Dynamics of Voiced Poetry: Popular Education through Wolof and Soninke Sufi Religious Texts

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Introduction

In African Muslim societies, religious values are transmitted and reinforced through "voiced texts," poetic texts recorded in writing but designed to be performed orally and received aurally (Foley 2002). Aural reception implies the participatory and/or virtual involvement of an audience within sacred or hybrid frames. For most Muslim preachers, voiced texts, written and then chanted, take precedence over other means of communication. This inclination is probably associated with the prevalence of oral performance that underpins African traditional modes of communication, although written communication has always coexisted with orality within the Muslim world. This has been extensively discussed by William A. Graham in his work, "'An Arabic Reciting': Qu'ran as Spoken Book" (1987).

Contrary to prevalent beliefs, orality is not segregated from writing. Islam seems to have found an entrenched method of diffusion via direct performances and chanted poetry as it appears in West African societies, rather than solely through long, prosaic texts that demand sophisticated reading abilities. By shifting to voiced poetry, West African Muslim preachers demonstrate lucidity about "oral reason" (M. Diagne 2005) and the importance of collective learning through aural and oral performance. The embodied or living nature of Islamic knowledge transmission has been rigorously examined in the recent scholarship (see Ware 2014; Wright 2015; Ogunnaike 2020). In addition to Arabic, the preachers use native African tongues to convey their ideas, chanted or recited, to the broader public. Such poetic translations are designed mostly for people who have not been educated in religious schools, and therefore lack Arabic literacy, while texts in Arabic are written primarily for religious scholars and students.

The use of Arabic scripts, known as Ajami literature, is a long tradition, widespread across the world, including Africa (Ngom 2018; Şaul 2006). However, this article focuses on a corpus transcribed into Latin letters, highlighting the thematic dimension of poetic texts that teach Islamic spiritual and moral standards among the Wolof and Soninke ethnic groups. It argues that the capacity of vocalization to expand the scope of a printed text beyond its confines allows ample responsive engagement from target audiences who cannot speak Arabic. It further suggests that the success of African religious preachers lies partially in their choices, not only to translate the essence of the religion, but also to employ performative mechanisms to achieve their goals. It shows that, although the rise of new technologies and virtual conduits constitutes

an extension of such vocalization, it is creating means of expression that often fall beyond the control of the authorized producers of that sacred poetic corpus.

Corpus and Community Backgrounds

A vast corpus of poetic texts remains unexamined and confined to annexes or appendices of numerous published and unpublished documents. The marginalization of these texts away from mainstream world literature rests on several explanatory factors, of which a false distinction between orality and writing appears to be the strongest. The emergence of Ajami and Timbuktu scholarship (Jeppie and Diagne 2008; Kane 2016; Lüpke and Bao-Diop 2014; Ngom 2010, 2017, and 2018) reverses the trend by foregrounding the treasures of African literature hidden in local languages (Irele 1990).[1]

This article draws from this corpus of texts that are often neglected within Eurocentric epistemologies to examine their meaning and value as compelling literature. To them, I add unpublished texts that circulate and are still performed in Senegal. For reasons of space, I focus on some Wolof and Soninke cases in Senegal. I further narrow down religious texts through their messages, performers, and occasion of actualization. Because of linguistic barriers in Soninke, I rely primarily on the appendices of Aliou Kissima Tandia (1999), a book that contains a rich corpus of religious poems that have not yet been fully analyzed; another pertinent published work is by Momar Cissé (2009). Other religious Wolof poems are from secondary sources, including those by Thierno Mouhammad Said Diop (2017), or posted on websites by disciples of Sufi orders and on YouTube.[2] The presentation of texts in such alternative spaces away from academic discourses accounts for the parochialism noted in literary scholarship: the unequal consideration of written versus voiced literature and European versus non-European languages as legitimate mediums of knowledge production (Brenner and Last 1985; Cissé 2007).

It is along those lines that Foley asks: "Given the built-in bias in favor of the technology of writing and printing, is it any wonder that oral poetry is ranked as a second-class citizen among the verbal arts?" (2002:27). Bringing out and shedding light on these forms of literary production may open new perspectives and understanding of the dynamics of grassroots African literature, and beyond—the religious life and ethos of the communities involved. I attended several religious events (Mawlid, Commemoration, *ziyaara*) where such poems and songs were performed from 2005 to 2010, and I have been distantly observing and examining those performances and debates around them through the Internet since 2010.

Little research has been conducted to analyze the contents and modes of composition and performance of religious poetry in Senegal (Sana Camara 1997). The most dynamic area of study is the interconnection between Islam and music (McLaughlin 1997; Niang 2010). Samba Camara (2019) has recently tackled what he terms the friction between secular music and Sufism,

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[1] A vast corpus of digitized and non-digitized Ajami and Arabic manuscripts resides in many academic institutions, such as the British Library Endangered Archives Programme, the African Ajami Library at Boston University, and the Northwestern University Libraries.

[2] A notable example can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lN5RhFS5IP4.

showing the delicate frontiers between religion and its transposition in the popular music known as *mballax*, and the tension incurred by that fraught endeavor. Joseph Hill (2016 and 2017) has explored some rappers' engagement with the Tijaniyya Fayda.[3] Verbal arts in religious circles have been collected, but not closely examined. The most comprehensive research carried out on Sufi narratives, as distinct from poetry, is by Mamarame Seck (2013) and Cheikh Tidiane Lo (2018). In Senegalese scholarship on Arabic religious literature, Amar Samb's *Essai sur la contribution du Sénégal à la littérature d'expression arabe* (1972) remains a classic. Fallou Ngom (2016) has studied in a monumental book the forms of Murid Ajami literature. Sana Camara has collected and transcribed an important body of Murid Ajami poems (2008) and examined some poems by Musa Ka (1997). Christine Thu Nhi Dang's (2017) article on erotic Sufi poetry in Senegal is also a reference in this domain. The work of Aliou Kissima Tandia (1999) on Soninke poetry is probably the only published scholarly research on that subject. Thierno Mouhammad Said Diop (2017) and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2009) have documented some of Abass Sall's poetic production.[4] The other works are unpublished master's theses at the University of Dakar (M. Lô 1993). Oludamini Ogunnaike (2016 and 2020) did a compelling study focusing on Shaykh Ibrahima Niasse's Arabic poetry. However, a cross-cultural study of the transition from written to vocal, and of the role of performers in addition to the themes, still needs to be undertaken—a task this paper attempts to initiate. Some of the themes that are less addressed in scholarship concern *tawhid* or the oneness of God, the intercession of Prophet Muhammad, and the moral and etiquette standards to attain spiritual transformation. The centrality of *tawhid* in African Sufi texts can be understood within a context of religious syncretism where lingering African beliefs still shape approaches to Islamic faith. Intercession, being a cornerstone of Sufi schools, is given due consideration as well. Seydi Djamil Niane's (2016) work offers an interesting glimpse into the importance of prophetic intercession in Malick Sy's poetry.

The Wolof texts are chosen because of my linguistic fluency in that language. As for the Soninke, the availability of the texts in both the original language and in French allows me to combine them with the Wolof texts. Besides, the Wolof and Soninke people share several religious and cultural traits owing to their long-held cohabitation and blending. The Soninke are reported to be the first Islamized Western African ethnic group, since they interacted earlier with Berber and Arab merchants in the Wagadu Empire, known as Ancient Ghana, a century after the birth of Islam in the Hijaz. They lived in Wagadu, Kaarta, Gajaaga, and the Guidimaxa, meaning the elevated lands of Assaba, Tagant, Hodh, and Adrar (Bathily 1989; Kane 2004; Tandia 1999). This wide zone is couched between part of Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania. After the decline of the empire (a process sped up by the Almoravids' assaults), the Soninke migrated in different directions: some moved down to the current area of Burkina Faso, naming their settlement Wagadugu after their fallen empire; others followed the Senegalese River valley down to the eastern side of the Fuuta region, then inhabited by the Haal-pulaar, followed by a second wave of

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[3] The Tijaniyya was founded by Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani in Algeria and then in Morocco, where his body was buried. The Fayda is a Sufi movement within the broader Tijaniyya Order created by Shaykh Ibrahima Niass (1900-1975) of Kaolack, who has millions of disciples in Nigeria and elsewhere.

[4] Abass Sall is a Tijani Sufi guide based in Louga, Senegal.

Soninke migration to Fuuta. Yet, unlike the first group, the second group did not become integrated within Haal-pulaar culture: they moved outward to settle in Bakel (northeastern Senegal) when they felt oppressed by the Toucouleur, the Haal-pular people living in Fuuta (Bathily 1989; Kane 2004).

One of their influences upon the Haal-pular was the introduction of Islam. They counted several religious preachers among the Dramé and Cissé clans. Muhammadu Lamin Drame, a nineteenth-century Sufi leader who resisted French penetration, originated in the Dramé clan, based in Gunjur. The Wolof nicknamed them Sarakhole, a name that probably derives from the phrase *sar xole* ("shout"), an allusion to what seemed to them like a loud and incomprehensible language. The European explorers and colonizers retained the name of Sarakhole in their written documents. Therefore, it can be argued that the Soninke Islamized Fuuta, which, in turn, Islamized the Wolof, as the latter's kingdom of Jolof was a neighboring entity to Fuuta. If Al Hajj Umar Tall (1796-1864), a Haal-pular-born religious propagator in West Africa, kept his native tongue as a medium of communication besides Arabic, the two other prominent Wolofized Muslim leaders of Haal-pulaar origin, Al Hajj Malick Sy (1855-1922)[5] and Ahmadu Bamba (1853-1927), chose Wolof as a lingua franca instead, to convert the Wolof communities in the early-twentieth century (C. A. Diop 1960:129). Next to their scholarly language of Arabic, their messages were transmitted to their followers in Wolof. In this way the Wolof and Soninke religious poems written by the religious guides and their family members and followers contributed to expanding Islam and Sufism, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In fact, poetry was commonly used as an effective rhetorical device of Islamic pedagogy by Arab Muslim scholars (Stetkevych 2010), especially Sufi writers (Ogunnaike 2016). It has been characterized as a medium of "mass communication" (Ngom 2016). However, in sub-Saharan Africa, oral performance of written texts seems to be a predilection, owing to the traditions already embedded in those forms of composition and vocal transmission. Oral poetry arguably can achieve what printed text alone cannot: "Because oral poetry has always been an essential technology for the transmission and expression of ideas of all kinds, it does not divorce entertainment from instruction, artistic craft from cultural work" (Foley 2002:28). The written genre of Muslim poetry becomes appropriated, contextualized to fit into the culturally dominant modes of communication, which are largely oral. The two modes, writing and orality, end up coalescing without any practical incompatibility, as previous scholars have generally assumed. Such a dichotomy has been challenged by several researchers of oral tradition and literature, demonstrating how the two modes often overlap and sustain one another (Finnegan 2012; Foley 2002; Ong 1982). Although this essay is confined to poetry as a genre, it needs to be mentioned that other Wolof prose texts have played similar functions, especially in the field of *tafsir* or Qu'ranic exegesis (see Jeremy Dell's "Unbraiding the Qu'ran: Wolofal and the Tafsīr Tradition of Senegambia" (2018)).

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[5] Malick Sy would teach both in Wolof and Haal-pulaar, depending on the students' native tongues.

Voiced Texts: Beyond Duality

That written texts may transition into oral texts is not unique to Africa. In Europe, many popular songs are known to be derived from literary texts. However, the passage from literature to orality has been devalued and cast as folklore: "It is not productive to think of orality in a negative fashion. Orality does not mean illiteracy, nor should it be perceived as a lack stripped of the values inherent to voice and all of its positive function" (Zumthor 1990:17). In contrast, oral poetry encompasses three modes of deployment: composition, performance, and reception (Foley 2002). When any strand of this triple continuum involves oral rendition, the dichotomy between writing and unwritten poetry becomes porous. Leaving aside a few special cases such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the canon of Western literature centers on texts composed, rendered, and received through writing. The other extreme edge is poetry composed, performed, and received through oral rendition. However, some forms of poetry may fall somewhere between these extremes. The voiced texts under scrutiny in this paper are cases in point, because they were originally composed in writing before being deployed and received orally. Therefore, when orality intervenes at any stage of the poetic spectrum, such a genre should be considered part of voiced textuality, a dimension of oral literature, broadly speaking.

The benefit of this theoretical point is that it allows us to expand the contours of oral literature by taking into consideration an important body of contemporary texts that fit within Foley's template, and that are often neglected by many literary scholars. Foley is not the first and only scholar to shed light on the dynamic possibility of oral poetry—Finnegan and several others have pointed out the artificial boundaries between oral and written literature, or simply the disappearance of purely oral societies (Zumthor 1990:25)—but his template has been innovative. Those who emphasize the oral composition of poetry (Parry 1971; Lord 2019) or oral performance alone (Bauman 1977; Okpewho 1990) fail to capture the complexity to which Foley calls our attention. As argued by Zumthor, "oral poets come under the influence of certain linguistic procedures, certain themes found in written works: intertextuality plays back and forth" (1990:27). Similarly, many African writers are influenced by oral literature and traditions in their styles and themes.

Borrowing from Foley, I argue that the concept of voiced text captures a large swath of contemporary African oral poetry, more particularly in Muslim Sufi circles of West Africa. Sufi shaykhs of the various orders are generally prolific poets in both Arabic and their native tongues. Their poems in African languages are modeled upon the Arabic written *qasida* (ode, a classic form involving a single meter, with each line ending in the same sounds) or follow the rhythms of African songs. While their sophisticated Arabic poems are readable by only a few learned students, they are still chanted for larger audiences during Mawlid (observance of the Prophet's birthday), *ziyaara* (spiritual gatherings), and so forth. For instance, the famous ode by Imam Al Bussayri, an Egyptian Sufi poet, called *Al Burda* ("The Mantle"), is sung during the first ten nights of Rabi al-awal (the first month of the Muslim calendar) before the Mawlid on the twelfth night of the same month: "The vocal style applied to the *Burda* is both vigorous and repetitive, with the same basic melody, rhythms and moderate, regular tempo employed with unfailing energy for the entirety of the recital" (Dang 2017:363). An audience does not necessarily understand the verbal meaning of poetry sung in Arabic, but people believe that simply hearing

and participating in the singing is a source of blessing. The aesthetic dimension of the melody attracts people to those religious gatherings in mosques, *zawaya* (spiritual centers), and more and more in public spaces. This has led Sufi leaders to tap into the attractiveness of the chanted texts to write religious poems in their native languages, accessible to all through communal performance.

The Murid Sufi community is the leading producer of religious poetry in Wolof. Fallou Ngom (2016) links the expansion of Ajami literature with the rise of the Muridiyya in Senegal. Among their distinctive identity markers, the Murids particularly valorize their African rootedness. Compared to other Sufi paths in Senegal, the Muridiyya is one of the rare *tariqas* (Sufi brotherhoods) to have been founded by a Senegalese-born shaykh, Ahmadu Bamba (1853-1927; Babou 2007). The other main brotherhoods, Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya, were founded outside the country. Such a position leads them to promote the black African identity of their community through their style of clothing and the use of Wolofal, a term coined to designate poetry in the Wolof language. As quoted from Sana Camara's book, Sëriñ Musa Ka, a prominent Murid poet, asserted this choice in two lines (2008:24):

Li tax way wiy wolof te waroon di yaaram	Why is the song in Wolof while it should be in Arabic?
Damaa nar gaayi jànjul xam Booroomam.	Because I want illiterates to know God.

A similar remark that foregrounds the didactic function of the songs is made in a Soninke religious poem drawn from Tandia's appendix (1999:146):

Suuguun misaali xampa yi	Take the songs like a ladder
Sondonme su gat into i ya,	Whoever uses them in that way
Ma ken ga hanmi katta i ya,	Going on them like a springboard
Ti na i kiñandi Alla yi,	To reach the peak of perfection
. . .	. . .
Nan li sigindi Alla ya.	Nothing will prevent him from attaining God.

Even in Tivaoune, home to one of the largest Tijaniyya branches of Senegal, the chanting of Arabic poetry is either preceded or succeeded by exegetical commentaries in Wolof for the non-literate audience. The traditional Wolof griots play an important role in religious oral performances. They transfer their artistic craft in the service of the religious songs. The Tijaniyya of Senegal is particularly visible in the reconversion of traditional secular griots into sacred song specialists. Their talent in creating what they call *air* (melody and rhythm), as well as the quality of their voices, factor into the profusion of poetic oral performances during religious events. The texts are generally composed by Sufi shaykhs, but the creation of the *air* designed for the performance rests with the singers, be they griots or non-griots. In other words, the authors of the texts are not always their popular performers or singers in the Sufi circle. The power of voicing is acknowledged in anthropology and literature, with its capacity, through repetition, to shape subjectivities. It is along these lines that Amanda Weidman claims: "Vocal practices, including everyday speech, song, verbal play, ritual speech, oratory, and recitation, can be viewed as modes of practice and discipline that, in their repeated enactment, may performatively bring into being

classed, gendered, political, ethnic, or religious subjects" (2014:44). So, the use of voiced text, beyond the communicative function, helps build distinctive community identity markers. With the profusion of Sufi affiliations, it is crucial for groups to forge their styles, called *daaj* by the Murids,[6] to distance themselves from other, similar communities. Even within a given community, different singers impose their idiosyncratic ways, despite the use of a shared repertoire of songs.

The properties of the voiced texts enable the expansion of African oral poetry in the era of mediatization. In fact, the diverse media platforms are conduits through which oral poetry thrives today. The shareability of voiced texts via social media platforms, such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook, provides unique and faster communication strategies for Sufi groups to circulate their messages and reassert their community identity and spiritual life. Sufi voiced texts are entering the world of multimodality, reaching audiences spatially separated but virtually interconnected, to engage with the oral poems produced by their religious communities.[7] Groups and individuals enjoy the possibility of consuming and sharing mediatized streams of oral and written poems enabled by social media applications. Those groups can now create audiovisual documents through YouTube, containing not only the written lyrics, but their sounds, which can be shared instantly among thousands of disciples and other listeners. The sonic dimension of the lyrics is critical as well, since "vocal communication fulfills an exteriorizing function within the social group. It assures that a society's discourse about itself, be it serious or futile, is heard for the sake of its own perpetuation" (Foley 2002:23). For example, the religious epic of Al Hajj Umar Tall, the West African Tijaniyya jihadist, is made into an audiovisual text, and the epic composed and performed by the Senegalese singer Baba Maal[8] incorporates French interpretations.

Other poems by Al Hajj Malick Sy (1855-1922), such as his *qasida* titled *Taysir*,[9] are transcribed on YouTube into Latin letters, with both the Arabic text and the recited versions included in the transcriptions. The use of multiple modes for a single text further complicates and enriches Foley's template. Today, old and new Sufi poems and songs are spreading to wider audiences, thanks to those technological and social media applications that continue to serve their original educational and spiritual function. Both functions are inseparable from the artistic and entertainment dimension—the essence of poetry at large. With the Coronavirus pandemic, many Mawlid events were canceled, but replaced by online and tele-Mawlid to avoid onsite crowding. Many of the song performances have been recorded and are still accessible on several social media platforms. This adaption has been made easy and effective because most Sufi communities have been engaging with new digital tools since well before the health crisis.

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[6] The Murid use the word *daaj*, whereas the Tijani use the word *air* to designate the melody and rhythm of songs.

[7] Antonio Diego Gonzales (2017) has explored how the Niass branch of the Tijaniyya reconnects its international community with the center in Kaolack via information and technologies of communication. Shaykh Mahy Cisse is playing a critical role in disseminating *mahrifa* knowledge through social media platforms.

[8] Examples of Baba Maal's audio can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqB1ebFzAP0.

[9] For an example of *Taysir* in Latin letters, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DjAa1ZFZXA.

Religious Poetry: Generic Contours

African oral religious poetry, especially from Islamic inspiration, carries a variety of subgenres, including *marsiya* (eulogy), ode, panegyric poetry, supplication, sermons, and *sira* (the Prophet Muhammad's biography) (Seydou 2008:162). Ruth Finnegan frames the genre of religious poetry as follows (2012:166):

> There are three main ways in which poetry can be regarded as being religious. Firstly, the content may be religious, as in verse about mythical actions of gods or direct religious instruction or invocation. Secondly, poetry may be recited by those who are regarded as religious specialists. Thirdly, it may be performed on occasions which are generally agreed to be religious ones.

Al Hajj Malick Sy's famous *sira* titled *Khilasu Zhahab* ("The Forged Gold") is a comprehensive biographical poem of around a thousand verses, with thirty chapters, chanted and translated in Wolof during Mawlid ceremonies. The following poem is not an exact translation of the Messenger's Ascension chapter in it, but a chanted synthesis in Wolof, intended for disciples ignorant of Arabic. The author, Mbaye Donde Mbaye, a singer from the griot caste, was the leading singer in the Tivaoune branch of Tijaniyya. The song, titled "Apollo," which I collected from YouTube,[10] is as follows:

Taraqaa: Yonent yeeg na.	*Taraqaa*:[11] the Messenger is ascending.
Mu reere Makka,	After taking dinner in Mecca,
Apoloo baa ngay langaan,	Apollo[12] took off,
Mu tong caak Jibriil,	Accompanied Gabriel,
Nees tuut mu jaar Yathrib.	Then they laid over in Yathrib.
Mooy Madinatul Munawara.	That is now Medina Munawaya.[13]
Mu wacci fa, julli fa naari rakaa.	He stopped there and prayed two prayers.
Soog a depaar ak porotokol bi.	Then, he departed with the protocol.
Taraqaa Yonent Yeeg na.	*Taraqaa*, the Messenger is ascending.

Al Hajj Malick Sy, the main Tijaniyya preacher in Senegal, who was also a prolific poet (Diallo 2010; Samb 1972). His known poetic lines are estimated to number more than five thousand. Some of them are translated into Wolof by singers or mixed with Arabic words, such as the word *taraqaa* in the quotation above. This poem is derived from the chapter where Al Hajj Malick Sy describes the Prophet Muhammad's ascension. As a *sira* text, the poem teaches the Prophet's history, beginning from the events preceding his birth to his death.

The genre called *marsiya* is most commonly found among the Muridiyya Sufi Order, led

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[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HNfd_OhOUE.

[11] An Arabic verb meaning "elevating, mounting."

[12] Apollo, referring to the space satellite as a metaphor for Gabriel, the Archangel.

[13] The city in Saudi Arabia where the tomb of the Prophet is located.

by Ahmadu Bamba. It is based on the Arabic elegy genre, which mourns deceased Sufi shaykhs or important religious figures to whom the disciples are attached. The following excerpt collected from YouTube[14] is from a long *marsiya* dedicated by Musa Ka to Ibrahima Fall, one of the most important followers of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba. It is chanted in a mournful tone and is accompanied by its transcription.

Seex Ibra gëm ga làndi na.	Shaykh Ibra's faith is overflowing.
Moo tax mu dëddu àddina.	That's why he turns his back on this world.
Fekki na Bàmba sotti na,	To go and completely join Bamba,
Wàcci na aljanay texe.	He has landed in Paradise; he is safe.

The poem was written by Musa Ka (1891-1966), a famous Murid poet, in both Wolof and Arabic. Here he chants about the death of Ibrahima Fall, abbreviated as Ibra, and his strong faith in Ahmadu Bamba, which accounts for his having left this world to join his shaykh in paradise. The song, modeled after Arabic poetic meter, is chanted by numerous singers, with a range of melodies. The intent behind the poem is not only to show how a disciple should be attached to his guide, but also to teach the younger generation about Ibrahima Fall's death. The events during which such poems are chanted in Wolof are mainly the Great Màggal of Touba (Coulon 1999) or during *cant* (thanksgiving ceremonies) of the Bay Fall, followers and imitators of Ibrahima, known for wearing clothing stylized with colorful patches and for their dreadlocks. The Bay Fall, unlike the Tijani followers, and some other Murids, use drums to accompany their *zikr* (recitative meditations) and songs.

Songs can also be a supplication to Allah (God) for protection or for obtaining specific favors and blessings. Consider, for example, this excerpt from a Soninke religious poem (Tandia 1999:144):

Alla o xalife an na maxa oku toxo!	O Allah, we are confiding in you!
Seyitaani do yonki bure maxa	Please, do not forsake us to Satan
Do xirise be ga ma foofo nari	With his dark suggestions
Kisi killun su ga sanku[15] a maxa.	And to any ignorant guide who went astray.

This passage is excerpted from a long poem of more than thirty lines in Soninke. It asks God for protection against Satan and a bad spiritual guide that leads people astray. Its formulation is indicative of Sufi orientation, which holds that a disciple needs a spiritual leader to guide him to God. Non-Sufi Muslims reject intermediaries between believers and God. As Finnegan has clarified the situation (2012:167):

In the areas where Arabic models have been influential through the tradition of Islam, religious
poetry, often in written form, occurs with a pronounced homiletic and sometimes narrative

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[14] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lDXzpigQxl0.

[15] The word *sanku* in the original Soninke version has the same meaning in Wolof, a trait of their linguistic borrowing from each other.

emphasis. Such religious poetry occurs, for instance, among the Hausa and others in West Africa. Although written in the local language, it is often directly influenced by the Arabic models and contains many Arabic words and sentiments.

We can conclude that religious poetry is a rich arena, containing almost all the genres of Arabic-influenced poetry. Such similarity denotes a certain creativity of local poets and singers to transpose texts into Wolof or Soninke songs, with appropriate recontextualizations, like Mbaye Donde's synthesis of All Hajj Malick Sy's *qasida* examined above.

The Leitmotif of *Tawhid* in Religious Poetry

Muslim life is said to be founded on five basic acts conventionally called pillars: profession of faith, five prayers a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition to these rituals is an exhortation to improve one's good manners and connection to God through meditation and personal efforts. The Sufi brotherhoods are mystical schools that emphasize this spiritual training to promote the individual's reconnection with God. Sufi poetry tackles all these ranges of topics. The fundamental pillar (*tawhid*), belief in the oneness of God, is prominent in their poems and songs. One is not a true believer unless one believes that there is only one God; believing in multiple gods is polytheism. Without this primary knowledge, no one can pretend to be a Muslim. This is perhaps why African religious leaders created songs in their native languages to educate the uneducated members in that regard. For instance, this Soninke poem from Tandia's corpus lays emphasis on the oneness of God and the need to rely entirely on him (1999:120):

Dunuya fiinum kunfa ga dangi mene.	The worldly things are fleeting.
Maxa hanmi an fin toxo Allam axa	Don't hesitate: return to God,
Tunka be ga siro an da na an dabari	The Supreme Master who created you
Na an riiti duna di komaaxu maxa	And who sent you on Earth to worship Him.
Xusa na a da kome ga sigi	Accept to be a permanent worshipper,
Batiye fi su di a ga duume a maxa	Always cultivating him.
Sere be ga a mulla a na i ku sago	He who wants his desires realized,
An xusa i fin su toxo Alla maxa	Let him entirely refer to God.

African Sufi leaders had to face the remnants of traditional religions and cults, even after the mass conversion to Islam. Polytheism and belief in supernatural powers other than God still influence the worldviews of recently converted Muslims. Al Hajj Umar Tall's jihad was waged against not only followers of traditional religions, but new Muslims, still adhering to paganistic practices, including divination (Dieng 1997). The consolidation of the *tawhid* becomes a cornerstone of the Sufi leaders' mission. Seeing the poor Arabic literacy of the recent converts, they decided to translate the tenets of Islam into their native languages. By replacing the traditional religious songs and rituals with Islam-oriented ones, they hoped to instruct those

unlettered masses. The following excerpt is drawn from a 75-line poem titled *Ben da in kamu tu* ("He Who Acknowledges the Oneness of God") in Tandia's corpus (1999:124):

I ben da in Kaman tu na a batu a ken da ho kita	He who worships God and acknowledges his oneness has something
Kitaana gabe su dangi kun su ma ken kita.	That the many wealthy people could not have.

These lines ending with the sound *a* are close to the Arabic poetic *ya* ending, called *Yahiya*, highlighting the incomparable value of having full faith in God's uniqueness. Wealthy African kings, vaunting their gold mines, are probably the addressees of such an invitation to return to God, the source of all goods. The Soninke originated in Wagadu, the ancient Ghana Empire, which Arab merchants associated with the land of gold as indexed in the poem. Having those powerful tycoons abandon earthly riches in favor of pure worship of God could not have been an easy task. The recourse to poetry, because of its communication capacity, seems an effective strategy for preachers to get their messages across.

Besides *tawhid*, the love for the Prophet and his way of life are the highest values promoted in religious poetry as expressed in this Soninke poem excerpted from Tandia's corpus (1999:158):

Xa sun ri seede in da	Come bear witness to my favor
Ti in ke duŋe seren da,	To see that allegiance I have to the being
Foofo ga xaaye ken da.	To whom all creatures are submitted.
Annebi Mahammadu.	I mean Prophet Muhammad.

The poetic technique of announcing the thing to which the poet is alluding, as the singer does in the last line of the above excerpt, is called *ghazal* in Arabic; we see here an indication of Soninke poets' borrowing from the Arabic poetic style. The term *seede* ("to bear witness") in the first line is common to both Wolof and Soninke; it points to a history of exchanges between these communities.

The Prophet Muhammad is not only a messenger in the Sufi understanding, but a master, who deserves veneration and imitation, because he is considered an intercessor on the Day of Judgment. An illustrative poem goes as follows (Tandia 1999:160):

Annebi Mahammadu,	Prophet Muhammad,
O da an ñaaga Alla nen ŋa.	Intercede for us to God.
An na oku deema non ŋa.	Bring us your assistance.

Some non-Sufi Muslims doubt that anyone can intercede in favor of anyone else on the Day of Judgment, but the Prophet's intercession is one of the backbones of the Sufi's prayers. The love thematized in much Sufi poetry and song turns on the Prophet's ability to assist believers against hellfire. In the following section, I will analyze poems related to moral decorum and good manners that are necessary for spiritual growth.

Decorum and Good Manners

Showing respect and kindness to one's fellow Muslims and all human beings is highly valued in the Sufi paths. The following passage, taken from the corpus that Cissé collected, is a poem of the Layeen community of Dakar (2009:282):[16]

Jëfew yiw ak maandu.	Be pious and just.
Mooy li gën ci Taalibe.	That is better for a disciple.
Ku xemmeem ndënal noon Yàlla	He who admires saints' hearts
Da ngay déglu woote ba.	Should listen to their message.
Nga am xel, te am teggin.	Be intelligent and full of respect.
Te bul déglu gaa ña regg	Never follow the wealthy people
Bay dox di puukare.	Who show off on Earth.
Lu du diine du teggin.	Unreligious behavior is disrespectful.

Being submissive and obedient are qualities expected from any disciple who yearns to be educated by a Sufi saint. Following the footsteps of wealthy people who are unmindful of divine religion is strictly prohibited for spiritual growth. Layeen songs are sung in unison during the group's religious gathering on Ngor's beach, wearing white clothes. Often, they make bodily movements in unison while seated. Men and women are separated in these gatherings, but everyone participates in the singing, which provides powerful spiritual flow and effervescence and helps the participants strengthen their sense of community belonging. The following excerpt written by Shaykh Abass Sall and drawn from Thierno Mouhammad Said Diop's book is telling in this sense (2017:31):

Bul gëd mak, bul wax yit fen nga	Never tell an elder you lie.
Waxal neeneen nu gën a noy sax juum nga	Better say it differently, like you are wrong.
Lu tee nga wax seetaat ko, ndeem kuy weddi nga	Instead tell him to check, if you disagree.
Gëmu ma lii, doy na lu naaw ci weddi	I don't believe it; it is better in refutation.
Wegu te teey, te jàng wax ci mbooloo	Be correct, and learn how to speak in public.
Wax mooy balaas, gaa naa ko wax te booloo	Your words are your judge according to all.
Dawal weereente, watul it wedente	Avoid disputes; avoid argument.
Bul di xulookat, bul di it xottante	Don't tussle; don't fight.
Bu wax bareee ba bëg naaw, jogal te wéy	When words get tense, go away.
Te noppi, noppiloo sa non, nga am woy	Be quiet, including your people, to win.

Shaykh Abass Sall is a prolific poet in both Arabic and Wolof; however, his Wolof poems are crafted according to Arabic styles. He respects the rhymes and meters. He is not known to be a singer, nor a performer, but some groups of his followers sing his poems for audiences. He is a famous Sufi shaykh and scholar whose work is popular across the Muslim world. Like other Sufi

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[16] This is a Sufi group based mostly on the peninsula of Dakar. They believe their leader to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and his son, the awaited Mahdi (see Sylla 1989).

shaykhs, he uses Wolof to reach listeners who are not versed in Arabic. Some of his poems are published and commented on by Mouhammad Said Diop (2017) using Latin scripts, as Abass Sall writes in Ajami.

Some singers have written their texts down, as they have been educated in Islamic learning. Mbaye Done Mbaye of Tivaoune used some sayings of Sëriñ Babacar Sy (known as Mbaye Sy) and reworked them in poetic forms. A perfect illustration is this song I collected from YouTube:[17]

Awwukat:

Ku fi yaakaar ne ganaaw Mbay

Di na wuuteek kanamaam

Xamuloo Yalla, xamoo Mbay Sy

Xamoo it la nga ngoy

Chorus:

He who thinks that after Mbaye

Will be different from before Mbaye,

You neither know God, nor Mbaye Sy,

Nor what you possess.

Woykat:

Réew mi nanu gem top ci Mbay

Sàmmi waxam ngoy ci jeffam

Te bañ geersu leeneen

Soloist:

People, let's follow Mbaye.

Respect his words and action.

Let's not turn away.

Awwukat:

Ko nak ci nu war na ganaaw Mbay

Ba mu laqo nu taxaw ci juróomam yi

Di ñaanal ak njabootam baña fay

Chorus:

Then what we should do after Mbaye,

After he passed away, is to respect his five.

Praying for his family to get united.

Woykat:

Sunu diine, sunu tariqa, sunuy Daahira tey

Ak sunuy mecce a kit yoonu tiwawan
baña fey

Soloist:

That is, our religion, brotherhood, and Daahira,

And our professions, and our way to Tivaoune.

Sëriñ Babacar Sy, nicknamed Mbaye Sy, once called all the disciples to Tivaoune to tell them his last five recommendations before his death. These recommendations were respect for Islam, respect for the Sufi brotherhood of the Tijaniyya, having membership in a Daahira (religious association for solidarity), having a job for a living, and regularly going to visit Tivaoune for spiritual connection. Mbaye Donde creatively incorporated these recommendations in his song, backed up by a chorus that reiterates the refrain in a call and response interaction. In short, the goal of Sufi voiced poetry is primarily to educate the masses to adopt Muslim values learned from the sacred text of the Qur'an and the hadiths or Prophet's sayings. Nevertheless, most of the songs are also panegyric texts, praising the Sufi shaykhs who have brought Islamic teachings to common believers in Senegal. I will briefly examine some samples of such panegyric genres, before concluding this article.

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[17]The excerpt begins one hour and fifty-six minutes into the following video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpJd4HvYSGs.

Performing Panegyric Texts

The key notion of Sufi spiritual training is gratitude, considered a force that can effect a spiritual connection between a creature and God, believers and the Prophet Muhammad, and disciples and their guide. In addressing each of these relations, Sufi songs are pervaded by the motif of gratitude, as expressed in this Soninke poem from Tandia's corpus (1999:138):

Alla oku da an taiga ti an ga da ke be na	God, we are grateful to You for what you gave us.
Tiigaye daga an ya da duna do laaxara	You deserve gratitude in this world and in the hereafter.

The modes of performing panegyric songs vary from one religious circle to another. For instance, while the majority of Qadiriyya shaykhs accept the playing of musical instruments like the *tabala* (a local drum), others, including the Tivaoune branch of Tijaniyya, categorically reject the use of drums or any type of instrument to accompany the songs. Al Hajj Abdu Aziz Sy,[18] one of Malick Sy's successors, wrote a Wolof poem in which he describes how to chant in honor of his brother, Sëriñ Babacar Sy.[19] The following excerpt is transcribed from YouTube:[20]

Bul leen ko xiinal.	Don't play a drum.
Bu leen mbalax.	Don't use a *mbalax*.
Ba leen tama yi.	Don't use a tom-tom.
Ba leen junj junj yi.	Don't use a *junj junj*.

This excerpt is drawn from a larger bilingual poem, in which the author alternates between Wolof and Arabic verses. In this passage, he forbids disciples to sing like *mbalax* singers. (*Mbalax* is the predominant musical genre in Senegal.) He enumerates the names of local drums, such as tom-tom and *junj junj*, as formally prohibited in singing the praises of the Sufi guides. The implied opposition between Sufi songs and the secular modes of performance leads to questions about contemporary ramifications of the performance of Sufi songs outside the purely religious realm.

Conclusion: New Developments

In Sufi circles, vocalization confers life upon written poetry. Written poems are often inaccessible to the masses, most of whom cannot read Arabic scripts. The existence of Latin letters facilitates the readability of such texts by Western-educated people. However, being able to read the transcribed poems in Latin letters is not, apparently, enough to duly appreciate the aesthetic essence and quality of the written poetry. Vocalization plays a bridging role, especially

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[18] He was the successor of his older brother, Sëriñ Babacar, from 1957 to 1997.

[19] He was the first successor of his father, All Hajj Malick Sy, after the latter passed away in 1922, until 1957.

[20] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdlHgJ5EduY.

when performed by adept singers, between the written texts and the broader audiences whom the author aims to educate. Two types of occasion, one ritualistic, the other more mundane, can be identified. By ritualistic occasion, I evoke those heightened moments of spiritual effervescence and communion associated with the Muslim calendar, like the Mawlid celebration, or invented by authorized figures, like a *ziyaara* or *màggal* (a commemoration of one's guide). The poems chanted or intoned during such occasions bear the mark of a special spiritual appeal, as they set themselves apart from those performed on ordinary days. The *qasida* known as *Al Burda*,[21] which is chanted on the eve of Mawlid night, stimulates emotion more easily than those recited in a different period. The degree of immersion and deference accorded to ritualized performances of poetry is immediately felt by the audiences, even by outside observers. In the Tivaoune *zawiya*, a loudspeaker repeatedly warns people to observe decorum and honor the recitation session of the *Al Burda* by avoiding futile talk and disrespectful bodily movements.

During the official Mawlid, a commentator leads the communication, accompanied by a band of singers, who back up his explanations through songs that match the events, ideas, or people being referenced. This dialogic interaction between commentators and singers, although it is present among the Senegalese Sufi communities such as the Murid,[22] is especially prevalent within the Tivaoune subgroup. The audiences' appreciation of the quality of the dialogic interpretation and song is expressed through snapping fingers, short but loud utterances of approbation, and even walking up to the singers or the interpreter to offer some cash or other gifts. Such monetary rewards account for the emergence of a greater number of interpreters, called *gàmmukat*, and singers that were previously unknown. Only renowned singers and interpreters, however, are allowed to perform in front of the khalif, the moral leader of the Sufi order, generally the oldest man in the extended paternal line of the founder. Small-scale religious ceremonies are held throughout the year at different localities in the country and among the Senegalese diaspora in Europe or North America, where emerging singers and commentators showcase their talent to earn the collective recognition of the whole Sufi community to which they claim to belong.

Such young singers often force their way to fame by recording videoclips and participating in semi-secular events, as well as by innovating on the established melody. Some even go beyond the traditional barriers by incorporating musical instruments. This new trend sparks vigorous rejection from the authorized voices of the Sufi communities, inviting the transgressors to return to orthodoxy or be excommunicated from the circle. Exclusion means losing legitimacy in the eyes of the disciples who consume the performances. In November, 2019, the general khalif threatened with excommunication a female shaykha among the

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[21] A panegyric poem written by the Egyptian Abdallah Muhammadu ibn Sa'id al-Sanhaji al-Busiri (1211-1294).

[22] Akassa Samb, a famous contemporary Murid singer, and many others use it among the Murids.

Muridiyya if she continued to allow "lousy" or immoral dances with her followers.[23] She presented her excuses publicly.

Other groups that appropriate the Sufi religious poetic repertoire and symbolism are secular musicians. Some ambivalence, however, can be noticed in how such a phenomenon is handled in Senegal. The use of *qasayid* (plural of *qasida*) in musical lyrics dates back many years. It has sometimes elicited a reaction from authorized voices that would condemn it, but no systematic bans have been announced by any religious circle. Samba Camara (2019) characterized the ambivalent rapport between Sufi authorities and musicians' appropriation of sacred texts, space, and symbolism as a source of friction, but no more. The boundaries between the repertoires and realms appear blurred when musicians are reaffirming their membership to the Sufi communities and at the same time exercising their musical professions. Youssou N'Dour and other hip-hop artists have clearly said that they sing what they identify with (Samba Camara 2019; Hill 2016). The categorical rejection tends to be expressed generally against religious singers who transgress the frontiers of the sacred by adopting secular musical styles, while moderate usage of Sufi poetic texts and symbolism by nonreligious singers is condoned.

In virtual spaces, powered by social media platforms, vocal songs benefit from a second life. Groups and individuals with the same Sufi affiliation constantly swap streams of religious songs, which they may use as cellphone ringtones, or for other purposes. Most religious singers have their own Facebook and YouTube accounts, which generate income through the increasing number of subscribers. Financial benefits are at the root of unwelcome innovation among young performers who compete to widen their fan base. All these new social dynamics are shaping Sufi poetry, dovetailed between sacred and secular styles of performance and communicated by multimodal vehicles of dissemination. The outcome of such interactions, typical of our postmodern and globalized world, will forcibly change the entrenched conservative modes of preserving this rich poetic heritage, created and still being produced after more than two centuries in Senegal.

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[23] Aida Diallo, who was one of the wives of Shaykh Bethio Thioune, the founder of the Thiantacoune. The latter was a disciple of Shaykh Saliou Mbacke, a son of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba. After Shaykh Bethio's death, Aida Diallo claimed to be the new leader of the movement, in competition with Bethio's elder son. This is particularly interesting as it challenges the male-dominant succession in Sufi communities.

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