

# Leopold Sedar Senghor : the Dilemma over a Linguistic Decolonization in Senegal

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## Abstract

This paper first addresses the early signs of the “sabotage” of the linguistic decolonization in Senegal. It discusses some of the obstacles that stood in the way of achieving that linguistic decolonization. It then analyzes Senghor’s major constitutional attempts to stifle the linguistic decolonization through several political brawls with his counterparts from 1960 to early 1980 in Senegal.

**Keywords** : *décolonisation ; linguistique ; Sénégal ; Senghor ; constitution ; sabotage*

## Résumé

Cet article examine les signes avant-coureurs d’un « sabotage » de la décolonisation linguistique au Sénégal. Il revient sur les obstacles qui ont fait avorter cette décolonisation linguistique et met en lumière les différentes tentatives constitutionnelles mises sur pied par Leopold Senghor pour étouffer la décolonisation linguistique à coups de multiples querelles politiques avec ses opposants de 1960 jusqu’à la fin de 1980.

**Mots-clés** : *décolonisation ; linguistique ; Sénégal, Senghor ; constitution ; sabotage*

## Introduction

The reconstruction of the nations of Africa began in the early 1960s in the aftermath of colonial economic exploitation, political domination and cultural alienation. After independence, few African post-colonial language activists and writers imagined this grand task of nation building would begin with the rehabilitation of African languages (Please see Cheikh Anta Diop, 1946; Ngugi Wa Thiongo, 1946). Other early African post-colonial political leaders, including Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal and Félix Houphouët-Boigny, were very unfavorable to the task, opting rather for the continuation of the same colonial language education policy in a united community of francophone nations. Dumont (1983) characterizes the attitudes of the latter as a phenomenon of a “*Mimétisme Tragique*,” or the willingness on the part of the post-colonial African political leaders to prolong the same colonial language legacy. *Mimétisme Tragique* was practiced less in North African states than in West Africa states. For example, after breaking away from their colonial grips in the early 1960s, most North African countries (e.g., Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria) rushed to make profound and radical changes in their language education systems by maintaining the preeminence of Arabic over foreign languages. The rehabilitation of the national

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language was seen by many of these Arab leaders as the first crucial step in the process of achieving linguistic decolonization and cultural liberation of the Arab people. Pertaining to this process of linguistic decolonization and cultural liberation, Grandguillaume (1997) writes:

Au moment de l'accession à l'indépendance, les pays du Maghreb ont décidé de rendre à la langue arabe la place qu'elle avait perdue du fait de la colonisation. Aussi entiché qu'on soit de la francophonie, il est difficile de refuser la légitimité de ce propos. En soi, il était évident qu'une société, dont l'identité propre avait été déniée durant cent trente ans, ne pouvait se restaurer sans assumer ce qui de sa culture constituait le socle : la langue arabe (étroitement associée à la culture islamique). Politiquement, par rapport à la population pour qui l'indépendance devait signifier la fin de la domination des *roumis*<sup>i</sup>, aucun pouvoir n'aurait pu se dispenser de dire qu'il allait rendre à la langue arabe sa place éminente. Enfin, des pays arabes du Moyen-Orient, qui avaient soutenu la lutte pour l'indépendance, une pression "amicale" s'exerçait aussi dans ce sens (Grandguillaume, 1997, p.18).<sup>1</sup>

This shift in discourse Grandguillaume describes in the Maghreb countries further led to a strong wind of Arab-Nationalism<sup>ii</sup> policy that swept across North Africa. Although the notion of this Arab Nationalism was short-lived in many Arab states, it has significantly contributed to raising awareness and promoting the exclusive use of the Arabic language in major Arab countries.

Nearly seventy-eight years after they achieved independence, most Arab states have successfully completed the process of linguistic decolonization by introducing the Arab language in their education system, national assembly, and major government entities. Most recently (1996), the Algerian government through *the Conseil National de Transition (CNT; National Council For Transition)* sent out shockwaves to its European allies by passing a new law that bans the use of any foreign languages at the expense of the Arabic language in the country (Grandguillaume, 1999).

This reform in language policy adopted by many post-independence Arab states was, notably, not positively received by most West African states. Only a handful of West African

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My translation: [After independence, the Maghreb countries have decided to rehabilitate the Arabic language and prestige it lost during the colonial times. Despite these countries' attachment to the *Francophonie*, it was difficult to dismiss that argument. It is obvious that a society, the proper identity of which had been denied for one hundred thirty years, could not be restored without asserting what in its culture constituted the foundational base: the Arabic language (intrinsicly linked to Islamic culture). Politically, no power would have been able to avoid assigning an eminent role to the Arabic language given the population for whom independence meant the end of the domination of the *roumis*. Finally, a "friendly" pressure was exercised by the Middle Eastern countries which supported the struggle for independence] (my translation).

# **Leopold Sedar Senghor : the Dilemma over a Linguistic Decolonization in Senegal**

## **Moustapha FALL**

\* \* \* \* \*

states (e.g., Nigeria, Ghana, and Burkina Faso) were able to make significant changes in their language education policy. Nevertheless, a vast majority of African states (e.g., Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Mali) have kept the arbitrary and outdated language education policy of their former colonists. As a result, these West African states have raised French to the status of their official national languages at the expense of their own national languages. In Ivory Coast, Mali, and Senegal, to name only a few, French has since become the language of the presidency, the national assembly, public administration, the courts, and education (Dumont, 1983; Diallo, 2005; Clemons & Yerende, 2009; Ngabaye, 1994; Thiam, 2000; Richmond, 1980; Salhi 2002; Cissé, 2005; Sall, 2009).

This paper first addresses the early signs of the “sabotage” of the linguistic decolonization in Senegal by discussing some of the obstacles that stood in the way of achieving that linguistic decolonization. It then analyzes Senghor’s major constitutional attempts to stifle the linguistic decolonization through several political brawls with his counterparts from 1960 to early 1980 in Senegal.

### **1. Early signs of Linguistic Decolonization “Sabotage” in Senegal**

In the case of Senegal, not only was there a categorical refusal to reassess the language education policy inherited from France, but there were several attempts to simply replicate the same French language education policy in the Senegalese constitution. After independence, Article 1 of the first constitutional amendment instituted French as “the only official language of Senegal” (Dumont, 1983; Diallo, 2010; Sarry, 2002). Moreover, Leopold Senghor, reinforced this first constitutional amendment by stifling any efforts to promote the Senegalese national languages. For example, he imprisoned national language advocates and political leaders who dared to challenge the prominence of the French language over the national languages. Furthermore, he used the Senegalese constitution as a weapon against his opponents. His frequent constitutional amendments with the intent to maintain and reinforce the status of French as an official language of Senegal were testimonies to his loyalty and attachment to the language and culture of the Republic of France.

Senghor’s voluntary departure from power in 1980 helped to create new possibilities for language education policies and reforms. Although Senghor’s successors Abdou Diouf and Abdoulaye Wade engaged in vast nationalization campaigns to promote the national languages,

**Horizons Littéraires**  
**Revue du Centre de Recherche sur la Critique Littéraire Africaine**  
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\* \* \* \* \*

there are still no major official bodies that assume the responsibility for organizing, conducting, and implementing language policy matters in Senegal. The constitution is the only available source of language policy matter and planning that Senegal possesses today. However, there are currently government bodies such as the *Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale*<sup>iii</sup> (*MEN*; Ministry of National Education), *Ministere de l'Alphabétisation et des Langues Nationales et de la Francophonie*<sup>iv</sup> (*MALNF*; The Ministry for Literacy, National Languages and Francophonie] and some non-governmental organizations and independent bodies associated with literacy education across Senegal (Diallo, 2010). Among those governmental and independent bodies are the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and United Nations Children's Fund (*UNICEF*). Both organizations have hold regular offices in Senegal; they crusade against poverty and promote children's development. In recent years, UNESCO has been a close ally to the *MALNF* in the fight against illiteracy and in promoting literacy education programs in the Senegalese national languages. While recent establishment of these government bodies reflects the efforts in language policy and planning in Senegal, the bureaucratic red tape associated with these government bodies poses serious challenges facing to the practical functioning of these bodies. Diallo (2010) provides a bleak and yet accurate assessment of the Senegalese linguistic landscape since independence:

Since Senegal attained independence, its policies to promote the national languages have not been successful because of chronic politicization of the public institutions, the lack of genuine political will, and its politicians' tendency to adopt tokenism as a policy strategy instead of performing rigorous planning and expressing a clear vision for the future of the national languages (Diallo, 2010, p.84).

Although Diallo (2010) might be accurate in his view of the current Senegalese linguistic landscape, his assessment of the current situation is incomplete. It is not sufficient to focus on the symptoms of the problems without an in-depth look into the root of the problems. In that respect, we argue that it is only by looking into the history of French colonial education in Senegal that we will be able to find out why the post-independence leaders (i.e., Senghor) promoted French to the detriment of their own national language. A careful examination of the colonial education system will demonstrate why current Senegalese leaders are still reluctant to develop rigorous plans and a clear vision for the future of the Senegalese national languages. Perhaps the answer to this question lies at the heart of the "colonial educational plan" initiated by France in Senegal. This

# Leopold Sedar Senghor : the Dilemma over a Linguistic Decolonization in Senegal

## Moustapha FALL

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educational plan was not only intended to destroy the local languages, but also to teach and train an army of future African leaders who would defend the language of their French colonial masters and consequently carry the cross of their “civilizing mission”.

In the following section, we will analyze Senghor’s major attempts to stifle the very process of decolonization in Senegal from 1960 to early 1980.

## 2. Leopold Sedar Senghor and the Process of Linguistic Decolonization in Senegal

As the president who accompanied Senegal to its independence in 1960, Leopold Sedar Senghor was a statesman, a poet and a very influential African leader. He was a well-renowned international figure, and the first black leader to secure a permanent seat in the French Academy in 1954. His proximity to France and the French language propelled him as the language architect and a key player in the *Afrique Occidentale Francaise* [French West Africa]. Additionally, his declared love for the French language and the great amount and quality of his writing made him one of the greatest novelists and poets of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Senghor’s language policy for the promotion of French language at the expense of the Senegalese national languages made him look like a puppet of France in the eyes of his African counterparts.

Some of the French-speaking leaders denounced Senghor’s language policy as a form of neo-colonialism as he continued to support the French language to the detriment of Senegalese national languages (Gellar, 2003). They also contested Senghor’s decision to use French linguistic norms to transcribe Senegal’s indigenous languages. As indicated earlier, opponents of his policy, such as linguist Pathe Diagne , lost their university positions for challenging the accuracy of transcription of the indigenous languages. Early efforts in his presidency to discourage the use of the national languages were even reflected in his first constitutional amendment in decree no 71-566 of May 21, 1971, in which Senghor and his government unequivocally stated:

Indeed, it will require at least two generations in order to make one of our national languages an effective instrument for the teaching of sciences and technology. And this provided that we had the financial means, which means qualified scientists and technicians. But, in this second half of the twentieth century, you cannot make up for being fourteen to fifteen years behind (Diallo 2010 as cited in Dumont, 1983, p.2).

Senghor was convinced of the impossibility of African languages to fully express their theoretical and scientific thoughts. This view led to an intense battle between Senghor and Cheikh

**Horizons Littéraires**  
**Revue du Centre de Recherche sur la Critique Littéraire Africaine**  
**N° 4, Décembre 2020**

\* \* \* \* \*

Anta Diop, a national language advocate and a linguist. For Diop, the development of any nation rests upon the development of its national languages. In the early 1950s Diop engaged in an intense intellectual battle against the West to refute the veracity of what he described as the colonial falsification and vilification of African history (Diop, 1946). He spent a lifetime emphasizing the real need to restore historical truth with regard to African legacy and its accurate history. As indicated earlier, his unparalleled and monumental work on African languages led him to the conclusion that African languages could be used to express African literature, history and philosophical concepts.

It must be pointed out, however, that the nature of the battle between Senghor and Diop was far from being a battle of ideology alone; rather it was a battle mostly grounded in politics. Senghor's cursory knowledge of language policy and planning did not allow him to engage in any substantive ideological battle with Diop with regard to the issue of national languages. Instead what Senghor really failed to understand, however, was that the French language, like any foreign language, serves as a mere vehicle for the transmission of knowledge of science and technology. In other words, the French language is not knowledge in itself, but it is merely a conduit for the acquisition of knowledge. Despite criticism and opposition, Senghor was resolute and firm in his position to give more priority and attention to the French language. For instance, in another decree, no 72-862 of 1971, organizing primary education policy in Senegal, Senghor and his government once again contended the following:

Remplacer le français comme langue officielle et comme langue d'enseignement, n'est ni souhaitable ni possible. Du moins nous ne voulons pas être en retard au rendez-vous de l'an 2000 (Sarry, 2002, p.7).

[Replacing the French language as the official language and as a medium of instruction is neither desirable nor possible. Unless we want to be among the last in meeting the year 2000] (my translation)

While decrees of this nature continued to flourish over the subsequent years, the overall national illiteracy rate in French on the ground was alarming. Most importantly, enrollments in public educational institutions were significantly low (Gellar, 2003; Diallo, 2010). According to the research conducted by Verrière (1965) on the population of Senegal between 1964 and 1965, 11% of Senegalese men declared that they were able to read and write in French, and only 1% of women were able to read and write in French (Verrière, 1965). These alarming figures were

# **Leopold Sedar Senghor : the Dilemma over a Linguistic Decolonization in Senegal**

## **Moustapha FALL**

\* \* \* \* \*

another major reason for Senghor and his government to review their strategy and completely change their view on their political tactics vis à vis the national languages.

I argue that all the subsequent policies taken by Senghor's government to boost national support in promoting the national languages were marked by a policy of "tokenism", to use Diallo's (2010) terminology. On various occasions, Senghor tapped into minority languages to give them lip service for his concern and support for the promotion of their minority languages including his own mother tongue, Serrere. Most significantly, this tokenism was the result of his inability to collaborate with linguists and the Senegalese civil society. Most of the major constitutional reforms that Senghor enacted during his presidency were not thoroughly discussed with linguists. Instead, these constitutional reforms were left to the discretion of his own cabinet which was oftentimes charged with language policy and planning. The recurring shift of attitude and language in Senghor's language policy and planning were a clear signal of his government's incapacity to plan and coordinate a rigorous language policy for Senegal.

Moreover, alongside this politics of "tokenism", there was a "one size fits all" policy of language planning under Senghor in Senegal. This policy consisted in applying a set of language policy rules and regulations to all levels of the Senegalese educational systems without a thorough understanding of what was involved in each level. As Diallo (2010) demonstrates, after the promotion of the six national languages, Senghor's government was facing an unprecedented administrative and bureaucratic dilemma as to which department or ministry should be responsible for addressing issues involving the national languages (Diallo, 2010).

Given the crucial importance of the political atmosphere in 1970s, marked by the introduction of multipartism in Senegal, nationalist political leaders (Cheikh Anta Diop; Abdoulaye Wade) voiced strong demands for more recognition and codification of Senegalese national languages in the constitution. In this climate of language brawls, Senghor and his government were forced to reassess and reevaluate their language policy to provide more room for the national languages in the Senegalese constitution. Senghor and his government went a step further in amending the constitution. Article 1 stipulated that French was the official language and that there were six national languages: Wolof, Pulaar, Serrere, Jola, Mandinka, and Soninke (Dumont, 1983; Sarry, 2002; Sall, 2009). Not surprisingly, this constitutional amendment was

**Horizons Littéraires**  
**Revue du Centre de Recherche sur la Critique Littéraire Africaine**  
**N° 4, Décembre 2020**

\* \* \* \* \*

backed by a politically charged rhetoric to introduce these national languages to the Senegalese educational system:

Aussi longtemps que nous, Sénégalais, continuerons à apprendre à nos enfants une langue étrangère quelle qu'elle soit, sans leur en enseigner au préalable leurs langues maternelles, notre peuple restera aliéné. Il est d'une nécessité urgente pour le peuple sénégalais de commencer à enseigner ses langues nationales (Sarry, 2002, p.7).

[As long as we, the Senegalese people, continue to teach our children a foreign language regardless of the language, without first teaching them their mother tongue, our people will remain alienated. It is of crucial and urgent importance that the Senegalese people start teaching their national languages] (my translation).

Although this constitutional amendment along with its rhetoric was applauded by a large segment of the Senegalese minority language groups, its application on the ground never became a reality under Senghor's presidency. Contrary to the previous language amendments championed by Senghor, this constitutional amendment was simply a political bluff to silence opposition and language activists. It did not take long before there ensued a political language battle between Senghor and language activists and writers.

The nature of the controversy between Senghor and Cheikh Anta Diop was primarily an issue of orthography which escalated into a more serious political battle. The Wolof-language journal that Cheikh Anta Diop launched for his newly created political party—the *Rassemblement National Democratique* [RND; National Alliance for Democracy] was titled in Wolof as *Siggi* [rise-up]. Paradoxically, as a non-native speaker of Wolof, Senghor was opposed to the orthography and demanded that title to be changed from "Siggi" to "Sigi" with one [g] because Senghor argued for the absence of gemination in Wolof (Diallo, 2010).

As an internationally renowned linguist and a native speaker of Wolof, Diop strongly refuted Senghor's argument. This resulted, after a long linguistic battle, in the banning of Diop's journal for the "inaccurate" use of a Wolof word. To avoid major conflict and a political standoff in the country, Diop finally made a change to the title of his journal. Instead of "Siggi", Diop used another word that has the same meaning: "Taxaw".

The linguistic battle Senghor was waging was not only limited to Cheikh Anta Diop, but extended to writers and filmmakers in Senegal. In 1976, nationally and internationally acclaimed filmmaker and director Ousmane Sembene released a film titled *Ceddo*, another Wolof word referring to the lifestyle of certain individuals before the advent of Islam in Senegal, and Senghor

# Leopold Sedar Senghor : the Dilemma over a Linguistic Decolonization in Senegal

## Moustapha FALL

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objected to the use of the [dd] (Diallo, 2010; Gellar, 2003). Unlike Cheikh Anta Diop, Ousmane Sembene categorically refused to change the title of his movie, and as a result his movie was banned until Senghor left power in 1980. It was later released under Abdou Diouf.

Although these linguistic battles were relatively insignificant to the average Senegalese citizen, they helped reveal some of the ugly politics of language that Senegal had been facing since independence. Most importantly, these linguistic battles were a major distraction from the real language policy issues that Senegal was constantly grappling with.

In summary, Schiffman's (1996) theoretical framework of covert and overt language policy, taken metaphorically, is certainly pertinent to characterize the overall language policy under Senghor. Senghor's language policy was marked by both an overt language policy and a covert language policy. The overt language policy consisted in making major explicit political declarations and constitutional reforms regarding the promotion of national languages; these declarations and reforms were never put into practice on the ground. The covert language policy was to promote the French language without major political declarations in the public sphere; it rather consisted, for example, in secret budget allowances to promote French, French TV and radio programs, and study scholarships in France.

As he failed to undertake significant language policy and planning, Senghor's final political declaration was one of an African elite who honorably led his country to independence, but of someone who still longed for his country to be like that of his colonial masters. As he left office, Senghor reiterated this attachment to France by contending that: "En l'an 2000, Dakar sera comme Paris" [In 2000, Dakar will be like Paris; my translation] (Senghor, unpublished source).

What Senghor really meant by this statement still remains, yet speculations over what he meant in his statement continue to grow. For some, Senghor was expressing his desire to see Senegal catching up with the Métropole in terms of economic development, science and technology by the year 2000. For others, Senghor was simply reaffirming his cultural and linguistic bond with the Métropole. Ultimately, Senghor was a complex figure. To his opponents, he was a real agent for the perpetuation of colonial language policy, but to his supporters he simply was an architect and agent for the political independence of Africa.

## **Conclusion**

The wind of linguistic decolonization that swept through several African states in the early 1960s failed to bring radical language changes. The process of eradication of the cultural and linguistic vestiges of colonialism has been very difficult to achieve. Given the deep ties of the African leaders to the language and culture of their formal colonial authorities, many African leaders and politicians were led to believe that an abrupt separation from the Métropole would cause major socio-economic setbacks. In that respect, with the exception of some countries in North and West Africa, a considerable number of African states opted for the maintenance of the French language, and continue the same colonial language policy and planning.

Senegal offers the gloomiest picture given that the French is the only language that is used as a medium of instruction in school despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Senegalese people speak a national language. This strong hold of the French language in Senegal, though it can be, in part, attributed to the successful language policies implemented by the French colonial authorities, is also the direct result of an early failure on the part of the political leadership to acknowledge the crucial importance of the national languages. As the Senegalese leader to accompany Senegal to independence, Senghor's failure to raise the Senegalese national languages to a higher status in the constitution of Senegal has some lingering effects with immeasurable consequences on current language policy and planning in the country.

Today, Senegal is left with without concrete language policy, and planning that would tackle the issue of illiteracy in the national languages, and reduce the high rate of student dropouts or low performance in French. Most significantly, the national languages are still not used as a medium of instruction in schools across Senegal. As many tend to believe, the issue of illiteracy in the national language and the issue of students' low academic performance in French are not separate issues; they are the two faces of the same coin. In that regard, addressing the issue of the low academic performance in Senegal necessarily entails tackling the issue of illiteracy in the national languages (mother tongues) because the absence of literacy in the mother tongue invariably hinders learning in any foreign language.

Future research should seriously address this issue of literacy in foreign language without a firm basis on literacy in the mother tongue in Senegal. Qualitative and quantitative data should be brought forward to further demonstrate that children with a minimum exposure to literacy

# Leopold Sedar Senghor : the Dilemma over a Linguistic Decolonization in Senegal

## Moustapha FALL

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education in their mother tongue will mostly enhance literacy in a foreign language. In that particular respect, the introduction of the national languages in the Senegalese educational system becomes an urgent necessity as the only way out of the systematic academic crisis in which droves of children are trapped today. Most significantly, introducing the national languages in the Senegalese school curriculum is one of the first steps in the process of a linguistic decolonization and the establishment of rigorous language policy and planning. The newly elected government of Senegal led by president Macky Sall should be more aggressive on giving the national languages priority in the Senegalese constitution, and also striving to come up with a clear vision and roadmap for the future and place of the national languages in the Senegalese school curriculum.

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<sup>i</sup> **Roumis**: Spoken Arab term primitively designating the Byzantines, and also used to refer to foreigners, especially the Christian colonists.

<sup>ii</sup> **Arab-Nationalism** started as a nationalist and revolutionary movement born out of the Arab-speaking populations of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. These Arab-speaking populations revolted against the Ottoman Empire to express their discontent with the way Islam was portrayed within the empire. Dawisha, in his book *Arab Nationalism in the Twenty Century*, argues that the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire was originally declared in the name of Islam and not in the name of Arab-Nationalism (Lehmil, 2007). Nevertheless, it was after the First World War that Arab-Nationalism emerged as a political movement whose agenda was to glorify the past, to raise political awareness and to awaken the Arab spirit among youths in the Arab world. However, this Arab-Nationalism encountered a range of obstacles such as tribalism, royalties and conflict of leadership. Most importantly, Arab identity and unity was not clearly defined. For example, it was not agreed upon as to whether it should be defined on the basis of Islam or on Arab culture. With the bloody coup in Iraq and the invasion of Egypt by Israel in June of 1967, the dream for stronger Arab-Nationalism was weakened, and subsequently deferred with the killing of Anwar Al Sadad in 1981 (Dawisha, 2003).

<sup>iii</sup> **MEN** is mandated to coordinate and to oversee the whole Senegalese education system. It hires high quality teachers and organizes exams and academic competitions at various levels. Part of its responsibilities also includes the maintenance of high-quality education to all of its citizens without discrimination based on ethnicity, nationality, gender, traditional and religious belief and/or geographical location.

<sup>iv</sup> **MALNF**, however, is a newly created government body which was charged with the task of promoting the Senegalese national languages and encouraging basic literacy education. In that respect, it has two sub-bodies: Directon de l'Alphabétisation et l'Éducation de Base

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(DAEB)[Directorate for Literacy and Basic Education]; and Direction de la Promotion des Langues Nationales (DPLN)[Directorate For the Promotion of National Languages]. These sub-bodies are mandated to work in coordination to serve MALNF in its daunting task of overseeing and promoting more than 30 national languages across Senegal.

<sup>v</sup> **Pathe Ndiagne** is one of the most distinguished Senegalese linguists. He extensively published on issues related to African national languages and politics of national languages. Apart his numerous publications on Cheikh Anta Diop and Leopold Sedar Senghor, he was one of the first linguists in Senegal to translate the Qu’ranic text into the Wolof language (*ALXURAAN CI WOLOF*). His frequent disputes with Senghor over languages issues have contributed in launching him as a nationalist figure, and fierce Senegalese national language protector in the Senegalese public opinion.

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