

Minority Language Promotion in Senegal and Mauritania: The Case of Pulaar

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A network of activists who reside in or have migrated from the Fuuta Tooro region of Northern Senegal and Southern Mauritania has adopted literacy classes, forms of entertainment and journalism in order to address perceived threats to the Pulaar language emanating from its minority status in those countries. Some of these activists become recognized in the Pulaar community as *ngenndiyankoobe*, a Pulaar word that translates as “patriots” or “nationalists.” Their activism is part of a brand of transnational social activism that might provide scholars with a new understanding of attempts by ethnic minorities in Africa to address the grievances associated with cultural and linguistic marginalization.

The Jeanne and Hunt Davis Pre-Dissertation Grant enabled me to spend the summer in Senegal and Mauritania in order to learn more about this phenomenon. Thanks to the hospitality of great hosts and friends, I had the opportunity to make contacts with over a dozen associations involved in the promotion of Pulaar and had over 30 interviews and informal discussions with Pulaar activists. My activities included frequent visits to the office of Lewlewal Group, a Pulaar-language media company that is working on beginning radio broadcasts in Senegal and operates an online news site. Other efforts included everything from conversations with mainstream journalists about the pressures of Pulaar activists’ demands on their work, to meetings with *Pelle Pinal e Bambaare* (Associations for Culture and Development) such as that established by the residents of the village of Sori Male, Mauritania, which conducts regular



Pulaar classes taught by members of the community, and has trained a cadre of skilled theater performers whose acts often deal with important social issues.

I am now completing an in-depth fieldwork report that addresses several themes discerned from what I observed and what I was told during my trip. One of the most important of these themes is understanding how current Pulaar activists situate their roles within what some of them view as a tradition of Pulaar-related activism, which is often portrayed as beginning with a group of Pulaar-speaking intellectuals back in the 1950s and 1960s who saw promotion of education in African languages as essential to the project of liberation from European domination. The report also grapples with the considerable degree of contestation I found within the Pulaar activist community in Senegal and Mauritania over who has rightfully earned a place among the *ngenndiyankoobe*, and the criteria by which that is determined. While some with whom I spoke this summer were very passionate about the need for those promoting Pulaar to assume such behaviors as speaking the

language in a way that does not betray influences of other languages, and wearing particular styles of clothes, others scoffed at such attitudes and saw them as ways of unfairly claiming a monopoly on representation of the Pulaar cause.

In addition, I found that assumptions about what makes a creditable Pulaar activist or *ngenndiyanke*, can underlie the grievances expressed in power struggles where positions of influence that involve use of the language are at stake, as seen in the case of one former TV personality whose removal from her position was believed by some to be justified by a supposed lack of depth in her Pulaar, as well as her closeness to members of other ethnic groups. I expect that exploration of these and other themes in my fieldwork report will, sometime in the next few months, begin developing into a bona fide master’s thesis.

John Hames is a master’s student in the Department of Anthropology. He received funding for his research from a 2010 Hunt and Jeanne Davis pre-dissertation research grant as well as summer FLAS from CAS to study advanced Pulaar. His research interests in the Pulaar community began to develop when he was in the Gambia, where he served as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 2005 to 2007.