

PULAAR

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Pulaar is the first language of millions of people throughout Africa. It is also used as a very important means of communication (by non-native speakers) in some areas of West Africa. Thus, Pulaar has the status of a national language in such countries as Senegal, Guinea, Mali, etc. Pulaar culture centers on the family and places a heavy emphasis on family ties. The individual is part and parcel of the family, which is strongly tied to the community. The individual is defined from within his/her family and community, each of which has a very strong influence upon him/her. An individual is considered "lost" when he/she cannot identify with those landmarks. In their view, three essential elements determine what a person is: his/her physical aspect, his/her language and his/her profession. One may lose one or two of these qualities and still remain oneself, but losing all three is becoming someone else; one is no longer a member of one's ethnic group.

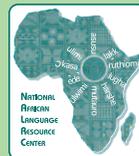
The notion of "person" is very complex. It implies strong internal dynamism (physical, psychic and spiritual at different levels) and constant adaptation to external constraints of life. The following terms are used to designate a person: *neddo*, meaning the individual and *neddaagu*, meaning the pluri-dimensionality of the individual.

Pulaar vocabulary explains very metaphorically the physiological, economic and political relations that hold groups of people together. For instance, the word *endam*, or maternal milk, signifies maternal/kinship affection. *Musidal* is the relationship between people who "sucked the same breast," therefore having ties of blood together. This does not necessarily mean having the same mother and father, but being related somehow to the family. *Musidal* is the warm source of any family affection. As a matter of fact, the Pulaar have the following saying that is appropriately used to refer to the obligation of preserving or strengthening family ties: *jokkere endam*, which literally means, "following maternal milk." Put simply, it means "maintaining blood ties." It is an example of expressions used to preach unity within a family.

STUDYING PULAAR IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Pulaar. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site, located at <http://african.lss.wisc.edu/nalrc>.

Michigan State University
University of California, San Diego



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A PULAAR WOMAN DANCING AT A WEDDING CEREMONY

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY PULAAR?

Because of the dispersion of the Pulaar people throughout West Africa, Pulaar is a language of survival as well as a key to accessing a lot of authentic historical, anthropological and religious works that were written in Pulaar using Arabic script. Pulaar people embraced Islam quite early and, in West Africa, a good deal of great Islamic figures are from the Pulaar ethnic group. Contrary to some languages that are more localized in terms of usage, Pulaar is a regional language.

Students in anthropology, history and sociology find Pulaar to be a good language to know in order to conduct research in West Africa. For students of linguistics, Pulaar is a very good example of language variation with regards to its numerous dialects. For students interested in land and environmental issues, land ownership policies and land management, a study of Pulaar would be useful as Pulaar people had very little concern about settling down in a permanent location.

Another element of Pulaar that attracts linguistics students is the large number of Pulaar words that are borrowed from other languages. Usually such borrowings occur as a result of long cohabitation with other ethnic groups (Mandinka and Fulakunda in Southern Senegal) and also as a result of Arabic influence (due to Islam). In the region of Kolda in Senegal, Fulakunda and Pullo Fuuta have been cohabiting for a long time; even though Fulakunda speakers can speak Pullo Fuuta, the contrary is not necessarily true. When a Fulakunda does not want a Pullo Fuuta to understand what he/she is saying, he/she can manage. In fact, the dialectal modifications that exist between Fulakunda and Pullo Fuuta are important.

Pulaar culture is very rich in stories and they play an important role in the initiation of younger children. Some examples are *Deddi* (sing. *deddol*), *taali* (sing. *taalol*) and *tindi* (sing. *tindol*). These different types of stories are told at different times: for example, *taali* and *teddi* are told at night. Studying Pulaar introduces the student to these vital parts of Pulaar culture.

WHO SPEAKS PULAAR? PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Fulfulde, Pulaar, Peul, Peulh, Toucouleur, Haalpulaar, Fulakunda, Fulbe, and *Pullo Fuuta* all refer to a language as well as to a very widely spread group of people in Africa. There are about twenty-eight dialects of Pulaar. This diversity of dialects is noticeable even within the same country. However, Pulaar speakers from the same country, and in a lot of cases, different countries, can communicate even if they may not speak the same dialect. The Pulaar people live in most West African countries, but they do not constitute the majority in any of them. The Pulaar are traditionally known to be nomad-pastors moving from region to region in quest of green spaces for their cattle. The majority of the Pulaar are Muslim; as such, they participated actively in the expansion of Islam in West Africa.

Despite frequent droughts in West Africa and the accelerated rate of urbanization, Pulaar people still preserve their reputation as cattle owners. They may live in larger cities, but they still find ways of keeping herds in the village. There has also been a recent trend among the Pulaar to settle down, in both urban and rural areas.

Every individual is related to his elders (*mawbe*) and to his family (*beyngu* or *beynguure*), and all of them form a group called “*musidal*” which includes long established neighbors as well as close friends. Family revolves around the mother, who bears and feeds the children under the protection of a husband who is generally older than her. Even though families are patriarchal in structure, mothers play an essential role and are highly respected. In Pulaar culture, the success or failure of an adult in life is contingent upon his/her behavior toward and treatment of his/her mother. If you treat your mother well, you get compensation if you treat her badly, life will treat you badly.

In sum, Pulaar communities are composed of family groups founded on maternal milk (*endam*) and related by religion (*diina*). For, in addition to the fact that Islam enlarges family ties (*musidal*), it establishes brotherhoods of people sharing the same faith in the same God.



Traditionally a Mandinka mask, kankuran is now adopted by Pulaar in southern Senegal as a result of long cohabitation.



Young children running to watch the kankuran as he walks in the neighborhood.



A group of Pulaar women helping one another weed their rice fields.