

The shadow-politics of Wolofisation

Donal Cruise O'Brien*

The relationship between language and politics in the African post-colony remains obscure and underexamined. Here we withdraw into a poorly lit area, an area of potentialities, where new political shapes may emerge as the outcome of half-conscious choices made by very large numbers of people. Language choices in the first place: the expansion of the Wolof language in Senegal, principally though far from exclusively an urban phenomenon, is to be seen in a context where the individual may speak several languages, switching linguistically from one social situation to another. Such multilingualism is general in Africa:¹ the particularity of the Wolof case, at least in Senegal, is the extent to which this language has spread, far beyond the boundaries of core ethnicity, of a historical Wolof zone from the colonial or pre-colonial periods. And these individual language choices cast their political shadow.

The political consequences of this socio-linguistic phenomenon are as yet indistinct, but to see a little more clearly one should in the second place relate it to the subject of the politics of ethnicity. Language is of course an important element in any definition of ethnicity, and there is an evident overlap; but the politics of language is also a distinguishable subject in its own right. Where the assertion of ethnic identity can be identified as a possible weapon in the individual's struggle for power and recognition within the colonial and post-colonial state,² the choice of a language is that of the most effective code in the individual's daily struggle for survival. Language choice in such a setting may be less a matter of assertion, the proud proclamation of an identity, than it is one of evasion, a more or less conscious blurring of the boundaries of identity. And in Senegal the government itself by its inaction has practised its own shadow-politics of procrastination.

* Professor of Political Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

¹ D. Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa* (Cambridge, 1992). My own research on the Wolofisation movement was principally in Jan.–Apr. 1975, updated by occasional interviews during field visits in 1981, 1983, 1992 and 1997.

² On the 'Shadow theatre of ethnicity' in J. F. Bayart, *The State in Africa. The politics of the belly* (London, 1993), pp. 41–59.

The choice of a language also has significant implications in terms of culture: to choose to speak Wolof, most of the time, is to enter a distinguishable area, if not of sharply defined ethnicity then often of a particular style of religiously styled interaction, in the accommodationist tradition of Senegal's Sufi brotherhoods. The different elements within that Sufi tradition, brotherhoods or segments, have enough of mutual recognition, within a shared Islamic identity, to amount to a single cultural group. It is possible, then, to envisage the future emergence, from the expansion of a particular language and culture group, of a more viable nationhood within the territorial frontiers of the Senegalese state. Such is the benign political potential of linguistic Wolofisation.

But of course one must tread very carefully here. In the first place one must recognise that the choice of (principal) language need be determinant neither of ethnicity nor of nationality. A benign language scenario, the painless emergence of nationhood from a shared language choice, must confront for example the tragic example of Rwanda, where Hutus and Tutsis speak the same language, Kinyarwanda, with a common culture within which took place the 1994 genocide.³ The use of a single language has never constrained the ethnic strife between Protestants and Catholics in Ulster. Perhaps the political problems arise, as with the rival clans of Somalia, when you do all too clearly understand what the other side is saying – less speculatively one may simply note that a shared language doesn't necessarily help in getting on together.

To clear away at least some of the mists, then, it may be useful to suggest some of the most important themes in African language politics, each relevant to the case of Wolofisation. A first obvious theme is that of the position of European languages as privileged languages of the post-colony: the role of these languages in the maintenance of juridical statehood and also in the maintenance of the advantages of a linguistically qualified élite. A second theme is that of the political use of various African languages, for example in the patrimonial politics studied by William Reno in Sierra Leone.⁴ A third theme is that of the potential for use of particular African languages as formal and written

³ See G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis. History of a genocide, 1959–1994* (London, 1995).

⁴ W. Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge, 1995). One might also bear in mind Emmanuel Terray's distinction between the politics of the 'air conditioner' and that of 'the verandah' in Côte d'Ivoire. The distributionist politics of the verandah here involve many other languages besides the official French of the air conditioner. See E. Terray, 'Le climatiseur et la véranda', in Collectif, *Afrique Plurielle, Afrique Actuelle* (Hommages à Georges Balandier) (Paris, 1986).

languages of state. The leading candidates for such recognition are languages which have had a trans-ethnic commercial function (Lingala, Swahili, etc.): but to convert the *lingua franca* of trade into a privileged language of state requires the intervention of a determined political leadership, which is likely also to encounter some determined political resistance. The question of a national language, one to be drawn from the African repertoire, at the expense of others to be ignored or excluded by the state, is an explosive one in any multilingual and multiethnic state, and thus most states in Africa. There may be very good political reasons, perhaps even that of the survival of the state, to fall back on the European language of colonial inheritance. The fourth theme in African language politics, then, is that of the already mentioned relationship between language and the politics of ethnicity: how far does language difference contribute to ethnic conflict? The relation of each of these four general themes to the subject of the politics of Wolofisation should become apparent below.

To take the question of a Wolof ethnicity first, one immediately confronts substantial ambiguity in terms of the politics of identity. Informants often find it difficult to specify either in general terms who can be identified as a Wolof, or even whether they themselves should be categorised as Wolof.⁵ Wolof identification is perhaps best seen as a process, one which relates to a range of subjects: urbanisation, migration, religion, statehood. There are no fixed ethnic boundaries here, no lines of battle drawn up by colonial experience, on the whole no primordialism, rather what may be (for the state) a helpful ambiguity and flux. In so far as it is language use which defines the terms of ethnic membership, then the ethnic boundaries are blurred, in part by the plurilingual reality of Senegalese life. David Laitin sees such plurilingualism as characteristic of Africa, where one should think in terms of language repertoires rather than single language identities: thus it is ‘language chauvinism’ which is unusual in Africa.⁶ This blurring of language boundaries in Africa, and the relatively non-antagonistic character of language divisions, may then in part be explained by the absence of obvious political issues in terms of which lines of confrontation might be drawn. Thus there are no reserved government jobs for the speakers of particular Senegalese languages, in

⁵ See L. Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 49.

⁶ Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction*, p. 157; ‘Language chauvinism’ may be unusual in Africa, but it is not unknown. The governmental imposition of Amharic in Ethiopia until 1991 is thus analysed by Mekuria Bulcha, in ‘The politics of linguistic homogenization in Ethiopia and the conflict over *afaan Oromoo*’, *African Affairs*, 96, 384 (1997), 325–52.

contrast for example with the Indian cases reviewed by Joyotirindra Das Gupta.⁷ While ethnic and familial favouritism does help in getting government jobs, in Senegal as elsewhere in the world, the preference in Senegal as elsewhere in Africa is seldom put in language terms.

Yet politics, from another perspective, is also clearly involved here, in the socio-linguistic process of Wolofisation, for it can be argued that Wolof speakers provide what could be termed a 'core ethnicity' for the Senegalese state, rather as do the English for the United Kingdom (or 'Britain') in the view of A. D. Smith.⁸ Those are rather the terms in which the Wolof (speakers) tend to see the subject, in so far as they trouble to think about it; as with the English until recent times, part of their advantage is that they haven't had to think about the subject much. Somewhere in the background, however, there lurks an assumption, that without the Wolof there would be no Senegal, that this is the irreducible core of the state. Members of the country's other ethnic groups of course see the subject rather differently, often with some degree of resentment of Wolof advantages within the state, either indeed in terms of government jobs or of the state's allocation of resources. At the limit there are some in Casamance who would prefer not to be part of the Senegalese state, and many more in the south who resent the 'Wolof colonialism' of state bureaucracy.

Could Wolof become the official language of the Senegalese state? With such a question we enter the zone of symbolic confrontation, a confrontation in the first instance with French. That question is implicit in the attempt to promote literacy in the Wolof language, then to be used in state education and in government documentation. The present situation is that Wolof is primarily an oral medium, while French dominates in all state education or documentation. The proponents of Wolof literacy (in Roman script) have thus thought of themselves primarily as contesting the post-colonial hegemony of the French language in Senegal, as agents of an African cultural liberation from the post-colonial French. Such a liberation was to be achieved by official recognition and promotion of the Wolof language, first, in state education. Enthusiasm in this cause reached its high point (to date) over the years from 1967 to 1971, concentrated around the University of Dakar. The ideas are still around in 1997, evoked with a little nostalgia now, but there has been remarkably little government effort

⁷ J. Das Gupta, 'Ethnicity, language demands and national development in India', in N. Glazer and D. P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity: theory and experience* (Cambridge, MA, 1975), pp. 466-88. ⁸ A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 153-73.

to pursue any promotion of Wolof literacy in the meantime. Part of the explanation for the governmental inertia lies in the nagging problem of the relation between Wolof and the other languages of Senegal: can one local language be the privileged instrument of national cultural liberation, not to speak of African authenticity, without provoking unwelcome reactions from other local language communities?

Leaving such a question to one side for the moment, it is to be remarked that a long-term process of Wolofisation continues to operate, quite independently of government language policy. Wolof has continued to spread as a spoken language, a *lingua franca* of commercial contact and of urbanisation, consistently since French conquest in the late nineteenth century. While membership of the Wolof *ethnie* has indeed expanded over this period (the Wolof as 30 per cent of the Senegalese population in 1900, 36 per cent in 1970, 44 per cent in 1988),⁹ use of the Wolof language has expanded much further, far beyond the (fuzzy) boundaries of ethnic self-recognition. Wolof is furthermore exceptional in this respect: the first remotely reliable statistics on language use in Senegal (1963–4) suggested that as many as four-fifths of the national population spoke Wolof in the home either as first language (41 per cent) or second language (39 per cent).¹⁰ Leigh Swigart in 1992 found Wolof to be spoken as first or second language by 71 per cent of Senegalese, although only 44 per cent were of Wolof ethnic background. She also found that such a language overlap from ethnicity was very much greater for Wolof than for the country's other languages: 'the Pulaar, Mandingo and Diola languages are also spoken by a sector of the population not ethnically of those backgrounds, (but) the discrepancy in those cases is at most a few per cent.' Serer on the other hand follows an Irish pattern, in that 'the Serer language is spoken by fewer people than claim Serer as their ethnicity'.¹¹ Many of

⁹ See tables for ethnic membership and language use (Senegal and Fatick) in Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal*, pp. 48–50, 53.

¹⁰ See F. Wioland, 'Enquête sur les langues parlées au Sénégal par les élèves de l'enseignement primaire: étude statistique', Dakar: Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar, 1965. The main findings of this survey, of languages spoken by primary schoolchildren (and their parents) in 1963–4, were also provided in a much shorter, undated pamphlet, 'L'expansion du Wolof au Sénégal', Dakar: CLAD, n.d. This 1963–4 survey covered 360 state primary schools from all the regions of Senegal – 35,434 pupils. The questionnaire distributed in the schools asked, for each pupil, mother's language, father's language, first language spoken in the home, other languages spoken by the pupil; see also Francine Kane, 'Sociologie des langues au Sénégal', Thèse de Doctorat, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, 1974, and D. B. Cruise O'Brien, 'L'enjeu politique de la Wolofisation', in Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire de Bordeaux, *Année Africaine* 1979, Paris: Pedone, pp. 319–35.

¹¹ L. Swigart, 'Practice and perception: language use and attitudes in Dakar', Ph.D. Thesis (Anthropology), University of Washington, 1992, p. 80.

the Serer, in effect, through their language use seem to be engaged in a process of (ethnic) Wolofisation.

Those who speak no Wolof are in a culturally marginal position in Senegal today, and the process of linguistic Wolofisation could provide a cultural basis for a Senegalese national community, although possible future political problems are lurking in the shadows. Here at least in principle could be a bridge across the cultural gap between the rulers and the ruled, as the Wolof language can provide a shared medium for the great majority of the state's citizens, thus suggesting itself as instrument in the (hypothetical) hegemonic quest outlined by J. F. Bayart for African states.¹² The fact that the rulers in this case have shown so little interest in building or using such a cultural bridge does then suggest that other political priorities are involved. Those in government seek to preserve their control above all through the administrative use of the post-colonial language, French: it is French which provides the tested and still preferred medium for the strengthening of ties within the élite, between persons of a range of ethnic and linguistic origins. This is the sort of process which Bayart has termed the 'reciprocal assimilation of élites',¹³ tending to the construction less of a nation than of a ruling class. The post-colonial language then becomes a means through which the dominant can restrict popular access to the top through a process of élite closure,¹⁴ first, through the best educational institutions. It is true in Senegal as elsewhere in Africa that the rulers are much more concerned with the construction of states than of nations. The particularity of Senegal may then lie in the fact that something like a nation is none the less being constructed, from below.

The conquering language here, the Wolof spreading across the territory of Senegal, is a hybrid language in the process of creation, the 'Urban Wolof' identified in Swigart's recent Dakar based study: 'the use of Urban Wolof is the Senegalese urbanites' way of expressing their identity as both the inheritors of a colonial legacy and the creators of a new urban culture and language'.¹⁵ To be linguistically pure in such a context is to be out of touch; urban Wolof is a language first of mixing between French and Wolof: 'To hear urban Wolof is to hear two

¹² Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 'Part Two: Scenarios in the pursuit of hegemony', pp. 119–204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–79.

¹⁴ C. Myers-Scotton, 'Elite closure as boundary maintenance: the case of Africa', in B. Weinstein (ed.), *Language Policy and Political Development* (Norwood, NY, 1990).

¹⁵ Swigart, 'Practice and perception', p. 280. See also P. Dumont, *Le français et les langues parlées au Sénégal* (Paris, 1983).

languages merging to create a single, highly expressive code.¹⁶ An excessive use of French on the one hand condemns the speaker as ‘an *assimilé*, a perhaps too willing victim of the French civilising mission’, while on the other hand the user of ‘a Wolof considered too pure’ may be ‘categorised as a *kawkaw* or hick’.¹⁷ The townies teach this new code to their country cousins, and those really in the know add English words to their lexicon, as is ‘the trade mark of young men... *les jeunes bandits de Dakar*’.¹⁸

The French language thus retreats, especially as a spoken medium, a retreat at least in part to be explained by considerations of political economy. Economic decline in Senegal, structural adjustment since 1981 (although half-heartedly applied) has involved at least a partial retreat of the state, with the closing of many parastatals and the freezing of most governmental hiring.¹⁹ Not much incentive then for the young to cultivate their French, the language of inaccessible officialdom: the language of material survival, in a Senegalese urban context, is the language of the informal or parallel or real economy, not French but Urban Wolof. These are difficult economic circumstances, to be sure, although not as forbidding as in many African states: we are at some distance yet from the threat of state collapse.

A relatively benign language scenario in Senegal, if it is to be set against the background of a faltering economy, has allowed the scarcely contested spread of the hybridised Wolof language to a dominant position in the speech of all urban centres. The lack of substantial contest from the speakers of Senegal’s other languages has in part depended upon their being few evident stakes at issue. Six languages are officially ‘recognised’ in Senegal (Wolof, Serer, Mandinka, Pulaar, Diola, Soninke), but these are in effect ignored both in education and in government documentation. Such a situation as already indicated is to be contrasted with the more fractious cultural politics of India, where ‘language demands have been concerned with many issues... the official language of the federal government; the reorganisation of the federation along regional linguistic lines; the official languages of the states of the federation; and language policies relating to education, public employment, and general communi-

¹⁶ L. Swigart, ‘Cultural Creolisation and language use in post-colonial Africa: the case of Senegal’, in *Africa* 64, 2 (1994), 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179–80.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 181; see also Mamadou Ndiaye, ‘Le Wolofanglais: interlect des teenagers des villes du Sénégal’, paper to West African Research Association, Conference on ‘West Africa and the Global Challenge’, Dakar, 22–28 June 1997, Session ‘Langues et Sociétés du Sahel’, 25 June 1997.

¹⁹ For a bleak enough assessment see G. Duruflé, *Le Sénégal peut-il sortir de la crise?* (Paris, 1994).

caton'.²⁰ These language demands furthermore are articulated by language leaders, who have been active in creating ethnic consciousness based on language loyalty. At the state level, under India's federal structure, it is argued that 'integral ethnicity rather than ethnic pluralism appears to provide the dominant premise of language demands and language politics'.²¹ These are the politics of linguistic closure, of the reservation of employment opportunities, which in turn create the problem of language minorities, thus raising 'problems of inter-state adjustment that are often difficult to solve'.²²

While India's cultural and linguistic politics are played out on an altogether different institutional scale, and in a very different cultural setting, they may be instructively compared with our case of the politics of Wolofisation. There is no question yet of the reservation of jobs to the speakers of particular Senegalese languages, rather a common subordination of all these languages to the still hegemonic French, in all formal sector employment. Language battles are yet to be fought out on the street, or indeed to be staged in the courts as in the USA since 1964.²³ Yet in Senegal one does begin to see a role for aspirant language leaders, of the Wolofisation movement from the mid 1960s, of a Halpulaaren movement from the 1980s. Pulaar is the second most widely spoken language in Senegal, spoken by two groups previously seen as ethnically separate, the Peul and the Toucouleur, which the Halpulaaren movement aimed to unite under a single language banner – 'partly a response to the threat posed by Wolofization'.²⁴ A linguistic confrontation in the Senegalese National Assembly in the 1980s showed perhaps some of the future possibilities, when a speaker from one of the small opposition parties (the People's Liberation Party) spoke in Wolof. French is the real language of the Assembly, and this speaker wanted to make his symbolic point, on behalf of the Wolof language. He was answered by a government minister in Pulaar, a language which the previous speaker did not understand, making another point, that 'Wolof was not the only indigenous language alternative'.²⁵ So there are some good reasons to carry on talking in French, at least in the National Assembly.

On the street, however, Wolof has increasingly prevailed over the

²⁰ Das Gupta, 'Ethnicity, language demands', p. 479.

²¹ Ibid., p. 482.

²² Ibid., p. 485.

²³ L. H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope. Race, ethnicity and the civic culture* (Hanover and London, 1990), especially ch. 24, 'Respecting diversity, promoting unity: the language issue', pp. 458–73.

²⁴ Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal*, p. 51.

²⁵ Swigart, 'Practice and perception', p. 268.

past century, a language lead to be explained first in terms of the impact of the colonial state. The French colony of Senegal was built first on Wolof territory, towards the Atlantic littoral, and the major colonial towns were sited among the Wolof-speaking. Those who migrated to these towns from the interior almost automatically learned Wolof, in St Louis, Dakar, Thiès or Rufisque. And the ascendance of Wolof as a language of commerce was then such that even a town such as Kaolack, built on Serer territory, became predominantly Wolof-speaking, while Ziguinchor in Casamance (among the Diola) had an increasing Wolof presence. The colonial legacy to independent Senegal has been one where the country's principal towns are all predominantly Wolof-speaking. Thus there has been a language lesson to be learned by the ambitious migrant from the countryside, in Wolof. And it is Urban Wolof, with its extensive borrowings from French, which has taken the lead in independent Senegal.

Reviewing the language situation of independent Senegal down to the present time, then, one may begin by thinking of Wolof in terms of different language situations, of different contexts and purposes of language use, with distinguishable political implications. The elementary situations to be reviewed here are those of the language of the home (first language); the language of commerce (*lingua franca*); the (parallel) language of state. A national struggle for recognition as language of civilisation is then to be appraised.

Language of the home

One starts here with the language of ethnic identification, which according to the 1988 census put the Wolof at 43.7 per cent of Senegal's population, followed by the Halpulaaren at 23.3 per cent, the Serer at 14.8 per cent, the Diola at 5.5 per cent, the Manding at 4.6 per cent and others at 8.2 per cent.²⁶ The ethnic statistics of the census, however, have understated the extent to which Wolof becomes the first language of the home. This became clear from the first national survey of language use in Senegal (1963-4), by the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar (CLAD), which found that where there was intermarriage between Wolof and non-Wolof, the language chosen for family communication was almost always Wolof, whether it was the wife or husband who was of Wolof origin. Such mixed marriages

²⁶ Ethnic census figures are provided in Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal*, p. 48.

accounted for 16 per cent of the domestically Wolof-speaking total.²⁷ The Wolof language was furthermore alone in having this maritally hegemonic status. Nor was intermarriage with a Wolof a necessary condition for the adoption of the Wolof language in the home by those of non-Wolof origin. The 1963–4 survey thus found that Wolof was spoken as first domestic language in homes where neither husband nor wife was of Wolof ethnic origin (another 15 per cent of the domestically Wolof-speaking total).²⁸ These proportions of Wolof-speakers beyond the boundaries of ethnicity (roughly one-sixth of domestic Wolof-speakers in 'mixed marriages' with one Wolof partner, another one-sixth with neither partner of Wolof origin) remained remarkably constant across the entire territory of Senegal. Such findings amount to an unpublicised referendum on the perceived utility of the Wolof language in Senegal. The CLAD findings of 1963–4 are confirmed (on a small scale) by Leonardo Villalon in his Fatick study of the late 1980s: in Fatick, originally a Serer town and now a regional capital, not only do 'all individuals of Wolof ethnicity speak Wolof, and the vast majority of them speak only Wolof... For many [members of other ethnic groups] Wolof is actually a first language, and particularly among the smaller ethnic groups in Fatick, frequently the only one.'²⁹ Thus not only has the Wolof language been invading the Senegalese home, where it has taken occupation in a significant number of cases, it has been expanding the frontiers of the Wolof *ethnie*.

Language of commerce

Wolof is virtually indispensable to market trade in Senegal, as can be demonstrated by a visit to any substantial market in that country, necessary at least as a second language: 80 per cent of the CLAD survey spoke Wolof as first or second language; 84 per cent of Villalon's Fatick survey. Swigart reports the view of 'many linguists... that if one includes persons having a passive understanding of the language, the Wolophone figure would rise to near 90%'.³⁰ It is the logic of the market above all which drives the process of Wolofisation, linguistic and then ethnic. As elsewhere in Africa, or in the world, the urban commercial setting allows for shifting ethnic identification; in Senegal the shift is above all to the Wolof benefit. One Wolof informant, himself

²⁷ Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar, 'L'Expansion du Wolof au Sénégal', undated pamphlet, p. 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁹ Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal*, p. 51.

³⁰ Swigart, 'Practice and perception', p. 80.

of some Pulaar ancestry, meditated along these lines: ‘What is a Peul (colonial ethnic category) anyway? A man who trails around after his cows. And if he sits down and sells his cows, he becomes a Toucouleur (another colonial census category, again Pulaar-speaking). Then if he uses the money to go off to town and starts to buy and sell cloth, he becomes a Wolof.’³¹

Nor does one have to go to town to become a Wolof. Commercial agriculture has also substantially contributed to the process of Wolofisation, linguistic and then ethnic, as cultivation of Senegal’s staple cash crop (the groundnut) was developed from colonial times above all on Wolof territory. State investment followed, leaving the Wolof with a lead in terms of communications infrastructure (rail and road). Seasonal migration was then (from the First World War onwards) attracted to the Wolof groundnut farms. Although this migration has much diminished since 1970, with the relative decline of the groundnut in the Senegalese economy, it has already had its lasting effect in the diffusion of the Wolof language. The groundnut–Wolof linkage was shown notably in a tendency for groundnut farmers of Serer ethnic origin to adopt the Wolof language and (virtual or complete) ethnic identity.

The tendency to the Wolofisation of the Serer, in terms of language use and identity, may thus largely be explained as a product of the market. A full explanation of that tendency also however requires consideration of a cultural dimension, with the contribution of the Mouride brotherhood to Serer Wolofisation. The Mouride founder Amadu Bamba became in his own lifetime among other things a Wolof folk hero, and Mouride leadership since his time (1851–1927) has communicated with the followers almost exclusively in Wolof. Mouride followers or *talibés* are automatically Wolof-speaking (and often enough literate in Wolof, using Arabic characters). In the countryside the brotherhood has made its most substantial ethnic advance among the Serer: this may be seen as a ‘retribalisation’, involving the use of a Sufi brotherhood in the interest of commercial survival, as with the Nigerian Tijaniyya studied by Abner Cohen.³² Thus as a Tukulor becomes a Wolof by going to town to sell cloth, so a Serer becomes a Wolof by turning over his fields to groundnut farming or by looking to Mouride saintly leadership.

³¹ Musings of Thierno Sow, Touba, March 1975.

³² A. Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa. A study of Hausa migrants in Yoruba towns* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969).

Parallel language of state

While French still remains the language of all official documentation in Senegal, and French-language qualifications are essential for government employment, the Wolof language is not excluded from the corridors of state power. On the contrary, Wolof is the spoken medium of bureaucracy (Urban Wolof) leaving, it is true, room for insistence on correct French in the interests of élite closure when dealing with troublesome supplicants. When the state officials talk among themselves, however, Urban Wolof tends to prevail (French as a 'they-code', Wolof as a 'we-code').³³ French is the language of authority and of instruction, the language in which the orders are given. Wolof is the language of collusion and of evasion, the language in which the orders are most effectively circumvented.

A Wolof language lead in the corridors of state power can be traced back to colonial times, with state recruitment among the ethnic Wolof around the colonial capitals of St Louis and Dakar. Today the state remains, as it has been over the intervening years, by far the biggest employer in Senegal, although it is now economically hard pressed and in partial retreat. It is logical enough, then, that Wolof should still be popularly perceived as the spoken medium of career success, even if success in securing state employment is remote from most people's reality.

Another official medium of communication, government radio, has since Senegalese independence given added impetus to the process of linguistic Wolofisation. The state broadcasting system, Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Sénégal (ORTS) operates on radio principally in Wolof. Rita Cruise O'Brien in a 1975 study found that 56 per cent of radio broadcasting time on the Chaîne Nationale was in Wolof, against 28 per cent in French, and 5 per cent or less in other Senegalese languages (5 per cent in Pulaar, 5 per cent in Serer, 3 per cent in Diola, 2 per cent in Mandinka).³⁴ Wolof rules, on the radio, and the radio has a long reach, in Senegal as elsewhere in Africa. The 1988 census estimated that seven out of every ten Senegalese households

³³ Swigart, 'Practice and perception' p. 265 for 'they code'/'we code' distinction, comparing with English and Spanish as used by Hispanics in the USA.

³⁴ R. Cruise O'Brien, 'Broadcasting for national development. The case of Senegal' (London: International Broadcasting Institute, 1975) (Roneo). R. Cruise O'Brien, 'Broadcasting professionalism in Senegal' in F. Ugboajah (ed.), *Mass Communication, Culture and Society in West Africa* (Oxford, 1985). Independent commercial radio, introduced in Dakar in the 1990s, furthers the cause of Wolofisation. Advertisers prefer Urban Wolof, which reaches the largest audience. L. Swigart, 'Language and legitimacy in Senegalese advertising', paper to Conference of West African Research Association, Dakar, 25 June 1997.

owned a radio, and that in Dakar over half the population listened to the radio every day.³⁵ It wouldn't be much less even far away from the capital city.

The principal radio broadcasters are themselves Wolof-speakers, often using an improvised Wolof translation of French language texts on the national radio. One broadcaster in 1975 self-consciously stated his task in Wolof Radio-diffusion to be one of 'nation-building'.³⁶ But then he knew that I was interested in political questions. It is probably economic necessity, rather than considerations of high policy, which dictates language choice on the radio, a very tight budget with means to broadcast effectively in no more than one 'national language'. Many more listeners understand Wolof than any other language, so that the priority accorded to Wolof on the radio is justified above all by cost-effectiveness. However, the massive preponderance of Wolof on the national radio is of course politically significant, first as an indicator of what kind of 'nation' is at issue, second as an agency in assisting the process of linguistic Wolofisation within the boundaries of the Senegalese state.

State education provides another area within which Wolof has been favoured by circumstances, although French remains the language of instruction. Textbooks (such as are available) are in French, and the teacher talks French in the schoolroom. But in the schoolyard, out of class, Wolof again prevails – the preferred medium of communication between children of various ethnic origins. To move Wolof from the schoolyard to the schoolroom, however, to make it the preferred medium of instruction, would be a hazardous venture, which appears not to have tempted any Senegalese government since independence. There are professional linguists and educators who point to the possible advantages of Wolof language instruction for the furtherance of mass literacy (only one quarter of the population – 26 per cent – was literate in French according to the 1988 census), and a relatively ample pedagogic documentation has been developed for the eventual teaching of Wolof as a written language (very much more so for Wolof than for any other Senegalese language). But in the first place, teaching through Wolof is not a popular idea, with parents or teachers or those to be taught, who all appear to share a fear of losing the possibilities which

³⁵ Figures cited in F. Schaffer, 'Demokaraasi in Africa. What Wolof political concepts teach us about how to study democracy', Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Berkeley (Political Science) 1994, p. 109.

³⁶ Doudou Diop in interview, Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Sénégal, Dakar, March 1975.

the French language still holds. And there are, in the second place, some good if unstated political reasons for governmental hesitancy on this issue, of which more below. The government refuses to allow the teaching of written Wolof on any more than a very timid, professedly 'experimental' basis: perhaps these experiments are designed to fail, but in any case the outcome remains that literate Wolof has yet been taught in no more than a few state schools. The children or pupils at the same time have been making their own language choices, as the schoolyard furthers the cause of Wolofisation.

The progress of the Wolof language cannot, however, plausibly be seen as moving along a line of battle, defeating the other Senegalese languages in open cultural combat. The language choices involved, in the marketplace, in the schoolyard, even in the corridors of administration, have little explicit political content. There are, however, considerations of status here, with implications for the political future. Wolof-speakers tend to see themselves as culturally advanced: they have a condescending term, *lakakat*, for one incapable of understanding the Wolof language. a *lakakat* (literally 'speaker') like the Greek *barbaros*, is one who makes strange and unintelligible sounds: the barbarian *lakakat* have only themselves to blame, in the Wolof view, for they need only learn the Wolof language to join the civilised club. There appears to be little enough of genealogical fastidiousness among the Wolof, no conspicuous tendency for example to draw sharp distinctions between the 'real' ethnic Wolof (from the traditional Wolof states, Kayor, Walo, Jolof, Baol and Saloum) and the growing horde of linguistic newcomers, from all over the country. The form of Wolof now spreading across Senegal is the Frenchified Dakar version, Urban Wolof, in a process which might be seen as the hand-me-down outcome of the French colonial policy of assimilation.

The barbarians will have their own views on this matter of cultural ranking, however, a politics yet to emerge from the shadows. The facts that spoken Wolofisation lacks official coordination, and that literate Wolofisation is in effect impeded by state authority, have thus far meant that there has been very little disposition to mobilise resistance to the spread of the Wolof language. The secessionist movement in the Casamance since 1981, organised by the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC) and strongest among the ethnic Diola, has not involved anti-Wolof linguistic mobilisation, although the Wolof language could be seen as part of the resented northern hegemony, spreading in the markets and the schoolyards of Casamance as of the rest of Senegal, spreading even among the rural

Diola as a result of very substantial migration to Dakar (young women, notably, in domestic service). The emergence of the Halpulaaren movement in the 1980s, defending the cause of the Pulaar language, working to unite the ethnic Peul and Toucouleur behind the Halpulaaren banner, on the other hand, is a possible indicator of a more culturally conflictual future.

Languages of civilisation

If symbolic confrontation of languages has yet to develop between the different indigenous or 'national' languages of Senegal, a symbolic issue has become manifest between some of the partisans of written Wolof (in the Roman script) and the defenders of the continuing monopoly of the French language in matters literate. University people, of course, have been prominently involved here, first inspired by the scholar-politician Cheikh Anta Diop, whose scholarly writings³⁷ argued the linguistic descent of Wolof (or, in his chosen orthography, Valaf) from the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt. His arguments have been strongly contested (in France) on scholarly grounds (for example, how could he ascribe vowel sounds to ancient Egyptian where the established authorities remain baffled?) but those arguments were also to be seen in a Senegalese political context. Cheikh Anta Diop had more than a linguistic thesis, eccentric in the view of his French academic critics, he had his own political parties in the 1960s (the Bloc des Masses Sénégalaises, then the Rassemblement National Démocratique) and a political periodical, the Franco-Valaf *Siggi*, later *Taxaw*. He blazed one kind of trail towards an eventual emergence of a Wolof literature and science, and his Sorbonne thesis was for his numerous followers the most glorious trophy of the Wolofisation cause. He was the cantankerous Grand Old Man of Wolof literature, demonstrating the possibility of a Communist Manifesto or of a Theory of Relativity transcribed in Wolof, demonstrating most importantly that what you could write in French you could write just as well in Valaf.

The cause of literate Wolofisation was taken on in the early 1970s by the younger Dakar intelligentsia, in a series of public meetings in and around Dakar University (now the Université Cheikh Anta Diop). A largely Wolof language periodical, *Kaddu*, was then edited by Ousmane Sembène, the novelist and cinema director, together with the university

³⁷ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Nations nègres et culture* (Paris, 1995 [1964]); *L'Afrique noire précoloniale* (Paris, 1960); *L'Antériorité des civilisations nègres. Mythe ou vérité historique?* (Paris, 1967).

linguist Pathé Diagne. Enthusiasm for literate Wolof was at its height in 1971, when this appeared (to its supporters) to be the logical cultural complement to political independence from France. But attendance at the public meetings in this cause soon began to dwindle. *Kaddu* went out of circulation, and the Senegalese government mounted its cultural counteroffensive. The government could rely on widespread (if, for a time, also quiet) popular support, and not only among the French educated; it could rely on much Senegalese reluctance to try to break any cultural (or other) links with France.

As the Wolofisers in nationalist style denounced the government's continuing reliance on the colonial language, unworthy of African independence, the government began its counterattack discreetly, with negotiations over an agreed orthography in Wolof ('Valaf' remained an idiosyncrasy of Cheikh Anta Diop). The use of written Wolof in the state educational system had to await an agreed orthography – President Leopold Senghor used such tactics of delay together with a discreet extension of government patronage, with Cheikh Anta Diop on the payroll at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire. The president had a particularly strong aversion to the cultural–political cause of Wolofisation, an aversion both to the culture and to the politics. How dared those young university upstarts try to tell a president who was also an Agrégé en Grammaire the terms of civilisation? The advocates of written Wolofisation for their part explained the president's resistance in terms of his non-Wolof (Serer) ethnic origin, his indifferently spoken Wolof, and his fundamental commitment to the French language and culture. Some of these culturalists scarcely concealed their scorn,³⁸ but they would have done well to remember that their president was also a seasoned politician. Poorly spoken Wolof might be ludicrous to them, but it was never an electoral liability for Leopold Senghor: worth quite a few votes among the Serer,³⁹ as well as others of non-Wolof ethnicity, and it didn't hurt much among the Wolof, outside of the university. The most ardent advocates of written Wolofisation were often those who had already been through the best of French-language instruction, some of the more prominent of them were French nationals: most Wolof speakers on the other hand wanted to see more and better French-language instruction, as a passport to occupational and geographical mobility for their children. Many no doubt could see little benefit in being taught a language they already

³⁸ When interviewed in Dakar over a period from January to April 1975.

³⁹ Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal*, pp. 81–7.

knew. Thus the president, who appeared to his Wolofising culturalist opponents to be a hopelessly Frenchified figure, out of touch with the national cultural reality of Senegal, was probably more attuned than they to real popular demands in the politics of language.⁴⁰

Government legislation in any case was to follow President Senghor's cultural and political precepts, slowing down any movement towards the introduction of Wolof in state education. The first step, in 1971, was to give official recognition to the six 'national languages' in Senegal: Wolof, Serer, Pulaar, Mandinka, Diola, Soninke. There was no indication of any legislative effect of this 'recognition', but an important symbolic point was made: six languages, no suggestion of ranking, the Wolof were reminded that they were neither alone nor recognised as pre-eminent. Decrees followed in 1975 establishing an agreed orthography for Wolof and Serer,⁴¹ but the introduction of Wolof to the state school system was then held up by an officially declared need to maintain equity with the other national languages. Of those six languages, however, only Wolof has been the subject of the sort of documentary study (dictionary, grammar, manuals) which could have provided a basis for written schoolwork. The Wolof language had been studied by French scholars for a century and a half, by Senegalese scholars especially since independence, the most extensive recent work being that of the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar towards a complete Wolof–French dictionary with a series of accompanying *manuels pédagogiques*.⁴² Leopold Senghor, whose views on the national language issue have strongly influenced the policies of his presidential successor, Abdou Diouf, however relegated all African languages to the status of *langues d'intuition*, at some distance below the *langue de raisonnement*, French.

Civilisation, in the presidential view, was a word best written in French, and the officially recognised languages were thus 'recognised' the more effectively to be ignored in the educational process. There are, however, political questions at issue here, together with those of cultural status, and the presidential perspective in matters of culture had its less than fully explicated political logic. The pedagogic benefits of learning to read and write in a language one knew well, rather than

⁴⁰ For an excellent biography see J. Vaillant, *Black, French and African. A biography of Leopold Sedar Senghor* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

⁴¹ Décret assurant le découpage des mots en Serer et en Wolof, nos. 75-1025/6 in *Journal Officiel de la République du Sénégal*, 8 Nov. 1975.

⁴² See A. Fall, R. Santos and J. Doneux, *Dictionnaire Wolof–Français, suivi d'un Index Français–Wolof* (Paris, 1990) p. 336), also J. L. Diouf and M. Yaguello, *J'apprends le Wolof* (Paris, 1991) (a manual for school use).

in the often unfamiliar French, might be accepted, but what would be the likely political consequences if the state were to accord the Wolof language an official priority through the educational system? There remains a clear potential here for a para-politics of primordialism, starting perhaps with some organised reaction on the part of those the Wolof call *lakakat*. Those barbarians might not accept the argument of the educationalists, that their languages were inadequately documented for use in formal education, they might refuse in any case to accept such an argument as a pretext for imposing Wolof-language state instruction. And although Wolof is very widely spoken in Senegal, it is little used beyond the state's borders, while two other Senegalese languages (Pulaar and Mandinka) are widely used in neighbouring West African states: an eventual possibility then of the language issue feeding into secessionist or irredentist politics. Any attempt to impose Wolof in school in the southern region of Casamance, some of it a war zone since 1981, would have an immediate effect in aggravating an already fraught cultural situation, prolonging the war.⁴³

The more euphoric Wolofisers in their heyday simply dismissed such considerations from their minds, or saw them as part of a necessary progress. One French university professor, with strong sympathies for the cause of Wolof-language instruction, thus remarked to a Dakar audience that 'History is full of linguistic assassinations.' That remark (in 1967) provoked at least one troubled reply, 'there are some languages that do not want to die'.⁴⁴ Government policy since that time has suggested a sense of the dangers which failed to disturb the French sociologist. Official discourses commonly express the hope that the national languages will in the future be more used in the educational process, and publicity is given to such experimental use of written Wolof as has already been made. At the same time, however, literate Wolofisation has remained subject to some close supervision and official control. Government decrees in 1977 thus reaffirmed the requirement for conformity with the Wolof (and Serer) orthography established two years before, also stipulating serious judicial penalties for those who transgressed. Three months in jail, or a fine of up to 1 million francs CFA (then worth £16,000), were to be imposed for anyone publishing Wolof texts which included, for example, double

⁴³ See D. Darbon, 'Le culturalisme Bas-Casamançais', in *Politique Africaine* 14 (June 1983), 125-8; also O. Linaires, *Power, Prayer and Production. The Jola of Casamance, Senegal* (Cambridge, 1992).

⁴⁴ P. Fougeyrollas, 'L'Enseignement du Français au Service de la Nation Sénégalaise' (Dakar: Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar, 1967), p. 32.

consonants.⁴⁵ The principal titles of the Wolofisers' press (Sembene's *Kaddu*, Cheikh Anta Diop's *Siggi*) flaunted that double consonant: although the editors never went to jail on that account, the titles soon went out of print. Those 1977 decrees might be seen as a last wave of the schoolmaster's cane from Leopold Senghor before his retirement from the presidency in 1980. Abdou Diouf as presidential successor was soon to identify himself with a relative political liberalisation in allowing (April 1981) a more open multiparty competition, but he has remained consistently faithful to the language policies of his predecessor.

In the altered circumstances of the 1980s, with some of the formalities of a multiparty democratic transition, against a background of economic decline, it was at the same time remarkable that the demand for literate Wolofisation was also reduced. Impasse in the field of language literacy left language politics still in the shadows, Wolof was thus denied its recognition, this at the same time as the progress of Urban Wolof as a spoken language has continued and even been accelerated with the urbanisation of Senegal's population. One politician in particular, Abdoulaye Wade of the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais, has successfully used Urban Wolof as part of his opposition campaign, while President Diouf (like Wade, ethnically Wolof) is more at ease, when speaking officially, in French. Swigart, observing the 1988 elections from a linguistic standpoint, remarked that while most candidates tried to speak as 'pure' a language as possible,

there was...one exception to this pure language pattern and that was in the speeches of Abdoulaye Wade. I watched and heard how he unhesitatingly switched from French to Wolof and back, intermingling single lexical items and phrases of the two languages in the Urban Wolof manner... Whatever lay behind his language choice, his supporters loved him. As he mixed French and Wolof the young people surrounding him cheered and applauded.⁴⁶

When she interviewed him, however, Professor Wade flatly stated that 'in my campaign speeches I used either one language or the other. It is preferable to speak either pure French or pure Wolof.'⁴⁷ The professor thus denies the disreputable language mixing which the politician so successfully practises.

⁴⁵ *Loi de la République du Sénégal*, no. 77-55, 10 Apr. 1977, providing also for double penalties in case of a second offence.

⁴⁶ Swigart, 'Cultural Creolisation and language use', p. 184. The prophesy of the linguist F. Wioland is relevant: 'Dakar Wolof has an irresistible socio-linguistic dynamic, it will come to dominate all of Senegal, as Parisian French has done through the ages.' F. Wioland, 'Enquête sur les langues parlées au Sénégal par les élèves de l'enseignement primaire...', p. 5.

⁴⁷ Swigart, 'Cultural Creolisation and language use', p. 185.

Urban Wolof is in more general terms not only a language, as Swigart remarks, it is a new identity, remarkable among other reasons for being seen as a composite of essentially negative attributes⁴⁸ – smooth talkers, sly, disrespectful, quick to take insult, dishonest – and is seen in these terms by the Wolof themselves. This is the ‘modern’ language of Senegal, the language of those who get on, the language of success. And around this emerging language, with its formidable power of attraction (and, in effect, incorporation) one sees the emergence of a Senegalese political culture, be it one of which nobody seems to be particularly proud.



The fact that French still rules as official language of state, in all documentation as well as in the training and selection of officialdom, in education from the primary level upwards, is probably the most important explanation for the relative absence of conflict between different language groups in Senegal. This is a linguistic situation to be placed in its African context, part of a post-colonial pattern, as argued by M. N. Ngallaso and A. Ricard in 1986.⁴⁹ The linguistic logic of the post-colony is that the primary language of state is different from the languages of society. Such is the general African pattern: there have been some attempts to use a local language in place of that of colonial inheritance as the dominant language of state, but these have tended to raise problems both of status and power between language groups. The post-colonial language inheritance thus raises some quite fundamental questions, questions of the survival of the state in contemporary Africa.

Some examples may be instructive here, beginning with that of the Zaïrian government which sought to impose Lingala as chosen language of authenticity, meeting determined resistance from the partisans of other languages. This was remarked by Young and Turner with particular reference to a Congress of Zaïrian Linguists in 1975, when the government’s linguistic contingent ‘had to retreat in the face of strong opposition from the Shaba and Kasai delegates’.⁵⁰ David Laitin in 1990 remarked of Zaïre that ‘despite fifteen years of seeking to implement an “authentic” language regime, the status of French is rising, if anything’.⁵¹ Similarly in Central Africa, although Sango was

⁴⁸ Swigart, ‘Practice and perception’, p. 106.

⁴⁹ M. N. Ngallaso and A. Ricard, ‘Des langues et des états’, *Politique Africaine* 23 (1986).

⁵⁰ C. Young and T. Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State* (Madison, WI, 1985), p. 155.

⁵¹ Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa*, p. 127.

declared the national language in 1964, French still prevails in practice: in Côte d'Ivoire the first article of the constitution stipulates that 'la langue officielle est le français'. Nor are such post-colonial linguistic phenomena peculiar to *la francophonie*. Even in Tanzania, where nine-tenths of the population speaks Swahili, and where the government declared Swahili the national language in 1964, using the language in all schools, it 'is facing popular pressure from students to provide secondary education in the English language', and has retreated on that issue.⁵² The Ugandan Constitutional Conference of 1993, after reviewing the claims of Luganda and Swahili for recognition as the country's national language, preferred not to 'revive old debates' (around the Buganda issue, most explosively) and thus to retain the relatively uncontroversial English as language of state.⁵³

The French language and cultural presence in Senegal thus fits into a post-colonial African pattern. The particularity of this case lies partly in its historical depth, more than a century and a half, partly in the consistency with which it has been promoted by African political leadership, from the years (1914–34) when Blaise Diagne represented Senegal in the French National Assembly, through the long hegemony of Leopold Senghor (1951–80) and the presidency of Abdou Diouf (1981–). The tide of French influence may now, however, be running out, a retreat viewed in Senegal with disquiet and occasional derision, as when the satirical *Le Politicien* calls French 'a moribund language'.⁵⁴ Hoots of derision for *la francophonie*, it has been argued here, may not quite fit the interests of the partisans of the Wolof cause. A paradox may be involved, and it is surely possible that Wolofisers in the future may look back on the role of the state's present leadership with nostalgia. That leadership's obdurate refusal to abandon their insistence on French language and culture (in writing) has created a political climate within which the (spoken) Wolof language and culture have expanded with remarkably little opposition, to a point where they are in an increasingly clear priority position within Senegalese society. This is the expansion not only of a language, Urban Wolof, but also, at one remove, of an ethnic group, an ethnic group in expansion and mutation, the possible core *ethnie* of a future Senegalese nation.

French, in the meantime, still works not only to secure the Senegalese state but also to preserve the privileges of a Senegalese élite. As

⁵² Ibid., p. 140.

⁵³ H. B. Hansen and M. Twaddle, 'Uganda: the advent of no-party democracy', in J. A. Wiseman (ed.), *Democracy and Political Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 145–6.

⁵⁴ Cited in Swigart, 'Cultural Creolisation and language use', p. 179.

Leonardo Villalon remarks, drawing on his experience of the bureaucracy of Fatick, 'literacy and the use of the French language, in a country where only a small percentage of the population can do so, serve as an exclusionary barrier that precludes much societal intrusion into the state's domain'.⁵⁵ True enough, and closely observed, but one may perhaps also discern some mass support for this remote language of the *élite*. Among the non-Wolof ethnic communities in Senegal, and especially among the barbarian *lakakat* who insist on speaking their own languages, French cultural domination is a much less immediate threat than would be involved in a Wolof literacy campaign, imposed by the state.

For the moment, however, in the absence of any such unwelcome state initiative, Wolofisation in Senegal remains in the zone of shadow politics, an undirected social movement indicating a possible language future for the state. Cheikh Anta Diop, the political leader who tried hardest to give some direction to this process, who was most determined in his effort to take Wolof out of the shadows, failed comprehensively in his campaign for Wolof literacy. His stance may be compared with that of Abdoulaye Wade, the political leader who denies that he is speaking Urban Wolof, while speaking it (perhaps only half-consciously) like a virtuoso. Wade has been the most successful orator of modern Senegal: he could be the hero of the Dakar crowds (at least at the time of the 1988 elections) without taking any interest in the cause of Wolof literacy. His oratorical medium, the hybrid Urban Wolof, has been an important part of his populist message: 'for all my university degrees, my career as lawyer and professor, I am one of you'. Abdoulaye Wade may not concern himself with linguistics, but he seems to know the rules of shadow politics. More than any other Senegalese politician he certainly knew how to draw a crowd: the individuals in that crowd have been making their own language choices, choices which have implications for an emerging political identity. A nation may thus be built not by high directives of state, imposed from above, but by a process of linguistic hybridisation, by only partly conscious popular choices, made for the most part in the shadows.

⁵⁵ Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal*, p. 83.