Wolof language and literature: an introduction

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ABSTRACT

Wolof language is knowing a period of rapid increment of its status and prestige, which is making it, from being one of the several local languages of Senegal, the second vehicular language of the country alongside with French. To this increasing status, also a rapid evolution of Wolof literature is accompanied: this particular development has started before the independency of Senegal, with the activity of Muridiyya brotherhood at the beginning of the 20th. This paper aims at being an introduction to the Wolof language from these two aspects: the socio-linguistic one, where the extents and limitations of the employment of Wolof in Senegal will be outlined, and the literary one, when the rapid developments in Wolof literature – and particularly poetry – from the beginning of the last century will be presented.

KEYWORDS

Wolof; language; poetry; prosody; wolofal.

Wolof is a West-African language spoken by more than five million people, the large majority of whom live in Senegal. It is increasingly spreading in Gambia and Mauritania, where the number of speakers is currently about 18,000[1]. A member of the Atlantic subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family, the largest in Africa, Wolof is closely related to Pulaar and Sereer; besides these two languages, it has long lived together with other linguistic realities historically present in the Malian and Senegambian areas.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of Wolof, currently the most widely spoken African language in Senegal (but not the only one: other languages, such as Sereer, Pulaar, Mandingo, Joola and Sóninke are found as well), can be read on the one hand in terms of its coexistence with the other languages of the region, and on the other in its relationship with Islam. The first attestations of this language date back to the empire of Jolof, born in the 14th century. Among the five kingdoms that composed the empire, four (Jolof, Waalo, Baol and Cayor) were inhabited by Wolof speakers: this division is partially reproduced in the Wolof dialects (Baol, Cayor, Jolof, but also Léebu and Jandeer). In the Jolof empire, Islam was practised, but exclusively by the *buur* (emperor) and the aristocratic class; the great majority of the population was animist (Da Costa e Silva, 1996: 612).

Islam was already long established in other parts of West Africa, despite being limited to the nobility in the states that had developed in this area (Gentili, 2012: 76). A change of perspective took place only between the 18th and the 19th century, when new movements of religious renewal gained strength in all the region, very often thanks to the action of Sufi brotherhoods such as the Qādiriyya and Tiğāniyya, which, though originating from outside West Africa, flourished rapidly in this zone. In the middle of the 19th century, many different languages were spoken in the territory of present-day Senegal. The Sufi brotherhoods and the movements they led brought new religious, social and political ideas, promoting not only their religious language – Arabic – but also the languages spoken by their members.

The rise of Wolof is due in particular to the influence of a third brotherhood, the Murīdiyya, born at the end of the 19th century thanks to the work of Ahmadu Bàmba, the member of a great family of marabouts. Bàmba is still remembered today in Senegal as one of the greatest historical personalities of the country: he was a very popular religious leader, and succeeded in ex-

[1] Ethnologue: https://www.ethnologue.com/language/wol (last visited on 20/06/2021)

panding his brotherhood to include the majority of the Senegalese people. A peculiarity of the Murīdiyya was their use of Wolof, instead of Arabic, in communication: although Bàmba himself wrote all his literary works in Arabic, he encouraged his first disciples to present the precepts of their brotherhood in Wolof poems (Ngom, 2015: 342). The prestige of the Wolof language thus increased progressively, together with the popularity of the Murīdiyya. Nowadays Wolof is often used instead of French as a vehicular language between non-Wolof people, and, though not recognised as an official language, it has definitely gained pre-eminence over the other African languages of Senegal, especially in cities such as Dakar, where it is the *lingua franca* for Senegalese immigrants from all the country (Robert, 2011: 2).

WOLOF SOCIO-LINGUISTIC STATUS

The case of the Wolof language in Senegal is a paradigmatic example of how the status of the superimposed European language undergoes fundamental changes with the end of the colonial period. Under the French rule, the French language was imposed by coercion, functional in the assimilationist perspective of the colonisers, and its diffusion was deliberately in contrast to the local languages, whose existence was considered as an obstacle to remove. In nowadays Senegal, on the contrary, the status of French is rather tied to its instrumental and professional functions, which derive mostly from its recognition as the only official language of the country; its acquisition is no longer imposed, but is an option that Senegalese young people can choose depending on their life aspiration (Schiavone, 2007: 6-7). As aforementioned, this redimensioning of the status of French has been accompanied, since the independence of Senegal, by the rise of the prestige of Wolof. The relation between Wolof, French and the other languages of Senegal is hardly describable with the classic diglossia model. A first reason of this is the lack of genetic closeness between French and Wolof. Ferguson's model of diglossia concerns two linguistic varieties that the speakers of a certain community could think of as a unique idiom (Calvet, 1994: 93), which can be the case of Classic and Vernacular Arabic, but certainly not of French and Wolof. Moreover, the perceived "superiority" of French, which should be the H language in this hypothetical diglossic model, is not a fact in Senegal: in fact, French is still established as "*la langue d'intégration aux structures de l'État*", Wolof is undoubtedly the first language for "*l'intégration en ville*" (Calvet, 1994: 101). From this state of affairs it derives that the employment of either Wolof or French as vehicular languages for the many non-Wolof Senegalese citizens is not a question of "fight for existence" between the two idioms, but of pacific co-existence of both of them in the linguistic mosaic of Senegal. To explain this coexistence Calvet (1994: 101) presents the example of a man

from Ziguinchor, the main town of Casamance (a region of Senegal where the dominant languages are Diola and Manding), which moves to Dakar to work in public administration: in all likelihood, this man will employ Diola at home, French at his office and Wolof in its errands in the city.

The vehicular role taken by Wolof in modern Senegal, alongside the equivalent function of French, seems also to be recognised by the young people of the country. A survey carried out in 1996 in Saint-Louis, a city where the Wolof people are the majority – 74,7% of the total population in 1988 – remarked that the informants recognised two varieties of both French and Wolof: *français correct* and *français débrouillé* (in the sense of "simplified French") on the one side, and *wolof* and *vrai wolof* on the other (Auzanneau, 2006: 4). 'Correct French' is the standard variety as regulated from the *Académie Française*, which can be learnt only by formal teaching and is exclusively employed in formal and official situations, whereas 'simplified French' is a variety of the same language, influenced by Wolof, which is employed by non educated people with the only aim of achieving a successful communication (Auzanneau, 2006: 5). In the same manner, 'true Wolof' is thought of as the "pure" variety, not influenced by the European languages, which is, in the opinion of the informants of Auzeanneau's survey, still spoken in the Wolof countryside; despite its prestige, however, the variety employed in the urban space does not reject French and English loanwords (Auzanneau, 2006: 7-8). Urban Wolof is therefore employed not to express a cultural belonging, but to allow communication with other people in the same space, and shares therefore with *français débrouillé* a vehicular function. It is remarkable that, while Auzeanneau's informants felt the need to distinguish two varieties for both French and Wolof, they didn't do the same for the other languages spoken in the zone (primarily Pulaar), which were grouped together in the broad category of *langues locales* (Auzanneau, 2006: 4).

WOLOF LITERATURE: A GENERAL LANDSCAPE

Wolof literature reflects the huge variety of historical contexts related to this language. It originated as oral literature: even today, there are songs that are traditionally performed on specific occasions. The relation between music and ritual is seen in non-Islamic ceremonies (for example, invocations for rain and rites of passage), as well as in Islamic contexts (Islamic new year, recitation of *ḏikr* in the Sufi communities). In addition, certain chants are heard on non-traditional occasions, such as songs in praise of the *làmb* fighters (*làmb* is a traditional martial art in the Wolof world, practised today as a sport), and also children's songs (Penna-Diaw, 2016: 37).

The traditional literature includes prose genres, above all tales, which nowadays are often published in collections (an example is Diouf, 2009a). Theatrical art also has its place in Wolof literature, for example in the tradition of *simb*, "the play of the false lions", where one or more actors dance while acting as lions, and using particular dresses and make-up[2].

Other genres recently introduced in Wolof literature (but not in Senegalese literature as a whole, since the literary production in French in this country has been really vast) are the novel, Western theatrical genres, and free-verse poetry.

The history of Wolof poetry, which constitutes the main topic of this paper, is interesting and worth being investigated, especially in respect of its relation with cultural change. Wolof poetry has known two main stages: in the earlier one production was exclusively oral, and in the later one written poetry appeared, heavily influenced by Arabic models. It would be exaggerated, however, to see in this second phase a complete rupture with the preceding one, as I aim to show in this brief historical sketch.

WOLOF POETRY AND CULTURAL CHANGES

Within the landscape of Wolof literature, poetry offers a privileged perspective to understand how the Wolof perceive their own cultural identity along the different influences they have been exposed to in their history. In fact, despite the high prestige attributed to Arabic, and later French, literary models, Wolof poetry is characterised by an uninterrupted continuity, from its archaic stages to modern productions.

In its earliest form, Wolof poetry consisted mainly of what is still today called *woy* ('chant', 'song'). The term contains a strong reference to music: *woy* is an artistic form which embraces the two Western categories of music and poetry in a single dimension. The Wolof language, in fact, has no specific terms corresponding exactly to our "poetry" and "music": these two concepts could be differentiated only by the use of Arabic loanwords (Penna-Diaw 2016: 37). The musical dimension is perceivable, expectedly, in the performance of the *woy*, which, on the other hand, presents a textual artistry based on very rich and articulated, yet unmetrical, versification.

The *woy* which survived in the Wolof tradition were mainly related to a particular context of execution. This is also the main criterion for categorising

[2] Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNJJTXjb4gI (last visited on 20/06/2021)

this poetic form in genres and subgenres. For example, Cisse (2006: 110-113) identifies the following genres:

– *woyi taajabóon*, religious songs executed during the *tamxarit* (the Wolof name for the first Islamic month of the year, *muḥarram*);
– *woyi gàmmu*, religious songs executed during the *gàmmu* (the Wolof name for the third Islamic month of the year, *al-rabīʿ al-awwal*; *gàmmu* is also the name of the festivity of *mawlid*, celebrated in the same month);
– *woyi ndëpp*, exorcism songs;
– *woyi jat*, apotropaic songs, employed to avert bad luck in various circumstances;
– *woyi njong*, circumcision songs. These are divided into:
– *ngomaar*, songs performed before the circumcision of young men in order to encourage them;
– *kasag*, songs performed during the circumcision rituals;
– *woyi njam*, tattooing songs, performed in a tattooing ritual which signals the entrance of a young woman into her adult life;
– *woyi céet*, marriage songs, divided into:
– *tàgg*, praise-poetry centred on the genealogy of the praised person, performed during marriages and other familial festivities;
– *yab*, songs for the bride when she leaves her parents' home to join her husband;
– *laabaan*, songs praising the bride's virginity, lost after her first night of marriage;
– *xaxar*, songs performed during the ceremony in the groom's home to welcome the new bride;
– *woyi làmb*, performed during *làmb* fights – the traditional Wolof martial art. These can be divided into:
– *bàkk*: praise poem for a fighter by his *géwel* (griot);
– *bàkku*: self-praise poem that a fighter performs for himself;
– *woyi pecc*, performed during communal meetings. These can be divided into:
– *taasu*, songs performed individually by women;
– *band*, songs performed individually by men;
– *gumbe* and *ndawrabbin*, songs for big festivities and events;
– *woyi baawnaan*, rain songs;
– *woy mbey*, agricultural songs, used to create rhythm and coordinate collective work in the fields. These can be divided into:
– *kañ*, songs for exhorting people to work;

– *kañu*, songs for praising one's own good agricultural skills, compared to the other workers;
– *taaxuraan*, songs for celebrating the harvest;
– *woyi boroom gaal*, songs performed by pirogue drivers to compete with each other or to praise the water beneath them;
– *woyi yalwaan*, songs performed by the *ṭālib*s (the children living in the Islamic schools, *daara*) to ask for economic aid;
– *woyi nax/beetal*, lullabies;
– *woyi mbëggeel*, love songs;
– *woyi jaloore*, epic songs;
– *woyi seede*, songs of moral exhortation.

It is clear from Cisse's list of genres that there is no stylistic criterion in this categorisation. No genre is distinguished for having a particular length, or special poetic structure, or particular features. In fact, despite this categorisation, all the genres of *woy* seem to share the same style. The texts can be properly described as poems, since they are composed in verses; such verses are not defined by a constant metre, but by one or more stylistic devices, which the composer can select and combine *ad hoc*. As a first example, we can quote a *woyu làmb*, where the performer, a fighter, asks his griot to praise him (Cisse, 2006: 49):

1. Lees bàkk ma!
2. Lees ngala bàkk ma!
3. Yaa ma daan bàkk
4. Géwél yu ndaw yi fi nekk
5. Ak géwél yu mag yi fi nekk
6. Yaa di seen njiit
7. Boo jiitoo ñu topp ciy mbalañ-faŋŋ
8. Mbalañ-faŋŋ, mbalañ-faŋŋ
9. Lees ngala bàkk ma!
10. Yaa ma wara bàkk
11. Lees, praise me!
12. Lees, please praise me!
13. You were the one who praised me
14. The lesser griots are here
15. And the greater griots are here
16. You are their leader
17. If you lead them, they will follow you dancing
18. Dancing, dancing
19. Lees, please praise me!
20. You are the one who must praise me

The reader will notice that the verses of this composition (which are marked by lineation in the transcription and by pauses during the oral performance) are not subjected to a constant metrical pattern; nevertheless, many linguistic devices are employed to mark linguistically the verse boundaries, so that this versification cannot be defined as a free-verse form. Verses 1 to 3 present a polyptoton of the verb *bàkk* ("praise"): that is, the same verb occurs once in each line, but in different flexion forms. Another word which is repeated once in each of these verses is *ma* ("me", 1st singular person object pronoun). Verses

1 and 2 are bound together by the anaphora of *lees* and the homeoteleuton in *bàkk ma* ("praise me"). Verses 4 and 5 are bound by a syntactic parallelism which becomes an actual repetition: verse 5 is identical to verse 4, with the only two exceptions of the occurrence of the introductory conjunction *ak* ("and") and the substitution of *mag* ("great") with *ndaw* ("little"). The ending of these two verses *nekk* ([ne:k:ə]) binds them in a consonantal rhyme with the word *bàkk* ([ba:k:ə]) which structures the preceding lines. Verses 6 to 8 are bound together by two repetitions. The first repetition, involving verses 6 and 7, concerns the root *jiit* which appears first in the noun *njiit* ('leader', verse 6) and then in the verb *njiitu* ('lead'; occurring as *njiitoo* in verse 7). The second repetition concerns the verb *mbalañ-faŋŋ* ('turning around dancing'), which occupies the end of verse 7 and all of verse 8. This group of three verses is connected to verses 4-5 by the reference to the figures of the griots (*gewel*), which is the main theme of verses 4 to 8. At the end of the poem, a couplet of verses goes back to the first linguistic device employed for versification in this composition (the polyptoton of *bàkk*) and uses it to close the text.

In this example it is evident that the versification, despite not being metrical, is not free. Free verse does not coincide with merely unmetrical verse: it is a form of versification where the verse boundaries are disposed in a way that cannot be expected in view of the linguistic organisation of the text (Gasparov, 1996: 285; Hartman, 1980: 61-80). This is not the case with the Wolof *woy*: here, the verse boundaries are always introduced by one or more linguistic devices, even if not in a regular and constant way, as it happens in metrical verse. To this particular way of versification, which is neither metrical nor free, I give the name of *distinct verse*. The adjective 'distinct' here refers to the fact that in this form of versification the verse-boundary is always marked by one or more linguistic devices: the verses, therefore, are somehow always distinct from each other. Distinct verse is not an exclusive feature of Wolof poetry; on the contrary, it is a versification form that can be observed in many different literary traditions, both inside and outside Africa. In the context of West Africa, distinct verse is part of the stylistic tradition developed across the centuries by the griots.

Common to several cultures of West Africa, the Wolof *gewel*, the Pulaar *gawlo*, the Mandinka, Fali and Bambara *jali* and other similar figures are represented by the French word *griot*, meaning the bards and performers of those societies which were part of the ancient Empire of Mali (Leymarie 1999: 5). As in other societies, the *gewels* occupy a special social class among the Wolof, and interact with the other members of the population in clearly defined ways. The *gewels* were a group of the *ñeeño*, that is, that set of classes of artisans compelled to practise endogamy. They were not, however, a pres-

tigious group among the *ñeeño*, since they were put at the lowest level of the artisanal classes, together with the *ràbbs* (weavers). The *gewels* themselves were divided into several subgroups with different functions (Leymarie 1999: 26-28):

> Les griots étaient divisés en bardes bouffons (bawleck [bawlekk]), qui chantaient et récitaient les généalogies; généalogistes et marchands (jëfleck [jëflekk]), parmi lesquels les gawlo et les géwél; en musiciens, plus prestigeux, distingués selon leur style musical; et en sableck [sablekk], aux fonctions mal définies.

Despite their inferior status, the *gewels* played an important role in traditional Wolof society: not only did they help to preserve the Wolof cultural patrimony, in particular genealogies, but they were also messengers and counsellors of the sovereign. Moreover, the griots had a monopoly on the practice of music, which was discouraged also for the nobles (*géer*; see Leymarie 1999: 32).

It is worth quoting a further excerpt from Leymarie's (1999: 122-123) work:

> L'acquisition du répertoire est longue et débute à un très jeune âge. Une vieille griote lébou se touchait la poitrine pour indiquer qu'elle avait commencé à absorber la "tradition" au sein de sa mère. Avant d'entreprendre un véritable apprentissage, l'enfant géwél bénéficie d'une immersion constante dans la musique, les chants et les récits oraux. Il assimile par mimétisme, en observant les membres de la famille. Les connaissances sont fréquemment transmises par des personnes du même sexe que lui : le père enseigne à ses fils, la mère à ses filles. […] Traditionnellement, il était impensable, pour un enfant gewel, de ne pas se consacrer à l'étude des chroniques historiques, des chants de louanges, d'un instrument de musique ou de généalogies.

From the situation described by Leymarie it appears plausible that Wolof *woy* and its parallel poetic forms in the rest of West Africa developed as stylistic traditions that were passed down within the *griot* classes of each population. The chain of inheritance was between father and son, or mother and daughter; if one considers that, in most cases, the *gewel* families were specialised in just one activity (such as the performance of genealogies or the mastering of a particular drum), one could consider that each of the skills that composed the Wolof verbal art of *woy* was connected to its past by a vigorous continuity.
This continuity also connects the *woy* with the protagonist of the second period of Wolof literature, namely the Murīd *wolofal*. The major innovation in this genre is represented stylistically by the introduction of metres, in particular the Classical Arabic metres. As mentioned above, the protagonists of this literary change were the poets of the rising Murīdiyya brotherhood.

The Murīd poets, under the encouragement of Ahmadou Bamba Mbakke, the founder of this new brotherhood, gave birth to this new poetic genre, whose

name has the literal meaning of "to make Wolof". Scholars have proposed two definitions of *wolofal*, focusing on different aspects. One is that shared by Fallou Ngom (2015: 335), according to whom *wolofal* is a manuscript tradition, not limited to literary works, of Wolof texts written in *ʿajamī* (that is, an *ad hoc* adaptation of the Arabic script). Other views, more centred on the stylistic aspects of Murīd production, such as that of Lô (1993: 2), define *wolofal* as a genre of Wolof poetry which employs Arabic metres for poems composed in Wolof. The latter definition seems to be more fitting for modern times. More than fifty years after the death of Muusaa Ka in 1967, the youngest member of the first generation of Murīd poets, *wolofal* poems are more and more frequently being published using Latin script, or more precisely the Wolof standard orthography. The genre has lost its religious specificity, since the poems of the 20th century also focus on secular topics (for example, Jóob's *Njool-Céytu* is an elegy for the famous Senegalese anthropologist Cheykh Anta Diop). The only feature that has been retained, despite many important developments, is the employment of Arabic metric forms.

Despite the recent secularisation of the *wolofal* genre, however, it is undoubted that this formation is due to the Murīds' intellectual activity. Ngom (2016: 3) argues that the use of *wolofal* as a mass-communication strategy has been key to the success of Murīdiyya. As mentioned above, Bamba himself encouraged his disciples, *in primis* Moor Kayre (Mor Kairé, 1869-1951), Samba Jaara Mbaay (Samba Diarra Mbaye, 1870-1917), Mbaay Jaxate (Mbaye Diakhaté, 1875-1954), and Muusaa Ka (Moussa Ka, 1889-1967), to compose and diffuse *wolofal* poems (Ngom, 2015: 342). It must be noted that the Wolof were not the first in Western Sudan to engage in the reception of Arabic prosody and script. Old Tashelhit or Medieval Berber, Songhay and Kanuri are believed to be the first West African languages to have been written in *ʿajamī* between the 10th and the 16th centuries, followed by Fulfulde, Hausa, Wolof, and Yoruba (Ngom, 2016: 8). From the 18th century in Futa Jallon, Pular literature developed forms of religious poetry in which Arabic metres were employed (see Barry, 2004; Seydou, 2001; Sow, 1965). Fuuta Tooro, by contrast, seems to have had a lower production of manuscripts, at least until the Islamic revolution of al-Ḥajji Umar (Humery, 2014: 173-174); this could explain the "delay" between Wolof culture, which was in strict contact with it, and other cultures in developing the *ʿajamī* scripts. However, given the extent of the familial and intellectual networks among marabouts in Western Africa, it is unlikely that the Wolof *sëriñ* and the Pulaar *cerno* did not have any knowledge of these traditions.

As mentioned above, the first main Murīd *wolofal* poets were four in number: Mor Kairé, Samba Diarra Mbaye, Mbaye Diakhaté and Moussa Ka. Of these, the first three were Tiǧānī scholars who had joined Murīdiyya, and started composing *wolofal*, during Bamba's exile in Mauritania. Moor Kayre, from Xombol in Kajoor, focused on hagiographies and topographic Islamic

knowledge (how to locate the right place and the topographic requirements for building a mosque). His relative, Samba Jaara Mbay, hailed from the Islamic centre of Kokki. He later relocated to the city of Saint-Louis where he spent the rest of his life. He was an Arabic-trained scholar who also engaged in commercial activities in Saint-Louis, and was versed in Islamic sciences, especially metaphysics, when he encountered Bamba in the early 1900s. Thus, his poems regularly dealt with metaphysics, including the transhistorical voyage of the souls of the Murīds that began from the Qurʾānic narrative of the primordial Day of the Covenant (the Day of Alastu). Mbay Jaxate was from Kër Makala, which was founded by his distinguished Tiǧānī father, Qāḍī Majaxate Kala (Bamba's teacher of metrics). Mbay Jaxate lived for the remainder of his life in the village of Xuru Mbakke in the vicinity of Diourbel. He lived there farming, teaching, and composing *ʿajamī* poems. Jaxate focused on internal social criticism, satire, and the code of ethics of Murīd discipleship (Ngom, 2016: 22).

Muusaa Ka, the youngest of the four Murīd *ʿajamī* pioneers, is from the village of Ndilliki-Kanka in Bawol, which corresponds roughly to the present-day region of Diourbel. His father, Usman Ka, who was a Qādirī Qurʾānic teacher, taught him the Qurʾān, Islamic law, and Ṣūfism. He also studied with his father's half-brother, Shaykh Ka. Muusaa Ka was a relative of Bamba to whom his father later entrusted him. He lived in Ceyeen-Jolof with Bamba during the first house arrest of his master (1907– 1912), performed peripatetic learning in Senegambia, and lived with Bamba again in Diourbel during the second house arrest (1912– 1927). Muusaa Ka drew on Bamba's extensive writings, multiple Islamic sources, and the works of his three senior colleagues, and he became an unmatched Senegalese *ʿajamī* hagiographer, historian, and poet. His productivity and eclecticism accelerated and broadly popularised Murīd *ʿajamī* poetry and the odyssey and teachings of Bamba among the Senegalese masses. His work spans religious, hagiographic, historical, and secular domains. Muusaa Ka captures best the voices and the collective memory of Murīds and offers the most radical alternative narrative to the prevailing discourse on the Murīdiyya (Ngom, 2016: 23).

Far from being an attempt to carry out an "Arabisation" of Wolof literature, the Murīd tried to build a genuinely Wolof Islamic literary tradition. That is why, leaving aside the script and the metres employed, *wolofal* places itself in direct continuity with the preceding tradition of *woy*. This is evident, for example, in Muusaa Ka's masterpiece, *Xarnu bi* ('The century'), an elegy for Ahmadu Bamba's death, whose death is compared with the other catastrophes and uncertainties of the century. Metrically, this poem is a *tasmīṭ murabbaʿ*, that is, a composition of quatrains following the rhyme pattern *aaax, bbbx, cccx, …, zzzx*. Besides sharing the same rhyme all along the poem, the last

lines of all the quatrains also present a common refrain, since they all end with the expression *xarnu bi* ('the century'). The metre of this *tasmīṭ* is *rağaz mağzūʾ*. Like the other Arabic metres, *rağaz mağzūʾ* is quantitative, thus based on a specific succession of short and long syllables. Its metric pattern can be represented as ⏑ ⏑ ⏓ — | ⏑ ⏑ ⏓ —. One could quote, as an example, the first stanza of the poem (Kamara, 2008: 121):

Sëriñ bi noo ngi deeti ñaan	Master, here we are again begging,
Fàqir dafay nangoo dagaan,	since it is licit for a poor man to beg,
Nangul nu lepp lu nu ñaan,	Grant us everything we ask you
Ndax Yàlla naatal xarnu bi.	so that God makes wealth the century.

In this case we have a plain application of the Arabic metric pattern of the *rağaz mağzūʾ* to the Wolof language. There are some particularities regarding syllabification, due to the different prosodies of the two languages. For example, the apparently monosyllabic word *lepp* [leppə] must be counted as bisyllabic, *lep-pə*, the first syllable being long and the second short. This appears to be due to the Murids' effort to adapt the Arabic metres; for the rest, the application of the metre is no particular problem. Other stanzas, however, reveal that Muusaa Ka employs other stylistic devices taken from the large patrimony of the *woy*, such as syntactic parallelism and repetition (Kamara, 2008: 123):

Xiif tax na ñenn mag ñi yooy,	Starvation has made some of the oldest men dull
Xiif tax na gor su ndaw di jooy,	Starvation has made the smallest of men weep
Xiif tax na yenn tool yi booy,	Starvation has made some fields barren
Sëriñ bi geesul xarnu bi.	Master, look back on the century.

One can also find examples of polyptoton, so common in the *woy*. In the following stanzas the polyptoton of the word *baax* ("to be good") occupies seven verses, and overlaps with a similar use of the word *waa* ("people"), which involves four lines (Kamara, 2008: 131):

Lu baax du baax ba jàll baax	What is good is not good beyond what is good
Waaye Sëriñ bee weesu baax,	But the Master has gone beyond the good
Baax a ngi yem fi xotti baax,	There is a limit to good, but he has broken it.
Baaxaale gaayi xarnu bi.	Good were with him the companions of the century.
	The people who loved you are now good
Waa ju la sopp dal di baax,	The people who opposed you are no longer good
Waa ju la weddi dootu baax,	The people who thank you are the most good
Waa joo gërëm muy gën di baax,	Oh people! To him we owe the century.
Waayoo ko war na xarnu bi.	

This bond with tradition can be explained by the explicit aim of the Murīdiyya to give Wolof a recognised Islamic literature, which would be part of the Islamic network without renouncing its particularities. Stylistic analysis offers evidence of this bond between *wolofal* and the literary tradition it is born within.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS: A GLANCE AT MODERNITY

Although *wolofal* poetry was written even in the earliest phases of its development, it has never lost its connection with orality. These compositions are intended to be performed in the presence of an audience rather than being read, and their execution needs a high level of mastery[3]. Thus, the continuity with the preceding tradition is striking. Nowadays, the composers of *wolofal* differ more and more from the first Murīd composers: many of them are not religious poets, and there are authors, such as the composer Ousmane Loo, who aim at renewing *wolofal* in order to make it even closer to the original Wolof poetic models.

Looking at today's poetic landscape, the main difference between *wolofal* and traditional songs seems to lie not in the medium of transmission but in the creative possibilities of the poet. The *wolofal* composer Ousmane Loo, in an interview I conducted with him in Dakar on 17/09/2019, explained that whereas traditional songs have their *raison d'être* in their content and the occasion of their performance, in *wolofal* the poet can freely choose the content, since everything can be the topic of a poem if it is expressed respecting the metrical forms. It is interesting that this is the point of view expressed by Loo, who is an extremely innovative poet, not only in his thoughts (his poetry is not at all religious) but also on the stylistic side (as already mentioned, he introduces many variations in the Arabic metres employed in *wolofal*). Nowadays, *wolofal* is undoubtedly one of the most interesting literary phenomena in Senegal.

[3] A good example of performance is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dz3NJvAc5oY&t=57s. It is the poem *Xarnu bi* ("The Century") by Moussa Ka, one of the most famous poems of the genre.

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