

FIELDWORK FOLLOW-UP: DAKAR & SENEGAL RIVER VALLEY

JOHN HAMES

Thanks to a travel award from the African Studies Association, I had the chance to visit Senegal for several weeks from May to June 2016 to attend a joint ASA-American Anthropological Association conference in Dakar. The focus of the meeting was on “Innovation, Transformation and Sustainable Futures,” and took place from June 1-3. I presented a paper titled “Linguistic Pride on the Airwaves: Pulaar Radio Broadcasting on the Senegal-Mauritania Border.”

The paper was based on research I conducted in the Senegal River Valley between 2010 and 2015 and looks at five community radio stations that originated as projects funded by NGOs, development agencies such as USAID, and the efforts of local government officials and migrants from the Senegal River Valley living abroad. The radio stations broadcast mainly in Pulaar, a language which is spoken by significant minorities in both Senegal and Mauritania and around the Sahel Region. Many programs broadcast

themes associated with Pulaar linguistic pride, showcasing Pulaar poetry or even airing shows in which callers compete to speak Pulaar without using loan words. Moreover, a significant number of broadcasters interviewed for this paper bring to their work backgrounds as language activists promoting the Pulaar language through teaching literacy, theater and other activities. Mauritanian listeners are an important source of support for the radio stations, and many Mauritanians appear as guests on shows, give donations, submit public announcements and call into programs. In this respect, the radio stations are not merely Senegalese development projects, but thrive on the linguistic, cultural and kinship ties shared by people on both the Senegalese and Mauritanian sides of the River Valley.

I took advantage of my trip to Dakar by visiting friends who had helped me during the several rounds of previous fieldwork I conducted in Senegal and Mauritania. Several of them are radio and TV journalists and they were eager to interview me about my purpose for attending the conference. On June 11, both myself

and Amadou Tidiane Kane, a respected Pulaar-language author and literacy teacher were invited to appear on a weekly TV talk show called *Ngalu*, which airs on the channel 2sTV. The purpose of our invitation was to discuss the legacy of the late, famous Mauritanian poet Mamadou Samba Diop, also known as Murtuo, or the “the rebel,” who was known as a staunch defender of Pulaar.

When we concluded with the program, Hamet Ly, the host of the TV show, drove me directly to the Gare Routiere des Baux Maraichers, where I was to board an overnight minibus to Thilogne, Senegal. My plan was to spend a few days visiting friends, as well as the radio stations at which I had conducted my research for the paper I presented. As we entered Baux Maraichers, I had the lucky coincidence of finding the man whose family I was on my way stay with. We waited and watched a crew load passengers’ luggage and merchandise on top of the minibus, marveling at how absurdly and unsafely high they had stacked everything. That was when I decided to take the picture that you see here.



John Hames is a PhD candidate in anthropology.