Ceëb ak Jën:
*Deconstructing Senegal’s National Plate in Search of Cultural Values.*

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Our cuisine is the product of our history, our view of the world, our dreams, our fantasies, and also our worries ("Notre cuisine est le produit de notre histoire, de notre vision du monde, de nos rêves, de nos fantaisies et aussi des angoisses.").

-Aminata Sow Fall, 2002.

“Food is, anthropologically speaking…. the first need; but ever since man has ceased living off wild berries, this need has been highly structured...”

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ABSTRACT

_Ceebu jën_, Senegal’s national plate of rice and fish, is an integral part of diet among the Senegalese despite differences in religious, ethnic, and geographic identity. Due to the plate’s democratic nature in Senegalese culture this study deconstructs the significance of the plate in relation to Senegalese values placed tradition, personal pride, community, and national identity. This study argues that ceebu jën’s widespread presence and cultural reflexivity finds its source in the universal accessibility of the meal.
INTRODUCTION

Senegalese culture is intrinsically tied to Senegalese cuisine. A country of numerous ethnicities (Wolof, Pulaar, Sereer, Toucouleur to name a few) and a final destination for many étrangers (foreigners) of poorer West-African countries, the diversity of Senegal is unmatched by much of the world. Each major ethnicity of Senegal has contributed to the macro-culture through numerous channels culminating in the Senegalese arts; dance, music, textiles, sculpture, sous-verre, and cuisine. Senegal is a veritable melting pot of culture, a culture that often manifests itself in the preparation and consumption of food. To understand Senegalese culture, one must also understand what, why, and how food is consumed.

Anthropologically speaking, it is no surprise that culture can be learned from the evaluation of a population’s eating habits and beliefs that surround food. Extensive anthropology of food research over that last century has validated this approach to the study of culture (Mintz & Du Bois 2002; Counihan & Van Esterik). “Food is communicative” of culture (Barthes 99999) and through the evaluation of food systems and consumption habits one can gather information on cultural beliefs surrounding society, religion, and any other number of other topics.

In attempting to better understand Senegalese cultural values, this study takes ceebu jën, Senegal’s national dish, and uses it as a lens through which to see culture. The first step to understanding the cultural values that are manifested in ceebu jën is to understand the complexities of what ceebu jën is. Looking at the preparation (modification) and consumption of the meal will help define the physical and ideological identity of ceebu jën in relation to Senegalese culture. Exploring the cultural food rules of
ceebu jën- what is expected, what is accepted, and what is rejected, will further reinforce comprehension of ceebu jën’s central placement in Senegalese daily life (Counihan 1992).

After describing the physical ingredients and preparation of ceebu jën, this paper will go on to discuss the preparation and consumption of the dish in light of cultural Senegalese values. The value placed on tradition, personal pride, community, and national identity will be revealed through the treatment of the dish and opinions that surround the cooking and eating of the meal. In allocating value to ceebu jën as a vehicle of culture, this paper will then argue that the centrality of ceebu jën to Senegalese culture finds its roots in the dominance of Wolof culture and the continual affect of colonialism on the West African country.

**METHODOLOGY**

To reach the previously stated objectives, research began with archival research and community observation. During this time, observation was informally focused on Senegalese eating habits and diet preferences. Informal interviews and conversation conducted in anticipation of the month-long research period also revealed various shared Senegalese values. After the research period began, the project design continued to rely predominately on participation observation and interview to elicit the bulk of the data.

Observation took place in restaurants, in private homes and at various food markets around Senegal. In restaurants and in homes, observations were made on how ceebu jën is presented and what constitutes ceebu jën. Participant observation began when the researcher set out to learn how to prepare ceebu jën in its various forms.

Ceébu jën was prepared by the researcher eight times in various settings; private
homes, in small ‘restos,’ or roadside informal restaurants which serve a set plate; in Dakar, in Rufisque, in Keur Sadaro, in St. Louis; in rural and urban environments. Each of these cooking sessions were typically followed by an hour-long interviews conducted in French.

The vast majority of information was gathered from formal and informal interviews with the above-described participants. Participants were classified into one of two categories becoming “formal” or “informal” participants. Formal participants were asked open-ended interviews based off of the interview questions that can be found in the “Appendix” section of this paper. Questions aimed to elicit information about the cultural importance of ceebu jën to the participant and ascertain whether ceebu jën was seen as a meal explicitly Senegalese.

Many of the formal participants also agreed to cook ceebu jën with the researcher and answered questions in reference to the preparation of the dish. Informal participants were not formally interviewed based on the questions, but were solicited for their knowledge and opinions on ceebu jën, Senegalese cooking, and the country’s values. Informal participants did not cook as part of their participation in this study. Both formal and informal participants verbally gave their consent to be participants in this study and were asked if their answers to interview questions and cooking techniques might be shared in this paper. Verbal consent was the preferred method of attaining informed consent due to literacy and language limitations paired with the unobtrusive nature of the study and its inquiry.

Married women with children account for the bulk of this study’s participants. Ages ranged from mid-twenties to late seventies, with varying levels of education and
employment statuses. Some of the participants had *bonnes* (hired help to clean and cook) who regularly cooked meals for the family, but all of the women included in this study had first-hand knowledge of how to prepare and present *ceebu jën*.

Given Senegal’s strict gender roles, women remain the population most knowledgeable about cooking and in turn, *ceebu jën* preparation. While university males and other young single men sometimes cook for themselves, they rarely prepare *ceebu jën* due to the amount of time and attention the meal requires. Thus, men, both youth and adult, remain on the periphery of this study on *ceebu jën*. The men that were informally interviewed were husbands and acquaintances of women that were official study participants. Interviews (informal and formal) often turned into mixed-gender focus groups when husbands chimed in with their own opinions. When this was the case, men involved often referred to their wives for verification of information shared.

Participants originated from five of the different ethnic groups found in Senegal (Wolof, Saraxole, Pulaar, Bambara, Sereer), though over half of the formal participants in this study were Wolof. The study’s participant makeup is not demonstrative of Senegalese ethnic percentages, but an effort was made to include ethnicities other than Wolof to add depth of perspective.

Research was conducted in the four different locations of Dakar, Saint Louis, Rufisque, and Keur Sadaro; all cities along Senegal’s Western coast. The various locations were chosen for specific reasons aside from practicality. Dakar served as the foundational area where the majority of research was conducted. Not only was it fitting to conduct research on Senegal’s national plate in its capital city, but Dakar is also the country’s largest city in terms of population and a region of ethnic and socio-economic
convergence. The importance of the fishing trade in the port city’s local economy should also be recognized; seafood accounted for 22% of all Senegalese exports in 2005 (Ndiaye 2007).

Ceebu jën was cooked five times in Dakar. The first and third session were located in private homes, the other three took place in two different restaurant settings. Three of these cooking sessions took place in the first and second week of the research period and were paramount in establishing a working knowledge of how to cook ceebu jën and the consistencies in preparation techniques that persisted throughout each cooking session. These three sessions, two in private homes and one in a restaurant, also helped the researcher to begin making comparisons between restaurant ceebu jën, that which is primarily a product to be consumed, and household ceebu jën, that which is primarily a meal to be eaten.

The first two weeks of the research period were also spent in Rufisque, Senegal a suburb of Dakar. Rufisque was an ideal place to look for differences and similarities between urban and suburban preparation techniques. After Rufisque, ceebu jën was cooked in Ker Sadaro, a village 7km from Thies. Little electricity and geographic isolation provided a window into inland village preparation of ceebu jën.

Ceebu jën was then cooked once on the half-island, half-coastal city of Saint Louis, Senegal. Saint Louis, Senegal’s first capital city and is also the supposed birthplace of ceebu jën. It was on the island of Saint Louis that Penda Mbaye, a 19th Century cook for the governor, first created ceebu jën as it is known today (Sy 2005). Saint Louis not only had historical significance, but the city prides itself on its method of cooking ceebu jën and claims to use the freshest fish and vegetables one can find in Senegal.
The largest limitation of the study was time. With the constraint of a three-week research period, travel was limited carefully chosen to get the most out of the time frame given. Time limits restricted the depth of the study as well as the berth. There was not time to cook in multiple venues in each location visited. Adding the fact that ceebu jën takes upwards of three hours to prepare, the researcher was also limited to the work she could get done each day, as cooking ceebu jën was a full-day commitment.

Part One: Ceebu jën, which is *riz au poisson*, which is rice and fish.

**OBSERVATION RESULTS**

“Each person who cooks has her own style of doing it. Sometimes the difference [of taste] is also with the ingredients.” (“*Chaque personne qui cuisine a sa façon de faire. Quelquefois la différence c’est avec les ingrédients aussi.*”)

The Senegalese diet is best characterized by its reliance on rice, wheat flour, and other refined grains. Rice has been grown historically in the lush, but politically-unstable Casamance region of Southern Senegal. One can also find rice fields along the Northern coast of Senegal between Dakar and St. Louis. Rice is found in most lunchtime meals and up to 69% of a Senegalese’s daily caloric intake comes from starches (Grigg 1996, 413).

Historically, with the introduction of French colonialism both rice and peanut oil were imposed presences on the Senegalese diet of fish and millet. The production of rice and peanuts however encouraged consumption of the two products. As prices rose based off of high demand, peanut oil and native rice became too expensive for the average Senegalese family. They could no longer afford the products that their diets had become dependent on. Peanut oil is for the most part exported, and only 15% of all rice produced in 2007 remained in country (Lançon, Benz 2007) While regional and ethnic variances persist (less oil is used in the southern regions, for example), the relative universal
availability of rice and oil make them staples in the everyday consumption of the Senegalese cuisine.

The rice and oil dependent meals *mafe*, *yassa*, and *ceebu jën* are arguably Senegal’s most well-known plates. It is *ceebu jën*, however, Senegal’s national dish and the dish of foremost interest in this paper, that is the most complicated and time consuming of the three dishes. Ceebu jën, or “rice and fish” comes from the Wolof fisherman of Senegal but is now popular throughout the country and eaten by the majority of the state. An informal estimate, which circulates among the Senegalese, claims that at least 90% of the country eats ceebu jën. While this is a hyperbolic statement, it is not uncommon for ceebu jën to be served in some households upwards of three or four times a week.

Ceeb (rice) u jën (fish) may be stripped down to its most essential elements and created quite inexpensively with *yaaboy* (herring), imported perfumed rice, salt, and oil. Rice, fish, and oil, happen to be three of Senegal’s major exports. Due to the price of these native products skyrocketing, cheaper alternatives are now in use. In current day preparation, imported perfumed rice and imported vegetable oil are typically used for ceebu jën. More over, many participants expressed a preference for the perfumed rice stating that it had more flavor than its native alternative.

Those four ingredients do not, however, combine to create what a Senegalese would call “bon ceebu jën” or “vrai ceebu jën.” In ceebu jën’s most commonly consumed form the dish includes rice, oil, but also at least two types of fish, mussel, parsley, garlic, bouillon and a wide assortment of vegetables; which include, but are not limited to:
pumpkin, turnip, cassava, tomato, carrot, eggplant, heirloom tomatoes, onion, peppers of numerous varieties. It is not uncommon to see ceebu jën served with all of these ingredients if not more.

As far as varieties of ceebu jën go, there are two main types of plates in Senegal, those that are tomato-based and those that are not. Ceebu jën can be either “red” (ceebu jën xonkh, tomato-based) or “white,” (ceebu jën weex), which is sometimes also known as “ceebu jën simple.” Ceebu xonkh is the more costly of the two and is served less during the dry season (hivernage) because of the increased price of vegetables during the season. Both red and white ceebu jën can be accompanied by a variety of sauces, the majority of which are used specifically with ceebu xonkh or ceebu weex.

Served with its head cut off, the yaaboy (if served with the meal and not merely used to add flavor in the preparation) is easily distinguishable from other fish. There are many bones throughout the fish’s meat, which are picked off the fish after the meal is served. Smaller bones are eaten, but many participants also lamented the difficulty of eating the herring, despite the appreciated taste the fish bestows upon the dish.

While contemporary consumption habits are not reflective of the historical use of native rice and oil, fish usage still relies completely on the Senegalese fishing industry. The inevitable surplus of ocean goods that comes with Senegal’s coastline drive down the cost of fish, particularly the price of yaaboy. In the early afternoons after morning fish markets, fish vendors can be heard in the neighborhood streets, yelling “yaaboy,” and alerting St. Louisiannes to the limited-time availability of discounted fish. Sold sometimes as inexpensively as three fish for 50 CFA (50 CFA is roughly $0.10 USD), the fish necessary to make ceebu jën also becomes the cheapest source of dinner available.
With buckets or platters of fish balanced on their heads, the (usually) female vendors answer to femmes de ménage opening their front doors to bargain for the dinner. While the yaaboy is a fish used in many plates, particularly in water-rich Saint Louis, it remains that yaaboy is one of the three pyramidal ingredients used in every ceebu jën dish. Aside from yaaboy, there is a multitude of pricier, higher quality fish (thiof is the most sought after) of many varieties that are optional additions to the national dish.

Regardless of the type of fish used there are two ways that fish is cooked with the preparation of ceebu jën. To make ceebu jën as a “St. Louisianne” one boils the fish with the dish’s vegetables in a large pot of water, oil, and if one is making ceebu xonhk, tomato paste or fresh tomatoes. This differs from the Dakar-dominant practice of frying the fish in oil before adding water and vegetables. “Saint Louisianne” ceebu jën is also accredited with the freshest fish and vegetables and many of the cooks recognized the superior health benefits of St. Louisianne preparation.

The vegetables used in the preparation of ceebu jën tend to rely on a) the availability of the vegetable, b) the financial accessibility of the vegetable and c) the personal preferences of those who will be eating the meal.

Vegetables hold an interesting role in relation to the preparation of ceebu jën. While usually included in the presentation, vegetables are often pushed off to the side of the plate and let uneaten. This is especially true in the case of the bitter eggplants, perhaps the most disliked vegetable to be used in the preparation of ceebu jën. While everyone the researcher talked to was convinced the bitter eggplant added flavor to the broth in which to cook the rice, the eggplant was almost always pushed to the side of the plate with the bones of the eaten fish.
While ceebu jën requires the minimum of rice, fish, and oil there are quite a few *ameliorations*, or improvements, to ceebu jën that have become standard practice in everyday ceebu jën. While not necessary by definition, many participants considered *roof* (also spelled *roff*), a leaf mixture stuffed into the ceebu jën fish, a necessary *amelioration* each time they cook ceebu jën. The most frequently observed way of making *roof* is with a parsley base. Using a mortar and pestle, whole dried red pepper and black pepper are pounded into a semi-fine powder. After the pepper has been ground, garlic and parsley are added into the mortar and ground into a rough paste.

Occasionally, parsley was sometimes substituted for a few leaves of cabbage or other types of edible leaf that were not bought but picked off of various native trees. This phenomenon usually occurs when the cook does not have the money to buy parsley along with all the other ingredients ceebu jën requires. The Keur Sadaro preparation, the most economically depressed and geographically remote of this study’s locations, used a combination of cabbage and tree leaves. A couple of cabbage leaves were simply picked off the cabbage to be served whole on the bed of rice and added to a few leaves found on a nearby tree providing shade for livestock.

The *roof* paste, regardless of what green leaf is used, is pinched into the already scaled fish before the fish is fried or boiled. The pinches of *roof* are inserted into each fish that will be served on the meal plate, *yaaboy* and *thiof* alike. One can create the holes in the flesh of the fish with a knife or a finger, typically two symmetrical holes are made in each piece of fish.

*Nokos*, a ground mixture of onion, green onion, dried red pepper, garlic, black pepper, salt or bouillon, and occasionally hibiscus leaf powder is the next ingredient
mélange used in the preparation of ceebu jën. It is now often substituted with bouillon alone, specifically MAGGI Nokos, which imitates the flavors created by the mixture listed above. In eight preparations of ceebu jën it was created four times. It is to be added to the ceebu jën broth after the fish and vegetables have been strained out, but before the rice is added in to cook it.

*Beugeudie* is sauce added to ceebu jën at the time of presentation and can be served with either ceebu weex and ceebu xonkh, prepared apart from the rice. A mossy green and seemingly greasy consistency, beugeudie is based off of hibiscus leaves and okra though pimon and bouillon were both added throughout the course of observation. To make beugeudie, hibiscus or *bissap*, is boiled in water enough to cover and then combined in the mortar with okra that has cooked along with the rest of the vegetables and fish. The okra and hibiscus are then whipped or pounded into a smooth thick sauce served on the edge of the plate in tablespoon-sized dollops.

When a red tomato sauce is served with ceebu weex, the meal is then often called *ceebu [jën]goor-jigeen* (“rice boy-girl,” more correctly translated as “homosexual rice”). For Senegal, a state where homosexuality is illegal and a jail-able offense, this colloquial term refers to the “unnatural” combination of white cooked rice and a tomato sauce. While “unnatural,” *ceebu goor-jigeen* is a nonetheless appreciated adaption. None of the women in the study expressed any negative associations they had with the dish’s taste or the affectionate name it had been given. On the contrary, many women described preparing *ceebu goor-jigeen* for their families on account of the taste.

Ceebu jën diaga, what many participants cited as the best ceebu jën one can prepare is often made in honor of guests or an *fête* (holiday). *Diaga*, a sauce served only
with ceebu xonkh, is a tomato-based sauce containing small dime-sized balls of fish and beef or sheep, carrots, and onions. The semi-elaborate process of forming the meatballs and frying each of the ingredients separately before mixing them into the tomato sauce takes too much time for everyday ceebu jën, but many participants claimed that *diaga* sauce is a necessity if one is entertaining company with ceebu jën. Of the eight times cooked, *diaga* sauce was only prepared in Rufisque.

One could claim that bouillon is the fourth essential ingredient needed for the preparation of today’s ceebu jën. While many understand the health risks that go along with the consumption of MSG-laden bouillon, it is still used as the main source of flavor in the majority of Senegalese meals. The typical ceebu jën cook with use a variety of bouillons in her preparation of the dish. Each bouillon has a particular flavor and many of the participants expressed their appreciation for the combination of multiple bouillon brands and flavors together. The most popular brands used are ADJA, JUMBO, and MAGGI. ADJA, comes in two primary forms, that which is tomato based and that which is not. ADJA is used most commonly with ceebu xonkh and sometimes replaces the fresh tomatoes in “ceebu jën Penda Mbaye,” (ceebu jën xonhk with the freshest fish and tomatoes available) to save the cook money. JUMBO and MAGGI are often in conjunction with each other to add seasoning at various stages of ceebu jën preparation. Of highest interest in MAGGI “nokos” which is a bouillon designed to be used explicitly for Senegalese fish dishes. MAGGI “nokos” is to be used in addition to or in replacement of *nokos*, the previously described ground mixture of green pepper, onion, garlic, dried pima pepper, and black pepper.
Apart from sauces, certain garnishes are also common additions to ceebu jën. *Dakhar*, or tamarin seeds, are often bought at the market and added to the meal to as a sour-sweet balance to the salty-sweet ceebu jën. To prepare the seeds, they are rinsed in cold water and then soaked in warm water (or a portion of broth that the vegetables and fish have been cooked in). The warm water is occasionally sugared to tone down the sour nature of the tamarin. An alternative to dakhar, which achieves the same prerogative, is to simply serve the ceebu jën with a wedge of lime. Lime is sometimes served in conjunction with the tamarin seed, particularly in restaurants where cooks do not always know the taste preferences of those served.

**INTERVIEW RESULTS**

“Ceebu jën dafa neex.” (Ceebu jën is delicious).

Ceebu jën’s importance to the Senegalese extends itself beyond that of being a staple meal. More than the readily available ingredients and inexpensive nature of the dish, ceebu jën is a complex vehicle of cultural conveying Senegalese values and perspectives. In particular, ceebu jën’s preparation, presentation, consumption, and popularity show the cultural emphasis placed on tradition, personal pride, community, and national identity. The evolution of the recipe and the advancing dominance of the plate internationally also show the changing nature of Senegalese culture in the face of colonialism and bombardment of Western society.

**Ceebu jën reflects value of tradition.**

Senegalese recipes and how to prepare them are passed down generationally, when a mother cooks her daughter is almost always her side. Even if the own cook’s
children are grown it is not uncommon to see young girls called to the kitchen to help aunts, grandmothers, or neighbors prepare a meal. With little moderation, the young girl accepts her mothers way of cooking the dish and years later can often be cooking it nearly the exact way her mother did, or at least saying she prepares it the same as her mother (or other matriarchal figure) who taught her.

In terms of ceebu jën preparation all of the formal female participants learned under the age of 14, many as young as 6. While the youngest children are not expected to know step by step how to make ceebu jën, by the early teens, most females who have helped their mothers in the kitchen will be able to prepare ceebu jën, and many other dishes, by themselves. In families with multiple female offspring, many women described how the older daughters would cook with younger siblings assisting to acclimate themselves to the kitchen and prepare themselves for the time when they were the oldest female child in the house (Ba 2009). Mothers and older sisters also sent the younger siblings (boys included) to the boutique to buy ingredients forgotten at the market.

Many of the participants, while claiming to hold fast to their mother’s and grandmother’s recipes, did cite certain changes, namely the addition of bouillon, augmentation of oil, and decreasing quality of vegetables (Fall 2009). The two oldest participants of this study shared their concerns about the amount of oil and bouillon used in the preparation of ceebu jën (and most cooking) today (Sidibe et Sidibe 2009).

iii. Ceebu jën reflects importance of community.

Senegalese meals, with the exception of breakfast, are traditionally eaten off of a communal platter. The platter is placed on a tablecloth or mat laid on the ground and shoes are removed before one steps onto the mat. Family or friends gather around the
meal with women typically sitting on the floor and men sitting on short benches or balancing in a squat position to eat. Some families serve meals in gender segregated parties, the same meal being served on all platters, but men around one plate and women and children around another. This gender-segregation is seen in higher frequency in rural communities as opposed to the more urban cities of Saint Louis and Dakar.

Despite the recent erosion of these historically dominant Senegalese eating habits due to the increased influence of the Western world, meals are consistently eaten in community and rarely by one individual alone. Many of the study’s participants referred to their distaste for meals eaten in solitude and the perceived personal ills that can be traced back to eating alone. One participant, citing occasions in the past where she was forced to eat her meals alone stated,

“It’s very difficult to eat alone and have the ability to eat enough. You don’t have enough will. But, when you eat in a group you eat, you talk, therefore, you don’t register that you’ve eaten a lot, you can eat a lot, you can eat a large quantity and when you drink some water you feel as if you’ve eaten too much.” (“C'est tres difficile de manger seul et de pouvoir manger assez. Tu n'as pas beaucoup de volonte. Alors que quand tu es en groupe tu manges tu parles, donc, tu ne te rends pas compte que tu manges beaucoup, tu peux en manger une grande quantite et quand tu bois de l'eau tu sens que tu as trop manger.”) (Fall 2009).

The same participant later shared,

“Psychologically, I think it’s good for my health to eat with others but all alone it’s as if I’m a robot. With others I eat, I talk, I drink.” (“Psychologiquement je pense que c'est bon pour ma sante de manger avec les autres mais toute seule c'est comme si j'etais un robot. Avec les autres, je mange, je discute, je bois.”) (Fall 2009).

While all Senegalese meals tend to be eaten in community as described above, ceebu jën is prepared specifically to be eaten in mass. The preparation of the dish is both too time-consuming and too labor-intensive to be prepared for one person. One Saint Louisianne shared that even if a person lives alone, if one cooks ceebu jën, “you’ll find a friend, a
sister, a neighbor… preferring to invite others if you cook ceebu jën” (“On va trouver un ami, une souer, un voisin... tu prefères d’inviter quel que gens si tu cuisine le ceebu jën.”) (Sidibe 2009).

**Ceebu jën reflects personal pride in the kitchen.**

Participant’s eagerly pointed out the strengths and specialties of their ceebu jën in comparison to other recipes. Some boasted of their lack of bouillon, others their discerning choice of fish or vegetables, others their constant inclusion of diaga. For those who boasted their consistency of preparation- always buying the same ingredients regardless of price changes, ceebu jën becomes a way of showing financial wealth and pride in having that wealth. For those who boasted of the health benefits (many vegetables, a minimum amount of bouillon used) pride was taken in possessing knowledge that others lacked.

Participant’s were also quick to point out that the possession of a delicious hand, makes all the difference in cooking ceebu jën. A Wolof belief states that there is more taste on the hand than on the spoon (Sidibe 2009). “Your hand is delicious,” (“sa loxo neex na!”) one male participant explained, was one of his favorite compliments to give to women who had cooked for him. Reinforcing the appropriateness of this compliment, many women prepare ceebu jën as a way of pleasing one’s husband. If one is a good cook, it is better than being physically beautiful (Ndour 2009). The researcher was warned however, that if pride is to be taken in one’s cooking one should have the skill to back it up. The participant went on to tell the researcher that if one did not cook well, “your husband will hit you!” (“ton mari, va te frapper”!) In this, the pride the
participants take in culinary knowledge and skill, ceebu jën once again becomes more
than nourishment for the body but a source of pride and confidence.

**Ceebu jën reflects to National Identity.**

Ceebu jën is also a vehicle of national identity for many Senegalese. How the
meal is cooked, the ingredients used, the taste and smell of the dish are all intrinsically
tied (for many of the participants) to an identity that is exclusively Senegalese. Aside
from the emotions of patriotism ceebu jën elicits, the countrywide accessibility to the dish
also makes it an appropriate national plate.

In the last decade, the international presence of ceebu jën has spread with the
upsurge of Senegalese migrants who have moved to Europe and the Americas.

Emigrant Senegalese have inevitably transplanted their primary culture to the secondary
and ceebu jën can now be found in “Little Senegal” neighborhoods around the world.
Eating ceebu jën, regardless of location, reinforces identity and connects the alienated
Senegalese to his native country (Gasparetti 2009).

Ceebu jën has the ability to transport the traveler back to their home. One
participant shares:

“My husband has travelled a lot, he says that when he travels outside of Senegal
and he sees a restaurant and on the menu “ceebu jën,” he will go into the restaurant to
buy the ceebu jën regardless if it’s expensive. Because he has nostalgia and it reminds
him of his country.” (“Mon mari a beaucoup voyage, il dit que quand il va a l'exterieur
du Senegal et qu'il voit un resto et dans le menu "ceebu jën", il va entrer dans ce resto
pour acheter ce ceebu jën meme si c'est cher. Parce qu'il est nostalgique et ca lui
rappelle son pays.”) (Fall 2009).

Another participant recounted a similar sentiment:

“When you are in Europe, the only thing in your head is to return to Senegal to eat
ceebu jën.” (“Quand tu es en Europe, la seule chose qui est dans ta tete c'est de revenir
au Senegal pour manger du ceebu jën.”) (Ba 2009)
Other participants recounted that their relatives abroad often buy *dakhar, gëg* and *yéét* on visits in Senegal to transport back their homes around the world (Sidibe 2009). The international transportation of ceebu jën ingredients not readily found outside of Senegal also testifies to the importance of creating Senegalese identity outside of the country.

In evaluation of the Senegalese diet one sees a pattern emerging— that of a dependence of oil and rice. Thus, with the inexpensive source of protein found in fish and the seemingly never-ending availability of rice and oil, the foundation of the Senegalese diet is conveniently the foundation of its national dish. It is in this, the perceived universal availability, popularity and appreciation of ceebu jën that the dish is again representative of culture and specifically Senegalese national pride.

**Part Three: Anthropological Theory Applied.**

**ANALYSIS**

“*Ceebu jën is more than a meal, it’s a tradition,*” or at least that is what the researcher claimed in recent conversation. The response of the group, graduate students at Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, to this claim, was positive: “*Ahh, tu commence de comprendre,*” (Ahh, you are beginning to understand) said one student as he leaned back (Sow 2009).

Ceebu jën has been presented as both a meal to be eaten and as cultural entity with the capacity to illustrate Senegalese values in variant ways. Theories for why ceebu jën has evolved into such an inclusive mirror of culture must accept that ceebu jën is reflective of Senegalese culture because it is omnipresent throughout the state. If one can realize this transcendent quality of ceebu jën, than only one question remains: why is ceebu jën so widely accepted as the national plate when it in fact originated from the Wolof ethnicity and the Wolof ethnicity alone?
Ceebu jën is seen by many of the participants as a meal that transcends ethnicity, socio-economic status and age. In formal interviews, participants were asked why ceebu jën was Senegal’s national plate. Dominant opinion expressed that ceebu jën became a national dish because it was universally eaten and appreciated by most of the country. “Everyone” (“tout le monde”), said one participant “can eat ceebu jën” (“peut manger ceebu jën”) (Siby 2009).

The following analysis offers two explanations for the deeply intertwining relationship between ceebu jën and culture. This first explanation lies in the democratic accessibility of the ceebu jën. Because the ingredients of the meal are financially accessible and geographically plentiful, populations other than the Wolof ethnicity have adopted the meal as a foundational plate in their diet as well. Functionally, ceebu jën requires a minimum of easily acquired ingredients. From a Marxist position, ceebu jën is inexpensive to prepare, such that the meal has been widely adopted by the poor as a national plate over more expensive alternatives.

It is a dish that almost all Senegalese have the financial means to make. Participants commonly stressed the idea that ceebu jën could be made regardless of the money one could spend, “one can make ceebu jën if you have six hundred cents or twenty thousand” (“on peut faire ceebu jën meme si on a six-cent… ou vingt mille” (Diallo 2009). The universal accessibility to the dish also reinforces ceebu jën’s appropriation of national identity. While realistically it is a meal like any other, pleasing to some in taste and displeasing to others, ceebu jën gains significance as the “democratic” meal; one that can be eaten by anyone regardless of their financial wealth.

It is the financial and geographic availability of ceebu jën’s three foundational
ingredients which predominately contribute to the meal’s democratic nature. The universal use of *yaaboy* and attested necessity of the fish further demonstrates the democracy of ceebu jën and explains the widespread consumption of ceebu jën in Senegal.

**CONCLUSION**

Ceebu jën comes in variable forms and changes its appearance and physical composition based on season availability, financial accessibility, personal preference, and also in the face of special occasions (such as a guest or a feast). It can be a plate of abundance but also be stripped away of its extraneous ingredients to leave a meal as simple as fried *yaaboy* on rice. While almost all Senegalese have access to some form of ceebu jën, the disparity between those with the access to location and money and those who are poor and removed from a supply of local fish should not be overlooked. There will always be an inevitable difference for those who live at port cities and those who live further inland. Likewise, there will forever remain some incomparability between those who have the money and desire to buy a “gros possion” (large, good fish) and many fresh vegetables and those who have financial constraints limiting them to small yaaboy and a few root vegetables. The amount of *ameliorations* one can add or subtract from ceebu jën both complicates and expands the definition of ceebu jën. Ceebu jën has a flexible identity and manifests itself in multiple forms.

In its multiple forms, ceebu jën is reflective of larger Senegalese culture because of a shared appreciation and respect for the meal and its significance to the diverse, all-encompassing Senegalese nation. The variety of forms ceebu jën can take and remain the national dish reflects the absorbent, diverse Senegalese culture and the values it holds.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study asks many more questions than it answers. Due to the time constraints of this study, it has many flaws and the research remains incomplete, begging for further analysis. Recommendations for future research would be the comparison of ceebu jën preparation and consumption based on ethnicity. Ceebu jën is rich in oil, but the Wolof are known for their excessive use of oil in comparison to others. When other ethnicities prepare ceebu jën does the quantity of oil change? Are there particular trends of preparation that can be connected to certain ethnicities? Or is ceebu jën truly a national plate, one that all ethnicities identify equally to?

Another suggestion for further study is an in-depth look at generational differences in ceebu jën. Interviewing mother-daughter pairs, comparing their methods of cooking and identification with ceebu jën could uncover wonders about the adaption of the younger generation to the growing influence of the West.
APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. Combien de fois cuisinez-vous le ceebu jën par semaine?

2. Est ce qu'il des fêtes spéciales pour faire le ceebu jën?

3. Est ce que vous faites le ceebu jën pendant la semaine seulement ou aussi pendant les weekend?

4. Est ce que vous avez votre propre recette pour préparer le ceebu jën ou vous faites comme tout le monde?

5. Quels ingrédients font le meilleur ceebu jën?

6. Est ce que la façon de faire le ceebu en change selon les saisons ?

7. Qui vous a enseigné à faire le ceebu jën?

8. Est ce qu'il ya une différence de faire le ceebu jën quand vous avez des invites?

9. Pourquoi est-ce que vous pensez que le ceebu jën est le plat national?

10. Pensez-vous qu'il y a une imporance du ceebu jën pour les Senegalais?
Sources Cited


Interviews Cited

**Dakar Interviews**


Abdoulaye Diallo. Professor of Sociology at UCAD. Discussion with advisor, 6 May 2009. Handwritten notes.

**Rufisque Interview**

Mame Bineta Fall. Language Teacher. Interview by author, 18 April 2009. HLM Rufisque. Transcription from tape.

Name unknown. Elementary school teacher. Discussion with author, consent approved, witnessed by Fall. 18 April 2009. HLM Rufisque.

**Saint Louis Interviews**

