

## Wolof

The Toucouleur are the first people mentioned in recorded history of Sénégal (eleventh century). Around 1040, the Zenega Berbers from Mauritania founded the Muslim Murabti sect in Sénégal, which exerted a powerful influence and was responsible for the conversion of the Toucouleur to Islam. Other groups who established early kingdoms in Sénégal were the Fulani, the Serer, and the Wolof. The Wolof established an independent kingdom on the coast of West Africa, and divided it into four states that were often at war.



### Location

The Wolof live in the modern nation of Sénégal in West Africa.

### History

European influence began in 1444 with the arrival of the Portuguese who set up trading posts at the mouth of the Sénégal River. In 1638 the French also opened a trading post at the mouth of the Sénégal. England was the other major European power to exert its influence in Sénégal. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans exported slaves, gum arabic, ivory, and gold from Sénégal, which became known as a center of the slave trade. Slavery was abolished in 1848.

In 1946 all Sénégalaise were granted French citizenship and the colony became an overseas territory. Léopold Sédar Senghor was elected Sénégal's first president in August 1960 after leading a movement for full independence which culminated with the establishment of an independent republic in 1960.

### Culture

*Marriage:* Many Wolof households are polygamous. Most men desire to have multiple wives which is a sign of wealth and success. Among the youth, however, a more positive attitude seems to exist toward monogamy. Most women desire to be the only wife, because men with multiple wives find it financially difficult to provide for all the children. Typically, the wife controls the house and children. The allegiance of the children is, in most cases, to their mother.

*Family Life:* The family is a source of strength and pride for the Wolof. In most rural areas and among traditional urban families, extended Wolof families live together in compounds with a separate dwelling for each nuclear family. An urban trend has influenced some nuclear families to live in single households, often with relatives in the neighborhood. Rural family strength and unity are weakened as young men migrate to cities in search of work. Most families live at subsistence levels as agricultural workers, although a middle class is growing and a small, wealthy elite exists.

Wolof families show great respect and care for the elderly. In traditional families, women and children respectfully curtsy to their elders when greeting or giving them water. People avoid eye contact with a member of the opposite sex or a person considered to be a superior in either age or status. Men and women keep their distance in public and are expected to be dignified and reserved around members of the opposite sex. More relaxed behavior is acceptable with members of the same gender, age, or status.

*Personal Appearance:* Wolof men always wear a shirt in public and few women, other than urban youth, wear pants or shorts. Revealing clothing is not appropriate in public. Villagers and many adult urbanites wear traditional clothes. Traditional clothing for men includes loose-fitting cotton robes (boubous) worn over bouffant pants and a loose shirt. The amount or quality of embroidery can indicate one's level of wealth. The Wolof women are known for their elegant dresses, usually a long robe over a long, wraparound skirt (sarong); some skirts have multiple layers. A matching headwrap completes the outfit. Religious holidays are a noted time for all members of the family to wear new clothing. Some ethnic groups have facial tattoos or ritual facial scarring.

### Religion

Islam among the Wolof is marked by a system of brotherhoods led by *marabouts*, Muslim religious teachers considered to be holy men and believed to have supernatural powers. A *marabout's* disciples believe he has done miracles, and there's a constant stream of followers seeking his "blessing" for all manner of things. A man becomes a disciple by coming before the *marabout* and saying, "I give you my body. I give you my soul. Whatever you command me I will do it. Whatever you reject, I reject." Eighty-five percent of the Wolof belong to one of these brotherhoods. Disciples believe that the *marabout* will mediate for them at the time of death and help them gain Paradise.

### SIM Involvement

Although the Roman Catholics entered Sénégal in 1445, evangelical missions have only worked there for about 50 years. SIM began serving among the Wolof in 1984. The mission does community development, translation, ESL classes, correspondence courses, reading rooms, bookstores and recreation centers in the Thiés and Khombole regions. Government AM and private FM stations are broadcasting short Christian programs in Wolof, some sponsored by SIM and other missions.

Many Wolof are very open to talk about Christianity. However, the control of the Muslim brotherhood over social and economic life makes change difficult. SIM is encouraged that some Wolof are becoming believers.

### Scripture Availability

Wolof can be written with two different alphabets. The Roman-based script is sanctioned by the government but many older men use an adapted Arabic alphabet for Wolof, called *Wolofal*. The New Testament was completed in the Roman script in 1987. Many Old Testament portions are available, and translators are presently working to finish the Old Testament. Limited editions of Old Testament portions—as well as Luke and Acts—have been published in the *Wolofal* (Arabic) script. However, the *Wolofal* editions have not yet been widely distributed.

### Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to

