

Green Shoots in a Spiritual Desert

by Sue Hall

An older woman wakes up in the night, realizes her Savior has mercifully healed her, and sings the new song of thanksgiving He placed in her grateful heart.

A young man, formerly on the street as a religious beggar, draws on gifts inherited from his father and plays the melodic *tama* hourglass drum as an accompaniment to simple songs of praise.

A Wolof-speaking pastor, gifted in guitar playing, gets excited at how effectively Wolof-style songs touch people's hearts in his neighborhood, and he composes more of them at a workshop.

First-fruits of a harvest of Wolof believers, these diverse people are a tiny minority among the three to four million Wolof people who follow the major religion of Senegal. Like the new, bright green grass that comes up shoot by shoot after the first rains in the Senegalese desert, flashes of color are appearing now in a spiritual desert. These believers, longing to see their friends and family come to know the Savior, are catching the vision of using their own music to worship *Yàlla Aji Kawe Ji*, the Most High God, and His Sent One, *Yeesu*.

Meetings

This growing group of songwriters gets together every three months in the capital city, Dakar. Wolof is the shared language for the many ethnic groups that have migrated there. Although most of the songwriters live in teeming Dakar and its suburbs (as does a fifth of the nation's population), occasionally a guest from a small, rural group of believers will travel there to be part of the gathering.

These believers, connected through the Wolof Music Commission*, meet in a church in the suburbs, tucked away from traffic noise. Meetings vary in form and size, with anywhere from three to fourteen participants, including up to three musically-gifted missionaries and facilitators. The majority of participants are men in their twenties and thirties, and one older man attends irregularly. One older woman, with a clear gift for song making, is always there. There are also two younger women who may work on a new song or two, even as they spend the morning cooking our lunch.

We begin the day with bread and coffee for breakfast, followed by a time of prayer, discussion of pressing issues, and sometimes a teaching-discussion on a biblical worship theme or an exploration of the question: "What *is* Wolof music?"

Then the drummers, guitarists, and singers pour themselves into creating new songs based on verses from the Bible or their own Christian experience. Because only the Wolof New Testament has been published in full, new song texts often draw on sayings and teachings of Jesus, how a disciple should live, festivals such as Christmas and Easter, and praise. Here is a song about becoming disciples called "In Truth, Disciple!":

Ci dëgg-dëgg taalibe
Boroom bi def nuy taalibe, taalibe
Boo nu defey taalibe
Nu mën a dooni taalibe yu wóor a wóor

The Lord has made us disciples.
 (Lord) If you make us disciples,
 Then we can be true disciples.

Defal mag ñi taalibe
Defal ndaw ñi taalibe, taalibe
Boo leen defey taalibe
Nu mën a dooni taalibe yu wóor a wóor

(Lord) Make disciples of the old.
 (Lord) Make disciples of the young.
 (Lord) If you make them disciples,
 Then they can be true disciples.

Defal réew mi taalibe,
Defal njiit yi taalibe, taalibe
Boo leen defey taalibe
Nu mën a dooni taalibe yu wóor a wóor

(Lord) Make the people of this nation,
 disciples.
 (Lord) Make the leaders disciples.
 (Lord) If you make them disciples,
 Then they can be true disciples

Composing Songs

Groups of at least three participants work on new compositions. Often, a group will elaborate on a song idea proposed by one of the members, adding verses and instrumental accompaniments, and tweaking melodies and texts until the final product emerges. Sometimes, however, it is only possible to compose these songs if the right musicians are present. It is especially difficult to find Christians who play the *kora* harp,** which provides a beautiful traditional accompaniment for longer narrative songs.

Some of the participants have Western music training, while most play their instruments by ear. Few have much exposure or experience in the deep-rooted Wolof music traditions that are learned within the Wolof *géwél* musician's caste. Only one participant belongs to such a family.

The urban environment encourages fresh fusion sounds, blending traditions which use modern instruments with beats such as *mbalax****. Most of the urban participants also have extensive exposure to church music in both Western and diverse African styles, and they tend initially to compose in these styles. Some whose mother tongue is not Wolof prefer to write in the musical style of their own ethnic group. Therefore, even though they may write the text in Wolof, the music reflects the style of their own people group, for example, the Sereer.

As an ethnomusicologist, I encourage the group to rediscover their own traditional music and to listen with newly-attuned ears to the familiar descending melodies, call-and-response forms and complex rhythms that shape Wolof music, including the urban fusions. As time goes on, they seem to be growing in confidence that true Wolof music styles can indeed be used for heart-felt worship or effective evangelism.

Recording

After our lunch break, an expatriate partner comes to record the morning's work with a basic field-recording set-up (cassette deck or laptop and four microphones). At

this point, groups often lend musicians to each other in order to produce the best sound mix for the recording. Many songs can be recorded in either of two styles: Senegalese, or Western (preferred by the churches). The Christmas story and an account of Noah have employed long, spoken narrative interspersed with sung refrains. Eventually, the group's hope is to record an album for the mainstream Senegalese market, switching the style of some songs to an authentic Wolof sound. This project would pose recording challenges, however, because the needed multiple drumming parts can easily overwhelm the vocals on a non-multi-track recording.

The songs from the workshop are collected on a master cassette until there are more than enough to fill an audiocassette. The group decides which ones to include, and then a local Christian studio produces it, along with a booklet of liner notes, which provides all the song texts and biblical references.

The cassette production is well done, with high-quality instrumental accompaniments that may include the *jembe* drum****, guitar and keyboard; and perhaps the addition of a *kora* harp and flutes. Unfortunately, the Dakar group tends to compose songs which require these instruments, creating a challenge for less well-equipped groups when they try to adapt the songs. Groups of believers outside the Dakar metropolis have access to fewer instruments and do not always have the skills to reproduce even the drumming portions of the songs.

Cassettes

Two cassettes which have been produced are entitled "Praise Songs for the Lord," and are intended for local Christians to use in sharing and teaching new songs to both literates and non-literates. Church music leaders select new songs to try in their congregations, which are usually a mixture of Senegalese and other nationalities. The songs are also disseminated outside Dakar to aid pioneer church planting among the Wolof. In isolated situations where the church is not yet established, these cassettes encourage seekers and new believers.

Wolof people do not always react positively to the cassettes. The songs contain potentially difficult or confusing terms, such as "Son of God" and "life which does not end", and use an unfamiliar style influenced by Western, Sereer or Central African urban churches. Therefore, Christian workers are selective about who receives or hears these cassettes.

One of the songs on the cassette is especially important because it teaches the seven key aspects of God's character that are emphasized in chronological Bible storying, a teaching technique which is being used extensively to plant churches among the Wolof: Here is the Wolof text with an English translation:

*Yàlla kenn la;
Amul kenneen ku dul moom.
Moom mooy sa Boroom
Kon bul ko wutal moroom.*

God is One;
There is no one else besides Him.
He is your Lord
So don't go make any other equal to Him.

*Yàlla dafa jub.
Yàlla xam na lépp.
Yàlla moo di Aji Doole.*

God is holy.
God knows everything.
God is all-powerful.

*Mbaax angi ciy moom.
Bëggul bàkkaar.
Yàlla lu mu dige, def ko.*

All goodness comes from Him.
He hates sin.

Senegalese Worship

Gradually, the dominance of European and West African styles of worship music is breaking down, as Senegalese believers experience the joy of worshipping with their own popular *sabar* rhythms—the ultimate way to express joy in Wolof culture—and with Arab-influenced descending melodies that can be chanted devotionally as call-and-response. While urban churches still hesitate to include such music in their worship on a regular basis, the popularity of youth drummers' groups such as *Jii Gob* ("Sow and Reap") is making this old-new music increasingly acceptable as it is sung, drummed and danced to the praise of Jesus Christ.

At a recent annual Wolof Consultation meeting, *Jii Gob* led the afternoon praise time. Two Gambian Christian "sisters" enthusiastically encouraged the conference participants in dancing to the glory of God as they called individuals to the front by tossing them a scarf. This was the first time *sabar* dancing had been seen in a "church" meeting, but even the most conservative Wolof Christian leaders joined in. The dances offered as worship were not the wild, sensual forms of *sabar*, but the more traditional, respectable yet energetic forms, still danced by older people at cultural events. The rhythms were purely Wolof, although played by hand and stick on *jembe* drums (already accepted for church worship) rather than on the more traditional *sabar* set of drums. The overall sound reflected contemporary Wolof *mbalax* music more than anything heard regularly in the churches—and many of the Wolof participants in the conference went away asking how this music could be used to glorify God in their different situations.

Two Christian recordings have been made of this *mbalax* music style: one by a church in The Gambia, which is proving very popular, though hard to obtain in Senegal; the other produced some years ago by a Dakar church. After meeting immediate resistance, the Dakar church group disbanded, but new youth groups are picking up where the ground-breakers left off. They hope to produce albums that will reach into the marketplace with a powerful message—as well as rhythms that make people want to dance! Wolof dance styles are controversial, and it seems likely that only modified

forms will make it into the church and Christian activities.

However, in addition to these animated songs, the Wolof Music Commission hopes to see the emergence of chants and simple songs that can be accessed easily by those without instrumental skills, especially in rural areas. Plans are underway to offer workshops all over Senegal and The Gambia so that urban musicians can meet with and encourage more isolated believers, and model the process of making and using Wolof-style songs for worship and outreach.

The new songs that “taste Wolof” are spreading from the capital into desert regions of Senegal where small Wolof churches are beginning to spring up, searching for ways to worship that reflect their proud heritage. Psalm 147:7–8 declares,

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; make music to our God on the harp.
He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.

As a result of these workshops, we expect that not only tender, green grass will grow, but robust, lasting spiritual fruit as we work this ground faithfully and trust God’s creative Spirit to water and enrich it.

* The Music Commission of the Wolof Consultation is an inter-church and inter-mission group which cooperates to reach the Wolof people with the Good News.

** The *kora* harp is a 21-stringed harp originating in Mande people groups, and it is appreciated by many other ethnic groups.

*** The *mbalax* style is a fusion between traditional Wolof rhythms and vocal styles, and modern instruments (e.g., guitar, bass, keyboard). It is extremely popular in Senegal and beyond.

**** The *jembe* is a popular West African goblet-shaped drum.

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