

Who Speaks Wolof?

Wolof a member of Niger-Congo language family, and it is spoken by more than 90% of the Senegalese population, either as a first or second language. Out of the six national languages in Senegal, Wolof is the most widely spoken. It is also spoken by a large number of people in The Gambia and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Wolof's status as Senegal's lingua franca stems from its use by people who do not have the same mother tongue. In fact, it is common to hear people say that there is not distinct ethnic group called Wolof because almost everyone in Senegal speaks the language.

Some Famous People of Wolof Descent/Speakers of Wolof

Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba: Sufi leader

Abdoulaye Wade: former president of Senegal

Akon: singer, record producer, philanthropist

Djibril Diop Mambéty: film director

Gorgui Dieng: basketball player

Youssou Ndour: singer, songwriter

Mariama Bâ: author and feminist

Ibrahim Niass: Tijani Sufi leader

Mbaye Diagne: army officer

Ousmane Sembene: filmmaker

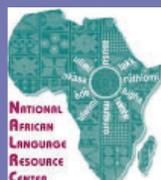
El Hadj Diouf: soccer player

Thione Seck: singer

Boubacar Diop: novelist, author of *Doomi Golo*, the first novel originally written in Wolof

Interesting Facts about Wolof Culture

- The name, Senegal, is originally a Wolof phrase, "sunu gaall" meaning "our canoe" which the Portuguese could not pronounce, and therefore changed it to "Senegal".
- Wolof used to use Arabic alphabet but recently shifted to using Roman orthography.
- Traditionally, Wolof society operated caste system based on occupation and the amount of time a family has lived in the area. It still has a remnant of this today.
- Within the different castes in Senegal, the griots (géwal in Wolof) are mostly the storytellers, the musicians and the drummers.
- Soccer and wrestling are the most popular sports in Senegal.



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WOLOF



Wolof women in traditional attire and tattooed mouth

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Why Study Wolof?

The majority of the West Africans who were later shipped to the Americas as slaves were first gathered on the island of Goree, just off the coast of Senegal. The “Slave Castle” which served as a temporary prison for the captives is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Several thousands of visitors, many of them African Americans, travel to the island every year. An understanding of Wolof helps visitors to communicate with the islanders and to learn first-hand about the history of the island.

There are also many study abroad programs between American and Senegalese universities that enable and encourage students to study Wolof. Although a knowledge of French, one of Senegal’s official languages, is a requirement of several of these programs, many of the students use the opportunity to learn Wolof because speaking Wolof makes their stay easier and enjoyable. When they return to the United States, most of these students want to continue to study Wolof to improve their knowledge of the language and to prepare for an eventual return to Senegal for research purposes.

Learn these everyday Phrases!

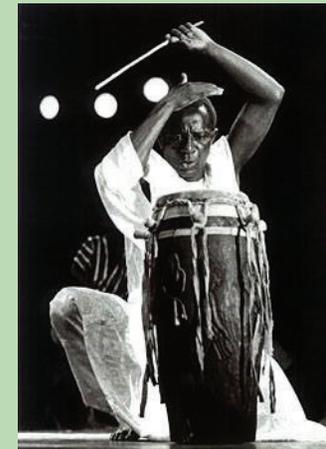
- Peace be with you!: **Assalaamu aleykum!**
- Peace to you, too!: **Aleykum salaam!**
- Are you at peace?: **Jàmm nga am?**
- Are you in good health?: **Sa yaram jàmm?**
- At peace only!: **Jàmm rekk!**
- How are you?: **Na nga def?/Naka nga def?**
- I am fine: **Maa ngi fi/Maa ngi fi rekk**
- Thank you: **Jërëjër**
- How is your family?: **Naka sa waakër?**
- They are fine: **Ñu ngi fi/fa rekk**
- Thank God!: **Alxamdulilaa!**
- What is your last name?: **Naka nga sant?**
- My last name is ____: **Maa ngi sant ____**
- God willing: **Bu soobee Yàlla or Bu neexee Yàlla or Insha Alla**
- Excuse me: **Baal ma**
- Have a good day: **Nu yendu ak jàmm**
- Goodbye: **Ba beneen**



Wolof Language Map



A family sitting around a large plate of rice during lunch



Doudou Ndiaye Coumba Rose, arguably the modern father of Senegalese traditional drum



Senegalese ataya, tea that is consumed by many Senegalese



Island of Gorée which was an important center for transatlantic slave trade

Studying Wolof in the United States:

Please check the “Language Inventory” menu on NALRC website.