the story are a collection of facts about the embassy programs and background about arts taken from experienced urban artists. Any scenes in my article are instances when I have attended events or been a part of an art exhibition during my research.

The main issue while reporting for this story was the actual interviewing portion. Moroccans have their own sense of time and while they are willing to help, are not necessarily punctual. I had to keep on top of reminding them about interviews and meetings which I probably would not have had to do while reporting in the U.S. Also, the language barrier was definitely a small problem. Both of these problems were easily dealt with however with patience and perseverance.

One last aspect that is a slight hindrance is the matter of quoting cultural ambassador Sam Werberg. The quotes must be submitted to the Department of State if they have the potential to be published in a U.S. publication and approved by the department. Should these quotes not be approved, they cannot be used in the article.

IV. Journalism Ethics.

I did not particularly encounter any ethical issues in my research for this story. The most I encountered were the difference of opinions and relationships among the urban artists I interviewed and their choices for on the record vs. off the record when recording. Also, making sure to quote everyone for my article correctly despite the broken English and translations was definitely an ethical concern. I did not want to misquote anyone.

V. Potential Media Outlet & Audience.

My story is a general knowledge piece about what the U.S. is doing overseas with U.S. taxpayer dollars. Thus the audience of my article is anyone who contributes to taxes and wants to know where their money is going. Also, educators and art activists would be a desirable audience for this article. I believe people want to know that they are contributing to their country’s extracurricular activities and/or helping others around the world.

As a reader of news and not an active journalist, I find it difficult to decide where this story would be best published. I think this story could be pitched to various travel publications, the arts and culture sections of The Boston Globe or NYTtimes, or the Washington Post. The article is about what American money is doing overseas and I believe there would be a general interest to know about this.
VI. The Story.

Three thousand six hundred miles away from Washington D.C., the United States government is reaching its arms out to the people of Morocco. Specifically, the youth population. With urban arts and youth leadership programs, the U.S. Embassy is taking an active part in Moroccan life through the aid of American taxpayer dollars.

Sam Werberg, cultural ambassador at the U.S. Embassy in Rabat, and his team have organized a total of five programs in the past year and a half. These events consist of various urban art forms such as skateboarding, BMX biking, street art (graffiti, stencil, and painting), and street music.

“There’s very, very few people in this country, very few that can make any kind of decent living in the field of arts, whether it’s film or graffiti or music,” Werberg said. “Hardly anybody’s making a living. When you talk to people about that industry they still have a very much old school, almost Soviet mentality that the government should support the arts and that’s it.”

America has a well-established infrastructure of arts and promotes this form of self-expression as a way for youths to express themselves. Often, arts are used as a tool to encourage creativity and keep youths out of trouble. Morocco lacks an established outlet such as this. The embassy uses this American outlook on arts to inspire a growth in the practice of arts among the younger generation.

The latest urban arts program called “Skate for All” was a week-long skateboarding tour through six Moroccan cities. The youths of Kenitra, Tiflet, Khemissat, Meknes, Fez, and Sale were all privy to workshop sessions and demonstrations of skateboarding technique.

As word spread, each consecutive city provided a few more participants every time. By the finale day in Rabat’s sister city, Sale, over one hundred youths participated in the
program. The response for these arts programs has been just as successful for the embassy over the past year. Attendance has been in the hundreds or even thousands.

The events are conducted in conjunction with local associations around Morocco. Each city that hosts an event is home to a non-profit organization. These associations provide housing and activities for youths between the ages of ten and twenty-five.

Often, the ideas for events come from the associations and are proposed to the embassy for support. As a result, the collaboration of Moroccans and Americans promotes friendship between the two nationalities. The associations are not only an asset to the embassy’s program efforts but also a result of them. Leadership programs are conducted almost as regularly as urban arts programs.

“The majority of Moroccan youth are spending most of their time talking to their friends and bathing,” Werberg said, quoting a study. “They’re not involved in civil society associations, they’re not taking classes for free, they’re not making products, they’re not going to trainings, they’re not even playing sports.”

An article titled ‘Generation Jobless’ by The Economist states: “In North Africa, universities focus on preparing their students to fill civil-service jobs even as companies complain about the shortage of technical skills. The unemployment rate in Morocco is five times as high for graduates as it is for people with only a primary education.”

Leadership workshops are done to push Moroccan youths in a productive direction. Rather than hand them jobs or create a mindless entry into the working world, these programs push Moroccan youths to develop life skills and focus on being a leader.

Two results of these workshops have surfaced in a town called Tiznit, two hours south of the touristy city Agadir, on the eastern Moroccan coast. Rachid Serhane, 24, completed the program in 2010, during his final year studying Tourism Marketing at the Institute of Technology and Hospitality.
“During and after this training I discovered the key [to being] an active citizen to further my techniques that will help me in my professional and personal career after this program,” Sehrane said. “I’ve had to adopt new techniques that allow me to develop my strategy and creative ideas for my company.”

Inspired by this program and the situation of youths in his home city of Tiznit, Sehrane founded the Urban Culture Association, a space for music, graffiti, and painting. He often collaborates with other NGOs in the area and organizes the Festival of Urban Cultural every few months for art exhibitions.

Sehrane’s goals are: “Promoting and supporting the values of moral and civic education, creating part time job opportunities, and preparing and training youth to organize sports and cultural events for youth.” Sehrane believes that youths are the key to forward movement in Morocco.

Another graduate of the program founded a seventeen-city caravan conducting basketball workshops at high schools throughout Morocco. With a successful response, he has now established a summer camp that trains youths in the sport and encourages leagues to be formed for sportsmanship and friendly competition.

On a regular basis, the embassy gets requests for collaboration on urban arts projects. American street artists coming to Morocco to participate in festivals want to alert an international audience of their work. The embassy collaborates in order to get its name out in the world of urban arts. Supporting festivals also allows the embassy to take an active part in Moroccan urban culture.

Public education in Morocco is free until university level. However, many Moroccan youths do not take advantage of this education or cannot get a highly-desired job with the government. In essence, they are not involved in many activities and that is just accepted of the general youth population.
Those who are involved in personal endeavors of urban art are not recognized or barely noticed. The goal of the embassy is to involve Moroccan youths in these activities that are not so widely spread throughout the nation yet. Their intent is to encourage these youths to be individual and be productive with their time, to show them that they are appreciated.

“It’s not about, to be perfectly frank, the content,” Werberg said. “It’s about what it allows us to do. It allows us to go to the disenfranchised youth of Morocco and say: ‘Hey, we care about you.’”

While Sam Werberg deeply cares about the youth of Morocco, the intentions of the embassy on the whole are not entirely selfless. Hundreds of thousands of dollars go into the budget that funds embassy activities overseas, all of this from the pockets of American taxpayers. The youths of Morocco are an important part of extending American diplomacy to their growing nation.

“Every program can’t be wasted,” Werberg stated. “We don’t do this because we want the Moroccans to like us more. The U.S. government doesn’t have a heart and mind. The U.S. government has interests in Morocco.”

Research contribution: Houda Baayou
VII. Photos.

A. Story Photos.

1) Caption: U.S Embassy cultural ambassador, Sam Werberg, poses with youths and association leaders during the Skate for All program. **photo courtesy of U.S. Embassy**
Caption: Association youth leaders 'show the ropes' to beginner skateboarders at the Skate for All program. photo courtesy of U.S. Embassy
Caption: U.S. Embassy, association, and youth participant personnel pose together at the end of the Skate for All program at Dar Chebab in Sale. **photo courtesy of U.S. Embassy**

B. Partner Photos

**Awaiting images from Moroccan partner’s camera. She has yet to provide me with them as she is currently on an excursion with her school and neglected to get the pictures to me earlier.**

VIII. Morocco News.

A. Informative Articles.

1) [http://www.economist.com/news/international/21576657-around-world-almost-300m-15-24-year-olds-are-not-working-what-has-caused](http://www.economist.com/news/international/21576657-around-world-almost-300m-15-24-year-olds-are-not-working-what-has-caused) Youth unemployment in Morocco is a constant and ever-present topic in Moroccan daily life. While this article gives a world overview, the statistics involving Morocco are informative and up to date. I was able to gauge how Morocco unemployment compares to the rest of the world.

2) [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2319538/Morocco-grip-DOG-MEAT-scandal-police-carcasses-pets-destined-restaurants.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2319538/Morocco-grip-DOG-MEAT-scandal-police-carcasses-pets-destined-restaurants.html) I found this follow up article to a an article I had posted as News of the Day and was intrigued by the ongoing meat battle that seems to have developed in Morocco. Kosher vs non-kosher meats is a very interesting topic to me in any country, especially a Muslim nation, and I was interested to learn about the extent of the issue.

3) [http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-04-30/acwa-power-says-it-was-awarded-solar-thermal-project-in-morocco.html](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-04-30/acwa-power-says-it-was-awarded-solar-thermal-project-in-morocco.html) This article was very informative about the solar projects going on in Morocco. I was able to learn about the future of solar in this developing nation and how it will affect energy on this side of the world.

B. Sources of Information.

1) Twitter feeds – Aida Alami
2) L’Economiste
3) Bloomberg

Twitter feeds are definitely a main source of news about Morocco. Journalists and educators feed up-to-the-moment information about the nation into Twitter, which is a great asset to any researcher. L’Economiste covers a wide variety of Morocco topics and Bloomberg covers major financial and industrial aspects of Morocco.

IX. Conclusion.

I am not a journalist by study and have only taken a few entry-level classes because of interest in the subject. Thus, I believe I could have organized my research
better from the beginning and decided on a much more definitive topic within my interests in art and society that would have had more information to pursue.

I believe this story could have a follow up depending on whether or not the programs discussed in the article are continued in the future. The article itself needs further interviews and more in depth research on the effect the programs are really having on Moroccan youths. With this extra information, there would be more real life accounts of the embassy reach its goals.

I learned a lot about time organization, the correct level of aggressiveness, awareness of surroundings, and approachability. I believe my communication and interaction skills have grown a great deal while doing this story and I will be able to hone these skills in the future for better and more effective use.