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# Once Upon Our Time: The Ancient Art of Storytelling in a Contemporary West Africa

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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Once Upon Our Time: The Ancient Art of Storytelling in a Contemporary West Africa

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## **Abstract**

Storytelling is an art form that has been flourishing in Senegal since the country's origin.

Traditionally, storytelling was a communal endeavor, oral and interactive. As modernity crept up on Senegal storytelling began to change, oral tradition only partially surviving in rural settings, almost completely obsolete in big cities. I am particularly interested in how Wolof tales and oral storytelling are surviving in a modernizing Senegal. I think that storytelling is a form of cultural education for children and adults alike, and that preservation is dire for the survival of this art. I will discuss story structure, content and the opinions of local storytellers in the form of a podcast. Through examining these topics, I will be revealing how important storytelling is to Senegalese culture, and exemplifying the necessity of cultural preservation via transcription.

**Keywords:** Language and Literature, African Literature, Folklore

## Podcast Transcription

My name is Harlee Keller. “Xadija Mbódj ci Senegaal”. This is episode two of a podcast series I am conducting about the culture of words in West Africa. In the first episode, I discussed my secondary research about the relationship between oral and written history in and around Senegal. This included unpacking the question of “who holds your history,” explaining how griots have had an ever-evolving role in society, the paradigm shift that accompanied colonization in regards to historical documentation, and a comparative analysis of the concept of “the word.” If any or all of that sounds interesting to you, that podcast is available online via Humboldt State University’s International Studies Department website. The research I did to complete that episode is intrinsic to the research I’ve done in the field here in Senegal. As you will notice as this podcast unfolds, some of the information from that episode is reexamined in this episode through a different lens.

I would like to preface *this* entire podcast by saying that stories are perfectly magical. An infinite number of stories exist. Some are written, but many live inside the minds of those around us. Those maybe older, maybe wiser, or maybe just beautifully colorful minds that we interact with throughout our lives. And if we are lucky enough, maybe we get to hear a tale pour itself out of someone, from deep inside their soul, at just the right moment. Similar to what I have discussed before, this is my understanding of storytelling, with a handful of allusions to other people’s understandings, trying to inform an audience about this topic devoid of crippling bias. My lens continues to develop but it remains my lens, and I encourage anyone intrigued by my research to further explore this topic using my bibliography as a starting point.

Welcome to my story. I am going to take you on a journey through words. I am going to talk about things that have happened in the past, things that are happening in the present, as well

as things that I anticipate to happen in the future. Definitely not in that order. More stream of consciousness than academic rigor. I think this better suits this topic than the format of my previous podcast. Keep your eyes and your ears open, your feet inside the cabin. Maybe stay seated for the duration of this discussion.

Stop doing whatever you are doing in this moment. Close your eyes. Focus on your breathing. In, out, in, out. In, your diaphragm contracts, your lungs expand. Out, your diaphragm expands again, your lungs contract. Involuntarily, your body is providing you with a means for survival—oxygen—and expelling that which you have no need for—carbon dioxide. Now that you're paying attention, your breathing is becoming voluntary, monitored, different. It's almost impossible to stop noticing your respiration once you think about it. But you can't stop breathing. You need to breathe.

Now again, stop what you are doing. You're probably still focusing on your breathing, but now try to focus on your words. Read, interpret. Listen, interpret. In, various tonal sounds enter your brain in a given language, neurons respond to selective phonetic triggers. Out, the “stream of sound” has to be broken into words, your brain looks up those words, and meaning is given to what you've heard.<sup>1</sup> Involuntarily, your brain is providing you with a means for survival—words—and creating that which you need for social interaction—comprehension. Now that you're paying attention, how you're comprehending the words I am saying has changed.

This awareness first began for me over a year ago in a course at my university called African Storytelling when I read Es'kia Maphlele's forward in a book called *The Black Cloth*.<sup>2</sup> His introduction discussed the idea of translation. How when a work is translated from one

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<sup>1</sup> “Researchers Watch As Our Brains Turn Sounds Into Words.” National Public Radio. 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Maphlele, Es'Kia. Foreward to *The Black Cloth*, by Bernard Binlin Dadié. ix-xii. 1987.

language to another, it's like an entirely new work is created. How the translator of a piece needs to be very close to the author of the original piece, because that is the only way that he or she can truly translate not only the words on paper, but the ideas that live inside the words. The day I read that introduction was the day my brain exploded. That is the day this story began. Words were no longer just words.

My advisor for this project, Daour Wade, who is also an author and a storyteller himself, discussed the idea of translation with me one morning in his office, reaffirming all the things I felt to be true a year ago after reading that introduction. He told me that translation is a slippery slope. That not all words can be directly translated, and sometimes between two languages (in his case French and Wolof), words can get lost. You can circumvent, but direct translation just isn't possible sometimes. But then he said to me: "There are things that are universal... Remember, we are dealing with emotions, with magic, morals, wicked people, good ones... As far as stories are concerned, these things are almost the same everywhere. We are all humans. Perhaps in different places in the world, but if you describe someone who is wicked, everyone will understand. If you're talking about an orphan, people will also understand."<sup>3</sup> He explained that the word for translate in Wolof is "tekki." It literally means "to untie." He said "a word in itself, unless you untie it you cannot understand. Stories untie the word."<sup>4</sup>

The rest of *The Black Cloth* was a compilation of short folktales. I then read the epic of *Sundiata Keita* (which was recommended to me by four of the five storytellers I interviewed during this current project). I read Yoruba poetry. I read Ousmane Sembene's *The Money Order*. The course I was taking was mesmerizing, the air in that class felt different as I involuntarily breathed it. Even when completely removed from its original location, the West African culture

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<sup>3</sup> Daour Wade: 24 November 2014, Keur Khadim at his office.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

of words had wrapped me around its finger. I had to keep learning. And so I did. I knew that my major at my university required me to complete a senior project with the topic of my choice. I chose, as we all know, the relationship between oral and written history in West Africa. My research was formal, secondary. But it was so important. I started the project with one idea in mind—I wanted to learn about how griots were evolving amidst modernity. What I learned drew my attention once more to the air I was breathing and the words I was saying. Words. The word. The weight of the word.

In the last episode of this series, I discussed Vaclav Havel’s concept of “the word.” Havel was a playwright before a politician, the last president of the former country of Czechoslovakia, and the first president of the Czech Republic. He described “the word as arrow.”<sup>5</sup> It can direct and it can destroy. Words are at the root of everything. And thus he concluded the word was created before man, by God.

The word of God is the source of all creation. But surely the same could be said, figuratively speaking, of every human action? And indeed, words can be said to be the very source of our being, and in fact the very substance of the cosmic life form we call man. Spirit, the human soul, our self awareness, our ability to generalize and think in concepts, to perceive the world as the world (and not just as our locality), and lastly, our capacity for knowing that we will die-and living in spite of that knowledge: surely all these are mediated or actually created by words?<sup>6</sup>

When I was originally exposed to this speech, I could hardly contain myself. I was smitten with Havel’s ability to manipulate words. My eyes sparkled as I read. I didn’t even have to agree with all of the ideas that Havel had, I just loved the way he said them. This feeling was exemplified three days into this project when I discovered Leopold Senghor’s article *The Spirit of Civilization*. Senghor, much like Havel, was a poet before a politician. He was the first

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<sup>5</sup> Havel, Vaclav. "A Word About Words." Frankfurt Book Fair. Frankfurt, Germany. 15 October 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

president of the republic of Senegal, and was beloved by many for his ability to captivate a crowd. In this article he wrote, he discusses the power and origin of words. He says:

It is clear to us that language is the major instrument of thought, emotion, and action...This fact is even more true among peoples, most of whom disdain writing...Spoken language, the word, is the supreme expression of vital force, of the being in His fulfillment. God created the world by the word...<sup>7</sup>

No matter what you believe, it is hard to deny that words were in fact the beginning of everything for us. Words compose stories, and stories compose history. Every type of story, really, from primary accounts to personal dissertations to folklore. Folklore! The primary topic of my field research over the past month. I was first compelled to learn about stories when experiencing the colorful, creative spirit of Senegal first hand. I had read plenty of stories from West Africa already, but, like Tony Fairman says in his compelling book *Bury My Bones But Keep My Words*, "...A tale in a book is like a drum in a museum; it's silent, it's dead, it's just there doing nothing. And that's sad because tales are for telling; they're for laughter, for singing, for sharing."<sup>8</sup> That's exactly how I felt! Like I had been racing from exhibit to exhibit inside a museum about Senegalese storytelling. Which is quite inhibiting! Senegalese storytelling is not dead, and therefore shouldn't be viewed like a drum in a museum. Figuratively, I needed to hear the drum, to see the dust being kicked up by the feet of the drummer as he danced around, the colors of the skirts of the women dancing around him. Literally, I needed to immerse myself in storytelling. I needed to bathe in words.

The first order of business was to understand the structure of a Wolof tale. I learned that every tale is supposed to start with the same chant:

Léeboon!

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<sup>7</sup> Sen Senghor, Leopold. "The Spirit of Civilization, or the Laws of African Negro Culture," 1956.

<sup>8</sup> Fairman, Tony. trans., *Bury My Bones But Keep My Words: African Tales for Retelling*. 1991.

Léepoon!

Amoon na fi...

Daa naa am.<sup>9</sup>

Which is an exchange between the storyteller and the audience, roughly translating to:

There was a story...

Our legs are crossed!

It happened here...

And it was so.<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, each tale has a similar format. Each tale starts with a statement. This exemplifies a conflict between an individual and their society or between two individuals. It is the exposition of the story as well as when the antagonist's stance in relation to society is established for the audience. This is followed by the analogy and refutation phases. The analogy phase is when the initial conflict is heightened. It stresses a particular aspect of the conflict. The refutation phase consists of images that conflict with the error of judgment made by the antagonist, therefore proving the initial statement to be false. This phase is meant to stress the necessity of a cohesive community. The conclusion of each tale consists of the consequences that result from the initial conflict. This phase punishes the "anti-social behavior" of the antagonist, and rewards the actions of the protagonist.<sup>11</sup> Thinking elementally, there is a protagonist and an antagonist—perhaps Bouki, the "unworthy and unreliable hyena," Golo, the "uncouth and noisy monkey," or Leuk, the "cunning and sometimes helpful hare." There is an object—whether it be physical or intangible—that the protagonist is searching for. There is an abundance of magic and mysticism.

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<sup>9</sup> Daour Wade: 24 November 2014, Keur Khadim at his office.

<sup>10</sup> Magel, Emil A. trans., *Folktales from the Gambia: Wolof Fictional Narratives*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

There are repeated songs. There is reward and punishment at the end, and the intention of the story is to teach morals.<sup>12</sup> This format, though definitely unique to the Wolof story, is also similar to story structure around the world. Rightfully so. Stories are shared. They travel.

Babacar Ndack Mbaye told me during our interview that when he travels, he tells stories that fit wherever he is. “Storytellers of the world, we are not different. Because we tell the same things. Courage, morality, honesty, all values. But we are different in our way of storytelling. Here we have [the] hyena and the rabbit to support our moralities. In Asia you have the tiger. In Europe you have the fox. Each people have symbols.”<sup>13</sup> After some book research and several interview questions, I was beginning to understand the story structure heard ‘round the world.

My first interview was with a pleasant, distinguished man by the name of Ndiogou Mboup. He began the interview by telling me that he personally identified as a proud griot. A proud, praise singing, griot. Which is a distinction that I did not ask him to make, but nevertheless was a very important distinction. A distinction that I did not intend to explore during this project, but that has become a big part of my research.

A brief aside about the difference between the two: Ndiogou Mboup, Babacar Mbaye, Daour Wade and Lamane Mbaye all made it a point to tell me that there is a difference between a griot and a storyteller. This is a fact they were all very passionate about. Ndiogou said “Being griot...means that he is dedicated [to] using orality. And in that sense... models of behavior... And also being taught stories, being taught praise singing... this is also part of educating the griot. In the past it was forbidden to kill a griot. Even during war, enemies also were forbidden to kill griot. Because they are guardians of...history.”<sup>14</sup> The phrase “and also” really shows that

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<sup>12</sup> Daour Wade: 24 November 2014, Keur Khadim at his office.

<sup>13</sup> Babacar Mbaye: 19 November 2014, Guediawaye at his home.

<sup>14</sup> Ndiogou Mboup: 17 November 2014, Keur Khadim at my advisor’s office.

storytelling is only a small fraction of the function of griot in society. This was further proven when speaking to Babacar Ndack Mbaye. He said:

Griots are not storytellers. Because storytelling is popular. In every house, there is someone. A grandmother, grandfather who tells stories. That's why it's not devoted to griot. Griot is devoted to counseling... He is also a social mediator. [A] link to make peace. The griot is master of ceremony. Composer. Teller of anthems of great peoples. Musician. Singer. Someone who accentuates the accomplishments of great peoples. He paints a portrait of the man that society wants to have. And the griot creates the courageous, honest man with his words a feelings.<sup>15</sup>

A beautiful, unexpected discovery for me. Something that I knew, that I had learned before, but that I had never previously been able to articulate. It's a lot like the square/rectangle analogy: every griot is a storyteller, but not every storyteller is a griot. I really understood that when Ndiogou said "and also being taught stories." And also.

Now, to return to focusing on storytelling: when I asked Ndiogou to tell me his favorite story, he chose a story that he had only ever performed one other time. A story about a peacock and a hyena. There is a statement: the hyena wants to eat the peacock. There is an analogy: he knows he cannot eat her, so he proposes a deal with her that they would eat the remains of their mothers together when they died. There is refutation: the mother of the peacock doesn't want to be eaten by a hyena, so when she dies her daughter flies her to the sea, via several stops in villages, while being followed by the hyena, who repeatedly sings a song telling the peacock to live up to the deal. And there is a conclusion: the hyena chases the peacock with her mother's remains all the way to the sea, but is so tired from chasing them that he dies of fatigue. All of the elements are there: a peacock protagonist, a hyena antagonist, the object being the peacock's mother's body, the magic happening from start to end, a repeated song, and punishment and

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<sup>15</sup> Babacar Mbaye: 19 November 2014, Guediawaye at his home.

reward. There was a sparkle in Ndiogou's eyes as he told the story—he bore his soul as he talked about a magical talking hyena and peacock.

My second interview was with Babacar Ndack Mbaye—a professor, a storyteller, a griot. When I asked him to tell me a story, he told me a tale about the hyena and the goat. This story also followed the Wolof tale format. The goat as the protagonist, the hyena as his antagonist. The statement being that the goat wanted to go out to look for jujubes. The analogy phase consisted of the goat eating an abundance of jujubes, not noticing the time and it getting dark. She saw eyes glowing in the darkness that we soon find to be the hyena, who tells the goat to share three truths with him and he'll let her go home safe. The refutation being the goat telling a truth, running away, and being chased by the hyena. This is repeated three times. And the conclusion: the goat runs into the village, passes a herder carrying a gun who scares the hyena away. All of the elements are there: the object is the jujubes, the repeated chant from the goat for each truth, the punishment of the hyena being his humiliation by the herder. Babacar's tone changed when he told the story. He went from distinguished professor to soulful storyteller. His words bounced rhythmically along, exemplifying his fondness of the story.

Another person that I spoke to, Adja Penda Wade (daughter of my advisor), wrote one story when she was eleven. Her father translated it into Wolof and had it published. The story was about a giraffe who wanted a long neck. A creature in the forest told him that he could help the giraffe, though the creature was not entirely trustworthy. The giraffe ends up getting his neck stretched and exits the deal unscathed by the creature in the forest. The protagonist is rewarded, the antagonist punished. Object. Magic. Moral lessons. The twinkle in her eye as she remembered the time she created a story full of marvel and magic. It's all there!

I also asked my advisor to share a story with me. He chose a story he wrote (in English) while he was in the United States studying. Its subjects were Native American, belonging to the Leni Lenape people. The structure is the same, the elements are the same, the outcome is the same, the glimmer in his eyes the same, though it is about a completely different part of the world. In writing that story, I think Daour not only participated in the culture that surrounded him at the time, I think he exemplified the idea that stories are universal.

Stop what you're doing for a moment. Think about your breathing, your words, your language. Think about how delicate and intrinsic language is. Five of the six stories that I had told to me were literally told to me in a language that I did not understand. I entrusted a translator to communicate what those stories were saying. Think about how even if the translator spoke each language in question perfectly, I still heard a different story than the one that was intended to be told to me.

Let's get back to what I was saying before. Beginning to notice a pattern? Because I did. Each interviewee that I spoke to had a story with a similar structure, with characters that were usually personified animals or creatures and were either obviously good or obviously bad characters; there was an object so desired, songs, punishment and reward, and moral lessons. And beyond the actual story, each storyteller was swept away by their own story as they were telling it. Because stories consume and propel us as humans. We are born to hear, create, share and perpetuate stories.

You might be asking yourself: "why does folklore in the relatively small country of Senegal matter?" Truth is, you should probably be asking yourself how does it not matter? One

of my interviewees told me that being a storyteller is like being a portal to a dream world.<sup>16</sup> You have the power to take people away from their daily life, bring them to a place you have created for them, a place they can escape the pangs of reality. For just a moment. And in that dream world, there is magic, there is wonder, there is mischief, there is wickedness, there is redemption, there is beauty, there is vibrancy. You have the power to teach people a moral lesson. To show them something that is right or wrong. And that is the power of storytelling. That is why this topic matters so, so much. Power itself. And it is dire that this power be preserved. That stories are preserved.

This is where my research comes full circle. In the last podcast, I learned that a hybrid relationship between orality and written story must exist in West Africa because that is the only way that tradition will survive. So I was very excited to hear several of my interviewees discuss the importance of transcription in the grand scheme of preservation. It *is* a catch-22: stories should be shared. They should be performed and interactive and fluid and dynamic. They really aren't meant to be written down. But if they aren't, they will fade away. Grandparents won't pass the stories on to their grandchildren, and when that grandparent dies, "it will be like a library burning to the ground."<sup>17</sup> So stories need to be transcribed.

Because nothing is more important than preserving the words of a people. Who will remember a people who have no words?

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<sup>16</sup> Adja Penda Wade: 29 November 2014, Keur Khadim at my advisor's office.

<sup>17</sup> Amadou Hampathé Ba, UNESCO, 1960.

**Learning goals:**

I came into this project with five learning goals, all different but complimentary.

First and foremost, I came into this research project with a plethora of research already done. I had completed a project of about the same intensity at my home university earlier in the year about the relationship between written and oral history in West Africa. That project was very rigorously academic, but entirely based on secondary research, as that was all I had available to me. I considered several different perspectives, constructed comparative analyses, and came to my own conclusions based on everything I had read. My most important goal was to continue this research, continue to discover as much as I could about the culture of words in Senegal, draw new conclusions, and stay true to what I genuinely wanted to explore as an academic. I would say that—without a doubt—I met this goal. The magic of words is something that genuinely intrigues me. And I had the opportunity to continue researching it in a place that also genuinely intrigues me. I gained new perspectives, constructed new analyses, and came to new conclusions.

My second goal was to branch out from secondary research. I felt like I already had a decent foundation of secondary research, and the richest form of research I could do was in the field. I wanted to try different methods of data collection that my previous research had lacked for obvious reasons. For example, reading about griot in books and academic journals was intriguing. But before arriving in Senegal, I could really only dream of sitting down and having a discussion with a griot who was proud of their heritage. I wanted that dream to become reality. And it did. Definitely. I was able to conduct interviews, read first edition copies of stories after meeting the person who created the story, observe authors discussing their writing tactics... All things I never imagined I would get to do.

The third goal I had was to work on my French communication skills. I wasn't very strong in French when I arrived in Senegal. I knew that I wouldn't be able to conduct interviews on my own—that I would need a translator to accompany me—but I wanted focus on my listening and interpretation skills. I wanted the translator to be in interviews with me almost as a backup. I don't think I met this goal as strongly as I met my other goals. I definitely improved in French during my stay in Senegal, but I think I may have used it less during my ISP period than the rest of my time here. *C'est la vie.*

The fourth goal was more of a personal goal, but I think it rightfully connects with my project. I wanted to network with authors and storytellers. I plan to have a career in book publishing in developing countries, so connecting with authors and storytellers while I am still a student, learning more about how their trade works, and making lasting connections were all very important to me. I met this goal, which means more to me than words can describe. I was able to connect with storytellers and authors who are interested in working with me in translation and book publishing. More than one of my contacts gave me business cards to contact them upon my return.

The fifth and final goal I had was to produce something that really reflected everything that I had learned in Senegal. My project is about the power of words. And conjointly, I've learned a lot about Senegal through conversation, communication, words. I wanted my project to reflect how deeply I appreciate the beautiful country that was hosting me. A country full of warm people, beautiful art and creative culture. I wanted my project to exemplify this creativity and "teraanga." I can only hope that this learning goal was met.

## **Methods:**

As discussed in the previous section, I wanted to rely on methods apart from secondary research to complete this project. But for obvious reasons, I needed to begin with some secondary research in order to prepare for field work. I drew on the research that I had already done, revisiting many of the academic journals about griots and “the word” in order to refresh my memory. I also reread my own podcast’s transcription in order to refocus myself and constantly keep in mind how the two projects could flow together seamlessly.

Most of my information was gathered through interviews. I conducted five main interviews: Ndiougou Mboup, Babacar Ndack Mabye, Daour Wade, Lamane Mbaye, and Adja Penda Wade. All of these interviewees identified as storytellers, but all of them had different perspectives on “the word” and stories. These interviews took place in Keur Khadim and Guédiawaye, two neighborhoods of Dakar I had never visited before this project. I had my translator present during all interviews except for the interview with Daour Wade, as he spoke English. For the interviews with Ndiougou Mboup and Adja Penda Wade, Daour Wade acted as my translator. For Babacar Ndack Mbaye and Lamane Mbaye’s interviews, my translator Yerim Conga attended and actively translated.

I also sent two digital interview emails out. One hailed no response, which at first felt very detrimental to my research. This interviewee was spoken of in high regard as a riveting storyteller and academic who had a grasp of the culture of storytelling in both rural and metropolitan settings. I compensated for their lack of response by asking some of the same questions to each person I interviewed throughout the month. The second digital interviewee, author Louis Camara, answered quickly and in great detail. There were definite pros and cons to the digital interview method. The most obvious pro being that the responses were neatly

organized, well thought out, and instantly accessible. The equally obvious con being that I did not have the ability to ask follow-up questions, especially considering that the response to the email came near the end of the third week of the ISP period.

Given the nature of my work, some of my research consisted of written texts shared with me during interviews. Each interviewee had names, places and works that they wanted me to explore. For example, Babacar Ndack Mbaye told me about Yande Codou Sene, President Leopold Senghor's griotte. Daour Wade told me about several oral stories that had been transcribed that he wanted me to read. This was not secondary research, but it did require a lot of reading.

Another method that I used to collect data was observation. My advisor invited me to the literary award ceremony at the Grand Theater in Dakar on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November. This was an opportunity for me to observe several different aspects of the storytelling community. I was able to see how my advisor, an author and storyteller himself, interacted with other authors and storytellers. He's well known and distinguished and was able to talk about everything that was happening with clarity. It was also an opportunity for me to see how alive storytelling is today. The book that won the literary prize of the night was influenced by an older book, *L'Etranger* (by Albert Camus). As an homage to the book that won the prize, actors reenacted a scene from the book that was very much influenced by *L'Etranger*. It was an interesting night that really helped bring to life a community that I had previously only seen through individual interviews and discussions with my advisor.

The final method that I used to collect data was unexpected, but riveting: participant observation. My advisor has been able to help other students in my class with their research for the ISP. One of these instances occurred after I told one of my peers that my advisor had written

a story about the *Car Rapide*—the subject of my peer’s research. She came with me to one of my regularly scheduled meetings and conducted an interview with my advisor about his story, as well as how she could best structure her own story about the *Car Rapide*. I was able to listen, as well as contribute the knowledge I had thus far acquired about telling stories in Senegal. It was a fascinating experience that revealed a lot about my advisor’s work methods as well as the nature of sharing stories.

### **Resources Used:**

The resources I used were not out of the ordinary. When conducting interviews I carried with me: my field journal to record my activity log, my ISP journal to take notes and jot down contact information, pens, and my iPhone in order to take voice recordings of the interviews. I used my laptop to transcribe interviews, record and edit my podcast, and write this paper. I used a free, downloadable program called Audacity in order to record and edit my podcast. I used it to record and edit my first podcast in the spring of 2014 and I trusted it to create a clear and unabridged audio file. In order to give the podcast to SIT, my advisor’s daughter helped me to burn the audio file onto a disk (for free!).

### **Difficulties Encountered:**

I knew before starting this project that I would encounter many difficulties. Most were unexpected difficulties, but some were anticipated.

The biggest obstacle that I faced on a normal basis was my French capabilities. I came into this program with very limited French, and though the language class helped me, there’s only so much I could learn in two months! Therefore, I knew those who I would work closest to during this project needed to speak English. Luckily, my advisor, Daour Wade, was fluent in French, English and Wolof. We were able to share ideas and he was able to expose me to

information that maybe would not have been available otherwise. And furthermore, my translator, Yerim Conga, was also fluent in all three languages. He accompanied me to the interviews that were on location. He would both translate during the interviews and assist with transcription. It is with the help of these two brilliant minds I was able to overcome my language barrier.

Another difficulty that I expected (but dreaded) was missed interviews. This happened with one of the people that I wanted to interview twice. The first time was a miscommunication of the time and date of the interview and the second was due to extenuating circumstances at Université Cheikh Anta Diop. Luckily that interview was still able to happen, though it was at the very end of the third week. Another desired interviewee was unable to schedule time with me because he worked at the president's palace, which was very busy because of the Francophone Summit that took place during the third week of ISP period. Though the Francophone Summit was marvelous, it was unfortunate that I was unable to talk to someone who was referred to me for his unique perspective on storytelling in the Senegalese context. I mentioned in a previous section that I sent a digital interview via email to someone that I had a strong desire to talk to. Unfortunately, that person never responded to that email. Thankfully, losing the opportunity to speak to those two individuals was not detrimental to my research, as the other interviewees that I was able to talk to gave me plenty of information.

An unexpected difficulty was faced during the recording process of my podcast. The previous podcast that I had done was recorded using a headset microphone, attached via the USB drive to my computer, running through the program I mentioned in the Resources Used section. I did not anticipate recording a podcast in Senegal while I was packing for this trip, so I did not bring the microphone headset with me. When I decided to create another podcast, I considered

using my laptop to record the audio, but then the file could not be exported from the program to be used with Audacity. I then decided to use my phone as the recording device. To extract the audio file from my phone I had to first use iTunes, and then use an audio file format converter, and then could edit it on Audacity. After devising that plan, I did a sample recording, and realized that there was a lot of background sound—echo, cars passing by, etc. I had to either find a different place to record or improvise. I chose to improvise. I grabbed a bed sheet, threw it over my head and my laptop, and pressed record. All of the annoying feedback disappeared and I could record my podcast in better quality. Complicated, but it worked. The audio file presented with this project was the best I could do in this situation.

And the final difficulty encountered was the fact that I could not incorporate all of the information that I learned while in the field into this project. I created a narrative, and used all of the research that complimented that narrative, but there were some things I learned that were fascinating but unrelated. I would say that though this is a difficulty, that information will not be wasted. This is an ongoing research project for me, so everything I learn about my topic has a place and a time that it will become important.

### **What Was Discovered/Learned:**

What I discovered through my research of this topic was an excellent reinforcement of the information that I had learned through my previous research. I had only ever had secondary resources available to me—books, academic journals, YouTube videos, etc. Having those morsels of knowledge come to life through interviews and personal observation was magical. It really exemplified one of the key arguments of my topic: to truly experience a piece of art (specifically in the case of my research, stories) need to live and breathe. Though my research

was interesting before arriving here, it became irresistibly riveting once I was able to interact with it directly.

I learned also that storytelling is subjective, orality is subjective. Therefore, my research is inherently partially subjective. I learned a lot about the history of orality, the history of transcription, the history of storytelling culture. My interviewees would talk in great detail about all of these things. But in the same breath, they would interject their opinion about it. For them, history is personal. Senegal is a proud, proud country. And the people that I spoke to were very proud of the history they were intertwined with.

One of my learning goals was to bridge the gap between this project and possible career ventures. Between the art of storytelling and a career in publishing stories. Amazingly, this happened. I came into contact with a few different people who are interested in working with me when I return to Senegal!

### **Recommendations for Future Study:**

As far as fleshing out this topic for future studies is concerned, I think a text message from my translator sums it up nicely: “How could your topic not be important? You learned about our past, our present and our future. You listened to our words. You know a lot about our history, and I truly think that your topic is one of if not the most important to talk about.” For me, this topic has been a gift that keeps on giving. It has been flexible, versatile and hopeful. There is so much learning potential for this topic. I began by listening to bed time stories that people had learned from their grandmothers, I inquired about how these people turned such a thing into a career, and I connected it to the bigger picture. Words, tales, stories, they matter. Every kind of story matters. Academically, stories compose history. Every place you have been has a story, and everything you learn is someone’s perspective on a story. Socially, stories are

ubiquitous. They unify, edify, and entertain. The further exploration of this topic could go in a number of directions; one could compare the importance of storytelling throughout the African continent, explore the reception of organizations like “Léeboon Ci Leer” that are trying to foster a hybrid existence of oral and written storytelling in a modern Senegal, learn about the use of films as a mode of storytelling locally, research authors and book publishing and book sales in Senegal, or examine the cross section of music and storytelling in both traditional and modern West African culture. These are just a few of the infinite possibilities that concentrate on the presence of story in Senegal and surrounding regions. I would also personally love to explore the linguistic aspect of words and stories. The possibilities are limitless. I encourage an infinite amount of further research. I think this topic is beautiful.

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## **List of Interviews**

- Ndiogou Mboup: 17 November 2014, Keur Khadim at my advisor’s office.
- Babacar Mbaye: 19 November 2014, Guediawaye at his home.
- Daour Wade: 24 November 2014, Keur Khadim at his office.
- Lamane Mbaye: 25 November 2014, Guediawaye at his workplace.
- Adja Penda Wade: 29 November 2014, Keur Khadim at my advisor’s office.
- Louis Camara: Digital (Email) Interview

## Time Log

Date	Activity	Time Started	Time Finished	Total Hours
9/11/14	First advisor meeting prep	12pm	2pm	2
10/11/14	First meeting with Daour Wade (advisor)!	10am	12:30pm	2.5
11/11/14	Research/synthesis @ WARC	12pm	5pm	5
12/11/14	Research/Sythesis @ WARC	9am	12:30pm	3.5
	Drafting digital interview questions	1pm	3pm	2
	Calling interviewees	3pm	4pm	1
13/11/14	Translating digital interview questions	11:30am	1pm	1.5
	Writing email to interviewee	1:30pm	2pm	0.5
	Research online	2pm	5pm	3
	Book research @ SIT	5pm	6pm	1
14/11/14	Market for recorder	12pm	1pm	1
	Read folktales book	3pm	5pm	2
	Call interviewees	5pm	6pm	1
	Email all interviewees	6pm	7pm	1
	Read folktales book	8pm	9pm	1
15/11/14	Read folktales book	7pm	9pm	2
16/11/14	Note taking	5pm	7pm	2
17/11/14	Ndiogou Mboup Interview	10am	12pm	2
	Advisor meeting	12pm	2pm	2
	Transcribe interview	2pm	5:30pm	3.5
	Email Louis Camara	5:30pm	6pm	0.5
18/11/14	Babacar Mbaye	10am	12:30pm	2.5

	Interview			
	Transcribing interview	1:30pm	4pm	2.5
19/11/14	Informal information gathering through discussion	11am	3pm	4
	Transcribing notes	4pm	7pm	3
20/11/14	Transcribing Mbaye interview	11am	2pm	3
21/11/14	Read folklore	11am	1pm	2
	Informal information gathering through discussion	1pm	5pm	4
	Transcribing	5:30pm	7:30pm	2
22/11/14	Drafting podcast	3pm	5pm	2
	Preparing for advisor meeting	5pm	7pm	2
	Finished Louis Camara's book!	7:30pm	9:30pm	2
23/11/14	Folklore notes	5pm	7pm	2
24/11/14	Advisor meeting	10am	12pm	2
	Daour Wade interview	12pm	2pm	2
	Interview transcription	5pm	9pm	4
25/11/14	Transcribed interview	10am	11am	1
26/11/14	Advisor meeting	10am	11am	1
	Reading material from meeting	4pm	7pm	3
	Preparing for interviews	7pm	8pm	1
27/11/14	Lamane Mbaye interview	9am	12pm	3
	Preparing for participant observation	2pm	4pm	2
28/11/14	Past advisor meeting research	11am	2pm	3
	Literary award ceremony @ grand theater w/ advisor	5pm	9pm	4
29/11/14	Adja Penda Wade	11am	1pm	2

	interview			
	Transcribe interview	7pm	10pm	3
1/12/14	Advisor meeting	11am	12:30pm	1.5
	Participant observation of literary interview	12:30pm	2pm	1.5
	Begin writing podcast	5pm	8pm	3
2/12/14	Began writing ISP	1pm	3pm	2
3/12/14	Write ISP	12:30pm	5:30pm	5
	Continued	6:30pm	10:30pm	4
4/12/14	Write ISP	10am	12pm	2
	Record podcast	2pm	6pm	4
5/12/14	Edit podcast	11am	1pm	2
	Final advisor meeting	3:30pm	5:30pm	2
	Edit podcast/ISP paper with advisor's suggestions	6pm	8pm	2
7/12/14	Pick up burned copy of podcast	5pm	6pm	1
8/12/14	Print/bind	9am	10am	1
	<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF HOURS</b>			<b>133</b>