

BOOK REVIEW

Conversation Hand-Book: Wolof, Manding, Pulaar/
French/English. Edited by Pathe Diagne.* Dakar:
Librairie, 1978; Sankore, B.P. 7404; 115 pp.

The promotion of local languages in Senegal has been a hot political issue for many years. After the 1960 independences the former French colonies inherited an educational system that totally ignored local languages. In Senegal, it took the government about ten years to publish the official alphabet and as of January 1981 when President Senghor relinquished power, the study of local languages had not been introduced in the primary school curriculum as promised.

At the forefront of the fight to accelerate the process and give these languages their real place in the educational system as well as in the media is Pathe Diagne. This handbook he edited has three sections. The first is Wolof/French/English, the second Manding (Mandinka)/French/English, and the last Pulaar/French/English. While Wolof is the lingua franca in Senegal and is spoken by over 85 percent of the population of Senegal and the Gambia, both Mandinka and Pulaar are widely spoken throughout West Africa and the continent. We should signal here that the term Mandinka is often used but it should be seen as a generic term encompassing several other languages that are all strongly related. These languages are all of the West Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo family.¹ Some of these languages are Bambara, Malinke, and Jula all spoken in the area from Senegal to Mali, down to the Ivory Coast and the two Guineas.

Designed for those interested in learning common terms and expressions in the three local languages, the handbook is nicely organized in themes such as greetings, relatives, travel, etc. The newcomer to Senegal will find the sections on customs, hotels, markets, and other situations particularly interesting, especially when one knows that the use of local language by a foreigner is always highly appreciated by the Senegalese people.

To help the new learner familiarize himself or herself with the pronunciation of the different sounds, a brief description of the alphabet is offered at the beginning of every section.

*Dr. Pathe Diagne is a renowned linguist who has published several articles and a book on Wolof grammar entitled *Grammaire de Wolof Moderne* (Présence Africaine, 1971). Dr. Diagne was a visiting professor at U.C.L.A. in the Department of Linguistics some years ago.

In those same introductory chapters, the editor presents sketches of the main elements of the grammar of the three languages. The Mandinka section is enriched by a comparative lexicon presented at the end of it. For the interested linguist or researcher, this lexicon of about two hundred and fifty words compares and demonstrates the strong relationship among five languages: the Gambian Mandinka, the Guinean Mandinka, the Dioula (Jula) of Ivory Coast, the Dioula (Jula) of Upper Volta, and the Bambara of Mali, with French and English translations.

One weakness of the handbook is the lack of a detailed table of contents for quick reference. Except for his minor flaw, the handbook is complete and offers the student learner or researcher the opportunity to start building a foundation for further studies in these languages. By its size and form, the book is very practical and can be carried along very easily. All three sections are co-authored by Rama Carrie Sembene, wife of the famous film-maker Sembène Ousmane. She deserves praise as she has only been living in Senegal for a few years. Her involvement in this project once more demonstrates the continual interest she and her husband have in the promotion of African languages.

The Wolof section is co-authored by Boubacar Kane, one of the linguists who, along with Pathe Diagne, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Sembène Ousmane have been the pioneers in this battle for the conservation and advancement of our national languages.

¹ This is according to Dr. Greenberg's family classification of languages.

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