

# Wolof

Data source: eHRAF

By Emily Pitek, Human Relations Area Files

*\*Data Source entry, prepared based on data sourced from an external project.*

Entry tags: Religion, Islamic Traditions, Sufism, Murīdiyya, Qadiriyyah, Tijāniyyah

The Wolof are a group of people who share a common language (Wolof), and live in what is now Senegal and the Gambia. They are predominantly Muslim, with elements of “traditional (i.e., pre-Islamic) magico-religious beliefs and practices” (Lagacé and Skoggard, 1999). A Christian minority is also present. Islamic beliefs permeate almost every aspect of Wolof culture, so the society is best characterized as coterminous with the religious group. This entry focuses on 1950, when Senegal was a French Protectorate, and the Gambia was a British Protectorate.



Date Range: 1925 CE - 1955 CE

Region: Senegambia

Region tags: Africa, Western Africa, Gambia, Senegal

"The majority of the Wolof are concentrated in [what is now Senegal and the Gambia], between the Senegal and Gambia rivers (16 degrees and 10 minutes to 13 degrees and 30 minutes north latitude); the Atlantic Ocean lies to the west, and Wolof territory extends inland to about 14 degrees 30 minutes west longitude" (Lagacé and Skoggard, 1999). This entry focuses on 1950, when Senegal was under French rule, and the Gambia was under British rule.

## Status of Participants:

✓ Elite    ✓ Religious Specialists    ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

## Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

— Source 1: Divale, W. 2004. Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. *World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research*.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

— Source 1 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ms30-000>

— Source 1 Description: Lagacé, R. O., & Skoggard, I. A. (1999). Culture Summary: Wolof. New Haven, Conn.: HRAF.

— Source 2 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ms30-001>

— Source 2 Description: Gamble, D. P. (1957). *Wolof Of Senegambia: Together With Notes On The Lebu And The Serer*. *Ethnographic Survey Of Africa: Western Africa*. London: International African Institute.

– Source 3 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ms30-003>

– Source 3 Description: Chabas, J., & Scholl, B. (1952). Marriage And Divorce In The Customs Of The Ouolof Inhabiting Large Towns In Senegal. *Revue Juridique Et Politique De L'Union Francaise*. Paris: Librairie Générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence.

– Source 1 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ms30-008>

– Source 1 Description: Ames, D. W. (1953). Plural Marriage Among The Wolof In The Gambia: With A Consideration Of Problems Of Marital Adjustment And Patterned Ways Of Resolving Tensions.

– Source 2 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ms30-007>

– Source 2 Description: Leca, N., & Crawford, D. (1935). Fishermen Of Guer N'Dar With A Note On The Wolof, Their Speech And Secret Languages By Henri Labouret. *Publications Du Comité D'Études Historiques Et Scientifiques De L'Afrique Occidentale Française*, (2), HRAF MS: iii, 82 [Original: 110 ] plate.

## General Variables

### Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: The Wolof people have been in contact with foreigners since at least 1455, as recorded by the Portuguese trader Alvise Ca'da Mosto (Cadamosto). Trade was developed with Europe by the 17th century. This contact opened the door for Christian influence in Senegal and The Gambia. (See Gamble, 1957:16-19).



Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1649 indicates that internal warfare seems to be absent or rare, however, SCCS Variable 1654 indicates that the society was pacified before the twenty-five-year ethnographic present (Ember and Ember, 1992; retrieved from Divale, 2004).



Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1650 indicates that external warfare seems to be absent or rare, however, SCCS Variable 1654 indicates that the society was pacified before the twenty-five-year ethnographic present (Ember and Ember, 1992; retrieved from Divale, 2004).

### Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Estimated population, numeric: 696000

Notes: "The Wolof population of the Gambia number about 30,000...reliable figures for the number of Wolof living in Senegal are not available, but this has been estimated at 666,000" (Ames, 1953:7).

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– Estimated population, percentage of sample region: 90

Notes: 90% is an estimation based on Lagacé and Skoggard, 1999; as well as Gamble, 1957:70-73.

Nature of religious group [please select one]:

– Large official religious group with smaller religious groups also openly allowed

Notes: The majority of the Wolof follow Islam. Elements of paganism are seen in some areas, such as the presence of a cult of spirit possession. A minority of Christians are also present. (Gamble, 1957:70-73).

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: "All heads of Mohammedan mosques, teachers of the Koran, and literate medicine men are freeborn. Some of the medicine men, who are often simultaneously teachers and mosque heads, are called ya bopa (wide-headed). They are thought to have inherited the ability to see and consult with supernatural beings, especially the Mohammedan jinn or spirits, who do various tasks for them - divining, prescribing medicines, and the like - sometimes for evil purposes. The waliu, another class of Mohammedan learned men, have reputedly done something miraculous, such as having walked when paralyzed, and are thought to be especially holy. Waliu have supernatural vision like the ya bopa and are considered effective in helping people with all of their ailments and difficulties and are believed never to use their power for evil purposes. They have higher status in the community than the secular leaders" (Ames, 1953:13).



Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:

– Yes

Notes: (Ames, 1953:13)



Powers are acquired by individual deeds carried out in the current life:

– Yes

Notes: "The waliu, another class of Mohammedan learned men, have reputedly done something miraculous, such as having walked when paralyzed, and are thought to be especially holy. Waliu have supernatural vision like the ya bopa and are considered effective in helping people with all of their ailments and difficulties and are believed never to use their power for evil purposes" (Ames, 1953:13).



Powers are inherited:

– Yes

Notes: "Some of the medicine men, who are often simultaneously teachers and mosque heads, are called ya bopa (wide-headed). They are thought to have inherited the ability to see and consult with supernatural beings, especially the Mohammedan jinn or spirits, who do various tasks for them - divining, prescribing medicines, and the like - sometimes for evil purposes. The waliu, another class of Mohammedan learned

men, have reputedly done something miraculous, such as having walked when paralyzed, and are thought to be especially holy. Waliu have supernatural vision like the ya bopa and are considered effective in helping people with all of their ailments and difficulties and are believed never to use their power for evil purposes" (Ames, 1953:13).

## Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– Yes

Notes: The Koran is an important religious text for the Wolof (see Gamble, 1957:70-71).



Are they written:

– Yes

Notes: The Koran is a written text.

## Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 66, Large or Impressive Structures, indicates that monumental religious architecture is not present (Murdock and Wilson, 1972; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 66, Large or Impressive Structures, indicates that monumental religious architecture is not present (Murdock and Wilson, 1972; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Are pilgrimages present:

– Yes

Notes: "One of the largest mosques in negro Africa has been built at Touba (in Baol) and this has become the centre of an annual pilgrimage which attracts an increasing number of people each year. In 1956 it was estimated that 250,000 people congregated for the pilgrimage" (Gamble, 1957:70).

## Beliefs

### Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Notes: "Women are said to have male spirits and men, female spirits, and interaction between the two spirits is used to explain and justify a great deal of the behavior of the husband and wife. Thus, a jealous male spirit of a woman causes her to have miscarriages. Conversely, a jealous female spirit, belonging to a man, is held to cause deaths of his wives" (Ames, 1953:50).

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: Belief in heaven is present (Ames, 1953:96-97).

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: "When the time for burial draws near, the corpse is taken to the back yard to be ritually washed by a person of the same sex as the deceased, with water drawn fresh from the well. The orifices are closed with cotton. A few drops of perfume are sprinkled on the body and it is clothed in a white shroud, generally of locally made cloth...The body is then rolled in a mat, carried on men's shoulders, and taken to the mosque, where it is laid on the ground outside the mosque facing east on its right side...When the prayer is finished all rise and the corpse is carried to the burial ground. All those present squat and bow down as the body is slowly lowered into the grave, where two men stand to receive it. The mat is unrolled from the body which is laid on its right side facing east. Leaves and sticks are put across the grave, some sticks being stuck into the side walls to take the weight. Earth is heaped on top" (Gamble, 1957:68-69).

↳ Interment:

– Yes

Notes: (Gamble, 1957:68-69)

↳ Corpse is flexed (legs are bent or body is crouched):

– No

Notes: "...the body is slowly lowered into the grave, where two men stand to receive it. The mat is unrolled from the body which is laid on its right side facing east" (Gamble, 1957:68-69).

↳ Corpse is extended (lying flat on front or back):

– No

Notes: "...the body is slowly lowered into the grave, where two men stand to receive it. The mat is unrolled from the body which is laid on its right side facing east" (Gamble, 1957:68-69).

↳ Corpse is upright (where body is interred in standing position)::

– No

Notes: "...the body is slowly lowered into the grave, where two men stand to receive it. The mat is unrolled from the body which is laid on its right side facing east" (Gamble, 1957:68-69).

↳ Corpse is interred some other way:

– Yes [specify]: Right side facing east

Notes: "When the prayer is finished all rise and the corpse is carried to the burial ground. All those present squat and bow down as the body is slowly lowered into the grave, where two men stand to receive it. The mat is unrolled from the body which is laid on its right side facing east. Leaves and sticks are put across the grave, some sticks being stuck into the side walls to take the weight. Earth is heaped on top" (Gamble, 1957:68-69).

↳ Secondary burial:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1850 indicates that "secondary contact with the body or bones of the deceased does not occur" (Schroeder, 2001; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

Notes: See Gamble, 1957:68 for a detailed description of a typical Wolof burial

↳ In cemetery:

– Yes

Notes: "When the prayer is finished all rise and the corpse is carried to the burial ground" (Gamble, 1957:69).

## Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: "Belief in a wide variety of supernatural beings exists..." (Gamble, 1957:71).

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 238 indicates that "a high god is present, active, and specifically supportive of human morality" (Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ The supreme high god has knowledge of this world:

– Yes

Notes: "...the widespread belief that a person's fate in life is predetermined by God" (Ames, 1953:118).

↳ The supreme high god knows what will happen to you, what you will do (future sight):

– Yes

Notes: "...the widespread belief that a person's fate in life is predetermined by God" (Ames, 1953:118).

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– Yes

Notes: "Spirits of ancestors, who can appear in dreams, and to whom libations are sometimes made" (Gamble, 1957:71).

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: See Gamble, 1957:71-72, and questions below for more detail

↳ These supernatural beings can be seen:

– Yes

Notes: "Spirits of villages or specific localities (rab), which may manifest themselves in visible form, e.g., as a large snake" (Gamble, 1957:71).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit positive emotion:

– Yes

Notes: "Among the Wolof, as among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, many of the pre-Muslim spirits, good and bad, have been identified with jinn of the Koran; and the pagan belief in a supernatural animal - usually a large snake - which acts as sort of a village guardian and is responsible for the fertility of the people, has persisted without change" (Ames, 1953:41).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:

– Yes

Notes: "The devil ( seitane) who makes people mad, and who may steal a child and substitute a deformed or abnormal infant" (Gamble, 1957:71).

## Supernatural Monitoring

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– Yes

Notes: See questions below for more detail, and Ames, 1953:96

↳ Is the cause or agent of supernatural punishment known:

– Yes

Notes: see Ames, 1953:96

↳ Done by other entities or through other means [specify]

– Yes

Notes: Done by angels (see Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Is the reason for supernatural punishment known:

– Yes

Notes: Women are rewarded supernaturally for being obedient, respectful and a hard worker for their husbands; women are punished if they do not follow these expectations (Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Done to enforce group norms:

– Yes

Notes: Women are rewarded supernaturally for being obedient, respectful and a hard worker for their husbands (Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Supernatural punishments are meted out in the afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: "The dominance of men in the religious affairs of the community is consistent with the strong supernatural sanctions for the authority of the husband over his wives and children. A woman who is obedient, respectful and a hard worker for her husband can expect him to pray for her and her children. These prayers are considered valuable because they are thought to bring good fortune ("mother's luck") to her children and to make it more likely that she will have a peaceful rest in the grave and rise to heaven on the Day of Judgement. The angels come to the grave of a "good" woman and widen it into a large room in which the air is perfumed and every material comfort is supplied until the Day of Judgement. If a woman has been "bad" the angels place pipes in her nostrils which are connected to the fires of hell" (Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Punishment in the afterlife consists of extreme sensory displeasure:

– Yes

Notes: "If a woman has been "bad" the angels place pipes in her nostrils which are connected to the fires of hell" (Ames, 1953:96).



↳ Supernatural punishments are meted out in this lifetime:

– Yes

Notes: Ames, 1953:118

↳ Punishment in this life consists of bad luck visited on descendants:

– Yes

Notes: "...it is believed that a wife who works hard for her husband and pleases him in every way will have children who will grow up to be prosperous and respected in the community. A woman who does not conform, on the other hand, is thought likely to have a child who will turn out to be lazy, dishonest, and possibly a murderer or a rapist" (Ames, 1953:118).

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– Yes

Notes: See questions below for more details (Ames, 1953:96)

↳ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known:

– Yes

Notes: See questions below for more details (Ames, 1953:96)

↳ Done only by high god:

– No

Notes: Angels are agents of supernatural rewards (Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Done to enforce group norms:

– Yes

Notes: Women are rewarded supernaturally for being obedient, respectful and a hard worker for their husbands (Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: "The dominance of men in the religious affairs of the community is consistent with the strong supernatural sanctions for the authority of the husband over his wives and children. A woman who is obedient, respectful and a hard worker for her husband can expect him to pray for her and her children. These prayers are considered valuable because they are thought to bring good fortune ("mother's luck") to her children and to make it more likely that she will have a peaceful rest in the grave and rise to heaven on the Day of Judgement. The angels come to the grave of a "good" woman and widen it into a large room in which the air is perfumed and every material comfort is supplied until the Day of Judgement" (Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime:

– Yes

Notes: "The dominance of men in the religious affairs of the community is consistent with the strong supernatural sanctions for the authority of the husband over his wives and children. A woman who is obedient, respectful and a hard worker for her husband can expect him to pray for her and her children. These prayers are considered valuable because they are thought to bring good fortune ("mother's luck") to her children and to make it more likely that she will have a peaceful rest in the grave and rise to heaven on the Day of Judgement. The angels come to the grave of a "good" woman and widen it into a large room in which the air is perfumed and every material comfort is supplied until the Day of Judgement" (Ames, 1953:96).

↳ Reward in this life consists of good luck:

– Yes

Notes: (Ames, 1953:96)

↳ Reward in this life consists of fortune visited on descendants:

– Yes

Notes: (Ames, 1953:96)

## Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: See Chabas and Scholl, 1952, pages 1-4 for an outline of Wolof social and moral norms, as well as laws.

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: See Chabas and Scholl, 1952, pages 1-4 for an outline of Wolof social and moral norms, as well as laws.

↳ Are specifically moral norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: Specifically moral norms (such as incest) are linked to Islamic law (see Gamble, 1957:59).

↳ Specifically moral norms are implicitly linked to vague metaphysical concepts:

– Yes

Notes: Specifically moral norms (such as incest) are linked to Islamic law (see Gamble, 1957:59).

## Practices

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## Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– No

Notes: Fasting is observed, but not mandatory in order to be a member of the religious group. "Among the Gambian Wolof the main tenets of Islam are adhered to: the fast month is generally observed, though if it falls in the farming season the young men often break their fast" (Gamble, 1957:70).

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– No

Notes: Taboos on food and drink are present, but not required. "The daily ritual prayers and feast days of the Muslim are today universally observed by the Wolof, though some of them, for the most part young men, break the taboos concerning food and drink - a practice especially noticeable in Bathurst and in the wharf towns" (Ames, 1953:41).

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Notes: "Suicide is rare, and it is believed that the soul of a suicide goes straight to hell" (Lagacé and Skoggard, 1999).

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– Yes

Notes: "The daily ritual prayers and feast days of the Muslim are today universally observed by the Wolof..." (Ames, 1953:41).

– No

Notes: Women are not required to sacrifice time. "Women are virtually excluded from active participation in Mohammedan religious affairs. Except for daughters of chiefs or of certain learned men, women rarely go to the Mohammedan school (dara), where the men learn to pray, to write verses from the Koran and recite them by rote. Women are not allowed in the mosque and seldom pray. Few of them know how to recite the prayers and those who have learned usually pray once or twice a day rather than the five times prescribed by Islam" (Ames, 1953:95).

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

i.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Large-scale rituals are present, but it is not clear if participation is required. "The religious festivals (Tabaski, and the feast at the end of the Fast Month) are the occasions of great celebrations" (Gamble, 1957:70).

## Society and Institutions

## Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A chiefdom

Notes: The Wolof have two levels of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004). Further, at the time this entry focuses on, Senegal was under French rule, and the Gambia was under British rule.

## Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– Yes

Notes: "Boys from about seven onwards are given religious instruction, for which purpose they are sent to a teacher. They are taught the prayers, though they have often acquired these already through imitating their elders; they learn passages of the Koran by heart; and are instructed how to write Arabic characters, and copy portions of the Koran" (Gamble, 1957:70).



Is such education open to both males and females:

– No

Notes: Only boys are sent for religious instruction (Gamble, 1957:70).

## Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

Notes: Senegal was under French Protection from 1877 to 1960, and The Gambia was a Protectorate of Great Britain from 1894 to 1965 (Gamble, 1957:20, 55-60).

## Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, indicates that food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, indicates that food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

## Enforcement

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: "In the Gambia, with the establishment of the Protectorate, native courts were instituted under the presidency of the District Chief and with leading men of the district as Court Members. A copy of the court judgement are sent monthly to the Commissioner (Administrative Officer) and they can be revised by him either on his own initiative or on the application of the parties concerned. If it is considered necessary, he can order the case to be retried, or have it transferred to a Protectorate Court. Sentences of imprisonment of more than 14 days have to be confirmed by the Commissioner" (Gamble, 1957:59).

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– No

Notes: "The [Wolof] elders complain that there is more adultery today than in the old days because they are no longer able to punish offenders as they did before the advent of British administration" (Ames, 1953:128).

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: "The [Wolof] elders complain that there is more adultery today than in the old days because they are no longer able to punish offenders as they did before the advent of British administration" (Ames, 1953:128).

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– Yes

Notes: The Wolof Muslims follow Islamic law (Gamble, 1957:58-61).

## Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Notes: "The Wolof speak a Negro-African language belonging to the family called Senegalo- Guinean from which also stem Serer and Peul. It is not written, although a few Moslem scholars write it with Arabic characters, but this practice is exceptional. On the other hand, some Christian natives have learned to use the letters of the Latin alphabet in Wolof, but this custom is not widespread, and the spelling has not been definitely settled" (Leca and Crawford, 1935:12).

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Arabic, French, English, and Portuguese are available and used by the Wolof (Gamble, 1957:24).

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Arabic, French, English, and Portuguese are available and used by the Wolof (Gamble, 1957:24).

## Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Notes: The Wolof's primary mode of subsistence is agriculture. Animal husbandry provides a secondary source of subsistence, and fishing provides an additional supplemental source of food. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Fishing

– Pastoralism

– Small-scale agriculture / horticultural gardens or orchards

– Large-scale agriculture (e.g., monocropping, organized irrigation systems)

Notes: The Wolof's primary mode of subsistence is agriculture. Animal husbandry provides a secondary source of subsistence, and fishing provides an additional supplemental source of food. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.