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From Sufi poetry to contemporary creation in Latin alphabet: interfaces between genres, scripts and aesthetic traditions in Wolof literature

Since the 50's most of the experts in Wolof literature situate modern literature in Wolof written in the Latin alphabet in the wake of Sufi poetry in Wolofal (ajami) : Cheikh Anta Diop in *Nations nègres et culture* make a list of *wolofalkat* (compositor of wolofal poetry); in the anthologies and essays that they produced, Amar Samb, Pathé Diagne, Assane Sylla and Cheik Aliou Ndao always deal with the two corpus. They don't regard it as opposites excluding one another. In the same way that the oral/written dichotomy has been revisited in the tradition of Jack Goody's work by specialists in African literature such as Alain Ricard and Flora Veit-Wild, it is necessary to consider the symbolic opposition between the Latin alphabet and the Arabic alphabet to understand the dynamics of literary creation in Wolof. Sufi tradition and more modern genres are interrelated in many ways. Reading the novels in Wolof one can be struck by the numerous references to the Wolofal repertoire or to Arabic tradition of writing. For example, at the beginning of *Doomi Golo*, BBD's first novel in Wolof, the narrator, old Nguirane Faye, remembers his Koranic schoolmaster :

Maa ngi lay gisaat, nga sëgg ay waxtu di jàng Alxuraan mbaa di bind li ngay bind.
Doo sëqat, doo sax yëkkati sa bopp. Bu weesoo sa loxo ndeyjoor bi nga téyee sa xalima, du dara lu ma gis mu yëngu ci sa yaram.
Dama daan làqu di la seetaan, ngay capp sa xalima ci daa ji di rëdd ndànk ci téere yi nga tegale ci sa wet, sa loxo ndeyjoor di yéeg ak a wàcc. Leeg-leeg nga siggi raay sa doq, ma gis ni sa bët yiy melaxe ak ni ngay noyyee, ndeysaan. Mu wóor ma ni am na booba lu la feeñu.

(I see you again, bent over for hours reading the Koran or writing what you write. You don't cough, you don't even lift your head. Except for your right hand holding the pen, I do not see [any part] of your body moving.
I hid to watch you, you dipped your pen in the ink, traced slowly on the notebooks piled up beside you, your right hand went up and down. Sometimes you would raise your head, put a hand on the back of your neck and I would see how bright your eyes were and how you were breathing, *ndeysaan*. It gave me confidence that at that moment there was something revealing itself to you).

Placed at the beginning of the novel, this passage portrays the narrator as a humble disciple (construction of the figure of the narrator; ethical posture) and places the novel in a literary environment marked by Sufi culture. The novel is written in Latin alphabet but it is the gesture of Arabic calligraphy that constitutes the first image of writing and this writing practice is immediately associated with a mystical dimension (revelation). Nguirane Faye says that he did not go to the school of the Toubabs, only to the Arabic school (daara), which leads Souleymane Bachir Diagne to suggest that Nguirane certainly writes

in ajami¹. Yet it is these notebooks that make up the first part of the novel. According to this fictitious genesis, the novel would therefore be the transcription in Latin alphabet of notebooks written in Arabic alphabet by an old man.

This example shows that the novel - a modern genre, from a Western tradition - claims a link with the Sufi tradition, whereas one might have expected a desire to break away from it. Based on this observation, my post-doctoral project aims to question the relations between genres within Wolof literature by postulating that the relation with Sufi tradition have a structuring character in the definition of modern genres (the novel defines itself by its integration of other genres; modern poetry defines itself by connecting with the oral heritage and Sufi poetry).

⇒ I will first give an overview of the Wolof literary system before addressing the question of the links between the Sufi repertoire.

I. The Wolof literary system: plurigraphy and interdependence of repertoires

The Wolof literary system is made up of 3 major repertoires - I use repertoire rather than corpus because the notion connotes less exhaustiveness, totality, and emphasizes more the idea, central to it, that these texts are intended to be spoken/performed - even in the case of novels, it seems to me that the mode of reading programmed by these texts is rather on the side of performance: the oral repertoire, the Wolofal repertoire (written in ajami) and the modern repertoire written in Latin alphabet: these 3 sub-groups are heterogeneous in terms of medium (oral/written) and graphy (Arabic/Latin alphabet). This diversity is not organized according to a principle of opposition; on the contrary, the Wolof literary system is characterized by a great fluidity: the repertoires interact continuously and I postulate that these circulations have a shaping role in the constitution of the modern repertoire written in Latin alphabet.

a) The repertoire of oral literature

In addition to the great founding stories, tales and proverbs, there are many occasional songs, including, for example, songs for the invocation of rain (*Baaw-naan*) or the *woyu-tool* declaimed during agricultural work in order to get one's heart into the work. Lilyan Kesteloot and Bassirou Dieng have made a typology of these songs. This is the oldest repertoire, but it is not a repertoire that has passed away; these oral genres are still very much alive.

¹ Souleymane Bachir Diagne, « De *Doomi Golo* aux *Petits de la guenon* et retour » dans Nasrin Qader et Souleymane Bachir Diagne (dir.), *Des mondes et des langues, l'écriture de Boubacar Boris Diop*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 2014, p. 59.

Voir Boubacar Boris Diop, *Les petits de la guenon*, Paris, Philippe Rey, 2009, p. 26 : « Je n'ai pas été à l'école des Toubabs et c'est à Mbaye Lô que je dois ma passion de la chose écrite, une foi authentique en Dieu et ma conviction que sans les mensonges des signes et des symboles il n'y aurait sur cette terre aucune vérité, bonne ou mauvaise. ».

b) The Wolofal repertoire

About 90 of the Senegalese population is Muslim. There are 4 major brotherhoods. The most important is the Mouride brotherhood. The Muriddya is an important source of Sufi poetry composed in Wolof and transcribed in ajami, i.e. using the Arabic alphabet. This alphabet is called Wolofal. The term can also refer to poetry written in Wolofal: one would say, "a Wolofal of Moussa Ka" to say a poem in Wolof by Moussa Kâ. Sheikh Moussa Kâ is the most famous Mouride poet, he sang the deeds of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of the Muriddya. Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba wrote his poems in classical Arabic but he asked his disciples to translate his thoughts into the languages of the people. In one of his poems he wrote that for knowledge in Arabic to be useful to the Wolof, it must first be translated into the Wolof language. A large part of the Senegalese population is literate in Arabic thanks to Koranic education, so texts written in Ajami are readable for a large part of the population, much more than novels written in the Latin alphabet for example. We can read it on printed leaflets, but most of the time people listen to audio recordings (cassettes, mp3, radio broadcasting). The Wolofal repertoire is quite extensive (hagiographic, satirical, didactic poetry...). From an aesthetic point of view, Wolofal poets are inspired by Arabic poetry from which they take the system of meters and rhymes, but they also propose innovations by using the musical resources of the Wolof language.

c) Literature written in the Latin alphabet

Literature written in the Latin alphabet was born at the turn of the independence era in the wake of Cheikh Anta Diop's *Nations nègres et culture* (1954), with the desire to apply his program for the development of national languages. The texts produced by the first militant writers were directly in line with the African Renaissance project that Cheikh Anta Diop was calling for. The activists for an African Renaissance produced a lot of texts and especially a lot of translations. Translation was seen as a means of effectively increasing and developing the Wolof literary corpus. This project has been revitalized since the 2000s with the publication of novels in Wolof by Boubacar Boris Diop (the third has just been published) and the appearance of new publishing houses.

Literature in Wolof in the Latin alphabet is part of a revolutionary project that intends to break with the domination of French over political and cultural life. On the other hand, writers do not see writing in the Latin alphabet as a break with the oral repertoire and the corpus in Wolofal. There is a tendency to want to oppose the corpus, but this is neither what the writers do nor what they defend in their writings and discourses. On the contrary, they inscribe their texts in a multilingual and digraphic environment, open to other languages - French, English, Arabic, other African languages). Texts written in the Latin alphabet often incorporate transcriptions of excerpts from the oral repertoire and quotations from major authors in Wolofal.

Circulation is thus part of the system; I think that the Wolof literary system, because of the importance of circulation between languages, alphabets and repertoires, needs to be thought of as a diversified but interdependent whole, in constant interaction with the other repertoires of the system; rather than the model of the literary field or the center/periphery model, one could visualize this system as an ecosystem where the elements are in constant interdependence. This would make it possible to account for the very strong connections between the repertoires and the very great fluidity of textuality in Wolof, which migrates easily from one medium to another. Texts circulate between languages and alphabets, but also between media: orality passes into written texts (transcription of songs within novels, for example) that often tends to re-oralisation, as shown by the example of Boubacar Boris Diop's first novel in Wolof, *Doomi Golo*, which has been read during public readings and broadcasted on local radio stations before becoming an audio-book.

To illustrate this idea of interdependence, we can go back to the beginning of DG that I quoted in introduction => we can see in it a kind of power transfer: the novelist chooses as narrator a figure of authority rooted in Wolof Sufi culture, which is a way of gaining the respect of the Wolof audience. It claims that the novel in Wolof is set in the continuity of traditions. One might even think that the writer is trying to put some of the mystical aura of the revelation into his work. But at the same time the novel take this figure out of its local anchorage => because the novel is a genre that transgress borders => with its adaptation into French and the translations into English and Spanish, the character of Nguirane becomes a kind of ambassador of Wolof culture abroad. The novel needs an heritage to assert its legitimacy but at the same time it assert its own usefulness by presenting itself as a new medium for the transmission of tradition.

2. The links between the Wolofal repertoire and contemporary literature in Latin script

I would like to focus on two genres, the novel and the contemporary poetry in Latin script and I would like to focus on the links that exists between these two genres and the Wolofal repertoire. The relationship between modern literature in the Latin alphabet and the still very active Wolofal tradition has remained a blind spot in research on Wolof literature, certainly because of the symbolic barrier of the alphabet and because of the tendency to study Wolof literature in the Latin alphabet as opposed to Francophone literature². However, these two repertoires share the same linguistic ideology: they argue that all languages are equal and that knowledge must be disseminated in the languages spoken by the people. Serigne Moussa Kâ (1889-1963) defended the value of Wolof as opposed to Arabic, while Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986) wishes to make it the equal of European languages, both scientifically and

² Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab world: The odyssey of 'Ajami and the Murīdiyya*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

culturally. These two projects resonate with each other³. I think it would be interesting to establish a detailed typology of the forms of intertextuality between the novel in Wolof and Wolofal poetry, trying in each case to define the nature and function of the references. This typology would start from the most explicit form of intertextuality, the quotation (e.g. there is a verse of Serigne Moussa Ka quoted in almost every publication in Wolof: « Béppub làkk rafet na/wuy gindi ci nit xel ma/wuy tudd ci jaam ngor ga » => it means: Any language is beautiful which widens the intellectual horizon of the human being and gives back to the slave the taste of freedom) and would go up to the tenuous repetition of motifs or images (e.g. the metaphors related to water are omnipresent). One should also consider cases where characters are depicted listening to Wolofal (the poet Kinné Gadjo in *Bàmmeeelu Kocc Barma*, BBD' second novel in Wolof) or when they produce poems (the coranic students in Cheikh Aliou Ndao's novel *Mbaam aakimoo*). I would like also to consider the notion of intertextuality through the concepts used in Sufi culture (for example to name the specific intertextuality with the Koran) and to look at the words and expressions used by the writers to describe their practice.

Similarly, it would be interesting to examine the images used by writers to represent their work. The poet often represents himself as a disciple of his masters in poetry, the novelist usually compares writing to a craft⁴. What do these representations tell us about the aesthetic continuity between genres?

Finally, I will propose to conduct a poetic study of texts, possibly combined with a genetic study of writers' drafts, in order to examine the dynamics of creation between genres and repertoires.

3. Methodology / Theoretical framework

In addition to learning the ajami alphabet of Wolof (using Pr Ngom's method), the first step will be to list the sources to establish a complete bibliography for the study of literary genres in Wolof. Concerning oral genres, the work of Lilyan Kesteloot and Bassirou Dieng could be completed by integrating more recent work on oral literature. As far as poetry in Wolofal is concerned, the pioneering work carried out in Senegal by Amar Samb and Assane Sylla has been enriched by Fallou Ngom in Boston, who is working for the preservation of Ajami material (see Endangered Archives Program's EAP 334: Digital Preservation of Wolof Ajami manuscripts of Senegal), as well as specialists of Sufi culture such as Rudolph Ware and Rüdiger Seesemann. Regarding literature written in the Latin alphabet, I collected references during my PhD but there are new publications that I should add, such as the third novel in Wolof written by Boubacar Boris Diop, *Malaanum lëndëm* (Dakar, EJO, February 2022).

My approach will cross anthropological approaches (I think about Goody and Furniss on the culture of writing; Barber and Ricard on textuality in African languages) and literary studies (poetics of

³ Cheikh Anta Diop in « Les problèmes de l'art africain » in *Hier quatre provinces (Baol, Cayor, Ndiambour, Djolof), Aujourd'hui une seule région : Diourbel*, le Centre Régional d'Information, 1960 gives an overview of the rules of composition in Wolofal cf. Jeremy Dell, "Unbraiding the Qu'ran: Wolofal and the Tafsīr Tradition of Senegambia", *Islamic Africa*, vol. 9, n°1, 2018, p. 55-76.

⁴ cf. poème Daouda Ndiaye en annexe

African language literature). The analysis of texts will be at the center of my work, drawing inspiration from the studies of the poetics of Swahili texts (i.e. Clarissa Vierke). This textual approach will be enriched by an interest in the material history of texts and the collection of testimonies through interviews with writers, poets and scholars in Senegal. I am also considering the realization, in collaboration with colleagues in Senegal, of a translation of the short treatise on aesthetics written by Cheikh Aliou Ndao, *Taarak ak ladab ci làmmiñu wolof*, which is a mine of information concerning the Wolof conception of literary aesthetics.

Ñaq du feeñ ci taw	La sueur ne se voit pas sous la pluie
<p>Bu xale yiy woy War na ñoo roy Ña daan fent Bañ xel yi gent Damay gëstu Saam xel geestu Gis mag ñu xereñ Sòobu ci njariñ Yëral seeni woy Gis nit ñu way Cosaanu mbind Ci Afrig, ñay bind Ñaare ñu lim Sejoor Lewo boroom sejoor Gi ci làmbi Tugal Mbër mu ñu fi tëggal Am nga sa mbugël Moo tax may xamle Te baña gam-gamle Làmb ji dafa yaatu Jar ne xeex ba faatu Wane sunuy woykat Ci làmmiñi beykat Sàmm ak nappkat Séex Musaa Ka nee Pël yaa nga naa mbiimi Wolof ya naa dama ne Te Yàlla xam na seeni wax Fu ñu mana ne Wax ji dafa yéeme Moo tax ma ñeme Jël kayit di bind Suuxatuma mbind Garab bi jébbi na Doom ya meññ na Dama cay witt di woy Woykat yi ma taxa woy</p>	<p>Quand les enfants chantent ils doivent imiter les grands poètes Pour ne pas laisser l'esprit divaguer Je cherche Je me retourne Et vois de brillants vieux Plongés dans l'utile Réciter leurs chants Je vois des gens chanter La culture de l'écrit en Afrique, parmi les écrivains citons Senghor Léo le maître du <i>sejoor</i> [ceinture de protection] dans l'arène européenne Tout champion dont on a organisé un combat a eu son châtement C'est pourquoi je fais savoir Et je refuse de comparer Car l'arène est vaste Et vaut la peine de se battre jusqu'à la mort Pour montrer à nos chanteurs Dans les langues des agriculteurs Des bergers et des pêcheurs Cheikh Moussa Ka a dit : Les Peuls disent <i>mbiimi</i> (je dis) Les Wolofs disent <i>dama ne</i> (je dis) Et Dieu comprend leurs propos Partout où ils se trouvent Cette parole est inouïe C'est pourquoi j'ose Prendre un papier pour écrire Même si je ne suis pas un expert [Je n'ai pas arrosé/entretenu l'écriture] L'arbre a poussé Ses fruits ont éclos J'en cueille les fruits en célébrant Les chanteurs qui m'ont poussé à chanter</p>
(traduction Moussa Sagna et Alice Chaudemanche)	

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