

## Wolof Language, People, and Culture

As a [West-Atlantic](#) language mainly spoken in Senegal and Gambia, Wolof is also used in the Southern part of Mauritania. Nowadays, migration, business, and trade have broadened the horizons of the language to some parts of Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali. Despite the Senegalese ethnic diversity- *Pël, Sereer, Mandinka, Joola...*, Wolof dominates as the lingua franca and remains a growing means of communication for different peoples of the above named West African countries. Unlike many other African languages, Wolof is not a tonal language. Although it has a long tradition of writing using the Arabic script known as *Ajami* or *Wolofal*, it has also been adapted to Roman script. Wolof language and culture has had the most observable impact throughout the Senegambia region. While only about 40% of the Senegalese population are Wolof, more than 80% of the people speak the language as either their first, second or third language. The extent of Wolof influence can be observed, to one degree or another, across the religious, economic, political, and social spheres and has been used as an effective medium of communication via radio and television broadcasts. The Wolof language varies slightly from St. Louis to Dakar; however the various dialects are mutually understandable across rural and urban divides and country boundaries. Wolof is not a static language and the dialect spoken primarily by the youth in urban areas has been noted for its adaptation and infusion with French, English and Arabic.

Culturally, the influence of the Wolof language is observable through *mbalax*, popular Senegalese music, which has gone international thanks to superstars like Youssou Ndour, Thione Seck, Omar Pene, and Cheikh Lo who have spread its beats through Europe, US and far beyond. Also, Film director and writer, Ousmane Sembene, transported the Wolof language to an international audience with his critically acclaimed films including, *Faat Kine, Mandat bi, Camp Thiaroye, Guelwaar, Ceedo* and *Xala*. Other points of interest throughout Senegalese culture include *lám*, Senegalese traditional wrestling; *ceebu jën*, the country's main dish and *ataaya*, a Senegalese special tea. Known for their generosity and *teraanga* or hospitality, the Senegalese often welcome friends and guests with conversations accompanied by three rounds of *ataaya*, which can last hours depending on the nature of the talk or meeting. Additionally, it is difficult to talk about the Wolof language or Senegalese people in general without highlighting the importance of the *Sufi* brotherhoods (*Murid, Tijaan, Layeen, etc.*) on a daily life basis. Islam has highly influenced Senegalese culture and more than 90% of the population claim some form of Muslim identity.

The Wolof language itself is fascinating. It is easy to learn and is a great facilitator for travelling, research, study, and work in the Senegambia region. Indeed, Wolof allows visitors to truly integrate socially and culturally, and helps convey messages, particularly when those are of capital importance. Knowledge of even just the basic Wolof greetings extends an olive branch of effort and interest in Wolof culture. From taxi drivers, to street vendors and university students, there is a strong pressure and warm appreciation for even the feeblest attempts to communicate in Wolof versus the colonially rooted French default use by most visitors. Actually, learning Wolof should be a priority for those planning to travel to Senegal, Gambia and neighborhood.