

# WOLOF

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Wolof is spoken by more than 90% of the Senegalese population, either as a first or second language. Out of the six national languages of Senegal, Wolof is the most widely spoken. It is also spoken by a large number of people in The Gambia and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. It is a member of the Niger-Congo language family. The Wolof language serves as an important link between people who do not have the same mother tongue. Wolof's status as Senegal's lingua franca stems from its function as a widely used communication tool.

Wolof traders have traditionally traveled throughout West Africa, and Wolof is an important trade language. Due to its widespread use as a trade language, it has great socio-economic significance. Wolof also plays a very important role in Senegalese culture. Many famous Senegalese singers, including Youssou Ndour, Thione Seck and Ndiaga Mbye, use Wolof extensively in their music. Also, many well-known Senegalese filmmakers, such as Sembene Ousmane and the late Djibril Diop Mambety, produce their films in Wolof.

During elections, all the political leaders and candidates use Wolof during public speaking appearances, even though it is not everyone's native language. Sometimes the president addresses the people in Wolof instead of French. The prevalent use of Wolof by government officials indicates its importance within Senegal.

Islam, which is the religion of more than 90% of the Senegalese population, is dominated by the largely Wolof-speaking brotherhoods of the Mourides, the Layenes and the Tijaniya. The holy city of Tivaouane in Senegal receives guests from Morocco during the night of the Qur'an, which is celebrated once every year. In each of these brotherhoods, Wolof is the most commonly used language. In many mosques throughout Senegal, Wolof is used during the sermons.

## STUDYING WOLOF IN THE U.S.

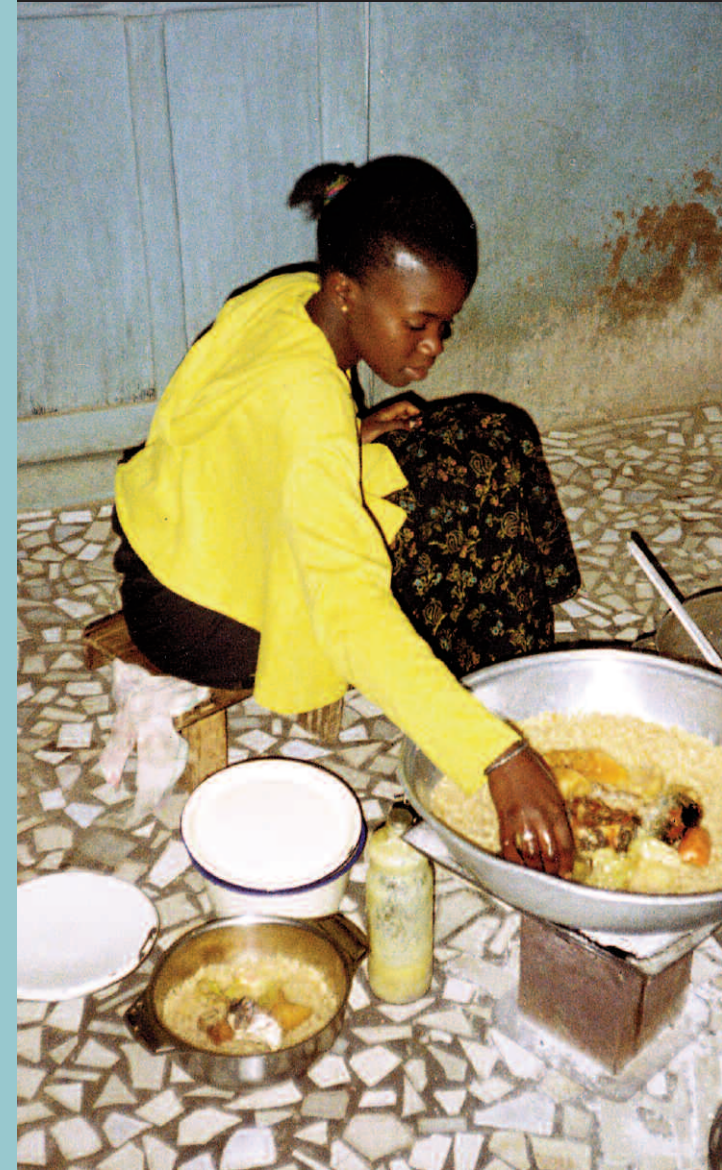
Below is a list of some universities in the United States that currently offer Wolof. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at <http://african.lss.wisc.edu/nalrc>.

Columbia University  
Michigan State University  
University of California at Los Angeles  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
University of Kansas  
University of Pennsylvania



NATIONAL AFRICAN  
LANGUAGE RESOURCE  
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NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE  
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

# WHY STUDY WOLOF?



The majority of the West Africans who were later shipped to the Americas as slaves were first gathered on the Island

of Gorée, just off the coast of Senegal. Last year, the “Slave Castle,” which served as a temporary prison for the captives, was declared a universal heritage site. Several thousand visitors, many of them African Americans, travel to the island each year. An understanding of Wolof helps visitors to communicate with the islanders and to learn first-hand about the history of the island.

There are also many study abroad programs between American and Senegalese universities that enable and encourage students to study Wolof. Although a knowledge of French, one of Senegal’s official languages, is a requirement of several of these programs, many of the students use the opportunity to learn Wolof. Although knowing French permits students to function in Senegal, speaking Wolof makes their stay easier and more enjoyable. When they return to the United States, most of these students want to continue to study Wolof to improve their knowledge of the language and to prepare for an eventual return to Senegal for research purposes.

Anyone interested in authentic Wolof, which does not contain too many borrowings from French, should travel to Baol or Sine Saloum, in the interior of Senegal. These areas are home to the original speakers of Wolof. Wolof was also originally spoken by the inhabitants of the coastal regions of Senegal, by the Lebou of Dakar and Rufisque and by Guet Ndar fishermen of Saint-Louis, which is along the Atlantic Ocean in northern Senegal. No matter what one’s interests are, Wolof is very helpful in all things related to Senegal.

# WHO SPEAKS WOLOF? PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The Republic of Senegal is home to more than 3 million Wolof people, along with the Fulani, Serer, Toucouleur, Diola and Mandingo ethnic groups. The history of the Wolof people can be traced back to the great kingdoms of pre-colonial Senegal, the empires of Kayor and Baol. Kayor and Baol are often cited as examples of the Wolof resistance to French colonialism.

In January 1959, Senegal and the French Soudan merged to form the Mali Federation, which became fully independent on June 20, 1960. Due to internal political difficulties, the federation broke up on August 20, 1960; Senegal and Soudan (renamed the Republic of Mali) each proclaimed separate independence. Leopold Sedar Senghor was elected Senegal’s first president in August 1960. After the breakup of the Mali Federation, President Senghor and Prime Minister Mamadou Dia governed together under a parliamentary system. Abdou Diouf assumed the presidency in 1981. He encouraged broader political participation, reduced government involvement in the economy and widened Senegal’s diplomatic engagements, particularly with other developing nations. Despite chronic economic problems, tempestuous domestic politics, border tensions, and nagging and occasionally violent separatist movements in the southern Casamance region, Senegal remains a cultural, social and political leader in West Africa.

It is common to hear people say that there is no distinct ethnic group called Wolof, because Wolof is spoken by almost everyone in Senegal. In other countries, Senegalese people are almost always readily greeted in Wolof with the phrase *Na nga def?* It does not matter whether the person is a Wolof native speaker or not; the assumption is that anybody from Senegal speaks Wolof. This is due to the fact that Wolof is understood by the majority of the people in Senegal.



Picking mangoes in the Gacubua.



Famous griot Ndaiga Mbaya performing at Teranga Hotel, Dakar.



Edris Makward visiting his ancestral village of Thiago in Northern Senegal.



Market scene in Dakar.