

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

OUMAR DIOGO DIALLO

Interviewed by: Daniel F. Whitman

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INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Diogo Diallo.]

Q: It is now August 1st, we're in Guinea, in a section of the city called Miniere and this is Dan Whitman interviewing Oumar Diogo Diallo, and for the transcriber; O-D-D. We will explain that, your friends and colleagues affectionately call you ODD. But I think I'll call you Oumar. We're here to talk about your development as a professional and also the things that you have seen in the few decades that you have been part of the U.S. embassy team. We are here in August of 2010 on the eve, we hope, of an election which will dramatically change the country into a democracy, so it's a very valuable moment to reflect back and to see how we got to this point. Let's start by talking about you. Can you tell me about your social, educational, professional background. Can you tell me where you were born into what type of family?

DIOGO DIALLO: I was born in 1951 in a village called Porédaka, about 55 km from Mamou. And Mamou is 267 km east of Conakry; it was in the center of the country, if you like.

In my family, my father had three wives, but he was not polygamist. He got married to a first woman, and she couldn't stay for personal reasons; then he got married to a second one, who died a few years later, and finally, he got married to my mother. He was not a rich man, but he was educated because as an Imam, his business was teaching the Koran. He was an imam in my village, and he had some kind of business. He had friends, and with them, he copied the Koran, and every time they finished making a copy, they would sell it by paper in Mamou. That was his only business; copying the Koran. Teaching the Koran and getting it translated to people; that was his business.

Q: Can you explain the role of an imam in a community? In the Christian community, the priest is a leader in various ways and a community activist. How does this differ or how is this the same as the role of the Imam?

DIOGO DIALLO: So in those days, imams were in charge of conducting religious affairs only. We used to have our, if you like, political leaders who were selected based on their level of education, obviously, but they exercised their duties separately. The imam was here to oversee not only his community, but his political leaders; he happened to be one of those people who, if you like, gave the crown to the last local chief of my village. For that reason, he had some power but no official power to come to the public. He had to come and tell him when an idea was not good, and that he thought it should be done this way instead of that way.

Q: Political advisor to the traditional leader of the community? So, he had no legal authority over them, but the leader turned to the imam for guidance? And the size of the community?

DIOGO DIALLO: Porédaka is currently a *sous-préfecture*, and the latest census says we are around 15,000 inhabitants.

Q: At the time of your birth, in 1951, what's your guess as to the size of the community?

DIOGO DIALLO: It would be over a third of that, 5,000 at most.

Q: So, your father was a key person in that community of 5,000. Were there other Imams?

DIOGO DIALLO: I was told that there were three people who played a similar role in our *canton*. Remember, we were a French colony. The area was called a *canton*. It's like a county. There were three people, and we had a very educated *chef de canton*. The man was a former soldier who went to France, and when he got back, he managed to have all educated people in a sort of body together with citizens from all the cantons to play the role of advisors, and he was such a clever man, he managed to have first French school.

That was in 1932, and he managed to encourage people to send their children to school. You may have heard of the first general secretary of OAU, called Diallo Telli, who is a cousin of mine, and he was the first ambassador to the U.S. and the UN; he was one of the first who went to that school in 1932. The first Guinean ambassador to the U.S. and to the UN. He was the first general secretary of OAU, the Organization of African Unity. He held office for eight years, from '64-'72, and unfortunately, he came back to Guinea in 72 and was killed in 1977. That's another story.

Q: So this is a family of major local importance?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, absolutely. The achievement of that *chef de canton* was great. He got three things: first, we had a school because our people used to go to Timbo, another *sous-préfecture*, which used to be the capital of the Fulani Kingdom called Fouta Djallon. They had the school in 1908, and he himself went to that school as a pupil, but when he got back he said there was too much working, and we should have our own school. That's how the *chef de canton* managed to get a French school in 1932. The first *chef de canton* encouraged people; he managed to get our primary school in that area, and the first school was for people who attended the school, among the group as named Diallo Telli, who was so successful that he played a very important role in the French...

Q: Tell us a little about the Fouta Djallon and its importance in the history of the last 1,000 years?

DIOGO DIALLO: The Fouta Djallon. I'm not a historian, but all I know it was a kingdom ruled by two authorities. It consisted of nine provinces. It was like a state ruled by Islamic principles. It consisted of-

Q: What century approximately?

DIOGO DIALLO: I would say 16th, early 17th century, the state was created. It was ruled by an Imam, called Almami. That was a religious title, and he was based in Timbo, known as the capital of the Fouta Djallon.

Q: The Fouta Djallon is also a geographical expression?

DIOGO DIALLO: It's an area which more or less is located in the Fouta, which is currently what they call Middle Guinea.

Q: Mountainous?

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly, it is. And it consisted of nine provinces. They fought together against non-Muslim people. Local communities consist of Djallon kids mainly, and when they were successful in 1625, they set up a formal state, and they agreed on basic principles on how to rule it. So there were nine great scholars called "Alfa" as a title, and they convened to set up a centralized state with some unwritten principles that can be summarized as follows.

The city of Timbo had a scholar called Karamoko Alfa de Timbo. Karamoko means a teacher because he has a certain level of knowledge of the Koran and Islamic law. Because he had achieved a certain level of knowledge of the Koran and Islamic principles, then you get title Alfa. It is not a person or a family name; it is a title.

There were nine of them in different provinces. For example you had Timbo as a province, you had Kébaly as a province, you had Fugumba as a province, etc. These knowledgeable people, when they defeated all the resistance, local chiefs and so on, decided to set up a state which would have a central command put under the authority of the elderly. In this part of the world, we give a lot of power to knowledgeable people and to the elders. There were several equally qualified to be the first leader of the first state, but because of the age difference, the Alfa who came from Timbo was selected by his peers to be the first Imam of the newly established state. It was Karamohko Alfa de Timbo, but his name was Ibrahima Musa Sambegu. That man got elected to be the first Almami of the Democratic Fouta because it is based on the principle of Islam and the Koran. Then the ruler said “You are to be elected for two years, and then another person will replace you.” So he became the first Imam of the state, but his elder brother Timbo was a set up by the imam.

There is another city called Fugumba, which is a separate province about 40 to 60 km away. The elder brother of the founder of Timbo settled in Fugumba, so to give him some kind of authority they said, “We should go to Timbo, and whoever is elected should go to the Imam in Fugumba to have his crown.” That was the principle; that is just acknowledging his seniority and giving some kind of respect. That was formalized whenever an Almami was elected for two years in office, he would go to Fugumba to be enthroned.

Q: So even the spiritual leaders had a hierarchy, and so the leadership of this state of nine provinces was a spiritual leadership in the 17th Century. I am not trying to make it seem like a Western country, I know it is not, but it is a little bit like the hierarchy in the church.

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly, the imam will go there and get the blessing of all the peers from all the provinces, get his turban, as it's called, you got it and stayed for a period. And the hut where he would go on his retreat for nine days is still there. I was there 24 May last year. What is amazing is that since it was built in the early 1700's, they have not allowed a female to spend a night in that hut. The thatch that is used to cover it is renewed every nine or ten years.

Q: So it goes way back before your own history and the history we are going to talk about of the recent Guinea. Prior to the 17th century, I take it that the ethnic people, the Fulani or the Peul, who created this state, came from somewhere else? Does anybody know their origin?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, historians talk about two major places, Senegal and Mali. So people came from there and down to Guinea to spread Islam. Technically, that is it because if you go through history there are ethnic groups everywhere. Basically, there is almost limitless Fulani, but in that particular case, those Fulani came down to Guinea definitely came from Senegal.

Q: Prior to that, we are only guessing, but Islam came from the Arabian Peninsula. It came from somewhere, we do not know exactly how, I guess.

DIOGO DIALLO: I think it spread west to the Maghreb because it could not be from the horn of Africa because of the Red Sea and so on. People followed that route westward to Morocco, down to Mauritania, Mali and Senegal and so on.

Q: This could be a the path, not only of the religion, but it could be the ethnographic path. I suppose there is some demographic background that mixes the people who came across the Maghreb and came down to Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, and Guinea. There may be some DNA...?

DIOGO DIALLO: It is possible. They spread well beyond Nigeria, and could have gone to Northern Cameroon.

Q: In the 17th Century, who came prior to them, we do not know, but it is too interesting not to speculate. The people came before that but the state was set up in 1625. This means that there was a period of conquest before that. So, there were some decades or maybe centuries where the people came with their herds. There was a question of conquest of those people who arrived over the local group. I say this because now, in a period of elections, we know there is an ethnic issue.

Now we come to where you started, which was your own birth in 1951. You are a very highly educated person; what contributed to your education?

DIOGO DIALLO: To be honest, it is because my father died when I was four. He did not want me to go to a French school; he was somehow reluctant to send his children there. You may understand, given his background. But he died when I was four. I have another sister who grew up in Fugumba, because my own mother came from Fugumba, and she grew up in the family of our cousin, who was the local chief of that area, the *chef de canton*. He had some kind of openness which our older brothers and sister did not have. What happened when my father passed away, he encouraged one of my brothers-in-law to send me to school. My father wanted me, his last son, to be an Imam, to be his replacement, to be prepared to take over. Because the older you are, the more responsibility you will be given to you. But the youngest is supposed to be the last person in charge of the whole family. My sister said, "No, father might be right, because we have many brothers and we are sisters, let's try something different." He encouraged one of my brothers-in-law, who happens to be the granddad of this man's wife. We are related to be honest.

Q: Amadou Cellou Diallo! [Candidate for president.]

DIOGO DIALLO: His wife is the daughter of a medical doctor who died in 1979 in Kindia. He was buried in the hospital. Doctor Al-Oumar Diallo.

Q: We are talking about a candidate for the presidency this week who got, by far, the largest percentage of the first round.

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly. His wife called Halimatou Diallo, is the daughter of a well-known medical doctor, called Doctor Afoman Diallo. The regional hospital in Kindia bears his name. He died in July 1979 and was buried in a compound of the hospital in recognition of the many efforts he made to save people's lives in Kindia, which is a Susu land. We are all from Porédaka, but the people in Kindia said, "No, we cannot return his body to his village. He must be buried here." The tomb is in there in front of his residence in the compound of the regional hospital of Kindia. That man's father was my brother-in-law; he was the man who sent me to school. So because my father did not want me to go to school, he died two years before I was sent to school by that man called Yunossa Diallo. He took me to school.

Q: Where?

DIOGO DIALLO: In my village Porédaka. I was not that clever. Instead of six years, which was the normal time, I spent five years and got my certificate to go to seventh grade. Something happened. It used to be a three classroom school, but villages managed to invest their own money and make it a six classroom school. They posted a teacher, but he did not have any students. I was in third grade and my older brothers were in fourth and fifth grade. The new director decided to set a group from third grade. Some colleagues and myself were taken to fourth grade and the oldest schoolboys were taken back, so we made a mixed group. That is why I gained a year rather than spending six years before taking the exam. Then I came to Mamou for my secondary education.

Q: This was your fifth year of school?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, primary school for five years instead of six in Porédaka.

Q: So you accelerated? You did six years in five because you had older colleagues who could assist you and bring you up more quickly.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes.

Q: In fact, did the older students serve a pedagogical role?

DIOGO DIALLO: No, the thing is my brother-in-law, because we have the tradition of a French education, his children, my nephews, they helped me. That is why I got the opportunity to do better than many other people who came from other villages. Because of that particular environment and because I was lucky, I did better than many others.

Q: Okay, so secondary school in Mamou. You would have been thirteen, fourteen?

DIOGO DIALLO: That was in 1963. I was twelve. Then I stayed there until 1970 to get a baccalaureate [secondary school diploma.] From Mamou, I was transferred to Kankan, now the University of Kankan, where I studied linguistics and mathematics. I did not want to go there at all; I wanted to do economics. My burning desire was to come to the University of Conakry and to study economics. I could not get the opportunity to do so, so I studied linguistics. For the first year, to be honest, I did not work hard at all. I scored the lowest mark of my whole education history.

Q: But you stayed?

DIOGO DIALLO: I could not.

Q: Now, let us put a context to Kankan, I believe it is the second university city in Guinea. It would be like in France going to Lyon or Bordeaux instead of Paris. In fact, Kankan is further away from Mamou than Conakry.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, there were about 361 km by road, not by railway. We used to have a railway, but now it is in our history.

Q: But here you are in Kankan and everything turned out very, very well, even though at the time, it made no sense?

DIOGO DIALLO: I did not like it for the first year, but in the end of the year I was told “You know what? God wants you to be there. Please accept it, and work harder than you used to.”

Q: Who said that to you?

DIOGO DIALLO: My friends, my relatives, and so on.

Q: Meaning what? That even though your dream was to study economics, that was not possible. They were saying education is so important, make the best of it?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, part of our pride is not to get a degree with low marks. They said “You have wasted this first year, and you are wrong. Nobody knows what is going to happen.”

Q: So there was no social pressure for mediocrity -- on the contrary?

DIOGO DIALLO: From my friends’ and my family’s side, it is so. Remember we had this particular background. I am related to Diallo Telly, and he was such a successful person in his career. So it is a tradition for people in my village to be good. Whatever

they do, wherever they are, they have to demonstrate that they are really good at what they are doing.

Q: Your intellectually elite family background put pressure on you to do better than you were inclined to do?

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly. They said, “Oumar, your luck is in God’s hand. Do well so that everybody will respect you.” That is why I did better the second year. That was part of my fate; I had to accept it. To be honest, things went well from the second year.

Q: Was this a three year licence?

DIOGO DIALLO: It was four years, and then you have to produce a dissertation, which I did in 1975. I defended the dissertation in 1976.

Q: A dissertation for a licence?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. The *mémoire* for the *fin d’études supérieures*. It is a five year program. We have a four year course, and then we had what you call an *examen d’état*. Then we will choose different topics to make the *maîtrise*. We ended up with the *maîtrise*.

Q: So the whole process gave you the equivalent of a licence, and then you went straight to a maîtrise?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, the *mémoire, maîtrise, fin d’études supérieures*.

Q: And that mémoire, was it linguistics?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, I studied the structure of a dialect of Malinke called Kouranko. It is the language spoken by the community in the diamond area called Banankoro. I went to Banankoro to collect my corpus [data.] Banankoro is the area where they have that big diamond deposit and where they used to have Aredor, a gem company.

Q: Is this near the Sierra Leone border?

DIOGO DIALLO: No, it is in upper Guinea. It is between the forest land and the dry land of Guinea.

Q: The middle of the country? Now, why Malinke? It was something foreign to you, I think?

DIOGO DIALLO: It is foreign, but if you have prepared, you can do any kind of description. All you need to know is to have the corpus and transcribe it probably. In those years, the ministry of higher education was responsible for selecting a number of topics and assigning them to students depending on their major. So you did not have much to say about it; you know, no complaints.

Q: So this topic was assigned to you?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, by the ministry of higher education.

Q: Tell us about the ministry of higher education. We are now in the Sékou Touré period. There are many opinions about this period and whether Guinea benefited from that administration. But, just the ministry of higher education, what was your feeling about the way it was conducted, and how did it work for Guinea?

DIOGO DIALLO: To be honest, it was not that bad. The structure was good and it was managed by highly educated people; almost all of them went to French universities. The only problem was that they did not focus too much on humanities because we lacked the resources. Science and agronomy were the focus. The belief was that we should be producing for our self-reliance. But we lacked the necessary equipment and the necessary resources to conduct things in the field. People who majored in science there were good. People who majored in some humanities, say economics, were also good. We used to have teachers from all of Africa. People from Senegal, from Benin, from Cameroon, and we used to have some Russians and even Romanians, who were very good.

Q: Why did they come to Guinea?

DIOGO DIALLO: We are the people who called them when we had that particular misunderstanding with the French authorities. We had little to do with them so we called on our new friends. The Russians helped. They are the people who built the University of Conakry. Mathematicians, people from the engineering department, all of them came from Russia or from the former Soviet Union, and the Rumanians ...

Q: And Benin and Senegal?

DIOGO DIALLO: We had people not officially sent by the Senegalese government, but people of Senegal came on because they were quite impressed. We even had a guy from Benin, who was a good mathematician. His wife was the director of studies of the university. We had many scholars who came to Guinea on their own because they were quite impressed by our leadership.

Q: Was this partly an ideological thing because Guinea had taken a different path from the other former French colonies? More independent, more centrally planned.

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly. The idea was good, but we did not have the means to implement it. That is why, I would say, we did poorly.

Q: So the francophone Africans, at that time, came from ideological commitment? And the Eastern Europeans came because of the political connection?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, definitely.

Q: You have given us the context of the whole socio-political, spiritual, and educational history. Now let us talk about you. You received your maîtrise in 1976, then what?

DIOGO DIALLO: I was hired because of my academic record at the administration of the university. I was hired to be an assistant to my teachers in Kankan. Then I stayed there for nine years; I could not come to Conakry.

Q: Nine years of purgatory?!

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. I stayed, and then I got promoted and became a full teacher, then a *chef de chaire* in linguistics. I had Guinean police and even Cuban teachers because we started teaching Spanish. In the University of Kankan, we had Cubans who had come to Guinea to help build a road between Kissidougou and Kankan. A 190 km-long road. People who were there, Cubans, there were medical doctors, they even sent teachers who offered to teach Spanish on a voluntary basis at the University of Kankan. As a *chef de chaire*, I took the opportunity to learn some Spanish.

Q: Did that become part of your teaching responsibilities?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes because not only was I teacher of linguistics, but I took over for a colleague who was transferred to the University of Conakry to become the head of the department of linguistics and languages. That included local languages. Remember at that time our leadership was very keen on teaching our local languages. So that was linguistics, foreign languages, that was English, Spanish, and Guinean languages.

Q: So you actually taught Spanish?

DIOGO DIALLO: No, I learned Spanish with the Cuban teachers, but I was in charge of managing all those programs. As a linguistics teacher, I was appointed *chef de chaire de linguistique et de langues étrangères et de langues nationales* in a single department..

Q: That is an enormous responsibility.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yeah. I had very young colleagues. I was a very good speaker of Pulaar. So I could speak Malinke, and my native French, and so on.

Q: Can you tell me the languages that you have learned?

DIOGO DIALLO: I was born in a Fulani area; obviously, I speak Pulaar. I went to Kankan where I learned Malinke. Then my little French as a French educated person. I was lucky enough to start English. Back in Mamou, we had some Peace Corps volunteers. Mr. Chatfield. We learned some English from them. And then when I went to Kankan, I had a Guinean teacher of English, who was later appointed Guinean ambassador to Ghana. So I had English for three years at the University. That is how I started getting in touch with English.

Q: When would the Peace Corps volunteer have been here? The '70's?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes in the '70's. Then in 1985, I had the chance to be transferred to the University of Conakry.

Q: At last.

DIOGO DIALLO: At last, yes. Six months later, after my arrival here in Conakry, I had the chance to take a test of my little English and then got the possibility to go to Britain by the British Council. For many reasons, we stopped teaching English at all levels in the secondary system, but at the University, there was a department of English but with a limited number of teachers. The British came down to Guinea after the political takeover by the military. To be honest, it helped a lot. The area where we are now, the Celaou House, was refurbished by the British Council. They started sending people to Britain to be prepared to become English language teachers. That was what happened.

I was successful; I was selected, and went to Britain in June, 1986 for a year. I went to a place at the West Sussex Institute for Further Education for a 13 month course. I got a diploma as a TOEFL teacher. We came back to Guinea. They had finished refurbishing the area, which was turned into a *centre d'études de la langue anglaise*. Educators of English in the mornings, private learners in the afternoons. From my position as teacher of linguistics, I became an English language teacher. That is how I stated a new job and even a new life. Everything I am doing now is the result of that particular opportunity I had to go to Britain because it was in my capacity as an English teacher that I was hired in 2000 by the then American Center to become the education advisor.

Q: So in 1985 you were offered a position at the University of Conakry. Six months later you sat for an exam at the British Council?

DIOGO DIALLO: Then I was selected to go to Britain.

Q: You went in June of 1986 for a year and a few months.

DIOGO DIALLO: 13 months, I got back to Guinea in July 1987.

Q: Then, were you employed by the British Council when you came back?

DIOGO DIALLO: No, they refurbished that area that is part of the University of Conakry. So I got back to the University of Conakry, but instead of teaching linguistics, as I used to do, I started teaching English. That was a quick turn in my life, because I completely abandoned the linguistics and started doing something absolutely new; that was teaching English. So in the mornings, we would teach university students, people who had been sent to the university to major in English. In the afternoons, we would teach the general public. Whoever was interested in learning English comes to the CELA, and we set up groups, and they start to learn English.

Q: You skipped ahead to the year 2000, but we are losing about a dozen years. Let's go back and get your views of Guinea and the politics of that time. Your own position was English for about twelve years. How did you and the U.S. embassy find each other?

DIOGO DIALLO: They used to have what they called the American Center. We set up an association called the Guinean Association of Teachers of English, GATE. That was in 1990. I was elected as sort of an external relations officer. In that capacity, I had the possibility to meet whoever we wanted to meet. We also used to host some events run by the American Center at the CELA; we started having informal contact with people of the USIS and even officials from other departments at the embassy. Every time they came, I was one of the people who will say a word to them or would make an announcement and so on. There was a guy from the embassy who said "Bedichek is very impressed with you. She likes the way you say things, she has a positive opinion about you. So I think she likes you."

Q: This would be Louise Bedichek, as she was the Public Affairs Officer at that time.

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly. Having heard that, I started, every time I had the possibility, to approach her to talk about everything and nothing. We approached her to have some support. We had a few books for the Guinean Association of Teachers of English. Later on, she heard about a possibility to train a special group of journalists, teachers sponsored by her organization. She paid for them, and we started doing business for the USIS. Journalists and some scholars from the university. That is how things started. The many officials came to USIS or the American Center, so it was a sort of continuity.

Q: There is no American Center any more, independent of the embassy, no separate building. How has that changed the relationship between the intellectual community in Conakry and the U.S. Embassy?

DIOGO DIALLO: All those people who were accustomed to going to the American Cultural Center were given same opportunity to go to the library. Maybe the only difference would be the distance, but they were always welcomed by the same staff. There were a few changes; now it is no longer a separate building with security issues, but people are fully aware of what the requirements are, and they were prepared to accept it because it is the only opportunity we have. They keep sending people on different programs, being it international visitors or seminars for people indigenous of English. There was no interruption of that.

Q: So in the case of Conakry, the programs kept going, and they are still very solid?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. There is one thing which I have failed to mention. In the early '90's, we had a very special opportunity. We had the U.S. Ambassador, Dan Smith. His wife offer to come and teach with us at the CELA. I think they came from Sudan. Mrs. Dan Smith was great. She is the one who set up a special group of foreign people who were unemployed in Conakry, the "*anges gardiens* [guardian angels]." She used to invite

students to her place. Together with her husband, they managed to visit every *préfecturat* of the country. She used to invite us at the residence to talk about our job, our activities, and everything. That was on a very regular basis. Not only did she invite students, but teachers as well. She too helped make closer relations with the top officials at the Embassy. That was great. When they departed, there was a continuity to get people from the American Center and the Embassy, and we kept on having good relations. Even though we were not that dynamic as an association, we engaged people, and we kept enjoying that kind of support.

Q: This is before you were employed as academic advisor? There was a growing relationship?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. Some students were hired at the Embassy. That was another important element. For example, I worked from the CELA. There are many others in other areas of the embassy. There was a man called Fadiga, who was in at the procurement department. Every time they had anything to translate, they sent it to me. I used to do it for them. They quite liked it. In 1988, I was selected to go on a summer course. I went to the University of Maine, Orono for a six week course.

Q: For teachers of English?

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly. It is a regular program attended by Sub-Saharan English language teachers.

Q: Something to do with Fulbright?

DIOGO DIALLO: Exactly. That was my first time to go to America, and I quite enjoyed it. It was six weeks, and I had two more weeks, and then I came back to Guinea. That is how things started. We used to host events, sometimes at their request. In 2000, _____, who was the PAO decided in agreement with Serge (we call him “*marabout*”), who is the cultural assistant, and they suggested to have some of those activities hosted by the CELA.

Q: We keep mention CELA. We should explain.

DIOGO DIALLO: The *Centre d'études de la langue anglaise*. That is my institution. So Serge decided that part of these activities should be transferred to the CELA. And that is how they selected me. They talked to me and asked whether I was interested. I said, Yes, I was quite interested. That is how we started. Very few formalities and I started doing it. They sent me some material and told me what to do and so on. And I started attending conferences. I became a new man. A few months later I went to Dakar; that was in 2000. In 2003, I went to South Africa in 2007, and to Addis Ababa and a conference in Britain.. I quite enjoyed it. It gave me a lot of opportunities. Now I became part of larger professional family with everybody calling me by my initials, O.D.D. I became a local celebrity. I could see a car coming from the U.S. Embassy with a registered plate number, and they would say, “Oh, this must be for O.D.D”

Q: In fact you have a double identity. You are CELA, and you are also an advisor for the U.S. Embassy. You have a foot in each place. Now, I've been here for one month, and it seems every person I've met is a former student of yours.

DIOGO DIALLO: More or less, to be honest. I remember one of the people telling me, "You seem to be very positive with the students." I said, "Look, I am exactly like IBM. They manufacture machines, and I educate people." I am selling my goods; its part of my pride now. I will sell them all. Particularly to you, you have money and you are happy to have staff. I will always have a positive relationship with job applicants. If I have someone who is not good, I won't tell you he's not that good, I will say, "I can't remember who that person is." Because at CELA I don't want to damage anybody's opportunities.

Q: So thinking back, you've been indirectly related to embassies since the late 1980's. Its 2010 now, so certainly, we are at a new phase in Guinea's history. Let's look back to the times you remember Guinea going through its changes. Tell me anything that you find interesting about their complex, if not sometimes troubling, history, and the role of the U.S. Embassy in that period. How far back can we go?

DIOGO DIALLO: This is a tough question, but I am going to say a number of things which I can remember. I wish I could elaborate on this history from independence till now, so instead I will give you my personal remarks and possibly, my impressions. I'll start by saying that during the Sékou Touré regime, we had a difficult relationship with the West, at large. Leadership was made to understand that everything from the West was bad, which was ridiculous in a way.

Q: At the time, the regime had a bad opinion of the West. Did this impression run very deep?

DIOGO DIALLO: I don't think so. Remember, at this time I was a student in Kankan. We were not that convinced that having relations with the West was bad. It was during the Cold War, and every regime tried to put forward its own ideas. We had two Francophone newspapers; one in the East [*Africasia*] that was not open, and the other [*Jeune Afrique*] that reported the facts as they were. We weren't allowed to have that one. But we, as students, always managed to get a hold of it and read it. They reported on the liberation movements in Angola which we were in support of. Both publications were printed in Paris too. It was very critical for a newspaper too though, of countries with repressive regimes. It was critical of the People's Republics.

Q: So it was prohibited?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, if you were seen with it, you'd be in big trouble.

Q: But you had it. So were you in trouble?

DIOGO DIALLO: People would get it from Cote D'Ivoire. And then they'd share it, so there weren't many copies at any given time, but I would tell someone they could come over to my place to read it. Our own view of the international community was that we could not properly value that wealth. As youth we had that in our mind, so we were not in perfect coordination with our leadership about the West.

Q: So you're saying this newspaper was the lens that you were to later go by?

DIOGO DIALLO: We were told, "This is bad. You can't look." We would say, "Let's have a look anyway. Oh, it's not that bad!" So it was good for the youth. The youth was not in phase with the leadership. We wanted to be in balance with the East and the West. That was our feeling as students. Some students had the opportunity to visit Russia, but would also visit Germany, Italy, Turkey and England, if they could afford to go. Then they'd come back and tell us that the Capitalist system was not bad at all, but that it might be better. The Guinean students would go to England and buy jeans. They would then bring them back to Russia and sell them for a huge profit.

Q: So, Guinean students who went to Russia could benefit from Russia's poor economy and the fact that Russians couldn't travel?

DIOGO DIALLO: Go buy things in Western Europe and bring them back to Russia, and then sell them for a profit. Take the money back to Guinea and spend it on our economy.

Q: An odd triangular trade that English Mercantilism would not have recognized!

DIOGO DIALLO: People who were traveling were able to say the West is not that bad. Look, I can actually buy things in the West and make money in the East because of their economy. Television was not that developed, so in Guinea we had to keep reading about what the world looked like, but then visit the Western nations and see it wasn't like that at all.

Now coming back to our relations with America; people started going to America in the 1990's in large numbers before Sierra Leone and Liberia got into trouble. Before that, only a few young people got to go in 1960's and 1970's. They were very positive about what they saw, and we were very happy with what we heard back from them about their travels there. We had a very good relation with the Peace Corps and John Kennedy. He was a very popular person for creating the Peace Corps. People of my generation loved him.

Q: We are talking about the elites?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. Educated people in Guinea were very positive about America. We would give each other American sounding nicknames sometimes.

Q: It was a status to be called an American?

DIOGO DIALLO: Oh yes, quite.

Q: So... independence, 1958, Kennedy 1961-1963. So this was only three years after your independence. Do you think the effect was very sudden when Kennedy came and visited? You gained independence in 1958, the relationship with France quickly soured, the U.S. was a bit off to the side, and it was not our problem, so to speak, so all of a sudden, America was noticed?

DIOGO DIALLO: The people who went to the West were seen as model students. When they came back from America, they looked and acted very different than those students who went elsewhere in the world. They came back with all sorts of interesting technology, like record players. Those were wonderful. Latino music was very popular, and they bought it in New York. Diallo Telly also gave us more information about what America was.

Q: Do you remember, as an indirect family member to the ambassador, what your feeling was about Guinean officials? I remember meeting one official in Washington DC in the 1970's, and he told me, " We are such a rich country, but we are so badly managed." There was an ideology, and there was a reality. Can you reconcile the difference between these two in terms of the official's position?

DIOGO DIALLO: I'm sorry to say it, our first regime leader was a clever person, but he didn't like to be challenged. His view was THE view. I would say that he was not a corrupt man, but was very reluctant to contradiction and change. Although he had very clever men around him, they didn't dare challenge him. His mass killings made people fear him. He would kill them if he wanted. People feared him, so he became isolated. Very few people dared to challenge him. Because of what had happened, people would tell him what pleased him rather than telling him something useful.

Q: So either they believed what they were telling him, or they were afraid to tell him anything else?

DIOGO DIALLO: That was it. He would come up with a plan and that was that. That idea was the only one. Ever.

Q: So a country like that, where you have a very strong ideology, how was the American embassy able to play a role?

DIOGO DIALLO: For that particular period, because I wasn't in Conakry, I couldn't say too much. But I think in a way, it played a big role in places like CBG. This was a huge success. It's a place that produces bauxite. So American companies and Canadian companies, with the Guinean government, set up a model of a successful mining company.

Q: Just the fact of good bauxite exploitation sent a message?

DIOGO DIALLO: It said that Americans and the West were good partners. We had been doing very little, but it's all thanks to those companies.

Q: Some companies extract minerals and give very little back to the country and take all the profits. You're saying CBG did not do that?

DIOGO DIALLO: No. They did not do that. We were able to achieve some economic gains. First, in terms of employment: over 2,500 were employed. Second, they created basic infrastructure to support the company so it remains. We have a port and a harbor now, which is very good for exporting our goods. Our entire country budget is \$250 million USD. Not one other company in Guinea contributed that amount. CBG did, in the form of taxes and donating income to the country. \$200 million from CBG back into the Guinean treasury. Even more than the Russians and the diamond companies, so this is a successful case.

Q: So, many Guineans were aware of this?

DIOGO DIALLO: Oh sure. The whole surrounding area owes its success to the company. That economy survives because of the employment opportunities the company creates. To give you an idea, in 1973, there was a village nearby, Kamsar, where they started their operations with 173 inhabitants. Nowadays, that same village has more than 140,000 inhabitants. I know this figure because I was often hired to help translate their documents. The same goes for any village around where the bauxite is produced. It's a big mine and was a tiny village. Now it's very modern and has a hospital, businesses, and more.

Q: The private sector was able to develop and flourish and brought Guinea with it, even though it was a country with a planned economy?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. And people could say that this was what America looks like. When everyone was suffering from lack of food from droughts and things, people in these places were not suffering much. They had everything one could imagine. It was an island of wealth in a place of low-income and poverty. It is still a successful case because Guinea relies on the income of that one area for the entire country.

Q: More powerful than propaganda.

DIOGO DIALLO: No words, just action. If you go there you will notice compared to all the cities in Guinea, there are no other places like it.

Q: Guinea has enormous mineral wealth.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. Now we are trying to build two aluminum plants where the bauxite is mined. The company doing that is called Global Aluminum. The other one is nearby as well. It's Alcoa I think. Headquarters in Pittsburgh.

Q: These are multi-national corporations, but are originally American. So the things that formed your country's image of the world were the things people said when they came back from traveling, the items they brought back with them, and the companies that came and invested. Did the U.S embassy here, were they able to take those facts and explain them to people more fully?

DIOGO DIALLO: I cannot tell you about that. I do not know. But scholarships helped a lot too. The U.S. government provided Guinea with many scholarships. Many university lecturers and the top students were given the opportunity to go to America. In 1985 a group of officials were given the chance to go to America. The process went on for years and many have come back now and are playing a role in government or business. They are really helping Guinea in the world.

Q: So it's all about cultural exchange? Lead by example?

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. That's really important. We used to have our staff sent to Russia. They did not do that. I can elaborate more on the year 2000 to today. I remember a number of major events that were sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, like seminars. Some American NGOs came, and we were also visited by U.S. State Department officials, USAID representatives, NDI, and some others. I was appointed as a translator, so I met many of these people. There was a lady ambassador here from the U.S. She set up a seminar that was well attended by the civil society and the Army. The panelists were all very well-informed and prominent people in Guinea. They discussed the rule of law and security for five days. That was essential. The rule of law. The U.S. Embassy was associating itself with that. The role of the military was a big topic as well, and they were present in the room. So the role of the military in a democracy was very important to the people present. People from political parties, people from the army, people from the civil society, people from the business community were all there and could express themselves openly. That was essential; it started everything else. I was hired to be an interpreter of the seminar.

Q: Interpreting because there were Americans present. Were they from the Department of State?

DIOGO DIALLO: Some of them were. Some were military. Others were NGOs. The final ceremony though, was important. The Ministers of Defense and Justice were there and gave very good, positive remarks. These two were very impressed by everything. Members of Parliament even attended. Since that first seminar in 2000, the U.S. Embassy has run many other programs like that one, all of them very good and well-attended, and I have worked as a translator for most of them, at one point or another.

There was another seminar that was run by a couple of Americans, and they delivered two seminars. One was one civilian and the military, sponsored by the embassy, and that was in 2002. They invited people from many backgrounds to this seminar, and this was a good lecture. The same people ran another successful lecture in Kankan in 2004. The head of the defense attaché, Colonel Ellington, hired my colleague, a priest, to work there

too and to invite other religious members. So this seminar was even bigger, even more people.

Q: Now we are in 2010, and perhaps moving into a democratic phase. It seems almost like it was part of a plan to get to this point?

DIOGO DIALLO: What I'm saying is that the American embassy did a lot to build in people's minds what the democratic state can consist of. Who is in charge of what? The separation of powers is important. When they get these large groups of people together, they can agree on what the separation is and what the roles of each organization are. The rules of engagement were a session. Things like that had to be talked about in such an open and academic setting. You need to model your behavior, and the U.S. was good about this.

Q: What do you think Americans were thinking at this time? We are said to be optimists, and change didn't seem possible at the time, but then we are here.

DIOGO DIALLO: I think that part of it was happening in the surroundings. We were involved with restoring peace in Liberia and Sierra Leone, so we were becoming familiar with a new role for us. We didn't expect the wars to spill over to our country, but we did want to train the military to be prepared for protecting our borders. Unfortunately it did not work that well. Just look at January 22, 2007. I was not here, but I heard it was a huge disaster.

Q: This was memorable as a very disruptive event, but it seems that the Guineans are now prepared to act differently? This was an example of fear and now the majority of Guineans, it seems, never want to repeat it again.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes.

Q: It was a terrible thing, but maybe it was part of the whole formula of building a democracy. Show people the opposite, the fear of chaos, and then, they will want democracy. I am making this up, but maybe there is truth to it?

DIOGO DIALLO: I agree with that; that is how it worked for Guinea. Some people didn't give up the fight, and so we have to keep fighting for it. We deserve to live in better conditions and have a better country, but we need to work for it too. My feeling is that we don't need much assistance. We have coastline. We have a mineral-rich country. We can have a tourism industry. I listened to our minister of tourism, a former student of mine, the other day. She talked about how, with our minds, we've got to produce and export these things. Put them on a train, then put them on a boat and make the money. I believe we have so much potential. My feelings are that with such a limited population, 10 million, and with better management, we can generate a lot of wealth for everyone in Guinea. Whatever you are, wherever you came from, you can be a part of it. We have a lot of water, mining ability, arable land, population that wants to work, so much hope, and potential. We can count on these things: Fish, palm oil, yams, sweet potato, corn, rice,

industrial, computer support and more. Just need proper management at the top and to restore credibility.

I am told that Malaysia, which is a successful country now, got their palm trees from Guinea and Sierra Leone in 1975. Now they've become the key exporter of palm oil. I met an employee of Malaysian Telecom in Saudi Arabia. I was very impressed. He brought his mother, father, sister, wife and another person to Guinea to visit from Malaysia. \$4,000 USD per person, so \$20,000 USD total, on his salary from Malaysian telecom. That is incredible. And Malaysia, I do not know if they have many minerals, but they are able to survive on farming and more farming. So we can do that and go one further.

Q: They are a second tier Asian tiger, but they are doing very well.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes, but it is all based on farming. If we were able to get our friend nations, including the U.S., to assist us, then we could have a prosperous country. Not necessarily money, but we need to have the chance to oversee the elections and vote and get back the minimum trust so that people come to invest in us. The American ambassador to Guinea, before he left in 2008, said such good things about Guinea at a party. He was so supportive and said some of the nicest things about Guinea and gave us hope that other countries are starting to recognize us. He made it clear, "We don't want strong individuals; we want strong people and institutions. That is why we are 'We the People.' We are going to remain friends of the Guinean people." We loved those words.

Guinea is important in this part of the world. We want peace and stability for Guinea. And when America speaks, people listen and understand. Because of the positive attitude of America, because of the fact that they are elected by the people of America, we want to be like you. Everyone is looking at Guinea, and we have the chance! These speeches have great value for us. They are watching us; we are ready. We need to educate our people and send people to America and the embassy. Cultural exchange. Don't support the individual so much, but support the people. We need strong institutions instead of strong individuals. We want to fight and defend our ideals. America's philosophy is to generate wealth for everyone and make it free for people to have the ability to do this.

Q: [Reading a certificate] June 30th, 2004, Barry Walkley.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. I was issued a certificate from the military after the seminars, and they told me I was doing very good things to help Guinea by working with the Americans. So you see, these are words that are good for our people and our leaders. You mentioned that we aren't a people who want strong President, but the Presidency itself. What is important is not the individual parliament official, but the idea of Parliament! It's not the judges, but the rule of law. We want elected officials, not just people with big arms. The world is becoming both larger and smaller very quickly. They can tell what is going on, and suddenly, we can see the world. President Obama, your president, has mentioned us in national and international speeches. We have heard these things, and we know that we have been given a good confirmation of our status as a growing nation.

Q: Today, we have three young Guineans traveling to Washington DC to meet with President Obama. It is now August first; their plane leaves at 6pm tonight. They will go to Washington and meet 115 other young Africans and get to talk with Obama about the future of Africa, as they see it and what they can do to help fix it and make the continent grow.

DIOGO DIALLO: Yes. So you see, Obama knows these things. He visited the three African countries that had successful transitions of power. He is saying that the rest of Africa should try to be like these countries, which then makes these countries try to be even better. Free and fair relations.

Q: I will ask an unfair question. What do you think will happen in the next three months in Guinea?

DIOGO DIALLO: Well, first of all, all of us are praying to God so we can have a positive end to this transition. We are looking forward to the second round of elections, and everyone is very excited about it. We will get a new elected President, and this is a new start. It's a new global partnership. We need the U.S. We need China. We need Russia and France. We need the world to come and invest in us and set up a model of partnership. This is so we can get out of this mess. We are able to do it. Ten million people, for what we've got, it's not difficult to manage. But we need your support. If you abandon us now, we are like a plane trying to take off, and then the wings disappear. No chance. When we take off, please help push so we can go.

Q: Thank you. I think the title for this interview is "Why Not Guinea?"

End of interview