The Traditional Wolof Voice
Lessons from a Griot in Pout, Senegal

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Acknowledgments: To Nar, for our friendship, your tremendous hospitality, and for all that you have taught me. À la prochaine fois.

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Abstract: This alternative project comprised of a three-week long, intensive study of traditional Wolof singing. I took twenty hours of voice lessons from a griot teacher in Pout, Senegal, with the intention of acquiring a rich knowledge of Wolof vocal music and the skills to perform for an audience. My Wolof teacher, Nar Diop, taught me seven songs by ear throughout our six classes together. In addition to perfecting, memorizing, and preparing for a final performance piece, I translated the lyrics of each song into English and French in order to analyze their content and investigate their origins and significance to Senegalese culture.

Introduction: My initial attractions to this project stemmed from my passion for singing and my desire to find and commit to an independent study that would only be feasible in Senegal. Certain types of research can be conducted anywhere in the world if the resources are available. However, studying traditional Wolof vocal music with a griot teacher was an opportunity unique to my semester abroad.

Singing has been an important aspect of my life in the United States since I was born. I grew up in a musically oriented family and was exposed to vocal music early on. My mother is a choral director, pianist, and organist, and began giving me informal voice lessons as I soon as I reached maturity. Throughout middle school and high school I sang in choirs, performed solos during church services, participated in musical theatre, and studied voice with a well-known female soloist in my town. Due to a busy schedule in college, my only singing outlet was through an all female a cappella group that I joined my freshman year and later quit because of academic pressures. Thus, in the United States, I have reluctantly stepped aside as singing has transformed into a casual part of my early adulthood and is no longer a serious activity that I pursue on a daily basis.

This project allowed me to explore my passion for singing in a completely different context. Studying traditional African music (of any kind) has never been
an option for me at home, and the prospect of focusing on the vocal music of a particular Senegalese ethnic group constituted an ideal independent study project for my final four weeks in Senegal. I began my ISP with three main objectives. First and foremost, I aspired to learn seven traditional, well-known Wolof songs and obtain the expertise to be able to perform them for an audience. My second goal was to successfully translate the eight songs into French and then into English with the assistance of a language professor. After developing my own perspectives on the songs and their meanings through my lessons with Nar, I focused on acquiring a richer knowledge of the music and its origins by conducting informal interviews with musicians in Dakar. My third and final objective was to develop an academic perspective on the Wolof ethnicity and the role played by traditional griots in Senegalese history.

This paper will comprise of five main sections that present an in-depth explanation of this study and my results. After providing a brief summary of the Wolof ethnicity in Senegal, the role of griots in Wolof society, and Nar Diop’s position as a Wolof musician, I will discuss my methodologies, my findings and analysis, and the difficulties I encountered along the way. I will conclude with a summary of my project and offer my own recommendations for further study.

**Context:** Wolof is the most widely spoken language in Senegal and also constitutes the country’s largest ethnic group (40% of the population). The majority of the Wolof people in Senegal are Muslim, and this ethnicity is additionally present throughout the Gambia and in Mauritania. According to Cornelia Panzacchi, author of *The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal*, the Wolof social system was traditionally stratified into a caste system. The géer, or nobles, held the highest rank in society as the descendents of ruling
families of the pre-colonial Wolof kingdoms. The middle position was held by artisans and griots, or géwél, and slaves, or jaam, formed the lowest class (190).

Historically, griots in Wolof society played a multifunctional role as masters of song, dance, traditional instruments, genealogies, and oral literature. As noted in Thomas A. Hale’s *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*, other social functions of griots and griottes (the female counterpart) included recounting histories, giving advice, composing songs, and witnessing or contributing to important ceremonies (19). Hale cites praise singing as “by far the most obvious and audible manifestation” of the griot profession (18). I will discuss this specific role in more depth later on in this article, as it relates to two traditional praise songs that I learned. I will also elaborate on the ceremonial role played by griots.

As the status of contemporary Senegalese griots forms the majority of Panzacchi’s (1994) analysis, she classifies and divides three categories of people who come from griot families in present-day Senegal. She notes that there are those who have “decided to refrain from practicing their hereditary profession and have taken up some other occupation; those who continue to perform without innovation the tasks and responsibilities handed down to them from their grandparents and grandparents in the traditional way; and those who have managed to find or to create a new kind of occupation that still seems to fit the traditional griots’ ethos, adapting the art of their ancestors to modern requirements and possibilities” (192).

My griot teacher, Nar Diop, falls into Panzacchi’s first category. Although he was born into a griot family (Nar’s mother was a singer up until her old age), Nar has been unable to successfully continue with this profession in Pout. As the head male figure of his household, Nar faces the responsibility of financially
supporting not only his wife and children but his extended family members as well. During our first lesson together, he explained to me that he gave up his dream to be a singer in order to find work and make a living. He has held an eclectic variety of jobs in Pout for approximately five years now, ranging from selling vegetables to sculpting wooden masks sent to Dakar to sell to tourists. Our six lessons together, in fact, was Nar’s odd job for three weeks.

Methodologies: My research was conducted over the span of approximately one month, from April 10th to May 7th, 2009 in Dakar and Pout, Senegal. Pout is a small town just southeast of Thiès, Senegal, and also the home of my Wolof griot teacher, Nar Diop. Thanks to Moutarou Diallo, Nar and I were introduced in late March at SIT headquarters in Point E. I chose to work with Nar because of his Wolof ethnicity, his friendly demeanor, and his knowledge of traditional Wolof music. In addition, I was thrilled with the prospect of conducting my independent study in both an urban and rural setting. Every week I traveled from Dakar to Pout on a sept place (a form of public transporation in Senegal) and stayed overnight in Bayakh, another small town in the area and the ISP home base of Elena Mayer, a fellow SIT student. Each time that I arrived at Nar’s compound, I was invited to share a traditional Senegalese lunch with his entire family before beginning our classes together. I eased myself into this Wolof community by introducing myself and explaining my project in the local language, presenting culturally appropriate gifts to his wife and sisters for their hospitality, and speaking as much Wolof as possible. I quickly developed relationships with Nar, his two daughters, his wife, Aminata, and other extended family members.

My research was primarily conducted through participant observation and informal interviewing. Nar and I held our classes in three different locations in
French 5

Pout: in his own bedroom, in the bedroom of his sister-in-law, and in an abandoned cement building approximately one mile from his family’s compound. He gave me six private lessons over the course of three weeks, comprising a total of twenty hours of singing. In addition to singing for three or four hours a day, I simultaneously organized informal interviews with Nar during which we would discuss the songs I was learning, their origins, relevance and/or significance, and various aspects of Senegalese and Wolof culture and history. We shared stories and musical experiences, and Nar revealed details about his family history and his life as a musician in Pout.

Although each one of our private lessons was unique to the rehearsal space and content, my classes with Nar generally followed an organized schedule. We spent the first forty-five minutes of each class discussing and interpreting each song’s meaning and cultural significance. I recorded these conversations with a cassette player in order to take notes at a later time. With the song lyrics on my lap, Nar and I would then tackle the Wolof pronunciation until I could recite the lyrics with confidence and minimal errors. Next, Nar would stand up and sing the song in front of me as if he was performing for an audience. He always sung each song twice through so that I could simultaneously listen, observe, and take notes on his vocal technique, his Wolof pronunciation, and his performance style. Every song was taught by ear and reinforced by repetition. I recorded our conversations, my recitations of the lyrics, and Nar’s performances of each song. His permission was granted during our first meeting for these audio recordings as well as for the digital photos that I took throughout our three weeks together.

In addition to the progress made in each of my six private lessons with Nar, I obtained my goal of learning seven Wolof songs through daily practice, memorization workshops, listening to my recordings, and consistently studying
and reciting the lyrics of each song. I refined my Wolof pronunciation with help from Nar, Moutarou Diallo, Keba Mané, my French professor and a Senegalese musician, my advisor, Ousmane Seye, and various native Wolof speakers on sept places to and from Pout.

In order to balance the information and feedback that I was receiving from Nar, I performed and asked for constructive criticism on my singing style and technique from my Ousmane Seye, Keba Mané, and Aïda Diop, a dancer and singer in the Dakar community. I collected further background information on my songs from these three informants as well as from Thieruo Doss, a musician, dancer, and comedian at Le Theatre National Daniel Sorano, Oumar Ndao, a playwright and professor of Lettres Modernes at Universite Cheikh Anta Diop, and Moussa Ndao, a drummer at Le Centre Culturel Blaise Senghor. Additional evaluation and advice was accepted from fellow SIT students, my Senegalese host family members, and various Senegalese friends.

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of my seven songs, I hired Moutarou Diallo to translate the lyrics from Wolof into French. I then refined these linguistic transformations and subsequently translated the lyrics into English. Throughout the three weeks of my study, I also supplemented my informal interviews and discussions with Nar with secondary research. Books and scholarly articles supplied me with historical facts on Wolof griots, Wolof society, and academic information on traditional Wolof music. Cassettes and recordings were purchased in order to study the singing techniques of Senegalese Wolof singers.

Findings and Analysis: The following section is a layout of my seven songs in Wolof with translations in both French and English, followed by a paragraph.
explaining the origin, background, and meaning of each song. The order of the songs reflects the sequence in which I learned them. It should be noted that although traditional Wolof songs do not have titles, I have labeled each song for purposes of organization and clarity.

1. **Maademba**

   *Kuy laal Maademba*
   *Sabar ga ca Ndayaande*
   *Kuy laal ndaat say*
   *Kuy laal sama doom jee*
   *Aayo beeyo beeyo*

   *Sama doom, sama soppe*
   *Dunda mata ñaan*
   *Moom laay ñaan, doom dundal*
   *Buu dundee ba maggoo feral say rongoñ*

   *Bul di dóór, dul di saaga*
   *Xale moomin la*
   *Dafa xamul dara*
   *Buu dundee ba maggoo feral say rongoñ*
   *Buu dundee ba maggoo feral say rongoñ*
   *Buu dundee ba maggoo feral say rongoñ*

   Celui qui touche Maademba
   Le tam-tam de Ndayande
   Celui qui le touche
   Celui qui touche mon enfant
   Aayo beeyo beeyo (mots pour calmer un bébé)

   Mon enfant, mon adoré
   C’est la vie qui est le plus important à demander
   C’est ce que je demande, que mon enfant vive
   Quand tu seras plus âgé, tu n’auras plus de larmes

   Ne frappe pas, n’insulte pas
   Un enfant est comme un animal
   Il/elle ne connaît rien
   Quand tu seras plus âgé, tu n’auras plus de larmes
   Quand tu seras plus âgé, tu n’auras plus de larmes
   Quand tu seras plus âgé, tu n’auras plus de larmes

   The one who touches Maademba
   The tam-tam that comes from Ndayande
   The one who touches him
   The one who touches my child
   Aayo beeyo beeyo (words to soothe a child)

   My child, my lovely
   Life is the most important thing to ask for
   This is what I’m asking for, that my child lives
   When you are older, you will no longer cry

   Don’t hit, don’t be rude
   A child is like an animal
   He/she doesn’t know anything
   When you are older, you will no longer cry
   When you are older, you will no longer cry
   When you are older, you will no longer cry

   French 7
Maademba is a Wolof lullaby sung by a mother to calm her crying child. It can be accompanied by both traditional and modern instruments, and was popularized by three different Senegalese artists: Daro Mbaye, Viviane Ndour, and Cercle Amicale de Louga. Thieruo Doss, a singer, dancer, and comedian in Dakar, recalled that this piece was composed in Louga (a small city in northwest Senegal) just after the end of the colonial period in 1960. When I asked if he knew the name of the original composer, Doss declined, and instead explained that the origins of most traditional Senegalese songs remain anonymous to this day.

According to Nar, Maademba is traditionally sung just above a whisper, with little diction and a soothing, consistent rhythm. However, since both the melody and the lyrics are well known throughout the country and sung among different ethnic groups, new versions of Maademba continue to evolve depending on the singer, the desired style, and the performance context.

2. Sënjee mbaarawaay

Sënjee mbaarawaay
Sënjee mbaarawaay
Sënjum Seerëér la mën njaayoo
Mbaarawaay

Daqoon naa fim naar njañam yëngu
Baay giléém Saar
Daqatu map naar dama caa daw
Bay bégga dee

Arawar njaayoo, arawar njaay
Yow mën nga mooñ
Sa cere neex na na

Arawar njaay sëtup Kumbë
Jaal mbombe yaasin jaal

French 8
Sënjee mbaarawaay (pas de sens)  Sënjee mbaarawaay (no meaning)
Sënjee mbaarawaay
Les Sereres peuvent le faire
Mbaarawaay

C’est lui qui a expulsé un Maure
Papa dromadaire Saar
Je n’essaie plus d’expulser un Maure
parce que je suis fatigué de courir derrière
Arawar njaayoo, arawar njaay
Tu sais bien préparer le couscous
Ton couscous est délicieux

Arawar njaay est la petite-fille de Kumbë
Jaal mbombe yaasin jaal (pas de traduction)
Ce n’est pas la première fois
Qu’elle a bien préparé le couscous
Njaayoo njëli (mots pour flatter le sujet)

Arawar njaayoo, arawar njaay
Tu sais bien préparer le couscous
Ton couscous est délicieux

Sënjee mbaarawaay is one of many Wolof songs specifically designated for a circumcision ceremony, or kassak. According to Nar and Moussa Ndao, the composition can be traced back to the Serrer ethnic group and is traditionally performed by a griot on the final day of the circumcision celebration. The somewhat obscure lyrics are intended to distract the participants from the pain of the healing process, encourage them to remain strong, and praise their accomplishments. Isabelle Leymarie, author of Les Griots Wolof du Sénégal, offers support for these claims in a section of her book dedicated to traditional circumcision ceremonies in Senegal. “La circoncision est pratiquée sur les
garçons âgés de quatre à six ans,” she writes. “Les initiés sont accompagnés par leur frère aîné, leur oncle maternel et les griots, qui jouent du tambour…Ces griots spéciaux chantent aussi des chansons ésotériques évoquant les exploits des ancêtres et stimulant le courage des garçons…” (75). “Circumcision is practiced on boys ranging from four to six years old. The initiates are accompanied by their older brothers, their mothers’ brothers, and griots who play the drums…these special griots sing esoteric songs that refer to achievements made by ancestors in order to inspire the boys to be brave” (75).

The majority of Sënjee mbaarawaay’s lyrics cannot be translated directly from Wolof. For example, the line Daqoon naa fim naar njañam yëngu is meant to flatter the recently circumcised boy by hinting that surviving this grueling process is similar to “chasing away” a Mauritanian. In an attempt to clarify this symbolism to me, Nar implied that, generally speaking, there exists a mocking relationship between Senegalese people and their neighbors from Mauritania. As it relates to the song, “chasing away” a Mauritanian refers to the act of getting “rid” of that person, and therefore achieving a task. Another line, Baay giléém Saar, contains no particular meaning except for the word Saar, which is a Serrer last name.

The second half of the song, Arawar Njaayoo, exemplifies a traditional type of repetitive singing that accompanies daily tasks performed by Senegalese women. Just like the lyrics that form Sënjee Mbaarawaay, these lines serve one purpose: to praise the subject’s cooking skills and to help pass the time spent preparing couscous. Traditionally, the spoons and bowls used to make the couscous additionally function as the drums that maintain the beat for this song’s flowing melody (Aida Diop interview, 2009.)
3. Gumbe

Faites le Gumbe!
C’est le Gumbe qui est d’actualité
Nous venons tout juste de commencer
C’est vous, Allah, qui a amené le Gumbe sur la terre
Pour qu’on puisse rechauffer les coeurs

Do the Gumbe dance!
It’s time for the Gumbe
We just started
It is you, God, who brought the Gumbe here
So that we can bring pleasure to our hearts

The Gumbe is a traditional Lebou song that accompanies a Lebou dance and ceremony. Although the Lebou are in fact a distinct Senegalese ethnic group, El Hadji Malik Sarr, author of Les Lébous Parlent d’Eux-Mêmes, confirms that the Lebou people identify with Wolof origins in addition to speaking the Wolof.
language (18). They are primarily a fishing community based in Yoff, Ouakam and Ngor, three quartiers (neighborhoods) of Dakar. Sarr (1980) refers to this ethnic group as “un people qui joue, danse, chante, et rit” (people who play, dance, sing, and laugh), and adds that the Lebou specialize in music that encourages successful fishing (147). According to A. Raphaël Ndiaye, author of La Place de la Femme dans les Rites Au Sénégal, “la danse lébou est toujours accompagnée de chants” (Lebou dancing is always accompanied by singing) (67).

Both Nar and Aida Diop explained that this particular composition is the second song and dance performed to honor a village chief or celebrate the Lebou courses de pirogues (fishing boat races). The first piece is a traditional folklore dance called Ndawrabine. Every participant or guest dances, sings and dresses in their finest boubous (West African robes) for this event. Traditionally, the Gumbe is accompanied by the tam-tam (traditional Senegalese percussion instrument) and repeated multiple times.

Ndiaye (1986) clarifies this point of view with more specific information. “Le danse traditionnelle de divertissement chez les Lébou, le Gumbe s’organise à l’occasion de l’élection du jaraaf, grand dignitaire de la société lébou et chaque année, pour fêter l’anniversaire de cette élection...le Gumbe traditionnel lébou regroupe la plupart des habitants du village, les femmes en particulier, qui se parent de tenues traditionnelles élégantes, afin de participer à la danse.”

“As the traditional Lebou dance and form of entertainment, the Gumbe is organized for the election of the jaraaf, the chief dignitary of Lebou society, and each year, to celebrate the anniversary of this election….the traditional Lebou Gumbe gathers the majority of the villagers together, particularly the women, who
dress up in traditional, elegant clothing in order to participate in the dancing” (116).

4. Fariyóó Yaddaake

Fariyóó yaddaake
_Fu ma yendoo di la waxtaane doo fa ŋaawee_

Fariyóó yaddaake, wóóy yaddaake
_Fuma yendoo di la waxtaane doo fa ŋaawee_

_Wóóy yaddaake_  
_Wóóy yaddaake_  
_Buur kumba Ndóóféén boroom Siin Saalum_  
_Doo fi ŋaawee_

_Woy la ci woy wi, hégal la ci woy wi_  
_Buur kumba Ndóóféén Juuf ŋoxobaay_  
_Doo fi ŋaawee_

Fariyóó yaddaake, wóóy yaddaake  
_Fuma yendoo di la waxtaane_  
_Doo fa ŋaawee_

Fariyóó yaddaake (name of a king)  
_N’importe où je passe la journée, je parle de vous_  
_Ton nom ne sera pas terni là bas_  

Fariyóó yaddaake, wóóy yaddaake  
_N’importe où je passe la journée, je parle de vous_  
_Ton nom ne sera pas terni là bas_  

Wóóy yaddaake  
_Wóóy yaddaake_  
_Roi Kumba Ndóóféén, chef de Sine Saloum_  
_Ton nom ne sera pas terni ici_  

_C’est une chanson dans la chanson_  
_Cette chanson, c’est pour vous faire plaisir_  
_Roi Kumba Ndóóféén Diouf ŋoxobaay_  
_Ton nom ne sera pas terni ici_

Fariyóó yaddaake  
_N’importe où je passe la journée, je parle de vous_

_French 13_
As expressed by Nar during our second lesson together, *Fariyóo Yaddaake* is a traditional Wolof praise song that dates back to pre-colonial Senegal. Historically, this type of music was sung exclusively by griots to flatter their kings. The majority of the song lyrics simply denote and repeat a king’s name, the names of his relatives, and whichever region he presides over. For example, the word *Buur* signifies a *Serrer* king, and *Kumba Ndóóféen* is his name. *Sine* and *Saloum* represent the pre-colonial kingdoms of modern day *Fatik* and *Kalolack*, two cities southeast of Dakar. The lyrics and melody of *Fariyóo Yaddaake* are recognized throughout Senegal and traditionally accompanied by the *xalam*, a wooden lute that resembles a small guitar.

In *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*, Thomas A. Hale discusses praise-singing in great detail. He notes that praises are “the stock-in-trade of griots” that “may echo a tradition that goes back many centuries or be created on the spot for a person or event” (129). Although griots perform a diverse range of activities, “the praise-singing function is by far the most obvious and audible manifestation of their profession” (18). Cornelia Panzacchi (1994) additionally offers scholarly information to support Nar’s point of view. She writes that the “customers” for the griots’ praise singing were traditionally the nobility or members of the royal lineage. However, modern day griots are still invited “to those born of noble families in order to celebrate them through their ancestors…the obvious occasions for this praise saying and signing are such family events as name-giving ceremonies, marriages, and funeral celebrations (194). During these rituals or parties, benefactors are cajoled with flattering statement about one’s nobility, elegance, generosity and wealth (195).
5. **Décé ndeela faal Birima**

Décé ndeela faal Birima  
Maawo Ngóóne faal Birima

Wóóy Birima, wóóy Birima  
Wóóy Birima, Meysa tendo joojo  
Maa damel wóóy Birima

Décé ndeela faal Birima  
Maawo Ngóóne faal Birima

Wóóy Birima, wóóy Birima  
Wóóy Birima, Meysa tendo joojo  
Maa damel wóóy Birima

I did not include French and English translations for **Décé ndeela faal Birima** because the Wolof lyrics simply represent the names and relatives of pre-colonial Wolof nobility. According to both Nar and Moutarou Diallo, **Décé ndeela** and **Maawo Ngóóne** are first names of Wolof aristocrats. **Faal** is their shared last name. **Birima** is the father of **Décé ndeela** and **Maawo Ngóóne Faal**. **Meysa tendo joojo** is the name of a relative in the royal family.

Similar to its predecessor, **Fariyóó Yaddaake**, this composition is a traditional praise song that was historically performed exclusively by griots for pre-colonial Wolof kings. According to Omar Ndao, the song’s origins stem from the Cayor region of Senegal, near the city of Thiès. In today’s elementary schools, this song is taught because of its simplicity and repetitive nature.

6. **Bul ma miin**

*Bul ma miin*  
*Bul ma miin ba fatte ma*  
*Kon mu ŋuaaw*

*Adduna yaa mëna wor*  
*Xaň ma ndey xaň ma baay*  
*Boo ma digee sama doom nax nga ma*

French 15
According to Nar, *Bul Ma Miin* was written as an homage to remember and commemorate a lost loved one. Although *sama doom* (my child) is the subject of the song, this piece of music can be dedicated to an adult who has passed or a friend that is no longer present. Essentially, *sama doom* can be replaced with whomever the singer wishes to remember. Moussa Ndao described *Bul Ma Miin* as a song that is traditionally sung by someone who feels alone, or who is nostalgic for a broken relationship. This song was popularized by the Senegalese singer Laye Mboup and l’Orchestre Baobab in the 1970s, and today it is often performed in theatre pieces or at remembrance ceremonies. Nar gave me the French 16
lyrics to this song after I requested a piece of music with a rich text and a melody conducive to a female voice. He performed the song for me during our fifth lesson in the abandoned cement building, my preferred rehearsal space because of its acoustics. I watched his eyes fill up with tears as he choked through the last two lines of the song. Although I was unfamiliar with the meaning of the lyrics at the time, I knew that if this song had brought Nar to tears, I wanted to include it in my project. Nar cried for several minutes while I sat next to him in silence with my head bowed. When he finally lifted his head, our eyes met, and he told me quietly that this song reminds him of every person he has lost in his life. “Je suis faible,” (I am weak) he confessed. Nar assured me that if I could learn to successfully sing and perform this Bul Ma Miin like “une vraie Senegalaise” (a real Senegalese woman), Senegalese audience members would be moved.

7. Ndongo Daara

Ennnnnnn, Ndongo daara yaangi jooy
Baay sori na fi

Ki la wóólu ba jox la doom am
Bëgg mu bari xam-xam
Boo ko defoon ni sa doom kon mu bari xam xam

Ennnnnnn, Ndongo daara yaangi jooy
Baay sori na fi

Xale yaangi ci mbedd mi di taxawaalu
Booleekok melokaan wu ñaaw
Boo ko defoon ni sa doom dina bari xam xam

Ennnn, Ndongo daara yaangi jooy
Baay sori na fi

Ki la wóólu ba jox la doom am
Bëgg mu bari xam-xam
Boo ko defoon ni sa doom
Kon mu bari xam-xam
Ennnnnnn, Jángaleen xale yi ngir nu bari xam-xam

Les écoliers sont en train de pleurer
Car leur Papa est loin d’ici
Celui qui a confiance en toi et t’a donné son enfant
Il veux qu’il ait beaucoup de connaissance
Si tu le traitait comme ton propre enfant
Il apprendrait beaucoup
Les écoliers sont en train de pleurer
Car leur Papa est loin d’ici
Les enfants traînent dans les rues
Avec une apparence sale
Si tu le traitait comme ton propre enfant
Il apprendrait beaucoup
Les écoliers sont en train de pleurer
Car leur Papa est loin d’ici
Celui qui a confiance en toi jusqu’à te donner son enfant
Il veux qu’il ait beaucoup de connaissance
Si tu le traitait comme ton propre enfant
Il apprendrait beaucoup
Il faut enseigner les enfants
Pour qu’ils apprennent beaucoup

Ndongo Daara, literally “children of the streets,” was written by Laye Mboup, a Wolof singer/griot, and popularized by l’Orchestre Baobab in the late 1960s. This song is dedicated to Senegal’s talibé (Arabic for students), the schoolboys of the Koranic institutions who are sent out into the streets of urban areas to beg for food by their religious teachers, the Marabout. Both Nar and Aida Diop clarified that this song is intended to critique neglectful Marabouts and reinforce the necessity of teaching these young children who are abandoned by their own parents. The singer is speaking directly to the Marabout and implying
that he must follow this advice. “If you considered him (the schoolboy) as your own child, he would gain a lot of knowledge.” Since the parents of talibé have given up all responsibility for their children, it is the job of the Marabout teachers to foster a successful Koranic education and to ensure that their students finish school.

**Difficulties Encountered:** The most challenging aspect of this project was searching for scholarly publications on traditional Wolof vocal music and Wolof singing techniques. I quickly realized that my printed references would be limited and that I would have to instead depend on informal interviews and conversations with members of Dakar’s music community. These personal interactions, however, proved to be the most useful to my research as they provided me with rich information and revealed the individual opinions and knowledge of my informants.

As for my private lessons in Pout, I felt occasionally frustrated with the unprofessional setting at Nar’s compound. Our classes were frequently disturbed by curious visitors, and Nar was regularly distracted by the demands of his two young daughters. I requested that we hold our final three lessons in the abandoned cement building in order to ensure privacy and time efficiency. Adjusting to Nar’s teaching style was an additional challenge. His creative style of singing and love for improvisation became clear during our first lesson. Nar often switched keys in the same song according to his own level of comfort with the notes. As a female singer with an entirely different vocal range, I had no choice but to adjust my own pitches to match his. This was certainly a disadvantage of studying with a male singer.

Perfecting my Wolof pronunciation of the song lyrics was another obstacle faced in Pout. Although I appreciate his attention to detail in hindsight, it was difficult to remain positive during our lessons when Nar outwardly expressed his frustrations with my lack of mastery over the Wolof language. I thank him for his overall patience with my Wolof articulation and also with my French communication skills.
**Conclusion:** In a period of four weeks, I learned to sing, memorize and master seven traditional Wolof songs. Although the main objective of this independent study was to be able to successfully perform these compositions for an audience, I also gained a rich understanding of each song’s meaning, origin, and cultural significance. The information that I collected through my private lessons with Nar, informal interviews, recordings, and printed publications all contributed to my growth and development as a student of Wolof vocal music. For further study on traditional music of West Africa, I highly recommend John Miller Chernoff’s *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*. In addition, Isabelle Leymarie’s *Les Griots Wolof du Sénégal* offers valuable information on specific Wolof cultural practices and highlights a variety of traditional songs. For recordings, I advise researching through the archives of a Senegalese radio station.

One of the most fulfilling realizations of this alternative study was discovering the homogeneity of Senegalese knowledge of traditional Wolof vocal music. I found that every Senegalese person that I spoke to about my songs, no matter their ethnicity, was familiar with either the songs’ lyrics, their melodies, or both. Knowing these seven songs by heart has enabled me to connect and form valuable relationships with a griot in Pout, musicians in Dakar, and numerous other members of the Senegalese community.

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