



SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN AFRICA



Narratives as Muslim Practice in Senegal



M a m a r a m e S e c k

Sufi oral discourse in Senegal is overwhelmingly dominated by stories about past and current shaykhs. An important corpus of oral narratives about Sufi clerics is not only (re)told by Sufi speakers throughout Senegal but also in the Senegalese diasporas in the Americas, Asia, and Europe. These accounts are interwoven by multiple speakers among followers of Senegalese Sufi brotherhoods and passed down from generation to generation in Senegal and its diasporas. The weaving together and spreading of such texts themselves are part of the Sufi praxis. These oral texts, deeply rooted in their context of production, which dictates their form and functions, are still generally unknown to scholars of Islam in Senegal and West Africa. By filling this gap, this book contributes to the discourse of religions in general and Sufi Islam in particular.

Mamaramé Seck is a native of Senegal. He received his Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Florida in Gainesville. He is Assistant Professor in the Department of African and African-American Studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. His recent publications include a chapter in *Communication Wolof et Société Sénégalaise: Héritage et Création*.

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To My Wife and Children

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Wolof Symbols and Diacritics

Consonants

- c close to English sound ch as in *child*
- ŋ close to English sound ng as in *king*
- x close to English sound h as in *hat*

Vowels

- a close to English sound a as in *far* (but shorter)
- e close to English sound e as in *bet*
- é close to English sound ai as in *bait* (but shorter)
- ě close to English sound i as in *bird* (but shorter)
- i close to English sound ea as in *beat* (but shorter)
- o close to English sound ou as in *bought* (but shorter)
- ó close to English sound oa as in *boat* (but shorter)
- u close to English sound oo as in *moon* (but shorter)

INTRODUCTION

How do Sufi orders in Senegal manage to keep vivid the faith and loyalty of their followers? What discourse strategies do Sufi speakers use to convince adepts that they made the right choice joining a particular Sufi movement or showing allegiance to a particular Sufi leader? How has narrative become the main communication channel through which Sufi speakers convey their message? How does narrative serve that function? How do the functions and Sufi cultural and religious contexts of the narratives affect their structure? How is this structure different from other ordinary Wolof narrative structure? These questions struck me when I first thought about writing a book on Wolof Sufi oral narratives and their functions in religious practices in Senegal. Before going into details about the topic, let us explore what can be considered a typical Sufi story in Senegal.

Narrative: “The Lion Chasing the Warthog”

1. Fii jumaa ji ne, gayndee ngi fi woon
2. Waaye mel na ni nak bam ko fàkke
3. Fàkkub yërmande la ko def
4. Ndax fii kër Sëñ Saaliw gi ne
5. Sëñ Saaliw dégg naa ci làmmiñam mu ni
6. Sëñ bi toog na fii di bind
7. ci garab gii mu taalife *Mat la bul fawseeni*
8. lu mel nig dimb la woon
9. mu toog fii
10. ag ngara gaynde di ko daq
11. ba fekk Sëñ bi ci gott bi ba ñów
12. waaye ngara gi daldi yewwu
13. daldi fap tànk yi aj daadi koy taxaw teg ko ci kaw Sëñ bi
14. Ñaari tanki kanam yi
15. Gaynde gi di ko xool
16. Ba yàgg mu ne waññit
17. Mbaam àll laa wax mbaam àll
18. Léegi nag ci ngay daadi xame ni kon
19. Moom bi mu fàkke dëkk bi rekk
20. Ci la ko def muy dëkkub yërmànde
21. Nga xam ne rabi rabi njaay àll yiy fàdde sax
22. Bu ñuy fàdd ba agsi fii taxaw
23. Loolu nga ciy daldi dégge

Translation

1. *Here where the mosque is, there was a lion*
2. *But it seems like when he (Amadu Bamba) cleared up the place*
3. *he did so for kindness/compassion*
4. *Because here, where the home of Sēñ Saaliw is,*
5. *I heard Sēñ Saaliw say that*
6. *the shaykh sat here to write*
7. *Under this tree, where he wrote his poem mat la bul fawseeni (Arabic)*
8. *It was something like a pear tree*
9. *He sat here*
10. *A lion was pursuing a warthog*
11. *Until he found the shaykh, in the bush, he arrived*
12. *But the warthog was smart*
13. *He then raised his feet, stepped on the shaykh*
14. *His forward feet*
15. *The lion looked at him*
16. *And after a moment, returned back*
(Laughs...)
17. *I am talking about a warthog, a warthog*
18. *Now, as you know,*
19. *As soon as he created the city,*
20. *He made it a city of compassion*
21. *So that, you know, even predators*
22. *When they come here, they stop*
23. *That is what you learn from this story*

The story above is an example of a typical Wolof Sufi oral narrative. The author, Moustapha Mbacke Ibn Abdoul Khadre, is a son of Abdoul Khadre Mbacke (1914-1990) and grandson of Amadu Bamba Mbacke (1853-1927)¹. The latter is the founder of the Muridiyya order, one of the four main Sufi orders of Senegal. The other three Sufi orders are the Tijaniyya, the Qadiriyya, and Layene. The speaker told this story about his grandfather to a group of Murid followers who came to pay him a spiritual visit or *ziyaar* in Wolof, in Touba, the headquarters of the Muridiyya. The visit happened during the Great Māggal of Touba, which commemorates the anniversary of the departure day of Amadu Bamba into a period of forced exile to Gabon for seven years (1895–1902), subsequent to his resistance against the French colonial regime. Indeed, the French administration accused Bamba of waging

¹ Founder of the Muridiyya, one of the four main Sufi orders of Senegal

war against their presence in the region and administration. Such opposition caused him many problems during his lifetime and led to the foundation of the city of Touba in the middle of bushy area, in the Diourbel region, where the shaykh stayed in retreat. Wild animals inhabited this area at the time of Amadu Bamba's settlement.

Telling stories about Amadu Bamba at this particular moment and this particular setting is the cultural norm within the Muridiyya order. Murid followers who came to celebrate Amadu Bamba expect to hear stories about him, to which they seem to enjoy listening and re-listening over many years. Similarly, adepts of other Sufi orders enjoy telling and listening to stories about their leaders during Sufi celebrations. Sufi poetry and songs in honor of those leaders often accompany the storytelling.

Scholars of Islam in Senegal have overlooked the rich oral productions flowing out of these Sufi gatherings and their contribution to the propagation of knowledge about practices of Islam in Senegal. While I acknowledge the substantial work on Islam in Senegal, based on written resources, this extensive oral corpus needs to be explored. This book focuses on the unstudied body of Sufi oral texts, particularly Wolof Sufi narratives, and what they reveal about Islam in Senegal. The context of production of these narratives, their content, cultural and religious functions, and role in society are investigated throughout this book.

Sufi oral discourse in Senegal is overwhelmingly dominated by stories about past and current leaders. Indeed, an important corpus of oral narratives about Sufi clerics is not only (re)told by Sufi speakers throughout this African country, but also in the Senegalese Diaspora in the United States and Europe. These accounts are interwoven by multiple speakers among followers of Sufi brotherhoods, which are passed down from generation to generation, city to city, in Senegal and the Diaspora. The weaving together and spreading of such texts themselves are part of the Sufi praxis. This rich corpus of Sufi oral texts is still generally unknown to the scholars about Islam in Senegal and West Africa in general, and this book addresses this gap.

I argue that Sufi oral narratives, in particular their centeredness on the shaykh, or supreme leader of a given Sufi movement, his exemplary personality, and the miraculous deeds he is said to have accomplished during his lifetime, are the medium through which Sufi orders communicate their messages and earn the loyalty of their adherents. As a result of the power and effectiveness of such oral texts, old and young generations of Sufi followers adore their Sufi leaders. Sometimes they may never have met such a leader;

however, they have heard many amazing anecdotal and biographical accounts, always embellished by the storytellers.

Sufi followers, unlike Christians and Jewish followers, see their leaders existing not only in the past, but also in current times. This is the reason many Sufi adepts visit the living shaykhs but also the tombs of past shaykhs to seek *Baraka*, or blessings. When visiting the tombs, they express their needs to the deceased shaykhs as they were face to face with them.

The pervasiveness of such practices among Senegalese Sufis certainly has to do with the way Islam was introduced in the country and the role Sufi orders played and continue to play in its spread and establishment in Senegal since the nineteenth century. Islam came to Senegal in the eleventh century. However, it was only in the nineteenth century that it really began to spread, thanks to Sufi leaders such as El-Hàjj Umar Tall (1797-1864), El-Hàjj Malick Sy (1855-1922), Amadu Bamba (1853-1927), Limamou Laye (1843-1909), and others. El-Hàjj Umar Tall and El-Hàjj Malick Sy both contributed to the spread of the Tijaniyya order in Senegal and West Africa in general, while Amadu Bamba and Limamou Laye respectively created the Muridiyya and the Layene orders.²

Senegalese Islam is therefore mainly Sufi in origin, characterized by a strong attachment of Senegalese Muslims to Sufi orders and their leaders or shaykhs, and the personal search for mystical knowledge. French scholar Christian Coulon portrays this relationship by stating that: “In Senegal, one is often a disciple of a marabout before being a citizen of a State” (Coulon 1981). By saying this Coulon refers to the authority that the shaykh has on his adepts, which the secular or executive authority may not even have. The term marabout – *sëriñ*, in Wolof – comes from the Arabic name given to the Almoravid, al-murabitun or “a soldier-monk” (Dilley 2004). The Almoravids are members of a dynastic movement that began in Western Sahara and expanded throughout modern Mauritania, North Africa and Southern Spain. This movement imposed a fundamentalist version of Islam, in an attempt to purify beliefs and practices from syncretistic or heretical beliefs. The French term “marabout” is today used in the French language to refer to a Sufi shaykh, Qur’anic teacher, and anyone else who provides talismans or protection from harms from bad spirits or witchcrafts, through mystical knowledge from the Qur’an and Sufi education or *Tarbiya*.

² The title ‘El-Hàjj’ is given to whoever accomplished the pilgrimage to Mecca, as did both Umar Tall and Malick Sy.

Sufi shaykhs are considered not only educators and preceptors of Islam and the Qur'an, but also intermediaries between the ordinary disciples and the founder or propagator of a particular order. Some Sufi followers consider that founder or propagator an intermediary between them and God or *Yàlla* in Wolof. Moreover, they swear to him – and not to God – and claim to count on his blessing, *barke* in Wolof, for admission to paradise. This mentality, although considered heretical by some orthodox Senegalese Muslims, is still current among Sufi followers in modern Senegal.

Sufi stories celebrate the shaykhs and their mystical and extraordinary actions, which are highlighted. The story is sometimes told by another shaykh; yet most of the time a designated speaker addresses the audience. In fact, it is not well viewed by Senegalese society that a spiritual or traditional leader speaks directly and aloud to a crowd. A surrogate speaker is in charge of conveying his message. This person can be a member of his family – usually his son, younger brother, or cousin – or a professional speaker known to the audience for his eloquence, a griot. The latter is an important figure in West African society, known for his speaking skills and whose functions include those of historian, storyteller, entertainer, surrogate, and others. I elaborate more extensively about the griot in Chapter Two.

Sufi storytelling is also a common practice throughout the Diaspora, among Senegalese Sufi immigrants living in Europe and the United States, where they organize themselves into dynamic local religious associations, or *daayiras* in Wolof, to celebrate Senegalese Sufi events and reconnect with their home country. They often invite their affiliated shaykh and, sometimes, a professional speaker from Senegal to recreate the ambiance of celebrations held in the homeland. The *daayiras* also contribute financially to building infrastructures and hosting events in Sufi holy cities in Senegal.

FUNCTIONS OF WOLOF SUFI ORAL NARRATIVES

In general, Wolof Sufi oral narratives fulfill a cultural and religious functions as well as a communicative function, which are interrelated. These functions mainly consist of extolling the great actions of past and current Sufi dignitaries. This practice is rooted in the Wolof culture where whoever has accomplished great deeds is sung about and praised for these deeds. Of interest in this regard is a popular Wolof saying that claims: *Ku def lu réy, dégg lu réy* “whoever did something big, will hear something big.” The famous Senegalese griot, El Hâjj Mansur Mbay, often retraces sequences of the lives of the past political notabilities such as former President Leopold Sedar Senghor, the first president of Senegal as well as Lamine Gueye; and Blaise Diagne, respectively, the first black lawyer and the first black African

elected to the French National Assembly in French West Africa (*Afrique Occidentale Française* in French). Mbay's shows on local television and radio are very popular and many Senegalese enjoy watching and listening to them.

However, stories about religious figures are more complex and are exclusively centered on the shaykh, the mystical dimension of his personality, and the miraculous deeds he accomplished during his lifetime. Each section of the story either prepares or evaluates the actions or statements of a particular Sufi guide. The storyteller needs spiritual training about Sufism in addition to being a talented speaker. His goal is to present the shaykh as an exemplum, someone with a mystical power or *baatin* in Wolof Sufi language, which differentiates him from "ordinary" people. Therefore, Sufi followers expect their master to be able to accomplish miracles or make noteworthy statements or predictions about the future. The philosophical teachings of a shaykh as well as his predictions are as important as his miraculous actions.

In this regard, Sufi oral narratives recall African epic stories, which extol the extraordinary power of epic heroes. Indeed, a striking resemblance exists between the Sufi figures and epic heroes in West African history such as Sundiata, the hero of an *Epic of Old Mali* (1960), by Guinean novelist Djibril Tamsir Niane. However, while epic heroes were warriors, Sufi figures were pacifists, except for a few such as El-Hàjj Umar Tall, who fought against the French colonial system and called for a *jihad* against Non-Muslims. Other figures such as Amadu Bamba and El-Hajj Malick Sy fought peacefully against the colonial regime in their own ways (see Babou, 2006), even though they pursued the same mission as the "*jihadists*," that is, to reject the politics of assimilation of the West African indigenous people into French society and culture as promoted by the French colonial administration. African epic heroes and Sufi shaykhs are both sung about and praised by griots: the epic hero for his military force and the shaykh for his mystical power. The genealogy of both figures is also recited by their griots.

Sufi stories vary from simple anecdotes to biographies both highlighting the mystical dimension and philosophical stance of Sufi clerics. It is very common to hear the same story over and over again, although it seems that



Serigne Ababacar Sy
(1885-1957), son and first
qalif of El-Hàjj Malick Sy

the public never gets tired of it. Finally, Sufi stories have become landmarks and part of the identity formation within the Sufi orders. The murid disciple is the one whose marabout “prayed on the water” and the Layene, the one whose marabout “commanded the ocean to back off so that he can settle with his community.” Indeed, in one of the stories about Amadu Bamba, the founder of the Muridiyya order, he is said to have prayed in the water after he was told not to pray on the boat. That took him to Central Africa into a forced exile for seven years (1895-1902). Similarly, the founder of the Layene order, Limamou Laye, is said to have commanded the ocean to part so that he could settle with his people after they were forced to leave their own territory, the Yoff village in Dakar.

The cultural and religious contexts of Wolof Sufi oral narratives, and their functions in society have resulted in unique textual structures, different from those of ordinary Wolof narratives. Indeed, Wolof Sufi oral narratives appear in religious discourse to serve the purpose of helping a speaker deliver a convincing message. The message usually concerns a mystical or spiritual dimension of a given shaykh or an important Sufi concept or teaching (e.g. humility.) This explains why Wolof Sufi oral narratives do not always start where one expects them to start or end where one expects them to end. They appear to illustrate a theme and point made by a speaker in the course of his speech, usually about a given Sufi shaykh or a Sufi concept. When they are complete stories, they start with a pre-story (statement of the theme of the story), followed by an abstract (point of the story), orientation (setting and characters of the story), and complicating action (actions of the protagonists), and end with an evaluation (assessment of those actions). The Wolof commoner stories can be accounted for using Labov and Waletzky 1967’s six-stage narrative framework. They are composed of an abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution and coda. The pre-story found in Wolof Sufi oral narratives is a stage that is present neither in Labov and Waletzky’s framework nor in Wolof canonical stories. It originated from the Wolof Sufi cultural norms of telling a story, which always require a general theme or topic for the story. This shift in narrative structure can be seen as the evidence that narrative is culturally and contextually defined.

In addition to the general function of Sufi oral narratives, each section of these narratives fulfills a specific communicative function. The pre-story is the first stage before the actual storytelling. In this step, Sufi narrators announce the theme or subject matter of the story. At this point in the narrative, the storyteller develops a context that legitimates the telling of such a story. In oral culture, nothing is taken for granted; the more the narrator presents, the better the audience understands the story. Everything is