

Modern Media and Culture in Senegal: Speaking Truth to Power

Maramé Gueye

Abstract: In a YouTube video, a young man performs a satirical poem about Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade. The author brilliantly sums up Wade's tenure in one minute. He compares the president to "a rat's hole" and makes fun of his physical features while emphasizing many ways in which Wade has failed the nation. Some viewers thought the performance was disrespectful of the president, and others feared for the author's safety. This article argues that although the World Wide Web gives voice to African youth, it can be a dangerous space, especially for artists. The viewers' negative comments and their concern for the author's life is a modern response to his art and a consequence of its presentation on the Internet. If viewed through the lenses of traditional Wolof oral forms, however, the poem's harsh rhetoric takes on less controversial meanings that the viewers did not seem to understand.

Résumé: Dans une vidéo sur YouTube, on peut voir un jeune homme récitant un poème satirique sur le président de Sénégal, Abdoulaye Wade. En une minute, l'auteur résume brillamment le régime de Wade. Il compare le président à un "trou à rat" et se moque de ses traits physiques tout en mettant l'accent sur les multiples manières dont le président a déçu la nation. Certains spectateurs ont jugé que le portrait du président était irrévérencieux, d'autres ont eu peur que la vie de l'auteur soit en danger. Cet article soutient que même si Internet offre un espace d'expression pour la jeunesse africaine, le Web est aussi un espace dangereux, en particulier pour les artistes. Les réactions négatives des spectateurs et leur inquiétude pour la sécurité de l'artiste sont une réponse moderne à son art et une conséquence de sa représentation sur le Web. Si le poème était remis dans le contexte de la tradition orale Wolof, sa rhétorique dure offrirait des clés d'interprétation que les spectateurs du Web n'ont pas, il semble, été en mesure de décoder.

African Studies Review, Volume 54, Number 3 (December 2011), pp. 27–44

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PAXOUM KAGNA

Na loxo ya dadie!
 Na loxo yi mbeukké!
 Na dadié na dadié!
 Na loxo yi dadié!
 E démal!
 Abdou dafa waatie, Ablaye yéék,

 Senghor wathioup leuguéy,
 Niou dém diko diaalé, bato ba diik,
 Kouné boppam la tal!
 Nélba dafa réy té xélma naax,
 Loumou wax fatté ko!
 Beut yeu da fa doug, té léx ya rass

 Laay leudieul naniou!
 Laay dolli niou,
 Nga doggaliniou,
 Boroom ndél bée niou ray.
 Nieup pa ngi dégë,
 Dilaay nioo ngui xool,
 Nioun guissou nou dara, loutax?
 Marsé bou niou lal, laay dieulé niou fa,

 Borom nél bée niou ray.

 Diw gui dafa yookou, ta tieep bi seer,

 Daxine suba ak ngoon.
 Mat mi dafa diafé té keurign seer,

 Keen amoul gaz,
 Courant daa raar, té farign dém,
 Keen guissoul mbourou.
 Wagnil mbourou mi, mou tiopatiko,

 Laay ladijal nga niou.
 Kii moo niou lakal,
 Kii moo niou khatal,
 Ak famèèm bou ndaw !
 Bénoup diabar niaari doom,
 Far goro ba déé!!
 Laay wadday paxoum kagna
 Laay wad ak ndongam gou darr,
 Laay waddak beuteum you dém,
 Waay amoul njarign fii,
 Amoul njarign feeyoo,
 Mooy paxoum kagna!

A RAT'S HOLE

Let the hands meet
 Let the hands collide
 Let them meet, let them meet
 Let the hands meet
 Hey, go!
 Abdou stepped down, Abdoulaye
 stepped up,
 Senghor completed his work (died),
 We went to his funeral, the boat sank,
 Everyone worries about himself only!
 His bald head is big and he is senile,
 He forgets anything he says!
 His eyes are in their sockets and his cheeks
 are wrinkled
 Laay bothers us!
 We asked for more (one more term),
 You finished us up,
 The bald head is the one who killed us.
 Everyone hears,
 I swear we are looking,
 We do not see anything, why?
 Any market we set our stalls, Laay move us
 away,
 The guy with the bald head is the one who
 killed us.
 The price of cooking oil has increased and
 rice is expensive
 Daxine day and night.
 Firewood is hard to find and charcoal
 is expensive
 No one has cooking gas,
 Electricity is scarce and flour has gone away
 No one finds bread.
 We asked him to reduce the price of bread,
 he chopped it off,
 Laay you bother us.
 This guy pesters us,
 This guy is a nuisance for us,
 With his tiny family!
 One wife and two kids,
 To make it worse, the in-law died!!
 Laay Waad is a rat's hole
 Laay Waad and his calloused backhead,
 Laay Waad and his eyes that are gone,
 He is useless here,
 He is useless there
 He is a rat's hole!

If there is one thing that can be said about Abdoulaye Wade, the current president of Senegal, it is that the majority of Senegalese are frustrated with his administration. He has been in office for eleven years (2000 to present), and the country is in a desperate situation. Young people in particular suffer from chronic unemployment. Critics have accused Wade of being a demagogue whose thirst for power is uncontrollable. Although Senegal is a democracy with a fairly outspoken press, openly criticizing the president has become increasingly dangerous. His entourage is notorious for retaliating against journalists who highlight the administration's failures. Thus, speaking against Wade has increasingly become an act of courage and heroism.

In June 2010 a humorous but controversial You Tube video sparked debates among viewers from Senegal and its diaspora.¹ In the video, a young man performs a satirical poem about President Wade. In his brilliant text, which literally sums up Wade's entire tenure in less than one minute, the artist compares the president to "a rat's hole" and makes fun of his physical features while emphasizing ways in which his administration has failed the nation. Although the date and place of the shooting of the video are not specified, its appeal and controversial nature are incontestable due to the subject matter. Before long, many Senegalese Internet users had watched it, and the debates that ensued were heated and even confrontational at times.

Comments ranged from comedic remarks to angry rants directed either at the artist or at President Wade. Those who wrote in support of the president thought that the artist was disrespectful and should be punished. Conversely, the artist's supporters promised financial contributions to help him further his art, but most importantly, they feared for his life and wondered whether the president would retaliate against the young man.

Any risk of retaliation would be a consequence of the song's exposure on the Internet. Those who have reacted negatively to the text, however, do not seem to have understood the cultural context within which it was produced. Recently the Internet has given voice to young people in Africa, and emerging cyber-studies generally view social media as a favorable tool for social change. However, the Internet also constitutes a space where art can be taken out of context and politicized to the detriment of the artist. In fact, the poet's critical and sometimes bullying discourse is far from disrespectful, and it takes on a socially sanctioned meaning when it is interpreted through the appropriate cultural lenses. These include: (1) *xaxar*, a literary genre consisting of songs or poems composed for performance during Wolof wedding celebrations in a subceremony (also called *xaxar*) where co-wives fight verbally in a call-and-response style; (2) *maame yaay*, a practice of joking that exists between grandparents and grandchildren that allows them to criticize or make fun of each other without being labeled as disrespectful; and (3), the tradition of the griot, the West African bards among whose many roles is that of social critic.

The poem's performance was posted on You Tube by a person in Canada nicknamed MK 1046, and it "went viral" through social networking sites and online newsmagazines. When the video starts rolling, a teenager is just finishing a performance. His name is not specified and he appears to be a street peddler carrying packages of incense and pest killers. He wears an outfit that most Senegalese recognize as the attire of a comedian, with brown bubble pants that end at the knees. The pants are paired with a short-sleeved shirt embroidered at the neck with gold thread, and the outfit is completed by a skull cap with the same color embroidery. He is surrounded by a small audience of children, two young men, and a woman who is not shown but can be heard asking him to perform *Paxum Kagna* (A Rat's Hole) or *Laay Wade*.² From the audience's laughter and apparent excitement, it is clear that they have heard the poem before. As the performer tries to walk away, a shirtless young man taps him on the back and explains that they liked his performances because most street vendors are not as funny. Another young man (whom the viewer cannot see) adds more compliments. He tells the performer that he thinks he has great talent and that he should be able to live off his art. This seems to persuade the performer, who explains that he is indeed trying to make a living with his art but has not yet been able to do so. He then decides to perform the requested poem.

It is not clear who recorded the performance and where it took place. The identity of the artist is also unknown. However, what is certain is that it reached a wide audience through the Internet. Viewer comments were abundant and very opinionated. The debates reached their highpoint when Senegalese media outlets such as *seneweb.com* (the first Web portal to feature news about Senegal), *leral.net*, and blogs located in Europe and the United States put the video and Wolof transcription of the text on their Web sites. One viewer addressed the Senegalese:

Senegalese people, I say in the name of our country, in order to have respect we need to respect President Wade! You must know that the whole world envies us. There are some words that are wrong to call any human being let alone the one that God has chosen to lead our nation. At least have some respect for our institutions. The duty of a citizen is not to be arrogant to anyone. (My translation)³

Another viewer called the young artist mentally ill, commenting: "This guy is sick or crazy or he thinks that he can do whatever he wants. One must respect others, it is good to talk but to be quiet is better."⁴

At the other end of the spectrum were those who thought that the young man was not only talented, but that he was also speaking the truth and should be supported with monetary donations: "Tell me where this guy is so I can give him money. Beautiful inspiration!"⁵ Another added: "You must give me your telephone number so I can send you money via Western Union. You are very brave and you are not afraid of saying the truth!"⁶

One interesting aspect of these comments is that those who were outraged by the text were predominantly located in Senegal, while the supporters of the artist hailed from the diaspora, mainly in Europe or the U.S. This divide conveys the Senegalese's sense of freedom of speech within and outside the country. Because of the Wade regime's notorious propensity for retaliating against critics, many refrain from openly voicing discontent inside the country. Consequently, some viewers worried about the artist's life: "This guy is going to have problems. I hope they will not physically assault him."⁷

The Dangers of the World Wide Web

The World Wide Web has been crucial in giving a voice to African youth, and because of its apparent role in the recent North African revolutions, many have deemed it a positive tool for sparking social change. In fact, the Tunisian uprising was nicknamed "the Facebook Revolution," and currently much political organizing is conducted via social media sites. In Senegal, Internet usage has increased with the flourishing of cybercafés in neighborhoods where youths can interact with the world for a very affordable price. Because a large number of Senegalese are immigrants in Europe and North America, the Internet is an affordable vehicle for linking this diaspora to their home country. With the increasing number of Senegalese news Web sites, they can stay involved in the sociopolitical debates that unfold. This diaspora plays an important role in how news is disseminated online, and immigrants are the main target of most Internet radio programs and magazines that try to cash in on their yearning for connection with the home country.

However, the Internet's capacity to spread information "virally" is not entirely positive. It can allow for events to be taken out of context and expose individuals, especially artists, to violence. Following the events in North Africa, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, where masses used social media to organize and stand up against dictatorships, many African governments view it as a possible threat. For example, until recently Facebook had been widely used by Malawi university lecturers to organize and gain international support for their rights to academic freedom. International exposure drove the government to come to an agreement with them, but it also triggered the monitoring of the e-mail and Facebook accounts of the leaders of the lecturers' union and some of them even received death threats.⁸ Thus, it is evident that many African governments are now viewing the Internet as a possible weapon that can be used to destabilize them.

Viewers are also a factor in polarizing events. Clearly, those who commented on the video lack the cultural competency to understand the cultural implications of the performance. Based on clues in the video, this young man seems to have been performing his poem without any concerns for his safety. His live audiences did not judge him like the You Tube view-

ers did because they were able to read his performance within the cultural context in which it was delivered. They actually found him humorous and entertaining. As a street peddler, he clearly considers his artistic talents and performative skills as part of his “promotion,” as a way of enticing customers to purchase his goods. But his Internet “stardom” has turned him from an innocent peddler to a politically engaged performer with an agenda to challenge Wade and his administration, thus making him vulnerable to retaliation. Because of the negative comments posted online and heightened concern for his safety, he reportedly went into hiding after the video went viral.⁹

The Internet not only broadened the public reach of his performance, it also took it to a transnational level where the risk of misinterpretation is even greater than it is locally. Although it is unclear whether he was aware at the moment of the taping that his performance would be available to such a wide audience, the performer does seem to have had some concerns that it could be taken out of context. Before his performance, he explains that what he is doing “is only art and anyone who interprets it as something else is completely wrong.” Clearly he was implying that within the context of art, “speaking truth to power” should not be construed as a threat to the state, although he was also aware of the risks of misinterpretation.

That the performance was in fact taken out of context by the online viewing audience is evident in the title given to it, *Tassu Laye Wade* (The *Tassu* of Abdoulaye Wade), which was likely assigned by viewers. The video’s live audience referred to it as *Paxum Kagna*, or simply *Laay Wade*, and calling it a *tassu* undermines cultural nuances that are important to its interpretation. *Tassu* are satirical or self-aggrandizing poems often performed by women during family ceremonies. They are often short in length and comedic in content. The young man’s performance has all such components. It lasts less than one minute and its message is delivered through humorous descriptions of President Abdoulaye Wade. The performer also executes a few dance moves, especially toward the end, as is the practice during *tassu* performances. But despite this resemblance, I am arguing here that its rhetoric goes beyond that of *tassu*: that it is, in fact, an example of a *xaxar*, the Wolof wedding genre. While *xaxar* and *tassu* share similarities and the latter can be a component of the former, their rhetoric and function are not the same.

In *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women’s Autobiographical Discourses* (2000), Lisa McNee extensively studies the *tassu*. Combining definitions of the verb *taas* (to associate, cause to participate) from the Wolof-French dictionary (Fall, Santos & Doneux 1990) and explanations from the renowned Wolof expert and mathematician Saxiir Caam, who explains that *taas* means “to give someone or oneself a taste of something,” McNee defines *tassu* as a panegyric form. However, because of the untranslatable nuances in the word *tassu*, and the fact that the above definitions do not specify the difference between self-praise and praise of others, McNee specifies that *tassu* is an

“autobiographical enunciation” that allows the performer to be self-aggrandizing. Thus, the text becomes a gift to oneself or to a patron and serves as a currency, according to McNee, in the ongoing exchange between performer and audience.

While I agree with McNee’s claim that any definition of *tassu* needs to consider the context of performance, I also contend that an important feature that McNee does not explore at length is the element of *gaaruwale*—an indirect criticism in which the speaker does not name the targeted person but gives hints about the latter’s identity. Many *tassu* are portrayals that showcase the positive attributes of the performer or a patron while implicitly contrasting these to the less laudible qualities of possible rivals or enemies. The “autobiographical enunciation” is juxtaposed with an “othering” that serves to set apart the subject being praised to the detriment of others who are not praised. For example, if a performer speaks about a patron’s physical beauty, it could be deduced that the patron’s co-wives are not as beautiful. This essence of *tassu* is best communicated in the Wolof saying *daxx ginaar waxaale sa soxla* (i.e., “chasing [verbally] a chicken while spilling what is on one’s chest”). In this context, *tassu* is a double-edged sword which accomplishes both praise and criticism. *Tassu* shares this feature with *bakku*, a genre performed exclusively by traditional wrestlers who compose self-aggrandizing poems enumerating their wins and challenging potential adversaries. It is also similar to rap songs in which artists use their lyrics to settle feuds and attack rivals by either praising himself or hinting at insults.

Wade: The Bride Who Brought Bad Luck

Because of the veiled satire inherent in *tassu*, this young man’s poem, with its direct criticism of President Wade, cannot be read as such. Despite the fact that *xaxar* is a feminine genre, this text, with its bold language and satirical content, clearly falls within this genre instead. Unlike *tassu*, *xaxar* is very direct and the target is named. The insults also leave nobody guessing about the identity of the addressee. By means of *xaxar*, co-wives use songs in order to discourage and discredit each other, with each performer trying to represent the other as unworthy of the husband. They speak atrocities that they would not dare utter during regular conversations or even during normal fights. *Xaxar* lyrics can also be addressed to a husband and his friends, in-laws, or other family members. *Xaxar* provides a space where insults are allowed in a “playful” way because what is said during *xaxar* is meant to stay within that space. The YouTube poem, therefore, although recited by a young man, should have been titled the *Xaxar of Abdoulaye Wade* because of the nature of its message and the performer’s various tropes and techniques.

The author compares Abdoulaye Wade to a bride who brings bad luck. Many *xaxar* songs from either of the co-wives’ parties speak of a woman’s karma or her ability to bring luck or bad luck to her husband and his family

(see Gueye 2010). The Wolof believe in bad karma, and a bride is blamed for sad events that occur at her wedding or around the time of her wedding.¹⁰ The Wolof proverb *tombeey indi aay gaaf* (Coincidence creates bad luck) is also relevant here. As “the new bride,” Wade is blamed for anything bad that happened during his tenure, whether man-made or natural. In light of the Senegalese’s high hopes for Wade during his triumphant democratic election in 2000, such text voices disillusionment and frustration. It suggests that the country’s “honeymoon” with President Wade was short-lived. Most important, this poem represents Wade as a leader who, rather than changing the country for the better, brought many misfortunes, and hence was a wrong choice.

In order to highlight Wade’s failures, the poet starts by reminding listeners of the circumstances that brought the president to power: “Abdou stepped down, / Abdoulaye stepped up, / Senghor completed his work.” The year 2000 was critical for Senegal. After succeeding Senghor in 1980 and remaining in power for twenty years, Abdou Diouf was defeated in a democratic election by Abdoulaye Wade. The election of Wade was a reward for this longtime opposition leader who was both Senghor’s and Diouf’s most avid rival. For the first time in many years the Senegalese felt empowered and hopeful. As a presidential candidate, Wade promised change and used the Wolof word *soppi* (to change) as a slogan. After forty years under Senghor and Diouf’s Parti Socialiste (PS), the Senegalese were striving for something new and different. Wade’s Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS) offered hope with its platform of jobs for the chronically unemployed youth and overall positive change for the country. However, very early in the new administration’s tenure, the Senegalese found that it was not doing enough to improve the country’s situation. The author blames Wade for major catastrophes that happened on his watch—the essence of the proverb about bad luck. The lines “Senghor completed his work, / We went to his funeral, / The boat sank” refer to Senghor’s death in December 2001 and the capsizing of *Le Joola*, a government-owned ferryboat, on September 26, 2002, in which 1,863 people died (making it the world’s second worst boat catastrophe). Both happened in the beginning of Wade’s first four-year term, and Wade’s administration was blamed for the disaster.

Le Joola was vital in connecting the capital, Dakar, to Ziguinchor in the southern region of Casamance, which for over two decades has been involved in an armed secession war against the Senegalese government. The ferry traveled twice a week carrying traders and general passengers who found the water-crossing safer than the roads where travelers risked being hijacked by secessionist militants. On the day that it sank, the ferry, after being out of service for close to a year for repairs and the replacement of one of its two engines, was undertaking its first trip from the port of Ziguinchor; it capsized near Senegal’s border with the Gambia. According to several reports, the accident was caused by negligence and poor main-

tenance, but mostly overloading. The report provided by the Senegalese commission charged with finding the causes of the accident remarked:

Comme le surnombre des passagers a été confirmé, il a fallu disposer ce surplus dans des espaces libres susceptibles de les accueillir.

- Au niveau du pont principal, il sera admis 250 passagers alors que le constructeur avait prévu 208.
- Au niveau du 1er pont supérieur avant, il sera admis 115 passagers au lieu des 32 prévus.
- Au niveau du 1er pont supérieur milieu: 351 passagers au lieu des 134 prévus.
- Au niveau du 2e pont supérieur avant: 86 au lieu des 18 prévus.
- Au niveau du 2e pont supérieur milieu 337 au lieu des 128 prévus.
- Au niveau du 2e pont supérieur arrière 81 au lieu des 16 prévus.

Because the overloading of passengers has been confirmed, the surplus had to be accommodated in free spaces.

- On the main deck there were 250 passengers instead of the recommended capacity of 208.
- On the front second floor deck, 115 were admitted instead of the maximum of 32.
- In the middle of the second floor deck, 351 instead of 134.
- On the front of the third floor deck, there were 86 instead of 18.
- In the middle of the third floor, 337 instead of 128.
- On the back of the third floor, 81 instead of 16.

(Commission d'Enquete Technique sur les Causes du Naufrage du "Joola," November 4, 2002)

The ferry was built to carry a maximum of 580 passengers and crew. The ticket sales surpassed one thousand, and the estimated number on board was over two thousand.

The large number of fatalities, which included many French nationals whose families later sued the Senegalese government, was also the consequence of the delay in skilled rescue efforts. Reports show that the ship remained afloat for an hour and a half before sinking, and the few survivors confirmed that there were several people alive but trapped:

Pêcheurs ont sauvé vendredi à 14h un garçon de 15 ans, le dernier rescapé, alors qu'ils entendaient encore des bruits provenant de l'intérieur du bateau. Le jeune garçon à sa sortie a confirmé qu'il y avait encore des personnes vivantes coincées dans " Le Joola."

Fishermen saved a 15-year-old young man on Friday who is the last survivor of *le Joola* and reported hearing noises coming from the boat. The young man confirmed that there were passengers who were still alive but trapped inside. (www.kassoumay.com)

Most of the frustration came from the fact that government rescuers did not get to the scene until the next morning and that rescue efforts were left to local fishermen who were not equipped to carry out such an enterprise.

The Senegalese felt that the government abandoned the passengers to their fate and the poem reflects this view: "The ship sank, / Everyone worries about himself only." The poem hence is revisiting an issue that remains engraved in the national psyche. The sinking of *Le Joola* is one of the sources of great frustration with Wade's handling of calamities such as the annual floods that plague the suburbs of Dakar. Many Senegalese feel that like the victims of the ferry accident, they are left to fend for themselves. In an interview on xibar.net in 2008, Mamadou Diéye (a.k.a. You 2, a singer who was one of the sixty-four survivors) communicates his frustration with the psychological services they were offered:

Vous savez, au Sénégal, quand un événement dur survient, tout le monde en parle. Et les promesses fusent de partout. Des mesures sont prises, malheureusement, cela n'est pas durable. Ce qui s'est passé avec le naufrage du bateau, c'est ça. On a été suivi pendant cinq mois. Mais, ils ont arrêté le suivi depuis. Pourtant, il y a des gens qui ont besoin jusqu'à présent d'être suivis au plan médical, car ils gardent toujours les séquelles de ce drame.

You know in Senegal when something bad happens, everyone talks about it. All kinds of promises are made, measures are taken, but unfortunately, it does not last. That's what happened with the boat accident. We were followed up for five months. Everything has stopped ever since although there are people who still need that medical help because they continue to suffer from the effects of the tragedy.¹¹

Although Wade and his administration offered compensation packages to the families of victims and dismissed the prime minister, no one was prosecuted for the disaster. Many families still feel that the government has not done enough.

The image of the sinking boat can also be read as a metaphorical comparison of Senegal to a sinking boat on which the captain and the crew abandon the passengers and worry only about their own survival. Senegal has always been represented in its national popular culture as a boat due to its name, which is very similar to the Wolof term "*sen gaal*" (their boat). Musicians and artists have often referred to it as *Sunu gaal* (our boat) in an attempt to advocate community and shared responsibility by asking all the passengers in the imagined boat to do their share of paddling in order for it to reach its destination. For this reason, the line that claims that "everyone worried about himself only" criticizes the country's leaders and highlights their failure to attend to the people's basic needs. It can also be applied to many contemporary issues such as the shortages that the poem focuses on later. The country seems to be plagued by many misfortunes, and as the head of state, Wade is portrayed by the poet as the new bride who brought

bad luck to the household and therefore must be undone with words.

This mission to undo a rival is the essential function of *xaxar*, which, translated literally, means to insult someone or to air their dirty laundry. Although the *xaxar* ceremony is meant to be a playful event where co-wives fight verbally, it is very confrontational. Its major feature is the two camps' attempts to frame the other as unfit for the husband or the household. The artist utilizes the same tactics that women use during *xaxar* such as making fun of each other's physical appearance.

Wade the Grandparent

Making fun of another's physical appearance is also an element of *Maame Yaay*, a playful custom whereby grandchildren and grandparents can tease each other without being judged as disrespectful or mean. In Wolof culture, grandparents and grandchildren are considered rivals for the attention of the grandparent of the opposite sex. For example, a granddaughter is considered the grandfather's "young wife," hence making her the grandmother's "co-wife," and conversely, grandsons are the grandmother's "little husbands," making them the grandfather's "rivals." This joking relationship is clearly connected to the love and attention that grandparents and grandchildren lavish on each other, especially on those of the opposite sex. The exercise of *mame yaay* is even present in Wolof funerals. If the departed is an elderly person, it is customary for the grandchildren to dress like him or her and imitate his or her habits in order to cheer up the mourners. In *maame yaay*, grandchildren and grandparents make fun of each other based on physical appearances, age, and the like.

Because *maame yaay* emphasizes the age difference between two generations, most of the text's references to the president's age definitely fall within this cultural practice. At eighty-five, Abdoulaye Wade could be the young performer's grandfather, if not his great-grandfather. Such age difference allows the latter to take certain liberties that others could not. Most Senegalese, in fact, look at Wade as a grandparent and refer to his old age as a reason for his inability to be an effective leader. In Senegalese culture, elderly people are respected because of their wisdom and life experiences, but it is also common to not take them seriously because of their old age.

Wade is one of the oldest presidents in Africa. Many Senegalese attribute his indecision to senility, hence his nicknames *Goorgi* or *paa bi* (the old man). Like an elderly person affected with senility, Wade is known to be spontaneous and unpredictable. As the poet suggests, "He forgets everything he says." During his eleven years in office Wade has changed prime ministers seven times. There have been claims that he often forgets the names of his close collaborators. Some Senegalese neurologists have claimed that his extravagant generosity is typical of old people who, because they feel close to death, do not attach much value to material belongings. In 2009, a political scandal broke over the gift of \$200,000 that the presi-

dent gave to a departing IMF officer. Wade's open invitation of Haitians who were displaced by the earthquake that ravaged their country in 2010 to permanently relocate to Senegal while thousands of Senegalese continue to be homeless as a result of floods was also blamed on his senility.

The poet also uses *maame yaay* to make fun of Wade's physical features, such as his "large bald head." Wade's bald head is a trademark that was fashionable in the 1990 at the height of his opposition to Abdou Diouf, and in Senegal people who are bald or prefer to shave their heads are nicknamed "Abdoulaye Wade." Senegalese popular culture also attributes baldness to intelligence, whereby those who know a lot lose their hair. With his degrees in law and economics, Wade is undoubtedly a highly intelligent and experienced individual. Because of his facial appearance and his education, Senghor once nicknamed him *joomboor* (the rabbit). In Wolof folktales, the rabbit embodies intelligence and shrewdness. Wade's bald head also emphasizes his ears, making him look like a rabbit. By making fun of these features that once were symbols of wisdom, the author uses *maame yaay* to communicate the shift in the Senegalese's perceptions of Wade: "The bald headed is the one who killed us." Once perceived as the leader who could save the country, Wade is now represented as a villain whose appearance conveys deceit and a criminal who is ravaging the people he was elected to serve. It also highlights the degeneration in Wade's image: "His eyes are in their sockets and his cheeks are wrinkled." Applying Senegalese standards of beauty, the poet frames Wade as a not-so-handsome man who bears the markers of age. The description borders on that of a monster whose big bald head, sunken eyes, and wrinkled cheeks incite fright and even terror. The person the Senegalese trusted is now an elderly person who is no longer the symbol of the hope and change.

However, the poet and the Senegalese are not the only ones who take advantage of the practice of *mame yaay*. Because of the Senegalese tendency to attribute his poor judgment to his age and the culture's reverence for seniority as epitomized in the proverb *mag buur la* (An elderly person is royalty), Wade himself has taken advantage of this cultural privilege of seniority to undermine the people's voice. He has been caught numerous times on television reminding journalists who were persistent in their questioning that he was not "their equal" (i.e., he is too old for them to challenge him). These episodes, although often recounted as humorous anecdotes, are testimonies to the president's abuses of culture and justify the text's rhetoric.

Griot or Modern Social Critic?

Before his performance, the young man warns of the possibilities of misinterpretation of his work. He claims to be a griot who has dedicated his life to his oral art form. He strategically positions himself, therefore, among these traditional West African bards who were the very few who could speak

truth to monarchs without fear of punishment. Although the role of the griots has shifted in modern-day Senegal, there remains some respect for them, or at least for their art.

In *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Word and Music* (1998), Thomas Hale delineates the following professional roles of West African griots: “recounting history, providing advice, serving as spokesperson, representing a ruler as a diplomat, mediating conflicts, interpreting the words of others into different languages, playing music, composing songs and tunes, teaching students, exhorting participants in wars and sports, reporting news, overseeing, witnessing or contributing to important life ceremonies, and praise-singing” (19). These attributes are not necessarily found in every griot. However, they each emphasize the griot’s mastery of speech and the power of the griot within many West African societies. Although griots belong to a caste system where art is handed down from generation to generation, in modern-day Senegal the definition of a griot has evolved and the profession is no longer practiced only by those who were born within the caste of griots. For this reason, whether the young man is a griot by birth or not, he understands his role within the framework of the griot tradition by using his oral art to serve as historian, spokesperson for the masses, and overall social critic.

Throughout his text, he emphasizes the collective voice by using the pronouns “we” and “us.” Starting from line 14, the text enumerates many ills that the Senegalese people are going through, especially during President Wade’s second term: “We asked for more, / You finished us up.” Wade’s first four years were difficult, but most Senegalese considered them to be a transition period. His administration continued to claim that they had inherited a bad situation from Abdou Diouf, and that it would take them more than one term to fix it. However, during his second term, the people started to demystify him and realized that in fact, they were worse off than before. While the people agonized between 2000 and 2004, his second term sent the country into the most precarious condition that it has ever witnessed. According to the CIA *World Fact Book*, the country’s unemployment rate was at 48 percent in 2007. As a consequence of this lack of opportunities the young artist in this video, who should be in school, is a peddler. And instead of encouraging him for finding creative ways to earn a living, the administration makes it even harder by displacing him and his peers from any place they set their stalls: “Any market we set our stalls, / Laay moves us away.” Because of this continuous displacement by law enforcement officers, he is obliged to be a wandering peddler in order to survive.

As a wandering seller who goes from house to house, he is allowed into the lives of the average Senegalese, thus witnessing first hand their daily trials. Over the last ten years, Senegal has witnessed real chaos when it comes to food and electricity. The neighborhood shown in the video looks like one of the poor suburbs of Dakar where working class Senegalese live. They are among those who suffer the most from the food and utility short-

ages that the poem refers to: “the price of cooking oil has increased and rice is expensive, / *Daxine* day and night.”¹² The Senegalese eat rice at least once a day and most of it is imported. There have been countless rice riots because of price hikes and shortages, the most publicized of which was the riot of March 31, 2008, in which twenty-four people were arrested and detained by government security forces who, according to human rights groups, engaged in “torture” and other “unspeakable acts” (Al Jazeera, April 27, 2008). Between 2000 and 2005 the price of rice almost doubled from 250 cfa to 450 cfa per kilo.

In October 2007 bakers went on strike for several days because of the 40 percent increase in the price of wheat: “and flour has disappeared, / No one sees bread.” The majority of Senegalese families have bread and coffee for breakfast. Unlike in many countries, in Senegal the price of food is set by the government. Although the price of bread was reduced as a consequence of the strikes, the weight of the loaf was also decreased: “We asked him to reduce the price of bread, he chopped it off.” The poem also refers to the shortage of propane gas. After people struggled to afford rice, as the poem points out, cooking it became another issue: “No one has cooking gas.” The price of propane gas has drastically increased, and due to continuous deforestation, wood and charcoal are increasingly hard to find: “Firewood is hard to find and charcoal is expensive.” Although they cost less than propane gas, they are not affordable to many due to the constant hikes in food and utility prices. The poem’s reference to these shortages delineates the average Senegalese’s struggles for basic needs. Most families live on small government salaries that sometimes are not paid for several consecutive months.

Wade, as the young man comments, has an unusually small family: “With his tiny family, / One wife and two kids.” Conversely, the average Senegalese family has at least ten individuals and comprises grandparents and other relatives such as nieces and nephews. Polygamy is common, and with the high unemployment rate, the possibility of large families with only one person working is inevitable. With a son, Karim, and a daughter, Sindiely, President Wade’s nuclear family is not representative of the country’s family structure. And with the death of Karim’s wife in April 2009 (“To make it worse, the in-law died”), that gap widened. The poet’s comments on the size of Wade’s family suggest that the president is removed from the realities of the average Senegalese head of household who struggles daily to feed, clothe, and provide a shelter for a large number of people.

Wade’s family is also the source of much criticism because many believe the president is grooming his son to head the nation in the future. Wade is known to be contemplating a third term in 2012, although his age makes him ineligible according to the Senegalese constitution. It is suspected that he is strategically looking for a third term in order to hand the presidency to his son. Karim Wade holds major positions in the government. In 2008 he served as the head of the organization of the International Islamic Sum-

mit. He is currently a minister in charge of seven departments. Recently Sindiely was entrusted with the organization of the third FESMAN (Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres), which was first organized in Dakar in 1966 by Senghor. Because he has given major political roles to his children, Wade's critics accuse him of attempting to turn Senegal into a monarchy.

Such criticism seems to be supported by Karim's most recent appointment as minister of energy, replacing Samuel Sarr, who was blamed for the numerous power outages that have plagued Senegal since 2003. As the performer mentions, these chronic outages turned electricity into a rare thing: "Electricity is scarce." The Senegalese are increasingly frustrated with power outages, which hinder economic growth. There were numerous demonstrations in most major cities in the summer of 2010. Even religious leaders, who tend to support the government, participated in boycotts such as the one initiated by imams from Guediawaye, a suburb of Dakar.¹³

Thus the poet serves as a historian by realistically enumerating the many problems the Senegalese are encountering during Wade's presidency and communicating the general frustration with his administration. But despite the fact that many Senegalese express a desire for Wade to quit, he is stubbornly clinging to power. The performer's message that Wade is a nuisance—"Laay you bother us, / This guy pesters us, / This guy is a nuisance for us"—parallels the sentiment of many Senegalese who feel stuck with him. Wade's thirst for power mirrors the symbolism of the poem's title: "Abdoulaye Wade is a rat's hole." Rats are known to be hoarders, and the Wade family seems to have the sole control of power in Senegal. Wade and his administration have also been accused of being material hoarders. Many of his cabinet members are reported to own numerous houses around the country.

Wade seems to have substantiated such accusations of greed by publicly claiming in 2009 that the recently erected Statue of the African Renaissance is his own intellectual property. The president argues that because he came up with the idea of the statue he is entitled to 35 percent of the tourist revenues. The monument is a statue of a man, a woman, and a child and sits at the top of a plateau facing the Atlantic Ocean. It cost U.S.\$27 million and was designed by the Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby Atepa and built by North Koreans. Critics suggested that the money spent on the statue could have been put to better use such as funding for the crumbling Senegalese educational system or finding permanent housing for the numerous families who are displaced by annual floods in the suburbs of Dakar.

Yet it seems as if the Senegalese will not get rid of Wade very easily. He is like the bride that one is not satisfied with but cannot easily divorce. Or he is the very old patriarch who is afflicted with dementia, does not make sense anymore, but refuses to relinquish authority over the family: "He is useless here, / He is useless there. / He is a rat's hole!"

Conclusion

Thus the poem's criticism is vested in a sentiment that Wade is completely out of touch with the nation's needs and attends only to himself. By highlighting Wade's shortcomings and the ills that plague Senegal during his tenure, the poet serves as griot in his capacity to be a historian and a spokesperson of the country's masses through his art. This role also allows him to speak truth to power. But his performance, if understood within the context of culture and oral traditions in Senegal, does not constitute a political challenge to Wade's administration. The polarizing factor is the Internet, where the meanings of the performer's art became corrupted and turned into a political act, hence exposing him to possible retaliation. There have been rumors that that opposition parties are contemplating using his poem as a hymn during the electoral campaign for the February 2012 Senegalese elections. This possibility undoubtedly is also the consequence of the Internet, which widened the young man's audience and allowed his text to be manipulated for political purposes. This young man, who is apparently not of voting age, has thus become involved in matters that are out of his grasp and control, and he could be exposed to violence based on inaccurate interpretations of his poem. Although Senegalese elections have never led to major conflicts, incidents of violence and retaliations against militants from opposing parties have taken place in the past.

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- Xibar.net. 2008. Six ans après le drame du "Joola", le rescapé Mamadou Diéye alias "You 2" parle.

Notes

1. The video can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5neCABijtM.
2. Laay is a shortened version of the president's first name (Abdoulaye).
3. http://www.xibar.net/VIDEO-tassou-abdoulaye-wade_a24382.html
4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5neCABijtM>

5. http://www.xibar.net/VIDEO-tassou-abdoulaye-wade_a24382.html
6. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5neCABijtM>
7. http://www.senvideo.com/view_video.php?viewkey=f4f1d23e9d30c89426cc
8. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5neCABijtM>
9. Personal conversation with Souleymane Jules Diop (April 17, 2011), who knows the young man's older brother.
10. This time frame can be up to years after the wedding.
11. http://www.xibar.net/SIX-ANS-APRES-LE-DRAME-DU-JOOLA-LE-RESCAPE-MAMADOU-DIEYE-ALIAS-YOU-2-PARLE_a12916.html
12. Daxine is a Senegalese dish that is very soupy. It is made with a small amount of rice and was considered a poor people's food.
13. It is believed that the performer is from this neighborhood, although there is not enough evidence to support such a claim.