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Sommaire

Devotional Soninke Poetry: Mama Jagana's Songs in Praise of Shaykh Hamallah and Yacouba Sylla

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Abstract

Praise songs in African languages, often overlooked in studies on Sufism in West Africa, reveal essential dynamics of certain Sufi movements. Whether in Arabic or ʿajamī (African languages written in Arabic script), these songs transcend their artistic dimension to address major historical and sociopolitical issues. This article examines the religious praise songs of Mama Jagana dedicated to Yacouba Sylla and his spiritual guide, Shaykh Hamahu'llah, a central figure of the Tijāniyya Hamawiyyah, a movement active in Mali, Mauritania, and Côte d'Ivoire. Adopting a performance-centered perspective and drawing on existing studies, particularly the transcriptions and translations of Soninke texts by Aliou Kissima Tandia, the study analyzes the context and impact of these songs. They emerge as tools of resilience for Yacouba Sylla's followers, who faced social hostility and the colonial authorities' suspicion toward the Tijāniyya Hamawiyyah. The article explores the origins of the movement, Yacouba Sylla's life, the recurring themes of suffering and resilience in the songs, and their contemporary reception, incorporating new dynamics introduced by digital tools.

Key words: Sufi poetry, praise songs, Hamalism, Soninke *ʻajamī*

Résumé

Les chants de louange en langues africaines, souvent marginalisés dans les études sur le soufisme en Afrique de l'Ouest, révèlent des dynamiques essentielles de certains mouvements soufis. En arabe ou en ʿajamī (langues africaines en caractères arabes), ces chants dépassent leur dimension artistique pour aborder des enjeux historiques et sociopolitiques majeurs. Cet article examine les chants religieux de Mama Jagana dédiés à Yacouba Sylla et à son guide spirituel, Shaykh Hamahu'llah, figure centrale de la Tijāniyya Hamawiyyah, mouvement actif au Mali, en Mauritanie et en Côte d'Ivoire. Adoptant une perspective axée sur la performance et s'appuyant sur des

travaux existants, notamment les transcriptions et traductions de textes soninké par Aliou Kissima Tandia, l'étude analyse le contexte et l'impact de ces chants. Ceux-ci apparaissent comme des outils de résilience pour les adeptes de Yacouba Sylla, confrontés à l'hostilité sociale et à la méfiance des autorités coloniales envers la Tijāniyya Hamawiyyah. L'article explore les origines du mouvement, la vie de Yacouba Sylla, les thèmes de souffrance et de résilience présents dans les chants, et leur réception contemporaine, en intégrant les nouvelles dynamiques introduites par les outils numériques.

Mots-clés: poésie soufie, chants de louange, Hamallisme, ʿAjamī soninké

Introduction

Praise songs in African languages, often overlooked in academic analyses of Sufism in West Africa, provide valuable insights into the dynamics of certain Sufi movements. Whether in Arabic or *ʿajamī*—African languages written in Arabic script—these songs arise from sociopolitical contexts and address significant historical issues beyond their artistic dimensions. This paper adopts a performance-centered perspective rooted in folklore studies to examine the religious praise songs of Mama Jagana, dedicated to Yacouba Sylla and his spiritual guide, Shaykh Hamahu'llah (Hamallah)[1], a prominent figure in the Tijāniyya Hamawiyyah, known as the "Eleven-Bead Tijāniyya," with a strong presence in Mali (Nioro), Mauritania (Kaédi), and Gagnoa, Ivory Coast.

The article focuses on a textual analysis, paying attention to the contexts of performance, and the intended impact on the community. While fieldwork is ideal for such objectives, this study relies on existing literature about the Hamawiyya community to reconstruct the context surrounding the songs' creation and use. Aliou Kissima Tandia's Latin transcription and French translation of the Soninke texts significantly aid in understanding the material.

[1]I will stick to this name throughout the paper, unless using quotes.

This paper aims to show that these praise songs are not only invaluable for understanding the sociopolitical contexts of Yacouba Sylla's life but also serve as tools for his followers to cope with the suffering and alienation stemming from strained relationships with a society that rejects his beliefs and a colonial administration that views the Tijāniyya Hamawiyyah with suspicion due to historical controversies surrounding its founder.

After providing a brief overview of the Hamawiyya's origins and evolution after its founder's death, the paper explores Yacouba Sylla's life, the central figure of these songs, and introduces Mama Jagana, the Soninke poet responsible for the praise songs. It delves into recurring themes of suffering and resilience that resonate deeply within Yacouba's community in Kaédi, Mauritania. Finally, the study considers the reception of these songs, especially in light of digital tools that influence their distribution today, and examines the literary and performative qualities that underpin them.

The Soninke Society and Islam: An Overview

This section begins by outlining the role of Islam, particularly Sufi Islam, within Soninke society, setting the stage for a review of existing scholarship on their *Madīḥ* poetic production in Soninke language. The Soninke, part of the larger Manding group that includes the Bamana, Malinke, and Mandinka, are primarily found in Mali, northeastern Senegal, Guinea, and other West African countries. They are among the most significant diasporic communities in Europe, especially in France.

Existing scholarship has largely focused on the Soninke's historical trajectories, migration patterns, and language, while neglecting their artistic and literary contributions, particularly their religious creativity. This paper aims to fill that gap by establishing a framework for understanding Soninke movements within Sufi Islam, with a brief mention of the Hamawiyyah-Tijāniyya.

The spread of Islam among the Soninke can be traced back to the invasion of the Almoravid raiders, which led to the imposition of the religion on

vanquished groups, resulting in their migration. Islam gradually became the dominant religion, whether through imposition or voluntary adoption, particularly following the decline of the Wagadu Empire. Notable families associated with religious education, like the Jakhanke in Senegambia and the Wangara in Hausaland, maintained strong ties to the Soninke (Ousmane Kane; Sanneh). The Soninke's Sufi education is characterized by a follower-guide relationship focused on "embodied knowledge. » (Rudolph T. Ware III*).* The main Sufi brotherhoods embraced by the Soninke are the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya (Amadou Hampate Ba). A prominent jihadist figure in the nineteenth century was Mouhamadou Lamine Dramé, whose resistance to colonial dominance was hampered by the pacifist culture among the Soninke and lack of community support (Abdoulaye Bathily). Although their involvement in jihadist movements was limited, the Soninke did support Umar al-Futiyyu Tall and Samori Touré's resistance efforts (Humphrey Fisher 51-69).

The eleven-bead Tijāniyya entered the Soninke community through the early twentieth-century interactions between Shaykh al-Akhdar and Soninke and Tukulor figures in Kaédi. Mama Jagana's devotional poems, produced in this context, reflect the strained atmosphere of the time. Before returning to her work, the chapter will provide an overview of the status of devotional poetry in African languages.

West African Devotional Sufi Poetry in 'Ajamī

Literacy and orality have coexisted for centuries, predating the Ethiopian syllabary's development in Ge'ez and Amharic (Alain Ricard 7). The rise of Islam accelerated the adoption of Arabic script in learned circles, leading to rich literary traditions, including public libraries like Sankoré in Timbuktu and Pire Sañoxor in Senegal, alongside written literature in African languages (Albert S. Gerard). As Fiona McLaughlin notes, West Africa has a longstanding elite Arabophone intellectual tradition that includes a significant body of literature in Arabic and African languages, featuring devotional poetry adhering to classical Arabic literary conventions:

> West Africa is home to an elite arabophone intellectual tradition that dates from the Middle Ages. Among other types of cultural production, this tradition has given rise to a substantial body of West African literature in Arabic (alongside a parallel tradition in African languages), a corpus that consists of devotional poetry that employs classical Arabic literary conventions as well as many other genres and themes (4).

Scholarship on devotional poetry in African languages is still emerging, with more attention given to languages like Fulfulde, Hausa, and Wolof than to Soninke (Fallou Ngom. "West African Manuscripts, 1-28). This neglect of Soninke, despite its early contact with Islam, is surprising, as major studies have focused primarily on secular folklore. Devotional songs have received minimal academic attention (Umar Abdurahman 86-102; Sana Camara; Cheikh T Lo 167-188. Mouhamadou Aliou 75-95). Ousmane Moussa Diagana's *Chants Traditionnels Soninké* on Soninke poetry touches briefly on religious songs, while Sean Hanretta discusses the role of Jagana's devotional songs within the Sufi community. Other studies have explored praise poetry in Arabic dedicated to Shaykh Hamallah and the complex history of Islam among the Jakhanke and Tijaniyya-Hamawiyya.

The article analyzes three poems by Mama Jagana from Aliou Kissima Tandia's corpus. It comprises three poems: the first roughly 75 lines, the second 44 lines, and the third 137 lines. All are transliterated in Latin scripts and translated into French, a basis of my English translation. Therefore, the analysis of the songs relies on two layers of translation, from Soninke to French and then from the latter to English. As I don't dominate the original language, I must lean on the French translation, with occasional consultation of native speakers' explanation on certain concepts. To track evolution and reception of the devotional poetry, I explore online platforms, specifically Facebook community groups and YouTube, for further details. Findings tend to indicate that devotional songs relish a new digital life, and the Web 2.0 enables users to generate responses. Online audiences that consume those songs reaffirm their group membership identity through their commentaries.

Traditional studies of written poetry focus on textual and thematic approaches, but Jagana's songs, meant for oral performance, exist within a

continuum of literacy and orality. This calls for a performance-centered approach, examining the producers, genres, channels, and audience responses. Although performance theories have primarily emerged in Western contexts (Richard Bauman; John Miles Foley*;* Walter J. Ong*)*, they provide valuable insights into African verbal arts and Sufi practices, highlighting how communities express their identities through artistic communication (Isidore Okpewho 1-8; Ruth Fennigan 3-28; Kwesi Yankah 14-44, Samba Diop 97-113). With the Internet and social media, community dynamics have evolved, encompassing diasporic networks and virtual spaces, and leading to the digitization of texts and enhancing their shareability and mutability.

The Hamawiyyah Branch of Yacouba Sylla

Mama Jagana, a poet from Kaédi, emerged during the heyday of Hamallism, displaying natural poetic talent from a young age. She attended *Dhikr* sessions, listened to oral histories, and participated in communal singing, which focused on themes of *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God) and faith. Her poetic creativity was reportedly sparked by a vision during a life-threatening illness, which led to her first song in praise of Yacouba Sylla and marked her recovery.

Jagana's poetry prominently features two figures: Ahmed Hamahu'llah (Hamallah) (d.1943), the leader of the eleven-bead[2] Tijaniyya in West Africa, and Yacouba Sylla (d.1993)[3], a local Shaykh in Kaedi, Mauritania. Hamallah

2The eleven-bead, as detailed by Hampâté Ba, was the number of times the Jawharatul Kamal or Pearl of Perfection used to be recited during a Wazifa session until the day when the disciples added the twelve grain to benefit from the closing blessings from Shaykh Ahmed Al-Tijani (d.1815) who happened to be just arriving late. Born around 1883, Shaykh Hamallah was first exiled in 1925 from his Nioro Zawiya for 10 years in Merderdra in Mauritania. Before ending his sentence, he was deported again in 1930 to Ivory Coast until 1936. In 1941, he was arrested, and this time exiled to France where he died in 1943. See Constand Hames. "Le premier exil de ShaikhHamallah et la mémoire hamalliste (Nioro-Mederdra, 1925"). In le Temps des Marabouts: Itinéraires et stratégiesislamiquesen Afrique occidentale française, v 1880-1960, edité par David Robinson et Jean-Louis Triaud. Paris: Karthala, 1997, 337.

[3]Yacouba Sylla, who was born in 1906 in Gajaga, Kadiel, not far from Nioro, into a poor family, was raised along with his brothers in Shaykh Hamallah's compound. Yacouba prematurely showed a strong affection and attachment to his Shaykh who noticed the devotion of his young disciple

faced significant tribulations as he promoted the eleven-bead practice of the Tijaniyya after being appointed by Shaykh al-Akhdar, a leader from Mali, who sought to restore this branch of Sufism (Boukary Savadogo 269-297; Sean Hanretta "Gender and Agency", 68; Constand Hames 337; See also Benjamin Soares, "Notes on the Tijâniyya"). This initiative faced strong opposition from the twelve-bead Tijaniyya followers, leading to deportations and exiles for Hamallah and Yacouba Sylla, who also encountered resistance from the Soninke and Pular communities.

Yacouba Sylla, born in 1906, grew up in poverty and demonstrated devotion to Hamallah, who sent him on significant missions, including a visit to Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké in Touba. Upon arriving in Kaédi in 1929, Yacouba implemented various social and religious reforms inspired by Hamallah (Y.A. Quadri 87, 206). However, he faced opposition, which eventually led to his exile in the Ivory Coast, where he became economically successful and politically influential (Odile Goerg 271-274).

Mama Jagana's poetry reflects the suffering of both Shaykhs and the Hamawiyya community, portraying them as oppressed and victimized. Through her praise songs, she celebrates the spiritual significance of Hamallah and Yacouba Sylla, invoking their intercession to alleviate the community's collective suffering in this life and the afterlife. This sentiment is particularly evident in her third poem.

> O Seexna, O Seexna, O Seexna
> May God make us benefit from your immense goodness.
> O Seexna, O Seexna, O Seexna
> May God exclude us from the circle of your enemies.
> O Seexna, O Seexna, O Seexna
> Help us to attain our goals.
> O Seexna, O Seexna, O Seexna
> Bring us your assistance when in the bed sheets of death.

In Sufi education, trials and tribulations are seen as a measure of God's testing of His saints. These trials are considered foundational steps in the long and perilous spiritual journey that leads to the elevation of the *murīd* (disciple).

Motifs of Divinity, Prophethood and Sainthood

In Sufi mysticism, *tawḥīd*—the belief in God's omnipotence and omnipresence—is fundamental to spiritual fulfillment, emphasizing the centrality of the Prophet Muhammad's light and that of his saints (Ismā'īl Rājī al Fārūqī 4). This motif recurs throughout West African Sufi praise poetry, where many poems begin with lines that celebrate God's Oneness, often using phrases like the Basmala (Abdul-Samad Abdullah and Abdul-Sawad Abdullah 368; Oludamini Ogunnaike, "The Presence of Poetry",58–97; *Poetry in Praise).*

Mama Jagana's awareness of the significance of *tawḥīd* is evident in the opening lines of her third poem:

> Praises to God, we are paying tribute to our Master.
> We lived yesterday's reality and today's thanks to you.
> Praises to God, we are paying tribute to our Master.
> We lived yesterday's reality and today's thanks to you.
> You showered us with grace upon seeking recourse to you.
> No one can appraise your goodness, O our dear Shaykh (Tandia 181).

While the poem honors her master, Yacouba Sylla, it consistently acknowledges God's primacy as the source of blessings, with her master serving as a channel for these blessings. In Sufi belief, *tawḥīd* involves recognizing God as the ultimate object of all desire, a notion echoed in Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's poetry during his exile, where he emphasized the unseen hand of God in all events:

> I was marching with the pious while God's enemies (the French) thought I was their prisoner. Indeed, they were wrong… By the grace of the Prophet, I was marching in the company of the honored toward God, the Almighty Possessor of the Heavens (Cheikh A. Babou,"Sufi eschatology", 62).

The role of intermediaries, such as saints, does not diminish faith in God as the ultimate source of prayer. Jagana articulates her reliance on God in her verses:

O God, who accepts prayers.
O my God, You who can fulfill wishes.
Once our love for Shaykh Hamahullah is secured,
Let others hate us for worshiping God.
Once we obtain the favors of Shaykh Hamahullah (Tandia 181-2).

Jagana's poetry reaffirms God as the sole source of hope, excluding any other agency. Her verses stress the Oneness of God, the Absolute Creator:

O Lord, O Lord, You created us!
O Lord, when You desire something, You simply say "Be," and it is—our Creator.
Lord, O my Lord, You are the one who created us.
Lord, only Your will is realized (Tandia 186).

These foundational expressions in Sufi poetry serve as a springboard for praises and supplications. Following acknowledgments of God's Oneness, attention turns to the Prophet Muhammad, seen as the gateway to God. For those unable to live in the time of the Prophet, following saints provides a path to spiritual fulfillment, as Jagana expresses:

Happy are those who didn't live in the time of the Prophet,
But who believed in Seexna.
Happy are those who didn't live in the time of the Prophet,
But who believed in Seexna.
Allah, You are the greatest, Allah, You are the greatest, purity to Allah.
Hamaahu, You are prestigious (Tandia 185).

West African Sufi poetry dedicates significant attention to saints, celebrating their virtues and miracles. Panegyric poems express gratitude and honor Sufi guides. In the Hamawiyya tradition, Shaykh Hamallah inspired poets, including Sidati b. Baba Aynayn, who penned a vibrant tribute to Hamallah and Yacouba Sylla:

We swear by God that your Guide is unique.
We were in darkness yesterday; today we are the light of truth.
We swear on the rank of our leader,
That we once knew nothing of worship, but now we do.
Even though we never met you, we met someone who knows you,
Through our father Yacouba *(Benjamin Soares and John O.Hunwick 97-112)*.

This tribute acknowledges Hamallah's ability to guide disciples from disbelief to faith, expressing gratitude to Yacouba Sylla for this connection. Yacouba, who identified as a disciple of Hamallah (Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change*, 170), often inscribed this identity on his business walls and vehicles:

> O dear Shaykh, we believe in your miracles.
> We have never seen you, but we adhere to your message.
> O dear Shaykh, we believe in all your dimensions,
> And all this is possible thanks to Yacouba Sylla.

These lines highlight Hamallah's miracles and teachings while emphasizing Yacouba Sylla's role in guiding the community to Hamallah. In the Soninke community of Kaédi, Hamallah's sainthood is validated through Yacouba's acknowledgment of his sanctity. Abdoulaye Hannoum notes, "Saints recognize other saints, and this recognition secures the institution of sanctity within Islam" (Hannoum 26). This dynamic is further illustrated in Jagana's poetry:

> He who led us to follow the master.
> And all this is possible thanks to Yacouba Sylla.
> He who led us to pledge allegiance to the master.
> I swear by God, without Shaykh Yacouba,
> We would have been eternal enemies of Ahmadu.
> I swear by God, without your call, Yacouba,
> We would have been hostile to Ahmadu forever.
> We testify, messenger Yacouba,
> That you found us disunited and reconciled us.
> We testify, messenger Yacouba,
> That you found us in error, and you showed us the truth.
> We testify, messenger Yacouba
> That you found us in ignorance, and you showed us the path.
> We are paying tribute to you, messenger Yacouba(Tandia 183).

In conclusion, Mama Jagana's devotional poems emphasize *tawḥīd* as the sole agency behind all manifestations. They highlight the Prophet Muhammad's central role as a source of grace and saints' significance in connecting followers with God and His Prophet. Her poetry serves as a call for collective resilience and faith amidst adversity, suffering, and oppression, acting both as a communal rallying cry and a prayer for salvation.

Suffering and Resilience as a Source of Salvation

In Sufi mysticism, the journey to salvation is often hindered by trials stemming from one's inner self (*Nafs*), rulers (Sultans), and societal pressures (J. Spencer Trimingham 155). Sufi literature illustrates that opposition to the Sultan signifies sainthood, as no saint escapes confrontation with authority. Shaykh Ahmed al-Tijani, for example, faced persecution in Algiers due to his growing influence (Valentine Wright 91-95*)*. West African Sufi poetry, particularly in local languages, reflects these struggles and highlights the importance of spiritual disciplines like patience, mortification, and reliance on God in overcoming such challenges.

Sufi saints, following the path of Prophet Muḥammad, endure tests from God through worldly temptations and oppression from those in power. Some, like El Hajj Umar Tall, were called to wage jihad against oppressive rulers, while others, such as Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mbacké, Shaykh Hamallah, and Yacouba Sylla, chose non-violent resistance, often facing exile or death, as seen with Muhammadou Lamine Dramé (d. 1887).

Mama Jagana's poetry reflects the oppression inflicted by colonial authorities, especially against the Hamawi shaykhs and their disciples. Through her verses, she encourages her fellow disciples to practice patience and resilience despite the violence they face, drawing on historical and Qur'anic figures as examples. She also highlights Yacouba Sylla's social reforms—like lowering marriage dowries and encouraging public confessions of sins—as means of spiritual purification to help the community resist worldly temptations:

> We testify, messenger Yacouba,
> That you found us disunited and reconciled us.
> We testify, messenger Yacouba,
> That you found us in error and showed us the truth.
> We testify, messenger Yacouba,
> That you found us in ignorance and showed us the path.
> We pay tribute to you, messenger Yacouba,
> For you have diverted our aspirations from worldly glitters.
> In the hopes that you will deliver us from the shackles
> Under which we kneel, we beseech your help(Tandia 183).

This passage contrasts disunity and reconciliation, error and truth, ignorance and enlightenment, reflecting Yacouba's efforts to guide his community toward God. He is portrayed as a redeemer, liberating them from ignorance and societal challenges that obstruct genuine Islamic practice.

Resistance to Yacouba Sylla's reforms arose from non-Hamawis, particularly the Twelve-bead Tijani, who saw his movement as a threat to social cohesion. This friction led to confrontations that attracted colonial authorities' suspicion, resulting in violent clashes, property destruction, and battles between Yacouba's disciples and the Twelve-bead Tijanis. Jagana vividly captures this turmoil:

> O Hamalla, we do not fear death.
> O Saja, we do not fear dispersal either.
> If it is for our father Yacouba that we are dispersed,
> Our father Aliwu is a great gatherer.
> O Hamalla, the God with us
> Is the same God who is abroad (Tandia 175).

Despite the violence, her community's resilience and devotion to their shaykhs endure. The passage probably alludes to the numerous deportations and assassinations to which certain members of the Hamalist community had been subjected. As put by Tandia, "*parmi ces assissinats qui restent encore gravés dans la memoire collective des hamallistes, on peut noter ceux de Baba Cheikh Tijane, fils du chef religieux*" (Among these assassinations that still weigh heavily in the collective memory of the Hamallists, one can note those of Baba and Cheikh Tijane, the sons of the religious leader) (Tandia 315). Jagana views the release of prisoners and the survival of the movement as evidence of their spiritual strength, paralleling their suffering with the trials faced by earlier prophets, such as Moses and Noah, asserting that God will intervene on their behalf through Shaykh Hamallah and Yacouba Sylla.

Her poems instill hope for salvation, likening her community's plight to the early followers of the Prophet during battles like *Badr* and *Uhud*. She urges patience, assuring them that victory is imminent with the arrival of Shaykh Hamahullah as the bearer of justice:

> What happiness, what happiness, Hamahullah has appeared!
> Hamahulla, the bearer of justice, has arrived.
> Good tidings, good tidings, Sharif Hamahullah is here.
> Hamahulla, the judge who mends the dents of injustice, has come
> (Tandia 181).

In short, Mama Jagana's poetry serves as a spiritual and socio-political commentary, reflecting the evolution of the Yacouba branch of the Hamawiyya-Tijaniyya in Kaédi and beyond. While her poetic language may lack historical precision, it provides valuable insight into the sentiments and struggles of her time, intertwining the lives of Shaykh Hamallah and Yacouba Sylla with past prophets to reassure her community of their divine mission and the redemptive power of their suffering. As concluded by Hanretta,

Mama Jagana's own knowledge about suffering and its redemptive power cut across the personal and the collective. Her songs have as their dominant theme the drawing of parallels between the experiences of the Prophet, the early Muslims such as Hasan and Husayn, and other prophets like Moses on the one hand, and the experiences of Hamallah, Yacouba, and his followers on the other (Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change*, 174).

Poetic Performance and its Digital Reception

In contrast to prosaic texts, which tend to be more informative and scholarly, poetry—whether in Arabic or ʿAjamī—holds a privileged place in most African Sufi circles due to its emotional and aesthetic impact. West Africa, in particular, has been a fertile ground for poetic production, especially panegyric poetry praising emperors, kings, and other traditional dignitaries. Historically, griots—members of a caste specialized in verbal art and music—were responsible for the creation and performance of such poetry. With the advent of Islam, while traditional forms of poetic expression persisted, Sufi circles became very active in this domain. Some griots converted into religious poets and singers to accompany prominent shaykhs, and Islam opened the door to oral poetic performance for non-griots as well. Shaykhs and their disciples, gifted in poetic expression, began composing poems in

Arabic and African languages (See Louis Brenner and Murray Last432–46; Lüpke, Friederike, and Sokhna Bao-Diop 88–114; Jeremy Dell 55-76).

A key feature of these poetic texts is that they are often intended to be sung to the community of followers on special occasions, such as *mawlid* (the celebration of the Prophet's birthday) and *ziyara* (pilgrimages). ʿAsmaʾu Fodiyo (d. 1867), a daughter of Uthman Dan Fodio, reflecting on her own poetry, emphasized the importance of listening rather than reading:

> Please listen to what I am saying about the Prophet and participate with me in singing his praises. Listen to my verse and do not listen to the lewd songs and whistling which are common when groups of people meet during communal labor... Such songs and whistling come only from the enemies of Muḥammad, not from good Muslims *(*Jean Boyd 2).

In present-day Senegambia, such poems are the subject of commentaries and exegesis in local languages, often accompanied by song. The poets themselves are frequently not the performers; rather, after a series of oral recitations, the poems circulate among the community, eventually becoming a collective heritage passed down through generations. Sufi poetry in African languages typically falls into three categories: poems that follow Arabic stylistic conventions, poems that adapt Arabic styles and metrics to African songs, and purely African-style poems, which are often orally composed (se Cheikh Tidiane Lo).

Mama Jagana's poems belong to the second category. They are written in an adapted Arabic style, blended with African oral traditions. Her poetry does not strictly follow Arabic poetic conventions but mixes free verse with occasional attempts at rhyme, as in the following, where "de" and "ki" alternate at the end of lines:

> Followers of father Yacouba, let's be patient,
> The awaited inheritor of the legacy has just dawned.
> Followers of father Yacouba, let's be patient,
> The awaited inheritor of the legacy has just dawned (Tandia 175).

The Arabic hemistich model is more pronounced in the following example, where each couplet ends with the rhyme "oo":

Sugandi komo hano toore duna di, The earlier elected suffered on earth
Annebi Musa dunka burun da a tooroo. Prophet Moses endured his ill-treatments
Xa Allah da ken wurugiti soobe, But ALLAH rescued him through patience
Annebi Nuuha dunka burun da a tooroo. Prophet Noe endured ill-treatments
Xa Allah da a ken wurugi ti ŋaame, But ALLAH rescued him through flooding
(Tandia 174).

At the textual level, the poet employs various poetic devices, including metaphors and imagery drawn from the local context, as well as anaphors or repetitions—a characteristic of oral poetry according to the Oral-Formulaic Theory (Albert B. Lord). The images of the herdsman, lion, cow, river, canoe, clouds, and rain are deeply connected to the local fauna, flora, and geography around Kaédi, where activities such as hunting and fishing on the Senegal River, as well as a peasant lifestyle, are predominant.

One telling example of these metaphors is found in the following lines, which convey spiritual meanings through references to local life:

The cows are separated from their herdsman,
O Aliw, to each person their piece of luck.
The cows are separated from their herdsman,
O Saja, to each person their piece of luck.
Some of the cows used to wander off,
Others were prone to straying,
While lions lurked in the bush (Tandia 179).

This passage alludes to the threat posed by enemies (symbolized by lions) to the disciples, with the poet invoking the intervention of the shaykh, the sole herdsman capable of saving his followers. The cows separated from their herdsman represent the community or disciples who are vulnerable without their spiritual leader, while the lurking lions symbolize dangers or enemies. The repetition of lines creates a rhythmic flow, reinforcing the themes of separation and divine guidance. The poem also directly addresses important figures, calling on their protection and highlighting the importance of leadership in maintaining the community's unity.

There's a contrast between safety (under the herdsman's care) and the threats posed by lions, symbolizing external dangers. The poem's tone is both urgent and defiant, suggesting resilience despite challenges. It reflects Sufi values of spiritual guidance and unity, while also hinting at political resistance. Overall, the poem highlights the community's reliance on its spiritual leaders and calls for perseverance in the face of adversity.

The poet also refers to the river, which signifies danger but also resistance:

> We swear by God, we were never incredulous,
> Much less today, when things are clearer.
> The river waves are agitated, but we have no canoes,
> The situation is worsening, let's remain steadfast, dear fellows.
> The sea water is furious, and we have no canoes (Tandia 181).

The agitated river waves and furious sea water symbolize the turmoil and challenges the community faces, while the absence of canoes suggests vulnerability or a lack of means to escape these difficulties. The poet urges steadfastness, calling on the community to remain strong despite worsening circumstances. The repetition of phrases like "we have no canoes" heightens the sense of urgency and danger, while the invocation of God reflects a deep spiritual faith and trust in divine guidance.

Overall, Jagana's poetry emphasizes endurance and collective strength in overcoming hardship. The poems, while demonstrating advanced literary qualities, must be understood in the context of their oral performance, which enhances the overall literariness of African oral literature, as noted by Isidore Okpewho in *African Oral Literature* and *The Oral Performance in Africa.* Although Jagana is a known author, her poems were likely performed by community members, targeting followers for spiritual revival while subtly addressing political themes relevant to the colonial administration.

Yacouba Sylla facilitated women's participation in communal singing gatherings, a practice not supported by some Tijaniyya shaykhs (Joseph Hill 375-412; Hanretta, "Gender and Agency", 58-74). Today, digital platforms

like YouTube and Facebook[4] feature performances of these songs, which are often accompanied by traditional instruments. The reception of these songs has expanded in the digital age, with followers sharing thoughts and emotions online. Additionally, the Yacouba Sylla Foundation (FOCYS)[5] has made previously inaccessible archives available on these platforms, while cassette recordings previously played a crucial role in preserving this heritage (Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change,* 174, 176).

CONCLUSION

The significance of West African devotional poetry in Sufi Muslim communities since the tenth century is worth emphasizing, highlighting how it enriches rather than replaces traditional panegyric compositions. While traditional praise poetry celebrated cultural dignitaries, devotional poetry allowed poets to focus on the Prophet Muhammad and Muslim saints. Jagana's works are deeply rooted in Sufi spirituality, dealing with *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God) and the preeminence of the Prophet and saints.

Her poetry conveys complex messages through poetic devices such as parallelism, repetition, and metaphor, making the meanings accessible to her audience. Jagana's compositions reflect the sociopolitical context of her time, capturing the struggles faced by her shaykhs and the Yacoubist community under colonial rule (Hanretta,"Gender and Agency" 78). Her poems depict suffering as a divine trial, calling for resilience and interpreting these challenges as tests from God. The literary quality of her texts, combined with their emotional resonance, plays a vital role in shaping the spiritual community of the eleven-bead Tijanis of the Hamawiyyah order.

The chapter has highlighted the essential role of women in composing and performing these songs, empowered by Yacouba Sylla's social reforms. Songs, alongside visual arts and oral histories, continue to be central to the

[4]One of the most dynamic groups I found is https://www.facebook.com/yacouba.sylla.9619. The administrator of the group is active in his posts in forms of photos, videos, excerpts of speeches and poems he writes, and he entices followers to react and make relevant comments accessed on 12/10/24.
[5] See this YouTube video Zawiya*11* de Bah Fodesylla à DioilaHadara

Hamawi-Yacoubi legacy, prominently featured in public rituals today. The digitalization of these sacred Sufi poems invites further exploration into their dissemination, political engagement, and heritage in contemporary Africa.

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