

RELIGIOUS POETRY IN MALI TODAY: FROM FILIATION TO CREATION

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This presentation will deal with the poetic and musical work of one important Malian Koranic teacher of the second half of the 20th century, Aboubakar b. al-Hadi Yaro, also known as Ko Yaro. Ko Yaro was born in 1940 and died in 1999. He was a native of Jenne in the Loop of the Niger, a holy city of (Sufi) Islam in Mali, like Timbuktu.

Ko Yaro's work includes more than one hundred of *maduhu* religious poems. *Maduhu* is a term in songhay language¹, which comes from the Arabic *madh* or *madih* and which designates the panegyric poems addressed to the Prophet Mohammad, to his mediators, but also to the people in power.

The *maduhu* of Ko Yaro belongs to the history of the classical Arabic poetry, within the *qâsidâ* genre, with original features though. Ko Yaro indeed drew on various sources of inspiration, and we shall see how he renewed the *maduhu* to make a poetic genre in line with his time. Thus, this presentation will highlight the inscription in time of Ko Yaro's artistic production.

This presentation also aims at being a reflection on notions which are commonly opposed, but whose dialectic is more complex: the oppositions learned/popular genres; profane/religious genres; traditional/contemporary knowledge of the Muslim African world.

¹ A short parenthesis about the language spoken in Jenne, which is called *jenne ciini* (the « language of Jenne ») and is a variant of the Songhay language (which constitutes a branch of the Nilo-Saharan linguistic family). As the *koyra ciini* spoken in Timbuktu, the *jenne ciini* is a specific language of the city, defined by a history and a place and not by an ethnic group. Cf. <http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/nilo-saharan>. In Jenne, people speak songhay, but also bambara, which is the vehicular language in Mali, as well as Pullo, Bozo and French language. Arabic language is not spoken daily, but only in religious context, by some (but not all) Koranic teachers.

I should specify that I am not a linguist, nor an Arabic-speaker. It is the inscription in history and the creative dimension of such a poetico-musical work that are of interest to me and about which I am going to speak here. This work is the object of a book that I am editing and which gathers and translates into French the most significant Ko Yaro's poems. This book, entitled *Islam and Art of the praise in Mali. The madih of Aboubakar b. Al-Hadi Ko Yaro (1940-1999)*, will be issued soon in Mali, by the Timbuktu editions.

Maduhu: poems in history

The poems of praise addressed to the Prophet and to his mediators (saints, sheiks and learned Muslims), but also to the sovereigns and other powerful people (in power), have been widespread in the Sufi Muslim world for more than a millennium, from Indonesia to Senegal, including Pakistan, Tanzania and Egypt. In Jenne, as in Timbuktu and in some other cities of the Loop of the Niger, these poems belong to the register of the local tradition, the custom (*alanda* in songhay, from Arabic *'adâ*: « custom ») and constitute the real mark of the poetic, musical and religious knowledge which the city offers during its religious, cultural and political events.

The repertoire practised today in Jenne includes several-centuries-old poems alongside more recent compositions, including contemporary ones, as those of Ko Yaro. The *Tarikh al-Sûdân*, which is the most famous chronicle of Jenne and Timbuktu drafted by scholar Al-Sa'dî by 1655 mention that *maduhu* practices have been attested since the beginning of the 17th century.

Their age in the Loop of the Niger seems to confirm that these practices are otherwise historically constant, at least recurring, socially anchored and with part of a strong local identity.

Maduhu performed today in Jenne are largely poems which come from outside, and circulated through Muslim Africa before settling in Mali. It is the case of *Al-Burda*, a famous poem performed for the Mawlid ceremonies of Jenne and Timbuktu, and written by the Egyptian poet Sharaf al-Dîn Muhammad ibn Sa' id al-Bûsîrî (1212-1294/7).

For several centuries, the poems of praises have been part of such a geographical dynamics which goes from Saudi Arabia to Mali, including the Sudan, Egypt, Morocco or Nigeria. We still do not know well how the knowledge and the texts circulated in Western Africa. We note nevertheless that the manuscripts of Jenne come mainly from Morocco, with which this city maintained tight political links between the end of the 16th and the beginning of 18th centuries. Other poems come from Egypt which traditionally constituted a major study center of the Malékite school, at the same time as a halt for the pilgrims coming back from the Mecca (even though the circulation networks have altered over the centuries, along the economic and political situations. I think quite particularly of the links which intensified with Nigeria from the caliphate of Sokoto at the end of the 18th century).

This circulation of texts and knowledge was based on what we could call an industry, that of the copyists. Félix Dubois, famous author of the book entitled *Timbuktu the mysterious* (1897), quotes Leon the African who, in his work *Of Africa* published in 1550, wrote that « books are very well sold [in Timbuktu], so much that we make bigger profit from it than from any other goods which we can sell there ». In 1920, about four centuries later, the French colonizer Paul Marty tells that « the industry of the copyists is prosperous in the whole region, but particularly in Jenne ». Today photocopy has replaced copy, but the texts of *maduhu* still circulate between pupils and their Koranic teachers. The transmitter does not miss to mention his name and the date on the photocopy, thus pursuing, by new technological tools, the transmission chain of the religious texts.

Certain foreign poems were appropriated by being the object of local versions. It is the case of *'Ishriniyyat*, a famous poem written by the Andalusian poet Al-Fazazi (who died in 1230) and performed all over the Sufi world. In the *Tarīkh al-Sūdân*, Al-Sa'dî mentions that « [his own father] wrote a comment, transforming in pentastiches *'Ishriniyyat* of al-Fazazi in praise to the Prophet ». Transforming a poem in pentastiches like *'Ishriniyyat* consists for every verse of the poem, in adding three hemistiches to the two already existing. This rewriting technique, named *takhmis*, is very frequent in the classical Arabic poetry.

Finally, a third part of the *maduhu* repertoire of Jenne is the work of local poets, whose texts seem to have not circulated much beyond the Northern Region of current Mali. The *Tarīkh al-Sūdân* dedicates for example a chronicle to jurist and eminent scholar Habib b al-Faqih al-Mukhtar (who died in 1606) who wrote « a significant number of texts, among which some beautiful panegyrics for the Prophet. For 5 years or more before his death, he had composed one eloquent poem on occasion of the anniversaries of the Prophet. He also composed eulogies for our sheiks [etc.]»³.

The local productions of *maduhu* do not however stop at the time of the *Tarīkh al-Sūdân*. For of the scholars, the religious studies have declined from the 17th century in Jenne and Timbuktu, that is from the time Moroccans ruled over these two cities. But it seems that the *maduhu* praises have been the object of a continuous production in the region of Timbuktu and of Jenne for at least five centuries.

Actually, the list of the poets made by well-known American historian John O. Hunwick⁴ begins with the poet named al-Tuwayjin, born in Granada in 1290 and who died in Timbuktu in 1346⁵, and ends with ... Abu Bakr b. Muhammad Al-Hadi Ko Yaro, who died in 1999⁶.

³ John O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire. Al-Sa'dî's Ta'rīkh al-Sūdân down to 1613 & other Contemporary Documents*, Leiden/Boston, Köln, Brill, 1999, p. 268.

⁴ John O. Hunwick, *Arabic literature of Africa: The writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, Volume 4, Leiden, Brill, 2003.

⁵ Hunwick 2003 : 10-11.

⁶ Hunwick *op. cit.* : 45-46.

The production of Ko Yaro channels into a double history: that of the West-African religious poetry and that of the cities of knowledge that Jenne and Timbuktu are.

If the local production of *maduhu* has continued at least for the 17th century, it is because the Arabic metrics (*'arûd*) discipline on which the poetic writing is based, is part of the syllabus of the classical studies taught in Jenne and in Timbuktu. In his work entitled *Tekmilet-ed-dibadj*, Ahmed Baba, a famous scholar native of Timbuktu and contemporary with al-Sa'dî, is the first one to draw up the list of the works that was the syllabus for the religious education dispensed in these two cities at the time. We can see there that the Arabic metrics was a part of it.

Four centuries later, in his *Monograph of Jenne* (1903), the French administrator Charles Monteil made the list of the works which were part of syllabus for advanced religious studies in Jenne upon the arrival of the French. He organized this syllabus in two branches, the first one concerning jurisprudence, the second literature. Among the works of literature, several praises were cited which are still taught in Jenne today.

A few years later, the French colonizer Paul Marty also made an inventory of the works being a part of the syllabus for the advanced religious studies, that he organized in several disciplines: law, grammar, Arabic language and literature, science of the traditions, the comments and exegesis of the Koran and prophetic panegyric. This last branch includes the most important praises that have been performed collectively during Mawlid ceremonies, in honor of the birth of the prophet, until today.

As the historian John O. Hunwick underlines,

« The capacity to compose verses in Arabic language came there to be considered as the mark of the man of letters. [...] There were many scholars who used poetic forms to express personal feelings, whether in praise of rulers, teachers, Sufi shaikhs, the Prophet Muhammad, *tarîqa* founders such as 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Jilânî, Ahmad al-Tujânî, etc. or to eulogize friends, relatives,

teachers, rulers, or to celebrate specific events, such as battle victories or to offer social and political comment »⁷.

Some Ko Yaro's poems praise the Prophet, the political figures, or his fellow scholars. Other poems celebrate an event (the erection of a mosque or of an Islamic cultural center, the publication of a religious work). Others have a more controversial character by participating in theological or doctrinal quarrels. Finally, others were written for his pupils with a didactic purpose. Nevertheless, all these poems belong to the same lineage of the West-African literary men, and also testify of the vitality of this poetic genre in the second half of the 20th century in Jenne.

An art of the poetry and the chanting

From the point of view of the poetry, Ko Yaro's texts belong to the lineage of those of his predecessors. They fall within *qasîda*⁸, old poetic genre which some scholars consider even as pre-Islamic. *Qasîda* is a poem in which every line rhymes with the other and the meter is one of the 'classical' ones — *tawîl*, *basît*, *wâfir* or *kâmil*.

Ko Yaro's poems follow the rules very codified by the Arabic poetry which concern the metrics (number, accentuation and duration of the syllables) and the structure (number of hemistiches by verse, rhyme) of the poem. Ko Yaro's poems thus remain very classical, while possessing a lyricism well relished by the people of Jenne. One of the remarkable features of his poetic production concerns the originality of his texts. I will analyze this originality more in details in the last part of my presentation.

⁷ Hunwick 1996 : 84.

⁸ Pour une définition de la *qasîda*, voir John O. Hunwick, « The Arabic Qasida in West Africa: Forms, Themes and Contexts », in S. Sperl, C. Shackel (eds.), *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa: Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings*, Leiden, Brill, 1996, pp. 82-97.

In the introduction to his main poems, Ko Yaro often mentions the meter and/or the rhyme used. We can see that he uses a large variety of rhymes (nûn, lam, mîm, ra, etc.), but that he favors only two poetic meters (*basît* and *kâmil*).

In reality, although he perfectly commanded the metrics of the classical Arabic poetry (on which he had even written an educational book that remained unpublished), Ko also forged his own poetic meters from Malian popular music. Actually, he enjoyed the songs performed on the occasion of family celebrations (circumcision, marriage, etc.) which he used as resource in the writing of his poems. So, one of the *maduhu* dedicated to his family is based on the song entitled *Sikey Jaje* (« Hey Djadjé! » in bambara language) performed by a singer named Nyabonka, who was very popular in Jenne in the 1960s. This song was dedicated to Djadjé Yaro, Ko Yaro's cousin, but also the richest man in the family.

Ko Yaro was also sensitive to the Malian popular musics broadcast on the radio. One of his close friends explains:

« Ko did not say that he loved such or such musician. He listened to some music as somebody who writes *maduhu*. If the music was pleasant to his ears, he wrote immediately the meter to use it in a *maduhu*. [...] Ko had a small tape recorder to record the musics he liked. Then, he listened again to the musics and wrote the meters which he would use for his *maduhu* ».

In fact, Ko Yaro did not use the mnemonic syllables of the Arabic metrics but wrote, in the new meter, the first verse of his poem, which he used as yardstick. Some melodies of lute played by famous griot Baba Sissoko, the songs of the successful singers Tara Bouaré and Koni Koumaré or the pieces of the Jenne Orchestra constituted important sources of inspiration for Ko Yaro.

[This is a work in progress: I am currently identifying the songs which inspired Ko Yaro precisely, because witnesses do not always remember the exact titles. I ask them to sing an

extract of the song which I have to identify to be able to compare it with the *maduhu* version.] From the musical point of view, *maduhu* are not said to be part of the category of « songs » (*don*), but of that of religious study category (*cow*). This way, they do not distinguish themselves from the recitation of the Koran or from blessings. Musically speaking, it is the melodic curve which makes all the difference though: the voice is ornamented, and even melismatic, what Jenne people translate by the term *cèndu* (« stretching in the voice »). And it is exactly this capacity « to stretch », that is to ornament the voice, but according to very precise rules of metrics, that makes the specific style of the *maduhu* of Jenne (and of Timbuktu).

The "voicing" of Ko Yaro's *maduhu* poems was made after their writing, often in association with some of his advanced pupils. While the poem is written, the melody is not the object of a writing itself, even if the poetic meter largely determines the musical metrics, the rhythmic and the melodic segmentation. And even if diacritical marks (*sukun*) placed above consonants inform about the syllabication (duration and ornamentation of the syllables according to their open [cv : °] or closed [cvc : ¯] structure).

About Ko Yaro's *maduhu*, several melodies were composed or recomposed from existing ones. They were then tested with some close Koranic teachers, to save those who « sound best ». A Ko Yaro's close friend explains that « [they] chose the melody the audience was most likely to like ». Ko Yaro indeed wished his *maduhu* touched the public, were popular, and he knew that the most direct means to achieve this popularity was to compose, or to adapt, a melody which the largest number of people would enjoy. Actually, most Malians do not understand Arabic and their first access to these religious poems is thus made through the vocal performance. Consequently, « a new voice is like a new *maduhu* poem ».

The *maduhu*: filiations and the making of a work

Ko Yaro has bequeathed an abundant work, made of hundreds manuscripts not yet published nor even listed. We can however organize them in three big cycles:

- The first one is constituted by poems dedicated to his teacher Ousmane Khalafu Haïdara;
- The second cycle incorporates poems dedicated to his own family;
- In the third cycle, poems intend to honor ulemas and saints of Jenne as well as the Prophet.

These *maduhu* gather people, in the sense that they were intended to suit everyone in Jenne, to be a part of the « custom » of the city. Besides, with these *maduhu* Ko Yaro had the ambition « to create an art work », that is to register his poetic production within the long history of the *madh* genre.

What is interesting is that Ko Yaro's project to be recognized as an author of poetry evidences various manners in the writing of the poems itself. For example, Ko Yaro does not hesitate to stage himself in his texts. In his poem entitled *Ulamahi* (« Ulemas ») dedicated to the Jenne scholars, we can indeed read:

« These people are agents of the knowledge / Which I evoked briefly, O wise men ».

Ko Yaro steps in the text as a writing subject, showing a real reflexivity. He does the same in footnotes where he gives additional information on some Jenne ulemas. About Sarmoy Korobara, he writes:

« He became Imam of the Great Mosque of the city in 1377 of the Hegira, and then Ko Yaro, the author of this poem, was appointed as his deputy Imam ».

It is interesting to see that Ko Yaro appears in the text of the poem explicitly as his « author », but also by showing his links with some of the praised ulemas. He presents « Alpha

Souleymane the famous » as his « grandfather ». In a footnote, he explains that the latter « is the first one of the Yaro family to settle down to Jenne. He began to perform the function of Kadi [that is of judge] in Jenne in year 1251 of the Hegira (1835), and died in 1269 (1852) ».

Ko Yaro also intervenes in his poems by calling out to the reader:

« If you speak, say that Alpha Omar Tanfo is one / Ocean of knowledge from which every thirsty person drinks »

or else by calling the reader as witness:

« Djeïdani Gaba exceeded his fellow, as you know / No doubt on this matter, it is necessary to believe this ».

Finally, he echoes the readers when he writes:

« O brothers, you benefit / From a magnificence which Allah granted you.

Your Jenne city has this peculiarity / to have the knowledge of the morality and the saints.

You see it as the "Kaaba" of all the cities / Very famous by its fame and its multitude of grand things ".

By being involved and by involving all Jenne people, Ko Yaro shows his status of author and the "public" character of his poems at the same time.

Ko Yaro also manifests his status of author by a search for *originality*. Writing a new text, which can be the mark of individuality, constitutes one of his objectives. Contrary to the

practices prevalent in the classical Arabic poetry, which consists in re-ordering pre-existent materials⁹ or to complete them¹⁰, Ko Yaro chooses to write texts of his own.

He uses many stereotypical formulae and metaphors stemming directly from religious texts, especially the Koran. The themes which he chooses are part of a common Sufi collection, what allows him to establish a bond with his audience.

But his poetic texts are nevertheless original, in the sense that he puts in words his poems himself, in a style of his own. And it is one of the reasons why his *maduhu* were quickly appropriated and claimed by a large number of Jenne people.

This originality thus constitutes one of the most eloquent means of Ko Yaro to assert his status of author. But it is remarkable to notice that this originality is always connected to a lineage. Ko Yaro does not invent new forms; he transforms the *maduhu* genre from the inside, by integrating themes connected to Jenne, and poetic meters stemming from popular musics. If the originality is set up as a value, this one does not nevertheless imply a break, a shift in what Paul Ricoeur calls a « new semantic relevance » (Ricoeur 1983: 9). And it is from there that the Ko Yaro's *maduhu* draw all their strength and all their legitimacy, in this subtle combination between loyalty in the old and canonical forms of the Arabic classic poetry and originality as mark of an individuality.

His status of author is apparent finally by the signature which acts like a stamp. By affixing his name at the beginning or at the end of a poem, Ko Yaro carries out a real « recognition of paternity ». Even there, the signature is at the same time a mark of individuation and filiation, because Ko Yaro always signs "Aboubakar son of al-Hadi Ko Yaro". But the signature cannot be considered here as the only demonstration of an individuation which would oppose anonymity. The opposition on the one hand takes place between private and public; on the other hand this opposition is between oblivion and durability. Actually, some contemporaries

⁹ it is for example the case of the genre called *diwan*, which is the assembly of already existing texts.

¹⁰ it is in particular the principle of the *takhmis* that I evoked previously.

of Ko Yaro chose not to sign their *maduhu*. They manifested thus their intention to confine the performance of their poems within the private place of their Koranic school. This choice led to the relatively fast oblivion of their *maduhu*, after one or two generations. We can thus observe different regimes of authority which testify of different, and even opposed, individual projects.

For Ko Yaro, the signature indicated the double project of publicising his *maduhu*, and making it an art work. It is not certain that Ko Yaro always had the project to create a work of lasting significance. But at the end of 1970, he wrote his autobiography, a literary genre very uncommun among Koranic teachers and Malian poets, in which he mentioned a « collection made up of poems and speeches »:

« Son of Alpha al-Hadi Yaro, born in Jenne in 1940 when he grew up and studied in the hands of his father. In 1962, he went to Bamako to be taught by Cheick Al Hadji Ousmane Kalafa, the imam of the Great Mosque of Hamdallaye. In 1964, he created a madrasa while he was still a pupil, thus continued to both teach and learn until 1973, when he was authorized by his teacher to go back home in Jenne, having received his qualifications from Secondary school, and having completed a Master's degree of the Sufi Brotherhoods. In 1974, a French-Arabic school was opened in Jenne and he was one of the teachers.

His texts are: *The simplest of the methods to achieve the best of what we look for in prosody and poetry* (under printing), besides a collection made up of poems and speeches ».

Later, at the beginning of the 1990s, he chose and gathered his main *maduhu* poems as well as other texts (a speech to the imam of Medina, a history of Jenne, a book of poetic metrics) to have them validated by the imam of the Mecca, before publishing them. The title of the collection, « Gift for humanity », reveals the ambition of Ko Yaro: to bequeath his texts to posterity. More than a simple « auctorial intention » (to quote Peter Manuel 1995), this is a

real *auctorial project*, as far as Ko Yaro implemented what he had intended: after gathering his texts, he contacted an intermediary (a Jenneke established in Mecca) and looked for financing. But this project failed: his intermediary did not manage to have his collection endorsed by the imam of the Mecca, and Ko Yaro did not either succeed in finding the financial supports necessary to publish his work. So his *maduhu* poems remained in one of his suitcases, with the rest of his manuscripts, until I discovered it in 2010.

I will conclude now by saying that in this second half of the 20th century, Ko Yaro is not the only one to write *maduhu* in Jenne and in Mali. But, contrary to other religious poets, whose texts are rarely present beyond their Koranic schools and disappear most of the time with them, Ko Yaro has the project «to create a work of lasting significance». This project consists in following the lineage of the West-African Muslim men of letters who shone on the Muslim world during several centuries, in order to rehabilitate Jenne as a city of knowledge. In the introduction of his poem dedicated to the Jenne ulemas, he writes: «[Jenne people] dream about a their past glory, and they long to recover it and preserve it ».

For his work to be legitimized straightaway, Ko Yaro inscribes his poems in an established tradition, that of the *qâsidâ*. But instead of rewriting or commenting existing texts, he chooses *originality*. In the same way, if he masters perfectly the rules of *'arûd* (Arabic poetic metric), he also uses meters stemming from Malian popular musics, thus widening the poetic and musical style of *maduhu*. And if his texts are classical praises of the Prophet, they also deal with the city of Jenne, its ulemas and its saints. Ko Yaro sets his poems both in the history of the *qâsidâ* and in the tradition of Jenne, and at the same time he gives them a very personal mark. Their success with Jenne people come from this subtle combination between inscription

in tradition, anchoring in the local, and innovation.

Through the artistic production of Ko Yaro, the image of an intellectual who lives in his time also takes shape. Far from the idea that the knowledge has to stay in the hands of an elite of men of letters, he writes and composes *maduhu* which may well become popular. For that purpose, in front of a little-Arabized audience, he is going to use diverse sources of inspiration: "traditional" songs performed during the family ceremonies and Malian musics broadcast on the radio, in order to create this feeling of identification and membership. Tara Bouaré, Djéli Baba and some other Malian "griots" enter the *maduhu* repertoire of Ko Yaro, blurring the borders between the religious and profane genre, but also between learned and popular genre. In the end, Ko Yaro will have produced a real national poetic repertoire, even if his audience remained mainly from Jenne area.

Through the example of Ko Yaro, it is finally the more general question of the visibility of the West-African *non-europhone intellectuals* (« intellectuels non europhones ») which arises. The well known historian Ousmane Kane aptly points out that « most of the African Arabist intellectuals are not only unknown to europhones, but also to numbers of Arabic and Orientalist compilers ». For two decades, a vast project of collection and cataloguing of texts in Arabic language has been undertaken however in Mali, especially in Timbuktu, and the documents already gathered give evidence « of an intense intellectual life and important public debates » that had remained in the shadows so far. The figure of Ko Yaro perfectly embodies intellectuals and poets who have built a space of Islamic knowledge and meaning independent from the dominant order.