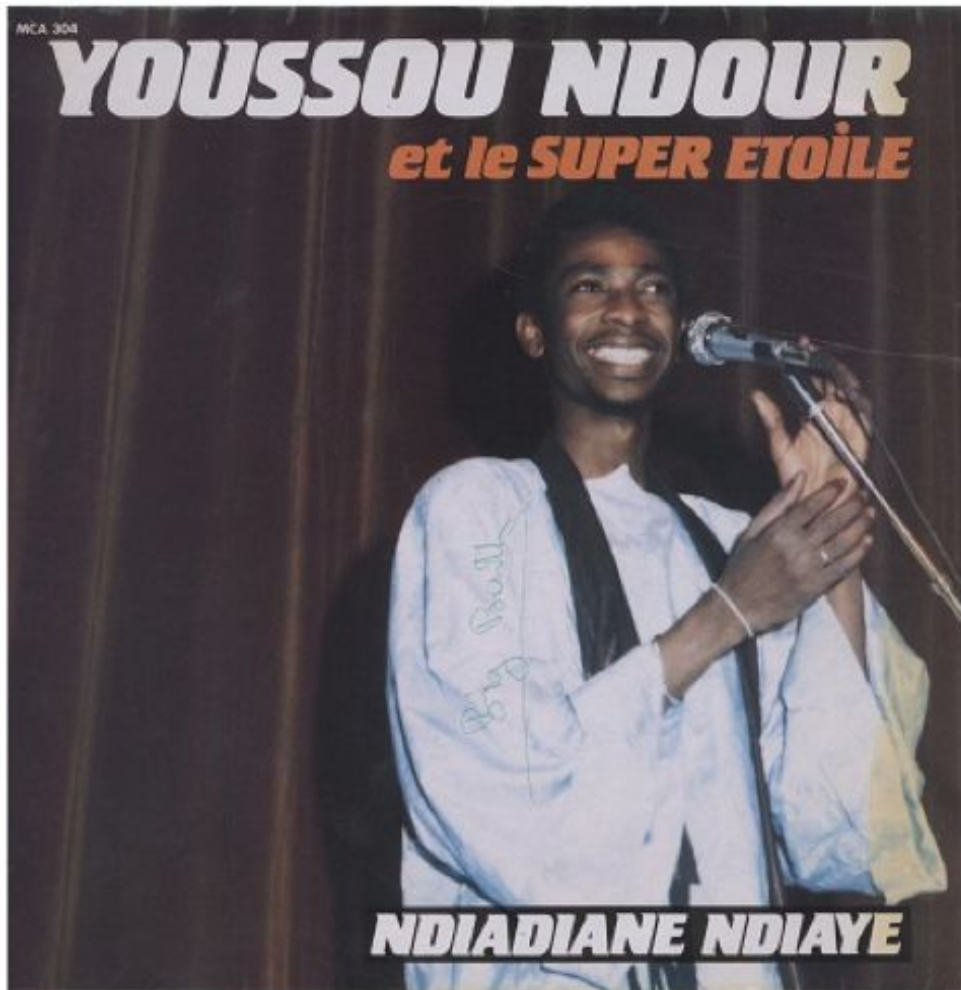


THE RHYTHM OF OUR DAILY STRUGGLES: MUSIC, YOUSOU
N'DOUR AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SENEGAL



INTRODUCTION

From taxicabs to corner stores the sounds of Youssou N'dour and Le Super Etoile stole the Senegalese airwaves in 1988 with their hit single "Set." N'dour's distinct voice pierced through fast-paced tama drum rhythms and Yamaha melodies to make quick, punctuated declarations— "set, set, set, set, set."¹ *Set* and the phrase *set ak setal*, meaning "clean and proper" in the Wolof, was the slogan for a grassroots movement of Senegalese youth who, marginalized from an envisioned role in the urban setting, articulated an alternative to the deterioration of public space and the "daily deconstruction of state."² Young people associated with the Set/Setal movement took to the streets to clean rubbish, direct traffic and decorate walls with murals of national heroes and pop culture icons. The Set/Setal movement represented an alternative to the movements of youth violence sparked by the 1988 presidential elections, a period where looting and rioting became a daily affair in Dakar, Senegal.³

Underpinning the political action of the *Set/Setal* movement was an ethical framework and explicit spirituality. Youssou N'dour's hit "Set" articulated the collective aspirations of the movement "Have a clear mind. Be pure in your heart. Be sure in your actions."⁴ Songs like "Set" incorporated traditional Wolof instruments, electronic sounds, and African proverbial allusions to create a distinctly Senegalese popular music that inspired Senegalese to embrace their culture and respect their homeland. In the 1991 magazine article "Neo Griot", Mboji, a young Dakarois describes how N'dour's music acted as a catalyst for the movement: "Youssou sang his song and originated the movement. Young people bought the cassette and heard it, and said 'We won't wait for the government. We'll rebuild our districts ourselves.' All Senegalese thank Youssou. We don't thank the government, but we thank Youssou."⁵

In Senegal, Youssou N'dour and other "electronic griots"⁶ are public figures that express popular opinions and ideals through their music. The development of a distinct, syncretic Senegalese popular music by musicians like Youssou N'dour helped construct a Senegalese identity and memory that was deliberate in its intention to embrace Wolof culture and create its own definition of modernity.⁷ By incorporating local idioms, traditions and Wolof instruments, popular music performance and recordings expressed ideas of what it meant to be culturally Senegalese in a modern,

¹ Youssou N'Dour and Le Super Etoile De Dakar, *Set*, 1990, Virgin 2-91426, Compact disc

² Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, "A lost generation? Youth identity and state decay in West Africa," in *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, ed. Richard Werbner, Terence Ranger, Zed Books Ltd: London

³ O'Brien, "A lost generation?," 2

⁴ See Appendix 1 for full lyrics of "Set"

⁵ Richard Gehr, "Neo Griot," *The Villiage Voice*, December 17, 1991, 16, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/232141213?accountid=11532>

⁶ Anastasia Tsioulcas, "Mory Kanté: A Modern Griot Returns to His Roots," *Sing Out! the Folk Song Magazine*, July 2005, 5

⁷ Erni Corinne, "Rhythms of Change: From the Sabar to the Mbalax," *Black Renaissance*, December 31, 1998, 3

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globalizing world. Drawing on a variety of reference points from the past and present Youssou N'dour expressed a Senegalese identity that was outward-looking in its participation in a global culture and inward-looking in its inherent reminder of a collective cultural history.

This research will focus on the period after national independence, from 1960 to 1990, in Dakar, Senegal.⁸ We will begin with an examination of the social function of the *griot*, the traditional West African musician-bard. This section is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the oral tradition of the *griot*, but rather a preface that is necessary to contextualize the messages put forward by the music of N'dour and Etoile de Dakar. In the next section, the topic of afropop in Senegal will be introduced. A variety of aspects that have influenced the development of popular music, such as the influence of Afro-Cuban styles, will be explained. Finally, a discussion on *mbalax*—the modern Senegalese music genre that draws inspiration from the *griot* tradition and afropop styles— will lead into an analysis of the modern *griot*, with a focus on the music and lyrics of Youssou N'dour and Etoile de Dakar.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Drawing on a variety of primary sources including musical recordings, documentaries, newspaper articles, and personal interviews, I will demonstrate the ways in which the narrative of the *griot* has developed in the modern era. These firsthand accounts and quotes will lead the research. Joseph Dieme, a professor of cultural studies at Humboldt State University,⁹ has translated many of the lyrics referenced from songs by N'dour and Etoile de Dakar. Personal interviews with Dieme have also served as a significant primary source that have aided the understanding of the topic and the influence of N'dour's music in Senegal. The majority of the sound recordings cited have been accessed through the on the internet. Newspaper and magazine articles, like Richard Gehr's "Neo Griot" and Lucy Duran's "Key to N'dour: Roots of a Senegalese Star", have offered an array of excellent primary source material like quotes from interviews with Youssou N'dour, members of Etoile de Dakar and their supporters.¹⁰

For a unique and critical analysis I build off of and challenge existing theoretical frameworks concerning topics in African history, such as colonial and globalization theories. In current scholarship a common theme is to frame modern cultural movements in "ex-colonies" like the Set/Setal movement within an oppositional narrative. Nation-building movements that emphasize tradition are seen "as a highly predictable form of antimodernity." This approach "limits the cultural spectrum to either a modern or an antimodern option."¹¹ Such an analysis of contemporary cultural

⁸ See Appendix 2 for map of Senegal

⁹ Joseph Dieme is a cultural studies professor at Humboldt State University from Dakar, Senegal. His own research focuses on African and Francophone studies. His most recent book deals with the hip-hop music movements in Senegal.

¹⁰ Richard Gehr, "Neo Griot," *The Villiage Voice*, December 17, 1991, 16; Erni Corinne, "Rhythms of Change: From the Sabar to the Mbalax," *Black Renaissance*, December 31, 1998, 3

¹¹ Kevin McDonald, *Global Movements* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 6

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movements emphasizes the force of modernization as coming from one direction, French colonialism for example, leaving little space for potential juxtapositions between the two categories. This binary view of tradition as necessarily contradicting modernity and vice versa is expressed in popular media and scholarship on African cultural movements; “electronic *griots*” are often understood as “Senegal’s attempt to straddle modernity and tradition.”¹² In order to understand the implications of this paper’s approach, a brief outline of the historiographical challenges will follow.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CHALLENGES

In the *World Press Encyclopedia*, national identity in Senegal is summarized in a short paragraph. It attributes Senegal’s sense of national unity to a shared sense of *Thiossane*, a word used by the Wolof as well as the Serer, which means “history, tradition, and culture.”¹³ “The nation’s pre-colonial traditions and long colonial history” it claims “have helped forge a strong sense of national identity among the majority of the people.”¹⁴ This understanding organizes Senegalese cultural history within two timeframes, “pre-colonial” and “colonial.” By contextualizing cultural development within terms of the “pre” and “post” colonial times, Western-based historical notions shape the central narrative with which events are understood and conceptualized. This implies that European historical narratives take precedent, and African historical narratives are thus marginalized. This culturally biased interpretation is the first obstacle to a historian of “post-colonial” nation building who seeks to objectively narrate, analyze and rationalize phenomena of the past.

In his work on the reconstruction of oral tradition in Senegal, historian Babacar Fall outlines two main narratives within Senegalese history:

The Senegalese past has been reconstructed in histories written by university-trained professionals and preserved in the collective memory by *griots*, who transmit stories of empires and kingdoms from generation to generation. These processes represent two types of discourse, which often display contradictory logic... As parallel discourses, which intersect occasionally or exist side by side in the people’s mental universe, historical texts and *griots’* accounts constitute two modes of representing the collective memory.¹⁵

As Fall highlights, current historical discourse does not incorporate the voice of *griot* into the discussion concerning Senegalese historical progression. This exclusion of the *griot* leaves out African narratives that are essential to understanding African historical interpretations. The narrative of the *griot*, like that of Youssou N’dour, has nevertheless been paramount in redefining the nation-state during the period after national independence.

¹² Corinne, “Rhythms of Change,” 3

¹³ Amanda C. Quick, *Encyclopedia*, Cengage Learning (Detroit: Gale, 2003)

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ Babacar Fall, “Orality and Life Histories: Rethinking the Social and Political History of Senegal,” *Africa Today* 50, no. 2 (Fall 2003): pg. 56

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WOLOF SOCIETY & THE 'MASTER OF THE WORD'

In current scholarship and popular culture the French term “*griot*” has been adapted as a universal adage to describe Mande musician-bards, traditionally known as *gewel* in Wolof or *jali* in Mande cultures.¹⁶ This term, translated as “praise-singer”, offers some insight into what their function was in their culture—to sing songs of praise to royalty and families. However, this is only one aspect of the role traditionally served by the *griot*. In Mande societies, *griots* are not viewed solely as praise-singers but rather as “masters of the word.” Just as a leatherworker or potter can be a master of a particular artistic medium, the medium of the *griot* is spoken word. As orators *griots* are able to be “adaptable and dynamic agents within their own societies”¹⁷ and apply their knowledge of history and skills in word craft to an array of social situations. Moreover, the success and popularity of a *griot* depends heavily on his or her ability to adapt their skills to various social situations. Youssou N’dour briefly introduces the historical role served by the *griot* in the documentary *Eyes Open*:

Before the colonial period we, the *griots*, were the guardians of our history. We acted as counselors, as intermediaries, as well as entertainers and musicians. And we made people laugh. Dakar is full of traditional *griots* like my uncle, Boucunta. He pays tribute to certain families, which are sung in the traditional style.¹⁸

This description conveys important aspects about the *griot*. As a historian, the *griot* ensures that the ancestries of families are not forgotten. Mamadou Kouyate, a modern-day *griot*, expresses his responsibility of preserving history: “without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion... by the spoken word we bring life to the deeds and exploits of kings and for younger generations.”¹⁹ In a live performance by Youssoupha Sidibe, a Wolof *griot* from Dakar, Sidibe echoes a similar sentiment as Kouyate. Between songs, Sidibe tells his audience that in Mande culture, and among his own ethnic group—Wolof, *griots* are seen as teachers. The oral tradition of the *griot*, he says, is passed through generations in an African school based on memorization. The function of the *griot* is to tell stories to their community, particularly to children, that will allow them to learn about their culture.²⁰

In village disputes, *griots* serve as intermediaries and counselors between conflicting parties. During celebrations and village meetings the *griots* also serve as entertainers and musicians, folktales and epics are sung or spoken to their audiences. *The Epic of Sunjata*, a praise song about the founder of the Mande Empire, is a

¹⁶ Tal Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa,” *The Journal of African History*, 32, no. 2 (1991): 211-250, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/182616>

¹⁷ Fiona McLaughlin, Islam and Popular Music in Senegal: The Emergence of a ‘New Tradition’,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 67, no. 2 (1997): 561, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1161108>

¹⁸ Rear Window, “Eyes Open,” *Youtube* video, 38:05, 1993, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N30iBAVUP9g>

¹⁹ Mamadou Kouyate quoted in Fall, “Orality and Life Histories,” 3

²⁰ Youssoupha Sidibe, interview by Kristen Russo, Humboldt State University. October 17, 2013.

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standard in any *griot* repertoire. Any epic has historical, linguistic and cultural references that serve as important identity markers and memory preservation items for their audiences.²¹ These oral histories, whether epic or praise song, represent rituals of respect that are public and reciprocal political practices— a person who to whom a *griot* sings a praise-song must reciprocate with gifts or money. In Sufi-majority Senegal, such practices also help to facilitate tolerance among a variety of groups. A Malian *griot* describes what a being a *griot* means to her, “Being a *griot* means to reconcile people, to tell people to live together in peace and harmony... Life itself is based on the duality of destruction and construction. We sing for peace.”²² The diverse roles performed by the musician-bard demonstrate that they are important social actors that educate the public about traditions as they mediate day-to-day civil life within Mande society.

Another aspect of N’dour’s statement is that for *griots* the colonial period represents a decisive shift, a period which their ability to “guard” history was undermined by colonial forces. It should be noted that this sentiment is not reserved to Mande *griots*, for many Africans the colonial period represents a “pause” in the natural development of their societies.²³ The era of French colonialism in West Africa represented a systematic attempt to bring new economic and social organizations to the areas of Africa that were not controlled by European forces. For the French colonizers, it was an obligation to bring metropolitan culture to the colonies thus seriously inhibiting the development of local styles.²⁴ In this light, independence, therefore, is viewed as a period where societal development was able to resume.

THE BIRTH OF SENE-AFROPOP

During the period of French colonization, imported styles from Paris and Cuba became the framework for popular urban music in Dakar, Senegal and in many ways shaped the way music was performed, produced and distributed. The social space created by Afro-Cuban styles was distinct from the one created by traditional *griot* music. Afro-Cuban music was an appealing style of music for its audiences because, unlike the traditional music of the *griots*, it was devoid of religious and social associations. The Afro-Cuban style represented a “modern”, secular mode of expression that altered traditional ways of social interaction. In the decade after independence traditional *griot* music remained widespread but with regard to the development of modern urban music styles Senegalese urban music was heavily influenced by Afro-Cuban styles.

Until the 1970s the Senegalese music market was dominated by imported music from Cuba and local versions of Cuban music sung in Wolof and other local

²¹ Samba Diop, “The Wolof Epic: From Spoken Word to Written Text,” *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 3 (2006): 127, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821183>

²² “Eyes Open,” 16:09

²³ Joseph Dieme, interview by Kristen Russo, Humboldt State University, September 17, 2013

²⁴ Ronnie Graham, *The Da Capo Guide to Contemporary African Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 143

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languages.²⁵ After independence many African scholars and artists sought to revive of old cultural forms or create new “national’ modes of cultural expression, which modified and adapted various ethnic traditions and cast them as ‘national culture’.”²⁶ An example of this cultural project was the promotion of *orchestres* by African national governments, including Senegal. For their promoters, these *orchestres* expressed a modern, European-based model for social music that was seen to minimize ethnic divisions as they represented a new, national popular music and culture. In Senegal the Etoile de Dakar emerged as one of the most popular “pop” bands of their time. Etoile de Dakar formed in 1960 to perform Afro-Cuban music and Congolese rumbas at Senegal’s independence celebrations. Some of Star Band’s most popular songs like “Thiely” and “Esta China” are examples of how these musicians adopted an Afro-Cuban style and sang in Spanish. For its musicians, Cuban music was responsible for introducing new styles and techniques for making “modern” music. New instruments like horns, guitar, and bass were embraced as a symbol of cultural progress. In pictures and album covers of young, urban Senegalese musicians in the 1960s and 70s new instruments and Cuban clothing styles appear to be proudly adopted.²⁷

Throughout the 1960s and 70s the Star Band was the house band for the Miami club in Dakar and their name was painted above the entrance of the establishment.²⁸ As the band gained popularity, their music became commonplace in Dakar. In the streets of Dakar, the sounds of Star Band could be heard coming out of corner stores. Live performances by the band were regularly featured on national television programs and broadcast on radio stations across the city. The rumba styles played by Star Band and other Afro-Cuban inspired bands like Orchestra Baobab created a distinct “modern” social space that permitted its participants to engage alternative forms of self-expression.²⁹ For many Senegalese, these alternative forms of expression represented a progressive shift from their colonial past.

If the 1960s was the decade of Afro-Cuban rumbas, the 1970s represented a strong movement away from these European cultural models. Rather than looking outside for cultural trends, popular Senegalese musicians increasingly turned towards their own local cultures for inspiration. The Star Band was among the first Senegalese *orchestre*-style bands to break out of the metropolitan mold, forming into a new band, Etoile de Dakar, in 1979. As a band, its musicians trained dozens of musicians to establish distinct style alternative from Afro-Cuban styles.

MBALAX AND THE EMBODIMENT OF IDENTITY

²⁵ *Ibid*, 143

²⁶ Ian Biddle and Vanessa Knights, *Music, National Identity and the Politics of Location: Between the Global and the Local* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 40

²⁷ See Appendix 3 for image of Star Band

²⁸ See Appendix 4 for image of Miami club’s entrance

²⁹ Richard M. Shain, “Roots in Reverse: Cubanismo in Twentieth-Century Senegalese Music,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no. 1 (2002): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3097367>

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In the 1970s Senegalese musicians who sought to incorporate African sounds into their Cuban repertoires developed the sound of *mbalax*. In *I Bring What I Love*, a documentary about the life and work of Youssou N'dour, Mbate Dieye Faye an early member of Etoile de Dakar discusses the change that occurred in Senegalese popular music during the 70s, "Back then, Latin music was very popular. But we said we were going to change things. We'd transform music with our *Mbalax* rhythm... pure and hard. That's how it all began to happen."³⁰ *Mbalax*, a fusion of Afro-Caribbean music, Western pop and Wolof folk music, refers to distinctive rhythm of the tama played at wrestling matches in Senegal. Youssou N'dour, introduced as a new member of the Star Band in 1975, was one of the forerunners of the *mbalax* sound and coined the name of this new music genre: "I took the word *mbalax* because it's a beautiful and original word, it's a purely Wolof word and I wanted to show that I have the courage to play purely Senegalese music. It's real "roots" word, and its the rhythm that the Wolof feel and love the most, above all it's the rhythm of the *griots*."³¹

The tama, the traditional "talking" drum of the Wolof, became lead instrument in the new wave of "pop" music. The way the tama was played also helped define which generation listened to the music. While older generations preferred popular, predominantly Afro-Cuban style bands like Orchestra Baobab, frantic tama rhythms became associated with younger generations of Senegalese.³² The importance of the tama rhythm section cannot be underestimated, in an interview N'dour expressed his desire to embrace Wolof percussion styles: "for me, percussion was the most vital part of the music. I saw my role as bringing percussion into my music, and putting rhythm into even the melody instruments."³³ The tama is also important for its listeners, as Lucy Duran notes in her article "Key to N'dour: Roots of the Senegalese Star," "Ask any Senegalese or Gambian woman why they like his music and most of them will say the tama. The tama is the drum that calls to dance; it is played at wedding, circumcision, baptism and any other Wolof ceremony."³⁴ For musicians and their audiences, tama rhythms boosted Senegalese and Wolof consciousness and self-esteem. In a 1979 Etoile de Dakar performance Duran notes that for the first half of the performance couples danced the Pechanga, a Cuban dance. Eventually the tama player joined the Cuban-inspired band on stage and played counter rhythm, when this happened Duran observed a change in the way the audience interacted: "circles formed, people clapped to the rhythm, and dancers, abandoning their shoes and partners, stepped into the center to do the Wolof dance... called *ndaga*... It was as if they could finally be themselves."³⁵ In these settings, the embrace of tama rhythms and Wolof lyrics meant Senegalese "could finally be themselves" as opposed to previous styles which, although adored by many, were dependent on European "approved" models. This

³⁰ *I Bring What I Love*, DVD, directed by Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi (NYC, New York: 57th & Irving Productions, 2008)

³¹ Youssou N'dour quoted in Lucy Duran, "Key to N'Dour: Roots of the Senegalese Star," *Popular Music* 8, no. 3 (1989): 275, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/931277>

³² Shain, "Roots in Reverse," 89

³³ N'dour quoted in Duran, "Key to N'Dour," 278

³⁴ Duran, "Key to N'dour," 279

³⁵ *Ibid*, 276

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trend towards creating a new “Senegalese sound” was also an idea that drove Etoile de Dakar and its lead singer N’dour. In an interview with Youssou N’dour, the singer talks about his embrace of Wolof styles:

I think that the main reason why the Star Band and later the Etoile de Dakar, the band I formed in 1979, were so successful was because I tried to do something in my music which I felt was right, which felt good; nothing more complicated than that! It wasn’t a question of searching for some remote musical style; on the contrary, what we did was music that was already familiar to the audience, music that made people feel comfortable and at home.

I’m not the one who changed the face of Senegalese music. Other bands were also the tama and singing in Wolof. But I think I’m the one who took these changes to their furthest limit. Others were moving in that direction, towards a more traditional sound, but they hesitated, they didn’t dare go quite far enough. Maybe they were afraid of being criticized, they weren’t sure they were doing the right thing; maybe deep down they didn’t even like what they were doing... I was braver and went straight for it. Some musicians at that time hated and rejected the Senegalese sound, but they’ve ended up doing the same thing themselves.³⁶

In his statement, N’dour expresses that his own movement towards the “Senegalese sound” was a part of a larger trend in Senegal to embrace the tama and sing in Wolof. *Xalis*, recorded in the Jandeer night club in Dakar in 1979, was the first hit produced by Etoile de Dakar. This song maintains strong Cuban elements but with Wolof tama and lyrics. Its lyrics “*Bilahi, Xalis*” (By God, money is nice!)³⁷ embraced the pleasures of having money and was especially relevant to Senegalese who, as Duran points out, “had been exposed to Western values but rarely its benefits.”³⁸ Musa Joh, a Gambian who listened to Etoile de Dakar since the early days, expressed the way in which N’dour’s music was significant for the audience: “Youssou would sing like an old-fashioned praise singer for his friends and for the audience; he’d say ‘It’s yours, the song is yours—I’m yours, I’m calling you!’ And people would feel so happy, they’d dig deep into their pockets to give him money.”³⁹

By the mid-1980s *mbalax* had become one of the most popular music styles in Africa bringing its message to almost every home, “reaching more people than any newspaper or music style since independence.”⁴⁰ Although championed by Youssou N’dour, musicians Toure Kunda, Mory Kante, Idrissa Diop, Ismael Lo and Super Diamono also included themselves into this distinct musical genre.

THE MODERN GRIOT: THE WORDS OF YOUSSEU N'DOUR

³⁶ Youssou N’dour quoted in Duran, “Key to N’dour,” 274

³⁷ Gehr, “Neo Griot.” 15

³⁸ Duran, “Key to N’dour,” 279

³⁹ Musa Joh quoted in Duran, “Key to N’dour,” 276

⁴⁰ Corrine, “Rhythms of Change,” 15

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The previous sections have offered a contextual basis for understanding how musical styles and their production have changed throughout different periods. The following section will illustrate, with specific examples, the meaning and significance of popular music performance and recordings from Youssou N'dour, the “modern griot”. The majority of the material analyzed is taken from music produced by Youssou N'dour. In some examples other Senegalese musicians, like Baaba Maal, who also view themselves as modern *griots* will be referenced.

Youssou N'Dour was born in Dakar in 1959. His father was a merchant and his mother a griotte singer who gave up her singing after marrying a non-griot. N'dour was raised a Sufi, something which is evident in his music career. Although he was not raised as a *griot* N'dour was interested in his *griot* ancestry and began spending time with his *griotte* grandmother,⁴¹ learning *griot* tradition in what Youssoupha Sibide referred to as an “African school.” By his mid-teens N'dour was singing regularly with the Star Band (1975), the most successful band in Senegal at the time. In 1979, Etoile de Dakar was formed with members of the Star Band. By 1981, the Star Band had evolved into The Super Etoile. Youssou N'Dour, who composes and sings in the majority of their songs, has guided the Super Etoile.

In Wolof society, *griots* play a vocal role as advisor and social arbiters in a variety of social situations.⁴² As a modern *griot*, Youssou N'dour also embodies this aspect of the griot tradition. However, N'dour also makes a distinction between a *griot* and “modern *griot*”: “I am a modern *griot*. I sing about things which are important to me. I sing about real life in Dakar as it is today.”⁴³ Modern *griot* musicians have inherited many methods from the oral tradition of the *griot*, however, as scholar Ron Paul notes, “Although tied to the past the musical, aesthetic, syntax, performance context, economic support system, and social organization are clear manifestations of modern African culture.”⁴⁴ These aspects— singing about modern day life in Dakar and the embrace of new styles and technologies from abroad— are what makes modern *griot* music distinct from its traditional counterpart.

As mentioned earlier from Duran's interview with Musa Joh, early on N'dour was known to sing “like an old-fashioned praise-singer for his friends and for the audience.” Along with tama performances, *griot* style praise singing was incorporated into the new *mbalax* sound of N'dour, Etoile de Dakar and other Senegalese musicians. These “pop” praise songs celebrated family ancestries of their audience members and historical figures. This emphasis on Senegalese *thiossane*— history, tradition, and culture— had not been included into older afropop music influenced by Cuban styles. In *Ndiadiane Ndiaye* one of Etoile de Dakar's most successful LP's, Ndiadiane Ndiaye, the father of the Wolof Empire, is the central theme. The album, released in 1982, was

⁴¹ See Appendix 5 for image of N'dour and his grandmother in a *griot* compound.

⁴² Thomas Hale, *Griots and Griottes : Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 233

⁴³ “Eyes Open,” 11:25

⁴⁴ Ron Pen review of “Juju: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular music,” by Christopher Alan Waterman, *Music Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (1992): 136

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named after the leader and dedicates a praise song to him. Like traditional *griot* songs praising Ndiaye, N'dour celebrates Ndiadiane Ndiaye as a symbol of cultural unity— an egalitarian leader who brought conflicting groups together. In both the song of the traditional Wolof *griot* and N'dour, the audience is meant to listen and express of joy.⁴⁵ Throughout the song, in the expressive manner typical of the *griot*, N'dour calls out the name of Ndiadiane Ndiaye to pay reverence to him. N'dour repeatedly proclaims to his audience “Walo naawul”, Walo—the homeland of the Wolof in northern Senegal—is not ugly.⁴⁶ These “hybrid praise songs”⁴⁷ offer a kind of cultural affirmation which became the trademark of Etoile’s music and contributed to their growing popularity. George Christensen, a Gambian who grew up listening to the Etoile’s music, talks about Youssou’s ability to appeal to a new generation while representing traditional values: “Youssou was echoing the sentiments of the new generation, and at the same time advocating the traditional values of elders. This is one of his great strengths-- he bridges the gap between the young and old.”⁴⁸ Similar sentiments can be heard from other N'dour fans, which commonly point out that Youssou N'dour’s appeal results from his ability to celebrate traditional cultural identity and simultaneously, not contradictorily, embody a more modern style.⁴⁹

Along with traditional allusions, N'dour’s songs deal with modern issues. In “Woye”, Assiane Thiam, the tama player for Etoile de Dakar, creates a high paced, celebratory atmosphere as N'dour sings; “You laugh one day. The next day you’re sad... Your child can make you cry, at times. Hard as he tries, he cannot find a job.”⁵⁰ N'dour points out issues of modern life in Senegal by playfully commenting on the issues people deal with in day to day life. His song “Bekoor” (Drought) combines his commentary on the ongoing drought in Senegal with fast paced mbalax rhythms. These familiar Wolof polyrhythms create a social space that invites people to dance in traditional styles and engage their culture. Erni Corinne notes in his article “Rhythms of Change: From Sabar to Mbalax”:

The musicians, dancers, and drummers are not trying to analyze or solve Senegal’s problems in a rational and abstract way, but they illustrate and comment on them in the language of the common people, comprehensible to all, reminiscing about moral standards and translating them into modern life.⁵¹

In the song “Immigres/Bitim Rew”, released in 1981, N'dour sings to Senegalese who have moved abroad to find work; “Immigrants it’s good to travel, but don’t take it too far by staying forever in a country that’s not your own.” In this song N'dour approaches some of Senegal’s most fundamental issues, like unemployment and the

⁴⁵ Samba Diop, “The Wolof Epic: From Spoken Word to Written Text,” *Research in African Literatures*. 37, no. 3 (2006): 125

⁴⁶ Youssou N'dour and Etoile de Dakar, *Ndiadiane Ndiaye*, MCA 304, 1982, lyrics tr. Joseph Dieme

⁴⁷ McLaughlin, “Islam and Popular Music in Senegal,” 561

⁴⁸ George Christensen quoted in Lucy Duran, “Key to N'dour,” 298

⁴⁹ Joseph Dieme

⁵⁰ “Eyes Open,” 15:60

⁵¹ Erni Corinne, “Rhythms of Change,”

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need to immigrate to foreign countries for jobs.⁵² In the “Immigres” music video, young Wolof men are pictured proudly wearing traditional Islamic dress and dancing the traditional *siyisiyi* dance.⁵³ These elements combine familiar cultural elements together to create an idea of what it means to be Senegalese, while harping on familiar Wolof themes of traveling and returning home. In Manthia Diawara’s article “Song of the Griot” he describes this theme of returning home as the “narrative of return”, and points out that it is a common theme within Mande *griot* music.⁵⁴ Diawara, an academic from Mali, is critic of “the flattery of the *griot*” and their ability “to keep West Africans in the thrall of a heroic past... despite our attempts to catch up with the modern world”. In the article, Diawara juxtaposes the experience of watching a live *griot* performance with his own thoughts on the performance:

They tell us to return to the Mande: no one knows us as well as the people in the Mande; no other place welcomes us as fully as Mande. We are kings in Mande, even if we wash dishes or clean toilets in other lands. We are like disenfranchised clans when we travel overseas; foreigners have no idea how noble we are or how much history we have. We say that no matter how well we do abroad, we belong in Mande: our homeland is Mande. We must return to build our homeland; we must return to claim our inheritance. We can never be anyone else’s children. We are our mother’s children; we are the children of the Mande. No matter how long a log stays in the water, it will never be transformed into a crocodile.⁵⁵

The “narrative of return” Diawara describes should be considered in the context of Youssou N’dour’s lyrics and the message they are trying to impart. In the early Etoile de Dakar song “Nit Kul Ngoul” (Black People), N’dour’s lyrics express what Diawara calls the “narrative of return.” The song begins with a story of a person being fired from their job: “You’ve been exploiting me all this time and one day you show up and fire me. It was my fault because when I started working for you I didn’t have proper documentation.”⁵⁶ The lack of “proper documentation” shows that this character is an immigrant working in a foreign country. The lyrics, which are about the struggle of unemployment and the life of an immigrant (“Nit Kul Ngoul” and “Immigres”), express, in N’dour’s words, “real life in Dakar as it is today” and allow listeners to relate to the song. N’dour’s message reinforces Diawara’s sentiment; “We are like disenfranchised clans when we travel overseas; foreigners have no idea how noble we are or how much history we have.” During the chorus of the song N’dour makes a shout out to his band and other audience members: “Etoile, check it, if God plays the drums for you and you decide not to dance, you will never dance again.”⁵⁷ Here, N’dour is calling on the audience to dance with a religious incentive— when a *griot* plays the drum well,

⁵² Jenny Cathcart quoted in Lucy Duran, “Key to N’dour,” 287

⁵³ See Appendix 6 for video stills from the “Immigres” music video

⁵⁴Manthia Diawara, “The Song of the Griot,” *Transition*, no. 74 (1997)

⁵⁵*Ibid*, 27

⁵⁶ Youssou N’dour and Super Etoile de Dakar, *Tolou Badou N’diaye*, 1980, ET 001, Vinyl.

⁵⁷ See Appendix 7 for full lyrics of “Nit Kul Ngoul”

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Sufi Muslims believe it is God who is playing the drum. Youssou continues as the song reaches a crescendo, “Oh, you – Senegal—have hospitality. I love black people, every black person is my brother,” these declarations are meant to inspire excitement for its listeners and a celebration of the positive aspects of their national and cultural identity. This, again, is in line with Diawara’s “narrative of return”: “We say that no matter how well we do abroad, we belong in Mande: our homeland is Mande.”⁵⁸ The idea of belonging in the Mande, which in N’dour’s case becomes the nation of Senegal, is a recurrent theme in Mande *griot* music. Likewise, this idea of belonging can be found in the message of N’dour who is telling his audience that no matter how well they do abroad a Senegalese immigrant belongs in Senegal— Senegal is their home and it welcomes them with hospitality, furthermore they should see all every black person as their brother. These kinds of affirmations of identity are a key part of many N’dour songs that call on their listeners to embrace their racial identity, as well as adopt a more pan-Africanist vision of their African identity. The song continues in a celebratory mood, “Pray that Senegal develops.” Again, in line with Diawara these lyrics express to its listeners that “We must return to build our homeland; we must return to claim our inheritance.” As N’dour calls on listeners to pray for Senegal he is also asking for young people not to forget their religious past, and reminds them, “If Senegal is a peaceful country it is because our ancestors prayed for us,” a peaceful Senegal is their rightful inheritance because there are children of Senegal.

In songs like “Nit Kul Ngoul” and “Immigres”, N’dour expresses the idea that the development of Senegal depends on the Senegalese of the past *and* present. “Africa Remembers/*Demb*”⁵⁹ is another song that advocates respect for ancestors and tradition. *Demb*, meaning yesterday in Wolof, talks about the historical legacy of slavery and advises its listeners to regain their most precious asset, *thiossane*—their history and culture. Its main message, “Yesterday is gone now, but it must be remembered,” tells its listeners to remember their history. “My ancestors knew the anguish of slavery,” N’dour continues with a Wolof proverb, “and if a tree grows here we owe it to them.” Next, N’dour addresses one of the painful historical memories of Africans, slavery— “Long ago, they would come for you in your home. They’d tie your hands and send you westwards.” In a *griot* manner N’dour narrates the past for his community, but also mediates and offers advice to bring peace. His immediate solution is to embrace their “most precious asset”:

Now, black people,
we must try hard and try again until we regain our best possession.
Our most precious asset, our culture.
Never trade away your culture!
Not for anything in the world!
Today, we Africans,
we never stop bickering and fighting because our leaders crave power.

⁵⁸ Diawara, “The Song of the Griot,” 27

⁵⁹ Youssou N’dour and Super Etoile de Dakar, see Appendix 8 for full lyrics of “Africa Remembers/*Demb*”

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Togetherhness is our strength.⁶⁰

N'dour acknowledges the issues of present day Africa like ineffective, corrupt governments as he simultaneously advocates for Senegalese to embrace positive aspects of their national identity, like their culture and togetherhness. In *I Bring What I Love*, a documentary about N'dour's life and work, N'dour speaks before an audience of students and the Cheikh Anta Diop University "We haven't discovered oil here. We don't have diamonds. But I believe we have something... and I believe, truly, we have our culture."⁶¹ Songs like "Africa Remembers/Demb" represent how *mbalax* styles are informed by traditional *griot* roles and methods (historian, mediator) to send a message that will inspire peace among conflicting groups: "Mboloo moy se dole", "Togetherhness is our strength." In the decades after independence, as Senegal struggled to maintain a stable economy and democracy, N'dour's message advocating respect for ancestors and tradition could be said to "push play" on African cultural development that had been put on "pause" during colonial period.

The discussion has centered on an analysis of N'dour's lyrics and their significance to Senegalese listeners. How did the Senegalese government perceive the message of N'dour? The *siyisiyi* "rascal" dancing inspired by N'dour's music and his critical stance on social issues meant that early in his career, and through to the early 1980's, he was not fully accepted by various political and intellectual circles in Senegal. However, in 1985, when N'dour released his album *Nelson Mandela*, an ode to then political prisoner Mandela, the President acknowledged it with the "Order of the Lion."⁶² N'dour had become an important ambassador for Senegal, the government and intellectuals increasingly accepted this fact. In the newspaper article "Neo Griot", Gehr points out that by 1992 Senegalese "politicians of all parties suck up to the avowedly apolitical musician."⁶³ In his work abroad, Youssou N'dour gained international recognition and sang at the birthday celebration for Nelson Mandela alongside international pop stars in London 1985. In other work, N'dour collaborated with Peter Gabriel and Neneh Cherry. In 1988, N'dour and the Super Etoile Band went on the Amnesty International "Human Rights Now!" world tour with Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Peter Gabriel and Tracy Chapman.⁶⁴ These projects inspired N'dour to develop a more political and social narrative in his music. For the Senegalese government and people, N'dour's success was a source of immense national pride.

In 1988 Super Etoile de Dakar released what would become one of their most successful LPs, *Set*. During the turbulent period of the 1988 elections public workers including waste management workers held a strike against low wages. These strikes led to the build up of trash in city neighborhoods. The cover of the *Set* cassette which

⁶⁰ *Eyes Open*, 15:12

⁶¹ *I Bring What I Love*, 1:29:31

⁶² Duran, "Key to N'dour," 279

⁶³ Gehr, "Neo Griot"

⁶⁴ See Appendix 9 for image of N'dour and other musicians during the "Human Rights Now!" tour

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pictures a broom sweeping through rubbish,⁶⁵ along with its hit single “Set” called it’s listeners to be “set ak setal” – clean and proper. *Set* acted as a catalyst for Senegalese youth who, unsatisfied with their government and its ability to maintain public space, took to the streets to clean Dakar.⁶⁶ The song, although not directly advocating the clean up of the city, expresses many struggles felt by Senegalese during this period of local and international instability. In his song, N’dour addresses political atmosphere created by the Cold War, “One day the Americans will find a new vision, and the Russians too will see life in a different way.”⁶⁷ As a griot, he addresses the issues that concern him; “The young people are crying because the older ones are frightening them... They are crying because they have no hope.” As a solution N’dour asks his listeners to “Give me your hand, give me one chance to know what do you think for the future.” In an interview with the BBC, Baaba Maal describes function of the *griot* as a community spokesperson; “The role of the *griots*, what made them very strong in the history, is that these are the people who were not afraid to come to the leaders, the kings—even now to the modern day, to the presidents, to say this is the aspiration of your community, of your country, of your people.”⁶⁸ Songs like “Set”, understood in this light, can be seen as an attempt by N’dour to express to the government the aspirations of their community, country and people to be *set*— clean. Similar to “Set”, “Toxique”, the final song on the original *Set* LP, offers a straightforward message to listeners and politicians:

Rich countries make toxic waste
Why should they send it to me?
Poor countries know toxic waste
Why should they accept it?

When I'm in bed
I can't stop thinking about it
When I'm awake
I have to warn you

We say it's true
Many of the underdeveloped countries
Are beginning to say No!⁶⁹

“Toxique,”⁷⁰ unlike almost all of N’dour’s songs, is sung in English. The recording begins with an introduction by Youssou N’dour, without musical accompaniment, where N’dour frames the issue in Wolof for his Senegalese audience. This purposeful

⁶⁵ See Appendix 10 for image of *Set* cassette cover

⁶⁶ O’Brien, “A Lost Generation?,” 5

⁶⁷ N’dour, *Set*, see Appendix 1 for full lyrics of “Set”

⁶⁸ Baaba Maal, interview with Stephen Sackur, *BBC HardTalk*, “Baaba Maal— Senegalese Singer and Songwriter,” July 20, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7xmEJelVoc>

⁶⁹ Jenny Cathcart, “Lyrics to Selected Songs by Youssou N’Dour,” *World Beat Planet*, September 24, 2001, <http://www.worldbeatplanet.com/youssou-ndour/lyrics.htm>

⁷⁰ See Appendix 11 for full lyrics of “Toxique”

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choice to sing in English shows that N'dour is attempting to reach an international audience with his message. In the song, N'dour sings with urgency about the issue of "rich countries" selling their toxic waste to "poor countries" like Senegal— "When I'm in bed, I can't stop thinking about it. When I'm awake, I have to warn you." Songs like this represent an attempt to send a message to not only Senegalese politicians, but the international community as well, about the concerns of N'dour and his people.

In his more political songs like "Alboury" N'dour alludes, through metaphors of an epic, to botched elections of 1988 "You leaders, just because you are ruling a country doesn't mean than everything in this country belongs to you. Real leaders love their country."⁷¹ N'dour ability to speak in double meanings and with traditional *griot* allusions about issues like politics, allows him to make music that does not explicitly offend or take political sides. In the hit song "Xale Rewmi" (Children of My Country)⁷² N'dour's skillful "double talk" can be detected by any Senegalese person who lived through the 1980s.⁷³ His declaration "The devil will mess up your mind and divide former friends,"⁷⁴ is a direct reference to the politicians who Senegalese believe manipulate the presidential cabinet to their benefit. His desire, however, is for Senegalese to forgive their leaders and "kneel and pray to God that our leaders and country get everything they ask for." Through his simple advice in "Xale Rewmi", N'dour is attempting create a remedy for social unrest, without discrediting either the government ("It is human to make errors") or the dissenters of the government. Open dialogue and mutual respect, reoccurring themes in N'dour's lyrics, is his proposed remedy:

If we have a dialogue with our elders we will listen to them
 And add their perspective to ours.
 Let's unite our ideas for the sake of the country,
 I don't have any sides
 Those who are inside or outside can pull together
 Wherever you might be, let's talk for the sake of the nation.
 Oh, children of my country, this is how I like it.

CONCLUSION

Dances, words, expressions and even social movements have come out of Youssou's music, but what has his music meant to his Senegalese audience? When residents of Dakar were asked their opinion on Youssou N'dour in the documentary *Eyes Open* one young woman responded, "My favorite singer is Youssou N'dour because he sings realistic and beautiful songs."⁷⁵ A little girl asked the same question expresses similar feelings, "My favorite singer is Youssou N'dour. He is the best singer. He is the king of all singers. He is on top." Youth can identify with Youssou N'dour

⁷¹ Corinne, "Rhythms of change," 13

⁷² N'dour and Etoile de Dakar, *Ndiadiane Ndiaye*, MCA 304, 1982, lyrics tr. Joseph Dieme

⁷³ Joseph Dieme

⁷⁴ See Appendix 12 for full lyrics of "Xale Rewmi"

⁷⁵ "Eyes Open"

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because he sings “realistic” songs that apply to their own social circumstances. An older man said, “Since I was a kid my favorite singer is Youssou N’ dour. He represents us like a monument.” In Senegal, Youssou N’ dour expresses popular opinions and ideals. As a public figure in Senegal and across Africa “N’ dour is seen as a symbol of an emerging, dynamic and modernized Africa, which is self-confident and successful.”⁷⁶ The development of a distinct, syncretic Senegalese popular music by musicians like Youssou N’ dour helped construct a Senegalese identity and memory that embraced its Wolof ancestry and create its own definition of modernity. Youssou N’ dour’s role in the development of *mbalax* and music, which often incorporates his *griot* knowledge of Senegalese history and culture, have placed him at the heart of Senegalese popular culture.

APPENDIX 1

SET

Have a clear mind
 Be pure in your heart
 Be sure in your actions
 One day all the world's musicians will meet
 Music has no frontiers
 One day the Americans

Will find a new vision
 And the Russians too
 Will see life in a different way
 For there are too many weapons
 And war is terrible
 I have a vision of all Africa
 Being united one day
 Give me your hand
 Give me one chance to know
 What do you think,
 For the future?
 The young people are crying
 Because the older ones are frightening them
 That's what makes me sad
 They are crying because
 They have no hope

Words & Music by Youssou N'Dour

Kristen Russo

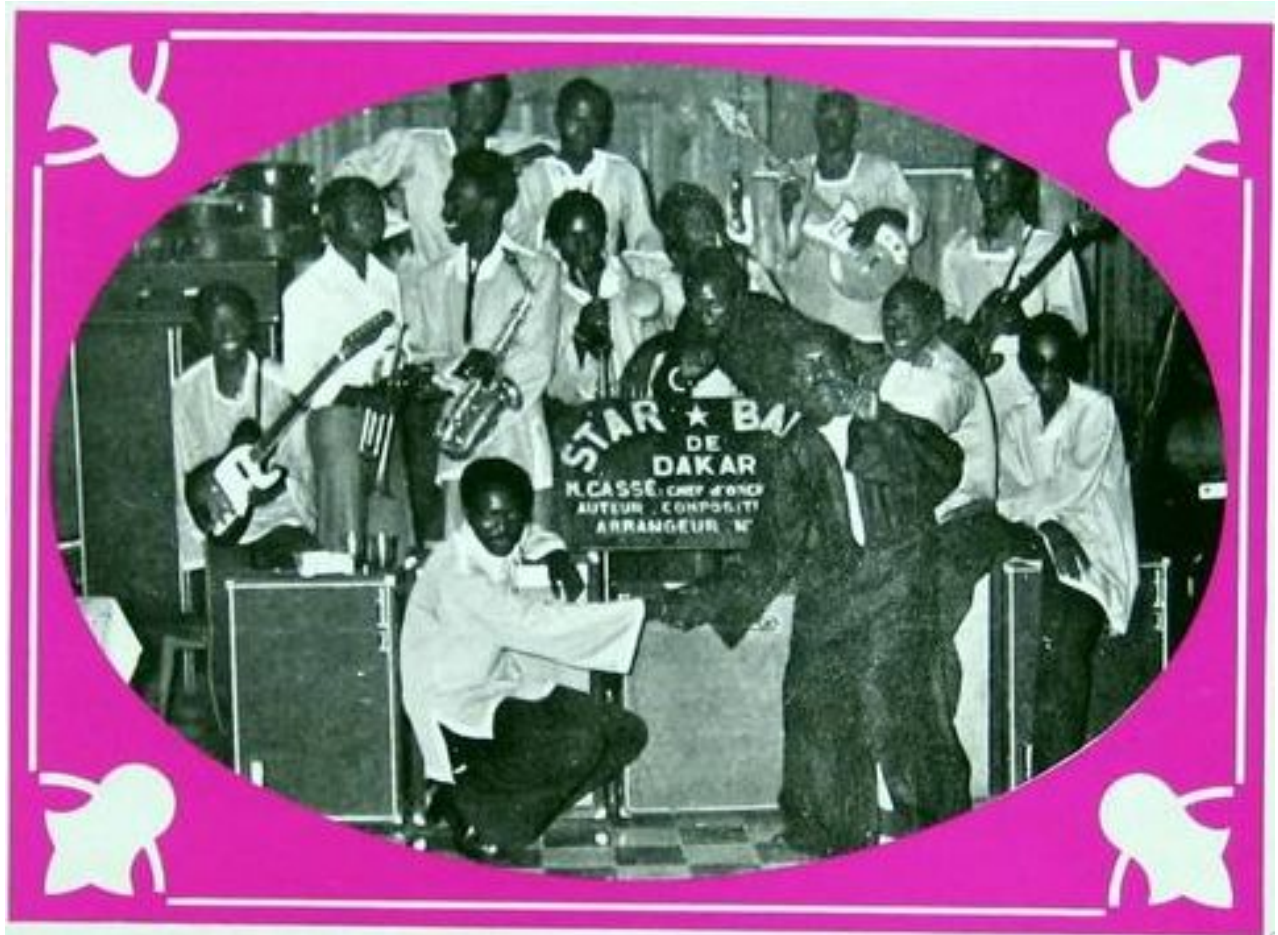
Youssou N'Dour and Le Super Etoile De Dakar, *Set*, 1990, Virgin 2-91426, Compact disc

APPENDIX 2

Map of Senegal in Thomas Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).



APPENDIX 3



Youssou N'Dour and Star Band de Dakar, *Tolou Badou N'diaye*. 1980. ET 001.Vinyl.

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The entrance of the Miami club circa 1970. Photo in *I Bring What I Love*.

APPENDIX 5



Youssou N'dour is pictured singing among a group of *griottes* in Dakar, Senegal. The woman in the lower left-hand corner In Dakar, *griot* and *griotte* families live together in communities where they are able to practice together and teach their children

Video still taken from *I Bring What I Love*.

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APPENDIX 6



Wolof dancers in the “Immigres” music video.

Video still taken from *I Bring What I Love*.

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APPENDIX 7

NIT KOU NUL

n

Words & Music by Youssou N'Dour. Translated by Joseph Dieme.

APPENDIX 8

DEMB

Yesterday is gone now,
but it must be remembered.
My ancestors knew the anguish of slavery,
and if a tree grows here we owe it to them.
I will always remember my ancestors.
Long ago, they would come for you in your home.
They'd tie your hands and send you westwards.
Now, black people,
we must try hard and try again until we regain our best possession.
Our most precious asset, our culture.
Never trade away your culture!
Not for anything in the world!
Today, we Africans,
we never stop bickering and fighting because our leaders crave power.
Togetherness is our strength.

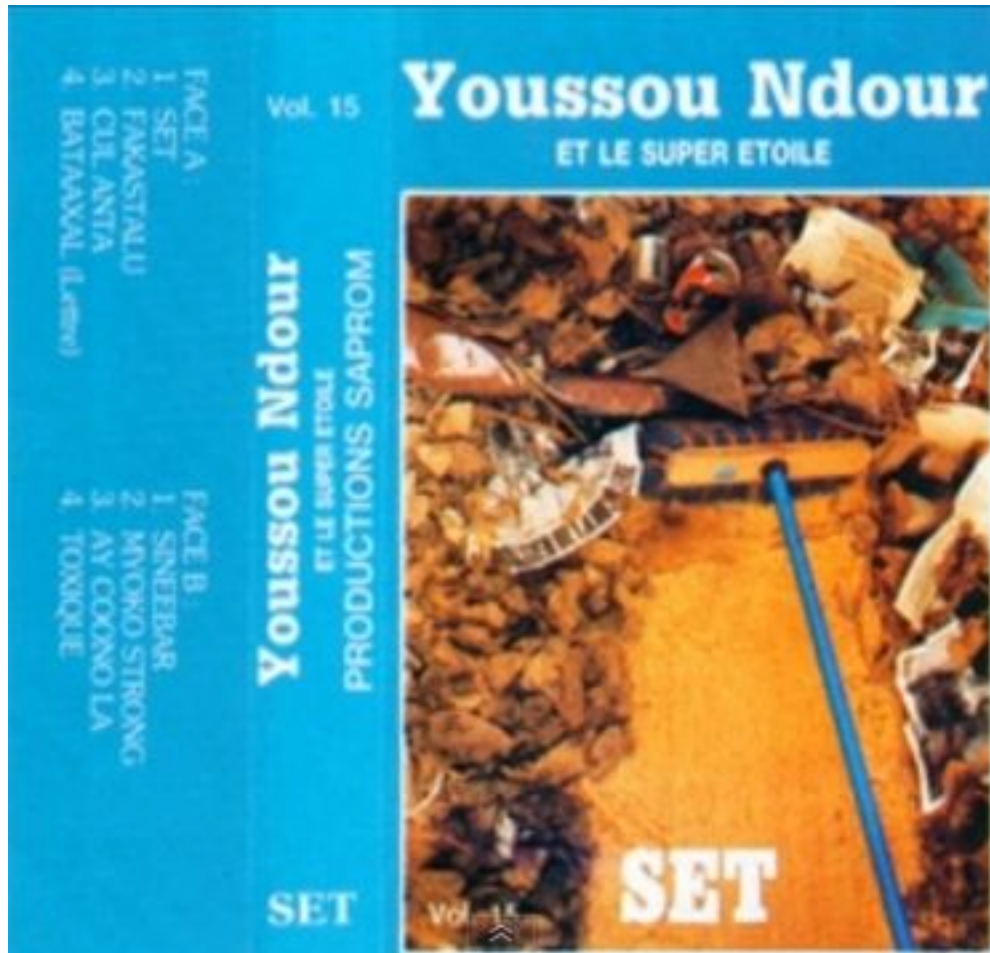
APPENDIX 9



Amnesty International "Human Rights Now" Concert, Philadelphia, Sept. 19, 1988. From Left: Joan Baez, Youssou N'Dour, Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, Sting & Bruce Springsteen.

John Reilly, "Amnesty International 'Human Rights Now' Concert, Philadelphia," September 19, 1988, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/johnreillyphoto/2910965167/in/photostream/>

APPENDIX 10



The original 1988 cover of *Set*.

Youssou N'Dour and Le Super Etoile De Dakar, *Set*, 1988, *Xippi*, Audiocassette

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APPENDIX 11

TOXIQUES

Rich countries make toxic waste
Why should they send it to me?
Poor countries know toxic waste
Why should they accept it?

When I'm in bed
I can't stop thinking about it
When I'm awake
I have to warn you

Chorus: We say it's true
Many of the underdeveloped countries
Are beginning to say No!

Words & Music by Youssou N'Dour

Youssou N'Dour and Le Super Etoile De Dakar, *Set*, 1990, Virgin 2-91426, Compact disc

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APPENDIX 12

XALE REWMI

Oh, children of my country, this is how we would like to see our country
Peaceful
It's human to make an error
Praise be to Allah
We have to kneel and pray to God
That our leaders and country
Get everything they ask for.
The devil will mess up your mind,
And divide former friends.
This year is the year in which we have a generation
that doesn't talk too much.
Let's do our best to unite and show the elders that they are
the strength of the country.
When a child separates from his or her family, they will face hard times
And your family will keep worrying about you,
Hoping for the best.
If we have a dialogue with our elders we will listen to them
And add their perspective to ours.
Let's unite our ideas for the sake of the country,
I don't have any sides
Those who are inside or outside can pull together
Wherever you might be, let's talk for the sake of the nation.
Oh, children of my country, this is how I like it.

Youssou N'Dour and Le Super Etoile De Dakar, *Djamil*, 1985, Celluloid 66809-1, Vinyl

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