

FOLKWAYS FE 4462

Wolof Music of Senegal and the Gambia

RECORDED BY DAVID AMES

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WOLOF MUSIC OF SENEGAL AND THE GAMBIA

SECULAR PRAISE SONG
WEDDING DANCE MUSIC
SAMBA GILAJAGI (Folk Story)
DANCE RHYTHMS
TARA (Traditional Song)

DANCE RHYTHMS
NDEI KUMBA ("MOTHER PETTICOAT")
DANCE MUSIC FOR NAMING CEREMONY (GAJO)
HASIDA (HYMNS)
MANKA YIRA (PRAISE SONG)

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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WOLOF MUSIC OF SENEGAL AND THE GAMBIA

The most striking characteristic of Wolof music is its intermingling of aboriginal, West African Negro styles with those of Muslim North Africa. Many other aspects of Wolof culture, too, reflect these two traditions. Their homeland, Senegambia is close to the southern end of the Saharan caravan routes, and these have been the highways of merchants, religious proselytizers, and conquerors for centuries. Mutual borrowing between Islamic North Africa and Negro Africa can be traced back at least until the 11th century A.D. -- five centuries earlier than any African contact with European nations.

The Wolof musical borrowings from the Mohammedans were selective. The elements the Wolof took over were re-shaped to fit their own cultural matrix. And some of their aboriginal musical styles were little affected by Mohammedan contact -- for example, most of the drumming. The styles of most Wolof music are hybrid, incorporating elements from both traditions. But it should be understood that these styles are unique amalgams rather than mechanical additions and subtractions of pagan and Mohammedan musical patterns.

These recordings were made in the villages of Njau and Ballanghar in the Saloum districts of the Gambia and in the neighboring Senegalese village of Medina. Most of the Wolof live in a tropical grassland region, lying between the Gambia river to the south and the Senegal River to the north, and extending from the Atlantic coast far inland. The Wolof number perhaps 700,000 people.

The Wolof are famous for their good looks. They are a tall, slender, black-skinned people, who stand straight and are proud and dignified in their posture. Their handsome appearance is set off by the long, flowing robes of Islam worn by the men, and by the full dresses, bright-hued head ties, elaborate coiffures, and gold filigree jewelry worn by the women. They are primarily a farming folk, growing guinea corn and millet for food, and peanuts for cash. Money is required for taxes, for the purchase of cloth, sugar, kola nuts, flashlights, and kerosene at the local trading store, and for marital expenses.

Wolof farm work is often done by cooperative labor groups, and then singing and drumming are always employed -- setting the pace of the work, and taking the minds of the laborers away from the heat, the dust, and the monotony of the toil.

Recorded by David Ames
INTRODUCTION BY DAVID AMES

WOLOF DRUMMER
PLAYING TABALA



NAMING CEREMONY:
A YOUNG WOMAN
DANCING WITH
BABY ON HER BACK
AT LEFT, PLAYER
OF PRESSURE DRUM



Most Wolof families own chickens and goats, and a few raise sheep for slaughter at the Mohammedan feast of Ramadan. In most villages there are well-to-do cattle owners who sell dairy products to other villagers. During the dry season men may hunt for small game with ancient muzzle-loading Dane guns, and, where the Wolof live near the river, their diet is supplemented by fish. Their chief crafts -- cloth weaving, basket-making, leather working, blacksmithing, and pottery-making -- are customarily worked at during the dry season after the crops are harvested. The practice of these crafts, except for basket-making, is restricted to certain classes.

Wolof society is divided into a hierarchy of caste-like classes. Membership in each stratum is inherited through the male line, and marriage outside the class is prohibited. From high to low they are: the freeborn (jambor); the descendants of slaves of the freeborn (jam); blacksmiths and leather-workers (tega and ude) who form an endogamous group; the descendants of slaves of the blacksmiths and leather workers (jam i tega or jam i ude); praisers, minstrels, musicians, and jesters (gewel); and finally, the descendants of slaves of the latter (jam i gewel). The first two classes far outnumber the others.

The "slaves" of the freeborn often play drums, but Wolof musicians are, for the most part, entertainers (the gewel or, as most Europeans say, "griots") and the "slaves" of entertainers (jam i gewel). These are the classes that have the lowest status in Wolof society. They are regarded in some ways of untouchables: they cannot be buried in the village graveyard, and members of other classes will not eat with them out of the same dish. Moreover, they

are stereotyped as lazy beggars and buffoons who lack pride and modesty. For commercial reasons they pretend to be worthless since the upper classes who give them gifts expect it of them. The upper class donors, on their part, lose face in the community if they do not give generously, and often, though they can ill afford it, conspicuously give handsome presents to the gewel who praise and entertain them. Despite the pretense of laziness presented to the public for business purposes, most of the gewel are hard-working farmers and entertainers. They take pride in their artistic abilities, and virtuosos among them are recognized by the whole community and often have a reputation beyond it. Paradoxically, they are, with the exception of the chiefs and their families, the wealthiest and best dressed persons in the community because their profession is well-paid.

Though the Wolof are organized into patrilineal clans, the most important group in their everyday life is the extended family which, typically, lives in a group of houses surrounded by a fence. The eldest male, who usually has two or more wives, is the patriarchal head of this family group, living in the compound with his wives, children and the families of his sons and younger brothers. The younger men in the family work on his fields and in return he feeds them from his granary.

Wolof villages, made up of these compounds, average about 120 people, but range from only one to as many as thirty compounds. The senior male members of the family whose ancestor founded the village is the headman. He confers with the freeborn elders in regard to village enterprises and disputes.

Prior to the coming of the white man the Wolof in Senegal had formed several large kingdoms named Cayor, Walo, Baol, and Jolof. Many of the songs played and sung today were composed by the minstrels (gewel) in honor of early warrior kings. Today, under European control, the authority of petty chieftains is reinforced by these praise songs, for their minstrels place them in the family trees of the mighty warlords of earlier times.

Nearly all Wolof today profess the Mohammedan faith. Feast days are universally observed, and daily ritual prayers, as well as Friday prayers at the mosque, are said. But the taboo against drinking alcohol is occasionally ignored, the young men being the chief offenders. Also, many of the young men are not as strict in their observance of the fast month as the older men. Old pagan religious and magical practices -- usually in a disguised or reinterpreted form -- and a considerable degree of independence for women, who are neither kept in seclusion nor required to wear a veil, are other major deviations from orthodox Mohammedanism.

Certain of the Muslim religious proscriptions appear to have affected Wolof music. Pious Mohammedans say that drumming brings the devil into the hearts of the young men and women, luring them into illicit love affairs and other socially proscribed activities. Drumming is now chiefly secular, though there is evidence that it had a religious function in pre-Muslim pagan rites.¹ Today drumming is prohibited when someone has died in the community, and also during the month of fasting, on Thursday and Sunday nights, and on Friday afternoons. On these occasions only the music of a five-stringed instrument, the Halam is permissible.² This is said to be the instrument of the angels with a sound like "wind though the trees in heaven." The singing of Mohammedan hymns is now the chief religious music.

This album contains only a sample of a wide range of songs and musical instruments. Wolof music is an integral part of many social activities. Drumming, singing, and dancing are employed at "life-crisis" ceremonies attending birth, puberty, and marriage, at rain-making rites, wrestling matches, and community work-projects. The community projects -- such as digging a well or weeding the chief's field

-- are not unlike the house-raising bees or corn-husking bees -- of the American frontier. Impromptu dancing parties, are comparable to our frontier play-parties, often promoted by the young people on moonlight nights in the village square. Wolof music is a part of that large body of African music in which, as Courlander says, "rhythms are likely to predominate . . . since (it) is in a sense action converted into auditory terms" (introduction to the Music of Equatorial Africa, Ethnic Folkways Library, P 402). Music not associated with dancing, however, can be found in the songs that are part of folktales, in certain children's play songs, in the tunes played on a musical bow by cattle-herders at night, and in the five-stringed "guitar" (Halam) playing which accompanies praise-chants and also epic tales which record the marvelous deeds of folk heroes.

In these recordings the most widely-used instruments can be heard: the percussion instruments of various types; and the Halam, which may have been the "grandfather" of the American banjo. The drumming, as in most of West Africa, is polyrhythmic. The drum that sets the key-rhythm is the sabar or the njol sabar. It is a long narrow open-ended drum, slightly concave in the middle, with a cowhide or goatskin head. The player stands erect with the drum suspended from his shoulder by a strip of cloth. The sabar, like all the other Wolof drums, is struck by a stick held in the right hand and by the palm or fingers of the left hand. It is tuned by heating the leather head over a fire. The sabar has a sharp high-pitched sound and, typically, is played in staccato bursts of rhythm. The sabar is often replaced by or played in conjunction with, a type of pressure drum called a tama, which is distinguished by its variable pitch.³

The sabar (or the tama) is usually played against the rhythms of upright log-drums at which the player sits. These drums can be recognized by a continuous, low, and rather muffled beat. The smallest one, and the one most often used, is the gorong, which can be heard in most of these recordings. Similar in shape but slightly larger is the MbalaH, and still larger is the Lamba, employed especially, with the others, for wrestling-match rhythms.

The chiefs' own special drums are called Hin. These drums are played by retainers of slave descent, and are destroyed when the chief dies. There are also sacred drums called tabala which are kept in the

¹ It is said that drumming is still used therapeutically -- for example, to cure an insane person by ridding him of an evil spirit. Drums are also used in a pagan rain dance, performed by the women in times of drought, and, during circumcision rites in several magico-religious dances of the young men. It is also heard accompanying the singing of some hymns.

² The "H" in Halam is a uvular fricative.

³ Wolof is not a tonal language, and therefore the tama is not used among the Wolof people to convey messages by imitating speech as it is, for example, among the Yoruba. However, special rhythms that have a conventional meaning such as "assemble in the village square", are played on drums of all types.

mosque and never used for dancing but only to "praise God" -- a pagan custom preserved in a Mohammedan form. The tabala heard in this collection are large bowl-shaped wooden drums with cow-hide heads. Some mosques have a very large drum, also called tabala, which is beaten to mark the beginning and the end of the fast month. It is said that these big tabala were used during the local wars of the 19th century to warn the villagers of an enemy attack.

Virtuoso drummers who play for large crowds-- and are therefore especially vulnerable to the "evil eye" and to exaggerated praise, which is thought to bring bad luck--put magic into new drums.

Except for placing magic in new drums there are no rituals or sacrifices preceeding their use. The Wolof do not make their own drums but purchase them from a small itinerant group of Fulbe wood-carvers called Laube.

The five-stringed instrument, the Halam, has an oval-shaped resonator, hollowed out of wood and covered with hide, from which issues a "neck" as on a guitar, over which horsehair strings are stretched to a bridge on the resonator. The "neck" is a rounded stick, to which the strings are attached by leather thongs, and the Halam is tuned by raising or lowering the leather thongs on the "neck". The strings are plucked by the finger nail of the thumb,

GEWEL PLAYING HALAM



forefinger and the middle finger of the right hand, and gewel keep their finger-nails long for this purpose. Occasionally all of the fingers are used to strike the resonator as in flamenco guitar-playing. The two longest strings are stopped with the fingers of the left hand without aid of frets. The three shorter strings are not stopped but are left "open" and are plucked in a constant pitch.

THE RECORDINGS

SIDE I, BAND 1: Secular praise song sung by four female "slaves" of gewel (jam i gewel) on the porch of a chief's home at the naming ceremony for his firstborn son. The young women provide their own rhythmic accompaniment by handclapping and by using a large over-turned gourd bowl, placed on a pillow, as a drum. One woman beats this "drum" with bare hands and another strikes it with a stick.

This type of song, which has just been introduced from Senegal, is called kɛndal (literally, a big shady tree where people rest for the day).

SIDE I, BAND 2: Music played at wedding dance with singing by female relatives and friends of bride. Drums: sabar and two gorong.

SIDE I, BAND 3: A professional entertainer (gewel) telling a folk story called Samba Gilajagi. The story teller accompanies himself with the Halam and sings occasionally.

SIDE I, BAND 4: Dance rhythms. A professional entertainer (gewel) talking and playing the tama. Other drums: two gorong. The hoarse shouting in the background is the professional entertainer urging the young women to dance faster.



WOLOF DRUMMERS
WITH TWO GORONG
AND (CENTER) SABAR

WOLOF MUSICIANS
WITH TABALA AND
IRON PERCUSSION
INSTRUMENT



SIDE I, BAND 5: Two professional entertainers each with a Halam, playing a traditional song called "Tara". This song was written for Sehu Omar Fatiyu, a famous Tukulor holy-man who fought a holy war.

SIDE II, BAND 1: Dance rhythms. The same instruments and musicians as on Side I cut 4.

SIDE II, BAND 2: A professional male entertainer (gewel) singing and "talking" a humorous song called "Mother Petticoat" (Ndei Kumba). Handclapping and choral response by girls and young women.

SIDE II, BAND 3: Dance music recorded at a celebration after a naming ceremony for a chief's firstborn male child. The drums are playing a dance-rhythm called gajo: one tama, two sabar, and two gorong.

SIDE II, BAND 4: Followers of a morit holy man singing Mohammedan hymns called hasida,

accompanied by sacred drums (tabala) and an iron beaten against an iron plate. Here we have an interesting blend of pagan and Islamic tradition. The stylized hoarse shout at the beginning is the way that a religious praise-song is commenced. A similar shout is used by the gewel to introduce the praising of people.

SIDE II, BAND 5: A professional entertainer (gewel) praising individuals in the audience, accompanying himself on the Halam. The tune is called Manka Yira, after a jinn in a folktale who fell in love with a beautiful Susu lady. One of the strings of the Halam is named after this jinn.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID AMES

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