

## **The Music of Senegal: A Way of Life in West Africa**

Lucien DeLaBruere

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Project Advisor: Keba Djibril Mane

Academic Director: Souleye Diallo

**Dedication...**

To all the people who helped with the making of this project: SIT: Senegal, Keba Mane, Jacques Diatta and all the musicians in Senegal that helped make it all come together.

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## **I. ABSTRACT**

“Music is in the veins and blood of the Senegalese people” (Bakayoko 2007). This paper aims to take a look into the reason for why this is. By examining the historical and present context of music in Senegal, one can better understand the social aspects of its music. In addition, analyses concerning the rhythmic and pedagogical importance will help provide a better picture for how we, as Westerners, can try to comprehend this rather undocumented subject.

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

It is difficult for a Westerner to understand African music. Moreover, it is difficult to understand the importance and social significance that music plays in African life. When a Westerner listens to African music for the first time, he will typically elicit one of two responses. He will become confused due to the assumed rhythmic complexity and consequently become bored or he will become intrigued for the very same reason, but still not quite understand why. While in Senegal, I have had the opportunity to see and listen to several different musical groups from a rural village setting to the urban nightlife of Dakar. Both of the aforementioned responses to African music were prevalent among the groups that I happened to be with. One has to ask himself, then, why this is. How can the music of Africa be so important and meaningful to the people indigenous to the continent, but have little to no substance to the ears of a foreigner?

What we tend to not realize as Westerners is that music in Africa is not simply a form of recreation and amusement, but rather a social framework built around the community to create a sense of kinship and often serve as a form of communication, even criticism. Music’s role in African society is a wonderment to be marveled at by the musicological and the social science communities alike. By studying African music,

therefore, it is important to recognize that we are also academically studying the music as “potential evidence for a conception of Africa” (Chernoff 1979, 30). Thus, music in Africa can be seen as a gateway to better understanding their culture and way of life.

In this paper, I examine African music and rhythm in the capital city of Senegal, Dakar. In addition, my experiences in learning how to play the djembe, a hand drum native to West Africa, help to demonstrate my findings. I will show that music can be found anywhere you go in Senegal and that this has been the case throughout history. Furthermore, I will accentuate the importance that rhythm plays in African music while discussing the problems that Westerners have understanding it, including notation and pedagogical aspects. Lastly, an analysis on how these musical traits can be translated into daily Senegalese culture and values will allow us to better comprehend this subject.

Chernoff (1971) eludes that in any study of music, especially African music, the overall “meaning” is apparent in everything that people say about it and do with it. What he means is that his research is by no means the most comprehensive or detailed analysis on the subject, nor is it the only interpretation of the topic. Rather, his text is only an offering of his findings and personal take on the matter. The search for complete validity in interpretation has long been the banana peel under the feet of social scientists. Therefore, an attempt to define the music of Africa is a goal that must be taken with the understanding that, in the end, it can only be an interpretation of one's findings to be construed by others. This approach is crucial to a fair and culturally sensitive analysis of another people's culture. If not, there exists the possibility of creating harsh generalizations and insensitive analyses.

While Chernoff's insight offers a good basis to start research on this topic, his personal background on the matter focuses on the ethnic cults and Ewe drumming of northern Ghana. It is my intention to illustrate the cultural aspects important to the people

of Senegal. Senegal is a “progressive and sophisticated nation...with musicians born to sing and play praise music” (Nidel 2005, 49). This stable West African country is one that reveres the music of its past while continually changing and developing new styles (Afropop, mbalax). Nidel (2005) explains that the music scene that exists in Dakar, Senegal’s largest city and capital is “arguably the most important on the continent.”

For purposes of this study, I took it upon myself to learn how to play one of West Africa’s most important and ancient percussion instruments, the djembe. The djembe is “on the verge of achieving world status as a percussion instrument” (Charry 2000). It is used in almost every ensemble in Senegal and is widely played throughout the country. Charry (2000) describes in his “Guide to the Jembe” that due to its more recent popularity in the world, there exists a growing amount of information on its use, but is generally an orally learned instrument with little documentation. Unlike other ethnographic studies, while learning the djembe I was able to test hypotheses first-hand, develop a true sense of the musical tradition in the region, and use primary information to supplement archival research.

I would hope that at the end of this work, one has a better understanding of the music and rhythm that exists so prominently in Africa. More importantly, I hope that people might look at African music differently and in turn, better understand the culture of this particular region. Moreover, I would hope that its validity be taken with a grain of salt on the matter that it offers only my findings in an analytical sense beneficial to a Westerner, and will be interpreted in a way exclusive to each reader.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

As previously mentioned, my field work for this study was carried out in Dakar, Senegal, located on the Cap-Vert Peninsula on the coast of West Africa. With a population

of approximately 2.5 million people in the metropolitan area, it offers a musical atmosphere ideal for any ethnomusicologist. The booming nightlife of mbalax and Afropop mixed with the traditional sounds heard at baptisms, weddings and funerals are a daily occurrence in this vibrant city. The opportunities are endless for anyone to listen, observe and participate in the musical experience here.

As one taxi man so blatantly explained to me en route to some location, “Everybody here is a musician. See that mason over there, he probably plays the djembe. That woman, she probably sings in a band.” The society in which Senegalese people live in is nothing but miraculous when it comes to music. The ability to attain their musical heritage and tradition and still be able to create and export new styles is simply amazing. Even my homestay brother, who does not like music very much (except rap), heard a percussion group playing at a political meeting one day in the distance and immediately identified the rhythm as being “*ceebujen*,” a traditional rhythm native to Senegal. This inexplicable behavior sets up an ideal setting for any researcher looking to study the cultural significance of a certain people’s music.

Before going into the field, it was known that documentation on this particular subject is limited, and even then is difficult to come by. One of the definitive books on West African music, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, by John M. Chernoff, provided a wealth of knowledge not only on the cultural aspects of music but also an in depth analysis of the rhythmic musical theory. In order to find other documents on the subject, internet databases were key. The sites jstor.com, questia.org, Google scholar, and the Ithaca College library all offered information including encyclopedia articles, books, periodicals and scholarly journals pertaining to the topic.

Due to the lack of textual information, reliance on primary sources became crucial. A plethora of information was gathered by everyday, run-of-the-mill conversations with

average Senegalese people. This allowed me to better understand the social and community aspects of the music. In order to get a more academic and scholarly view, I conducted interviews with professional musicians and professors from the Dakar area. Some work as performers and helped to explain their journey as a musician while the academicians were able to offer a bulk of information about the theory and pedagogy of African music.

Without a doubt, though, the most important form of gathering information came in participant observation. When using ones own emotion and responses in an analytical setting to gain information on a certain subject, the researcher is conducting field work called participant observation (Chernoff 1979, 8). In order to best explain the social framework of music in Africa and have it be authenticated as best as possible, participant observation is necessary to earn credibility. Consequently, this creates a thin wire for an investigator to walk on when his evaluation is explaining what will be interpreted as reality. In order to avoid any troubles with misrepresenting this subject, I have consulted with certain scholars to verify my observations and analyses.

My role as participant-observer came by taking djembe lessons from a local musician, Jacques Diatta. His expertise on the djembe and other musical matters gave me the backing of information needed to supplement the textual and verbal information already gathered. The ability to recognize the musical points and intricacies that are explained in books through the djembe was an invaluable learning tool. In turn, by being able to comprehend these points, I am better equipped to articulate the musical and cultural importance.

As a foreign researcher, sensitivity was key, especially in a country unofficially dubbed "*le pays de teranga*" or 'the hospitable country.' With the utmost respect and gratitude, I was easily able to gather information from several sources. By immersing myself into the music scene and learning how to play the djembe, I, in turn, was respected

as a musician, student and researcher. At all times, though, the researcher-subject line was intact and subjects were always aware and reminded of the research project at the base of my inquiry and investigation.

With all that this lively city has to offer to an ethnomusicologist, I believe that the lack of documentation does not hinder one's ability to conduct a comprehensive research study. In fact, it creates an extreme reliance on actual field work by working closely hand in hand with the people and the informers of the region. This paper, thus, is a tool helpful not only to a Western audience intrigued by the musical styling of Africa, but also an offering to the people of Senegal as an analysis of the music that they have allowed me, so welcomingly, to study.

#### **IV. FINDINGS**

##### **Music in Senegal**

While walking home from school everyday, I quickly became accustomed to the multitude of sights and sounds along the way; birds chirping, evening call-to-prayer at the mosque, the occasional honk from a taxi man looking for his next client, an airplane landing, and often times, some form of music, whether it be a drum ensemble at a political meeting, an evening choral practice or a group of kids singing and dancing in the street. It is hard to avoid the existence of music in Senegal.

The music scene in Dakar is one of the most exciting and lively music scenes in all of Africa. Dakar is home to two of world music's greatest artists, Baaba Maal and Youssou N'Dour as well as West Africa's most renowned band, Orchestra Baobab (Nidel 2005, 49). On any given night the city is full of several options to see and hear live music. The city boasts enough musical genres to please any critic. From reggae to hip-hip, from Cuban to mbalax, there is a style suited for anyone's liking.

To restrict music in Senegal, however, to these modern forms would be doing a disservice to the Western reader. Senegal, rich in tradition and culture, has much more to offer to the ethnomusicologist. In fact, by taking a look at the traditional music here, we can learn not just about an interesting art form with its own concepts and meanings, but also see how it relates culturally to the people of the same region.

Traditional music is still a major component to music in Senegal. Whether it be a rural village setting or the urban nightlife, it is easy to hear the traditional sounds and defining characteristics of Senegalese music. Many of the traditional instruments are still used even in the more modern bands today. Common instruments include the djembe (to be explained later); the *sabar*, a native Senegalese drum played with one hand and one stick; the *kora*, a 21-stringed harp-like instrument made out of a calabash and the *tama*, a drum played under the arm with an interesting ability to change pitch.

### **A Brief History of Senegalese Music**

Although studies of this nature often look at West Africa, and sometimes all of Africa, as a whole, it is important to note that Senegal has its own unique culture along with several ethnicities differing in their own way. Therefore, it is imperative to step back and take a look at Senegal as an independent entity, as it is, from the entire region of West Africa. Music in Senegal is different than ancient Mande music of Mali and other modern forms of popular Malian music. Due to the influence of polyphony of the Serer ethnicity and the existence of Islamic brotherhoods, i.e. Mouridism, the music of Senegal has developed its own unique style. Senegalese music is more upbeat and lively in comparison to the sounds of neighboring countries, such as Mali and Guinea Bissau (Wikipedia Contributors 2007).

The existence of the griots in Senegalese culture is also a notable influence. Griots can be professional historians, genealogists and/or musicians who together form a distinct caste (Nikiprowetzky 1963, 79). In a country with a history of alarming illiteracy, the role of the griot to withhold centuries of information pertaining to its past is an impressive task. As musicians, griots have been responsible for being present at ceremonies such as baptisms, circumcisions, marriages, and funerals. To this day, griots are existent and still important in many senses to the Senegalese custom.

Perhaps the biggest proponent of music and art in Senegal, though, was its first president after gaining independence from France, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Senghor was a devout advocate of the negritude philosophy which meant that he argued that music from griots and Senegal as a whole was (and is) just as valid and meaningful as the classical music of Europe. Senghor often referred to the importance of rhythm to the African and even goes as far to state that the “organizing force which makes the black style is *rhythm*” (Chernoff 1971, 23).

After independence, Senegal continuously changed and many popular ensembles and solo artists exported their music from Senegal. Although change is inevitable and music is always fusing with other forms of music, traditional Senegalese sounds have been able to remain commonplace throughout the years in Senegalese music. This is largely due to the fact that instrumentation has not drastically changed all that much and the existence of certain characteristics that define the African/Senegalese rhythms.

### **African Drumming and the Djembe**

In order to better understand the information gathered during this research, I found it necessary to not just listen, but also participate in the music. That is why I met up with Jacques Diatta, a local musician, to help me learn how to play the djembe. Jacques has

played the djembe since childhood when he grew up in the Casamance, the region of Senegal south of The Gambia. Jacques' expertise extended from the basic playing of the djembe, to its history and its construction.

The djembe is one of West Africa's most ancient instruments. The origin of the djembe is believed to be Malian. Its musical impact, therefore, is especially noticeable in the regions surrounding Mali; Guinea, Ivory Coast, Guinea Bissau, and Senegal. The exact time and place of its creation is uncertain, but after speaking with Bounama Bakayoko, djembe professor at *L'Ecole National des Arts*, I was told a unique story of its creation. Mr. Bakayoko recounted a fantastical story about a Malian man who was shunned from his village with his pregnant wife. During labor, the mother died and the man was left to raise his child by himself. After a while, times became so hard that that man needed to find a way to be welcomed back into his community. As a result, he took a large chunk of wood, hollowed it out, tightened goatskin over the top and made a drum. He offered the drum to the chief of the village and he liked it so much that he accepted the man back into the community and he called the drum the djembe.

Although Mr. Bakayoko offers this quite eccentric story, it is only one possible scenario of the djembe's origins. Most scholars agree, however, that the djembe was an instrument first created by the Maninka/Sunu blacksmiths native to Mali, known as 'numu' possibly as long as three millennia ago. The reason for its existence all over West Africa can be attributed to the 'numu' migrations of the first millennium AD (Charry 2000). It is without question that in the past, and still on occasion today, the djembe was used to communicate between rural villages to inform each other of certain festivities, i.e. prayers, weddings, baptisms, etc.

The djembe itself is a goblet-shaped drum, skin-covered, and meant to be played with bare hands. Most djembes range in size from about twelve inches in diameter and

about 24 inches in height. There is no specific wood that is required to make a djembe, but it is usually the most accessible hardwood of the region. In general, goat or calf skin is used to cover the drum. Cords or ropes are used to hold the skin over the drum and can be tightened or loosened to change the tone of the drum. The solo or master drummer usually has a high-tuned djembe whereas the rest of an ensemble has low-tuned djembes (Wikipedia contributors, 2007).

Because of its unique shape, the djembe has the possibility to produce a wide range of tones. While this holds true, there are generally three tones that are classified in djembe playing. The “slap” is the highest tone created by tapping the skin near the rim with open fingers while letting your palm hit the rim itself. The “tone” is the medium, rounder note produced the same way as the “slap,” but with closed fingers. It is important to mention that advanced players do not necessarily differentiate the “slap” and “tone” with the fingers open and closed technique but rather make subtle differences to change the pitch. The bass is the lowest note and is produced by hitting the center of the skin with the palm of the hand. These three notes are the basis for all traditional djembe rhythms.

During my time I spent learning how to play the djembe, I learned several rhythms and the accompaniments that go with each rhythm. Each lesson consisted of reviewing rhythms already learned and trying to improve the fluidity of each one. Obviously, trying to memorize all the rhythms was also a big step. Once the rhythms were in good shape, we focused on picking up the tempo and when that finally came around, Jacques would accompany me on the *dunduns* while I played solo on the djembe. The *dundun* is a cylindrical bass drum often played to accompany djembe ensembles. This became a regular scenario for each lesson. Jacques would also take time to stop and explain the importance of each rhythm, or the values of West African drumming, or just to tell me I was playing something wrong and show me how to fix it.

Without a doubt, the hardest part in learning how to play the djembe came when I had to play rhythms with the *dunduns* because of the rhythmic complexities that existed. When playing just the djembe with Jacques, we were playing the same thing the whole time and it was no big deal. After adding in the *dundun*, though, the beat or the meter seemed to disappear and it became difficult to keep a steady beat. It seemed as if Jacques was playing in a completely different meter, or maybe he was simply playing at a different tempo. Furthermore, what I assumed to be the “downbeat” on the djembe was not as prevalent on the *dundun*, or it was simply placed at a different beat. Whatever it was, it made me focus strictly on my part on the djembe and stick to it. After a while, the bizarre became normal and things settled in to place. It was at that point that I could step back and take a real look into the reasons for my initial confusion and how I fell into the all too familiar rhythmical traps fitted for Westerners.

### **Looking at Rhythm**

“Rhythm is probably one of the most profound yet misunderstood aspects of music making in Africa” (Kauffman 1980, 393). There is no question that rhythm is the heart of the body that makes music in West Africa. “Rhythm is to the African what harmony is to the Europeans” (Chernoff 1979, 40). With this in mind, it is worth examining what the rhythmic differences are that exist and why they may be difficult for the Western ear to understand.

The percussive sounds of Africa are often described as “primitive,” “frenetic” or “unorganized” by musicians trained in a Western style. To the native African, however, their music is anything but unorganized. Rather, it is more disciplined and easier to comprehend than we’d like to give it credit for. There are several explanations as to why this is. Many ethnomusicologists have attempted to explain this very same concept of

rhythm, including Chernoff and Agawu. Both having spent time in Africa, they have taken firsthand approaches to their research in order to best analyze the subject.

The reasons for confusion over this music are understandable though. Africans are way more developed with their sense of rhythm. Their basis for even thinking of rhythm is something in contrast to the Westerner. For example, when out listening to a band in Dakar, one will most often hear the drum or rhythm section playing their strongest beats on what we normally refer to as the “off beats.” We call them the off beats because to us, they are when we tend to not emphasize the beat. In a piece of music in 4/4 time, an African would be more apt to set a beat on 2 and 4 whereas a Westerner would emphasize beats 1 and 3. In 3/4 time, the African would prefer beats 2 and 3 over beat 1 which the Westerner would choose. This was apparent one night at a bar in Ouakam, a district of Dakar. While listening to the band play a song in 4/4 time, the audience quickly started clapping along with the strongest beat of the measure which happened to be the second beat. This is in stark contrast from the Western norm of the strongest beat being the first beat or the “down beat.”

This is simply a basic example of the difference in mindset. The complexity of the rhythms heard in traditional Senegalese percussion ensembles is an entirely different ballpark. There are certain defining characteristics that ethnomusicologists have developed through the years of studying West African music. These characteristics are present in Senegal and can be helpful in explaining the reasons of how and why we, as Westerners, interpret traditional Senegalese music the way that we do. The vocabulary and definitions used in this analysis are accepted by the entire musical community.

First off, it is important to take a look at why perhaps it is so often difficult to listen to traditional Senegalese music. Having already taken a look at the rhythmic basics through a modern lens, we can now look closer into the intricacies of the traditional art form. The

difficulty that we have in determining where a certain beat lies in this music can be attributed to what is called cross-rhythms. Cross rhythms are the “conflicting rhythmic patterns and accents” (Chernoff 1979, 46) that make it hard to determine the pulse of the rhythm. Often times, the individual rhythms that make up an entire piece are not hard at all. In fact, they are very simplistic to our standards. The fact that each rhythm is played simultaneously, but at different times with different accents (and often in different meter) is perplexing to the Western listener.

How these ensembles play together at the same time, then, still remains a bit unclear. The technical reason for this is due to a term dubbed by Robert F. Thompson as “apart-playing.” Apart-playing can easily be defined as the separation of each part. More technically, however, it refers to the contrapuntal or “staggering” entrances made by each drum within an ensemble. If one listens closely to the drum ensembles, it is common to hear different rhythms played in duple or triple meter. I was at a concert one evening listening to African choral music being accompanied by a drum ensemble. While one *sabar* was playing in duple meter with the vocalists, there was a shaker accompanying the group playing in a rapid triple meter as well. In music, when this three versus two appears at the same time, it is called hemiola. In general, anytime there is more than one meter playing at the same time, it is called polymeter. Hemiola and polymeter are very common in West African drumming and are considered normal to the average drummer even if they do not recognize it as these terms. To the Westerner, however, they are less often used making them difficult to comprehend.

Another very important aspect to look at when discussing African rhythm and drumming is the idea of a constant response. Response can be in the form of other rhythms or in the form of an observer (dancer). If polymeter and apart-playing create a continuous rhythmic structure in drumming, then response is the resulting necessity. When a dancer is

present to accompany drumming, the existence of response is at its best. While observing the music ensembles at the *Centre Culturel Blaise Sengor*, it was interesting to note the nonverbal communication between the musicians and the dancers. The dancers would begin to dance and the solo drummer would respond to each aspect of the dance by accentuating certain beats. In this sense, the drummer was responding to the style of the dance and “talking” to her. In the same way, the solo drummer can provide a critique of the dancer by his response or vice versa. If a drummer likes the dance, he may try to add his best flare to the music, but if it is only mediocre, he might stray from the ornamentation.

The ensemble itself provides within the plethora of rhythms, a responsive interaction. Each rhythm is built in to the entire sound in order to fill in every gap and create a constant sound. The tight sound that is created overall is what is so often difficult for the Western ear to understand because it seems like random drum playing. However, the connection of each rhythm as an ensemble creates a sense that the drummers are constantly responding in order to compliment one another and their particular rhythm. This response creates a unifying presence and is crucial for a solid performance from any drum ensemble.

Due to the differences between each rhythm that is played simultaneously, each musician must be well-educated on every single part. They each have the responsibility to the ensemble, therefore, and must show that they can play dependently amongst one another. The interdependence is very important to drumming ensembles. Each rhythm has equal importance, for when they are all played simultaneously is when the overall sound can be heard.

If interdependence between musicians is established and each rhythm is set in place, an ideal atmosphere is created for the solo or master drummer. Solo drumming is always a part of drumming and is difficult to pick up. A drummer may spend years practicing before

given the chance to solo (Diatta 2007). Once given the opportunity, there are certain rules that must be taken into consideration. A good master drummer uses his solo and improvisational skills to compliment the overall rhythm of the ensemble. Therefore, he may play something similar to another rhythm but with different accents to show off that particular rhythm. In other situations, he may switch meter to accentuate the cross-rhythms that exist. No matter what, though, the soloist understands that it is not his job to create flamboyant sounds to show off his own skills. Just as the soloist provides a critique to a dancer, he also provides a critique of the ensemble for which he plays and must not overpower them. Therefore the sense of unity is withheld.

### **Notating African Music**

Notating African music has long been a quest for Western musicians. It is logical that if one could write out the music in western notation, it would be simpler for anyone to understand and learn how to play African drums. Well, it's not exactly that easy. The existence of apart-playing, polymeter and other defining characteristics not only make it difficult to notate, but also do not necessarily make it easier to understand. After all, if a trained Western ear has difficulty telling what meter the rhythm is in, how is he going to notate it?

Moreover, western notation is not fit to describe in detail the necessities of drumming in Africa. The djembe for example, has three main sounds, but they are not defined pitches to be placed on lines and spaces in a bar of music. In fact, "the use of bar lines remains one of the most contested issues in transcriptions of African music" (Agawu 1995, 381). Plus, trying to find a common meter to write each accompaniment in is not only difficult, but once accomplished, may not necessarily do justice to the rhythms.

Probably the most important thing to note on this topic is the way in which drumming is learned in Senegal and in Africa. The pedagogical importance lies not in the ability to read music in the sense that Westerners have learned to read music. Instead, the process of “watching, doing, being criticized, revising and apprenticing” (Charry 2000) is much more important. This was apparent while taking djembe lessons with Jacques. I learned all of my music by him playing it to me and me playing it back to him. Once that was fine, we would play the rhythm sometimes for several minutes without stopping in order to improve, perfect and memorize the rhythm. This sort of learning is comparable to the learning passed on through griots for centuries. Just as they orally teach each generation the knowledge necessary to be a griot, so does the drummer orally learn the rhythms from the elders in the community.

This doesn't mean that nobody has ever attempted to notate African music. In fact, most of the literature read during research had some form of notation. Others even went as far as developing a new notation system that better suits the rhythmic complexities of African music. And even then, Willy Anku (1997) explains that some ethnomusicologists are becoming so well-trained in other forms of music and their notation that they are becoming “bi-musical.” No matter how notation is interpreted or viewed, though, the truth remains that it is of no importance to the native African for experience trumps all other forms of learning. Experience and observation are the most essential elements in developing a sense of African rhythm.

Because careful observation is key to the process of learning, it could explain to some extent why music is “in the veins and blood of the Senegalese people” (Bakayoko 2007). Africans are raised with music all around them and because it is such a participatory event, they are driven to absorb the cultural significances that go hand-in-hand with the music.

## V. ANALYSIS

In Laura C. Boulton's (1937) article entitled *Some Aspects of West African Music* she alludes to the idea that music is the most vital component and form of expression to the native African. Furthermore, she explains how music is intricately placed into all forms of everyday life from work to play to social scenes to religious events. In other words, it is nearly impossible to conduct a study on West African music without looking at the cultural significance of the music because the two are inseparable.

The first time that I witnessed this in real life came not long after arriving in Senegal. While practicing the djembe in a workshop with other classmates, we were playing a traditional West African rhythm when a lady walked by and immediately recognized the sound. She stopped and began to dance in time to the rhythm. I found this especially interesting considering that we didn't know her, but she was still welcome to come and dance to the music being offered. This is just one example of how music brings people together as a community in Africa.

This idea of music being life in Africa manifested itself on several occasions during my research. The importance of music was seen at the political meetings during the presidential election season, in the village to celebrate finishing work, to help during work, etc. One day I was walking home from school and saw a team of construction workers building a house. The men did not have a pulley system to lift their supplies, so in order to get their dirt to the roof of the house, the men threw it by shovel from one level to the next. I could see a small group of five men or so shoveling in rhythm while singing a song and hoisting the dirt in unison to the roof. It was interesting to note that instead of repeatedly counting to three and then tossing the dirt (as we might do in the US), they used a song instead to help them through the labor.

While taking djembe lessons, a day didn't go by at the beach when a person didn't come up and somehow acknowledge us playing music. Whether in the simple form of a greeting from a stranger, a person doing a dance, an individual working out to the rhythm of the djembe or the occasional passer-by stopping to play with us, the response was always there in some form or another. It all comes back to music being a social framework to the African. Music is a community and everyone in Senegal is a citizen of that community.

Just as people in the US may jump up and start shouting to their favorite song, so will the Senegalese get up and begin dancing to the presence of rhythm, whether it be in the streets at a festival or in a nightclub downtown. This indisputable phenomenon is a direct tie to the cultural importance of music and its rhythm.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

In Senegal, music has always been an important form of expression. Today, just as in the past, traditional music's existence allows the Senegalese people to create a community. Overall, though, rhythm is the foundation of the community and is the basis for all forms of music, traditional or modern. The djembe, present in almost every ensemble in the country, is a prime (if not perfect) tool to look closer at the music society as a whole. By learning the djembe, I not only got a taste for the style of drumming, but also was able to identify several key components to rhythm and how they relate to Senegalese music and culture. In conjunction, I grasped the traditional idea of learning through experience which has been the pedagogical tradition for so long.

This paper should reflect the importance of music, rhythm, and culture in Senegal in a way best fit for a Westerner to understand. It is my intention that in the future, one can use this paper to help understand not just the musicological aspects so crucial to Senegalese music, but also the cultural significance of these aspects in everyday life.

## VII. APPENDICES











## VIII. GLOSSARY

**Afropop** – African pop music played on electric instruments and inspired by Western pop or soul music.

**Apart-playing** – The separation of parts through independent relationships and cross-rhythmic relationships.

**Contrapuntal (Counterpoint)** – A compositional tool using two or more melodies and/or rhythms at the same time, most often with separate entrances.

**Cross-rhythm** – Conflicting rhythmic patterns and accents found in complicated rhythms.

**Downbeat** – The first beat of every measure (the strongest beat in Western music).

**Duple Meter** – Metrical organization of two beats to a measure.

**Ethnomusicology** – The comparative study of music of different cultures.

**Hemiola** – Metrical pattern when music is played simultaneously in triple and duple meter.

**Mbalax** – Popular music native to Senegal featuring traditional Wolof rhythms and traditional instruments from Senegal.

**Meter** – Organizing rhythm into beats and notated in the form of measures.

**Mouridism** – A Senegalese Islamic brotherhood formed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Cheikh Amadou Bamba.

**Negritude** – An ideological position affirming the independent nature, quality and validity of Black culture.

**Offbeat** – A weak beat; not accentuated and found between stronger beats.

**Polymeter** – The existence of two or more meters or rhythms being played simultaneously.

**Polyphony** – The existence of two or more melodies being played simultaneously

**Triple Meter** – Metrical organization of three beats to a measure.

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