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BÉPP LÀKK RAFET NA: TEXTUAL ESTRANGEMENT,
VERNACULAR AFFINITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the enigmatic afterlife of a widely circulating Wolofal verse—“bépp làkk rafet na”—commonly attributed to the early twentieth-century poet Muusaa Ka, and long mobilized by Senegalese writers and activists advocating for the value of writing in Wolof. Taking up Annette Damayanti Lienau’s invitation to consider *‘ajam* as a ground of comparison, the essay uses this fragment to explore the relationship between Wolof’s two major scriptural traditions—Arabic-script and Latinate—and the forms of textual estrangement and unexpected affinity that arise between them.

KEYWORDS: comparison, vernacular literature, *‘ajam*, *‘ajami*, Wolof, Wolofal, Senegalese literature, Muusaa Ka

In her expansive and generative book, Annette Damayanti Lienau makes a compelling case for *‘ajam* as a ground of comparison. As Lienau shows, textual traditions in Arabic scripts developed across global Arabophone spaces, resulting in complex interfaces between Arabic, imperial, and vernacular languages. Of the project’s many important interventions, one of the most welcome is Lienau’s determination to draw out the internal diversity of vernacular traditions, a fact often belied by scriptural barriers. That diversity is especially evident in the case of West Africa, where *‘ajami* traditions of writing in African languages are long-standing despite their marginalization in the colonial period.

As Lienau rightly argues, the shock of colonial education and its “overaggressive” language policies were decisive in creating “the perception

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of textually orphaned local languages” across West Africa, even though in many cases the reality was far more complex.¹ In French West Africa, francophone literacy became increasingly entrenched in the political and educational elite in the first half of the twentieth century, leading to the emergence of what Lienau aptly calls a situation of “textual estrangement” wherein francophone authors sought to “recover the literary inheritance of vernacular languages” by “experimentally transcribing local vernaculars in the Roman alphabet” even in cases where ‘*ajami* traditions were vibrant and long-established.²

In broad strokes, this account gives an accurate sense of one of the cases Lienau studies in detail: the situation of Wolof in Senegal. In the decades leading up to and following formal decolonization as national independence, language debates and vernacular activism erupted frequently in Senegal but were often (though not always) focused on popularizing and institutionalizing a Latinate orthography for the language. And yet, the writers, linguists, and activists who saw themselves as working toward the founding of a modern, secular literary tradition in Wolof were also very much aware of the existence of the ‘*ajami* tradition in Wolof, known locally as Wolofal. In this essay, I harmonize with Lienau’s work to explore some of the possibilities and paradoxes of textual estrangement by examining the curious life of a widely circulating fragment of Wolofal poetry.

Bépp làkk rafet na / buy yee ci nit xel ma / di tudd ci jaam ngor la. “Every language is beautiful / that broadens the intellectual horizon of the human / and returns the taste of freedom to the slave.” This phrase is commonly attributed to the early twentieth-century poet Muusaa Ka (1889–1963), who wrote songs and poems in Wolofal (Wolof ‘*ajami*) in praise of the Sufi Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba in the first half of the twentieth century.³ Since the mid-twentieth century, these lines have become a touchstone and a rallying cry among Senegalese activists and intellectuals who promote vernacular languages and literatures in Latinate script. As Alice Chaudemanche astutely points out, the phrase’s ubiquity is astonishing.⁴ Historically, it has appeared as an epigraph in grammars and manifestos of the Wolof language. It continues to circulate widely to this day, scattered across the bios of dozens of social media accounts.

Asked to reflect on ‘*ajam* as a ground of comparison, I found myself returning to this phrase, which I had encountered many times in my own research on Wolof literatures and language debates for my first book, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination*. But as I reflected on these lines and returned to some of the places I had found it, I was struck by two observations. First, as widely as these lines are cited, they rarely appear exactly the same way

twice. This observation led to a second one: the citation seems to have taken on a life of its own, quite independent of whatever original context(s) it had. This led me in turn to a series of questions. Where did these lines come from? What does it mean that perhaps the most widely circulating quotation of a Wolofal poet in Latinate Wolof literature is this malleable? What would this citation have to teach about the relations between the two major scriptural traditions of Wolof and, by extension, about *‘ajam* as a space of comparison *within* vernacular traditions?

It is easy enough to grasp why this citation has become a rallying cry for Wolof-language writers—as an articulation of radical linguistic equality, it is remarkably succinct. The power of this citation also lies in the way it superimposes one language debate over another. As Lienau’s work explores with great insight (though she does not focus on this exact citation), the linguistic equality that Ka had in mind was between Arabic and Wolof. Ka was concerned with establishing Wolof as a coequal medium of sacred expression, over and against claims that only Arabic could serve this function.^{5,6} But the later secular writers and activists who continue to quote this phrase are largely working in a Latinate script and seeking to dispute a different linguistic hierarchy. For them, the target is the presumed supremacy of French, the former colonial language.

In both cases, then, the lines trace an implicit defense of the worthiness of Wolof and articulate a vision of linguistic pluralism. But they do so by making an analogy between two forms of linguistic chauvinism that have devalued the language, one religious and one colonial. It is almost as if language debates have a palimpsestic quality whereby one keeps hearing in the new arguments echoes of the older ones, which themselves remain available for appropriation.

The Ka verses are also potent because they invoke a textual heritage of writing in Wolof. Even if Wolophone writers like Pathé Diagne, Ousmane Sembène, and Boubacar Boris Diop, who all invoked this phrase, were not writing primarily in Wolofal, referring to one of the most famous Wolofal poets was also a way of insisting on the abiding existence of a written tradition in the language.

Curious to know where this citation came from and how it assumed such pride of place in Latinate script Wolof literature, I went in search of an original text. But in trying to trace its trajectories, I very quickly encountered both a lack of clear answers and the limits of my own expertise. So for the purposes of this forum, I made a very informal survey of several other specialists in the field of Wolof languages and literatures.⁷ Despite this phrase

being familiar to everyone, none of us could locate an original “textual” context for the citation. Opinions varied on whether the citation was indeed Ka’s and, if so, whether it might perhaps be from a preface or a poem that has been lost. This, of course, does not mean that the lines are not Ka’s, but it adds weight to the hunch that the phrase’s widespread currency has little to do with any textual point of origin.

It is not my aim here to dispute the authenticity nor the attribution of the citation. What I want to focus on instead is how encountering a murkiness of textual origin can actually be quite clarifying: these phrases travel widely not in spite of their vague provenance but by virtue of it. Although versions of *bépp lakk rafet na* appear frequently in Wolof literatures, the wide circulation of the phrase seems to have been achieved not primarily through textual channels.

At this point it will be helpful to explore some of the many iterations of the citation. By my reckoning, the lines start to appear in Latinate Wolof language texts with some regularity starting in 1971. This is around the time that a postcolonial version of the language debate entered a new phase, as the Francophile President Senghor began to target writing in African languages with a series of presidential decrees creating onerous new regulatory frameworks for orthography, transcription, and word separation.⁸ *bépp lakk* appears in the introduction to the first issue of the Wolof-language journal *Kaddu*, published in 1971 by the writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène and the linguist and translator Pathé Diagne. There one reads: “Béppup lakk rafetna / Wuy gindi ci nit xel ma / Wuy tudd ci jaam ngor la.”⁹ Of the two collaborators on *Kaddu*, Diagne seems to have had a particular fondness for the phrase but rarely used it the same way twice. He includes a version of the phrase as the epigraph to his *Grammaire de Wolof Moderne*, also published in 1971: “Béppup lakk rafet na / Buy tudd ci jaam ngor la / Buy leeral ci nit xel ma.”¹⁰ Finally, Diagne includes the citation in the section on Wolof literature in his anthology of world literature in Wolof, *Teerebtanu ladab ci wàlàf*, published also in 1971. In the *Teerebtanu*, though, Diagne lays out the verses with a striking mise en page:

Béppup lakk
 rafetna
 buy gindi
 Ci nit xel ma
 buy tudd
 ci jaam
 Ngor la¹¹

The *Teerebtanu* is a remarkable collection, featuring Wolof translations of a huge array of writers from global literary traditions, including Homer, Virgil, Dante, Neruda, Montaigne, Hugo, Aimé Césaire, and Richard Wright, to name just a few. By setting *bépp lakk rafet na* in this company as one of his few examples of the Wolofal tradition, Diagne stakes a claim to it being equivalent to any world literary text. The condition of this transformation into world literature appears to be the added line breaks that give the citation the quality of free verse. (It is also striking that, given the breadth and depth of Ka's *oeuvre*, Diagne selects only these three short lines.)

Beyond Diagne's considerable efforts to popularize the phrase, Boubacar Boris Diop has done much to ensure its continued currency. Diop opens his 2010 essay "Langues africaines et création littéraire" with this phrase as an epigraph: "Bépp lakk rafet na buy yee ci nit xel ma / Di tudd ci jaam ngor la."¹² This launches Diop on a "defense and illustration" of the Wolof language, in which he takes the reader through a concise and comparative literary history that leads inexorably to a single conclusion: for Diop, writing in former colonial languages can only be a "literature of transition" for African writers. Since then, *bépp lakk* has appeared in several other essays by Diop and in articles on Diop's Wolof-language news and culture website, *Lu Defu Waxu*.

A close reading of these verses proves challenging, since the exact phrasing varies. Nevertheless, it is possible to attend to their nuances even as they shift across instances. The closest thing to a constant in these lines is the opening: *bépp lakk rafet na*, every language is beautiful. This assertion, however, is quickly qualified in the second and third lines (which sometimes switch position), in which this beauty of language is said to be determined by the extent to which it enlightens the mind and awakens dignity. One is struck by the variety of verbs even in just the examples cited above: language is said to *tudd*, *leeral*, *gindi*, and *yee* (*to call*, *to enlighten*, *to clarify*, *to awaken*). While the actions of language vary, the objects of these verbs are more stable, as they always constitute the rhyme: *xel ma*, *ngor la*.

The conceptual core of the verses is the agency attributed to language itself. Beauty is not inherent in language, the lines suggest; rather, beauty lies in what is done with language. Any language can be beautiful so long as it clarifies or enlightens the mind and undergirds a practice of freedom. Besides the beauty attributed to linguistic agency, the key concepts here are *xel ma* (mind or intelligence) and *ngor ga* (dignity). It is these qualities that language awakens in the lines' two human subjects—*nit ki* and *jaam bi*.

Nit ki refers to human beings in general. For them, language is said to be a source of enlightenment: language *yee/gindi/leeral* the *xel ma* [*mind, spirit*]

of *nit ki*. The other human figure acted upon by language requires a further gloss. *Jaam bi* is a dense sociohistorical term. In Wolof it can refer both to enslaved people and to individuals of subaltern status in the precolonial Wolof systems of endogamous caste-based hierarchy, whose bloodlines were considered polluted.¹³ In certain contexts, *jaam* can also have a religious connotation—as in English, one might also say one is the servant of the Lord. Parsing the poet's sense of *jaam* in these lines is difficult without an original context, but perhaps the different registers of this term are part of what has allowed these lines to enjoy continued currency.

Importantly, the third verse spotlights the *jaam* directly after the second verse's invocation of the more encompassing *nit*. Language's beauty is manifest in all humans, then, but perhaps especially in its work for the *jaam*. For the *jaam*, the language is said to awaken *ngor ga*, dignity. The awakening of *xel* and the restoration of *ngor* by language are not a given. Rather, they are cast as emergent qualities of language in use. Language *can* be beautiful, the lines suggest, but only to the degree that we free ourselves and others in and through it. The pairing of both *nit ki* and *jaam bi* in the two verses that are linked to the initial verse as dependent clauses is especially striking, since it suggests that merely awakening the mind of the human would not be a sufficient achievement for linguistic beauty; to be truly beautiful, a language must also undo deeply entrenched systems of oppression. Enlightenment without emancipation produces a hollow beauty indeed.

What then to make of the trajectory of these lines? It seems fairly clear that the popularity of this phrase is not a case of citation, at least not in any simple sense. The invocation of these lines and their attribution to Ka are ways of invoking and calling back to the poetry and ideas of Muusaa Ka, but not through a chain of reception that is necessarily textual. This certainly seems appropriate for Ka's poetry, which is as likely to be chanted or sung as it is to be read. The phrase itself may well be Ka's, but it also does not need to be demonstrably so to create an effect in the world.

And indeed, what is most powerful about these lines is how they have circulated in print while also remaining untethered from any print form. In a sense, my argument is simply that it may not matter whether there exists a manuscript where Muusaa Ka said this. Rather, what matters is that these lines were said, and above all that they continue to circulate, evolving and changing to suit new contexts and new demands. Often deployed to substantiate a linkage between the two major scriptural traditions of Wolof, this citation ends up demonstrating something else: a certain neighborliness that transcends textual estrangement. The actual script used here seems to matter less than the shape of the thought conveyed.

Lienau issues an invitation to scholars to “explore horizons for literary comparisons and methods that move beyond Eurocentric paradigms and disciplinary configurations.”¹⁴ By tracing *‘ajam* as a ground of comparison, her work points toward ways of responding to this welcome challenge. A focus on script helps to draw out the internal diversity of vernacular traditions. On the one hand, it brings into focus instances of textual estrangement, in which writers working in the same language are divided by the scripts they use. On the other, though, such a focus can also illuminate the ways in which literary texts and literary practices can transcend such divisions by circulating in unexpected ways and tracing enduring affinities across alphabetical boundaries.

To conclude: might the beauty of all languages be a ground for comparison? Perhaps, if one were to hear *beauty* here in harmony with the ideas expressed in the verses attributed to Ka: languages are comparable because they can be beautiful, but it all depends on what is done with them. Languages are not equal in their status, their inherent qualities, nor their worldly power, but they are radically comparable in the beauty of their capacity to enlighten and their ability to ground a practice of liberation.

In being ubiquitous and yet not self-same, these lines gesture toward other ways of practicing literary comparison. To compare a citation such as this, one needs the usual determination to pay close attention to the language of the text itself. But these lines are rarely repeated the same way twice. One also needs a certain openness to the complex movement of these lines across contexts and the ways in which their ongoing transformations form an integral part of their story. That is to say, one has to consider language closely and carefully, but not always textually. *Bépp làkk rafet na* is not merely a textual phenomenon, nor is it an oral one either. Even while recognizing the lines as a celebration of the Wolofal tradition, they also appear untethered from any one scriptural community. Perhaps phenomena such as this can help point the way toward practices of literary comparison that expand our focus beyond texts as stable material and linguistic objects to include more of the larger, holistic life of texts, their journeys across a spectrum of transformations that includes composition, publication, translation, circulation, and adaptation. Careful attention to script helps draw out all the ways in which literary texts are always more than textual.

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Comparative Literature Association. His work has appeared in such venues as *PMLA*, *Small Axe*, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, *Yale French Studies*, *Études Littéraires Africaines* and *Research in African Literatures*.

Notes

1. Annette Damayanti Lienau, *Sacred Language, Vernacular Difference: Global Arabic and Counter-Imperial Literatures* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 125.
2. Lienau, *Sacred Language, Vernacular Difference*, 125, 94.
3. Sana Camara and R. H. Mitsch, "A'jami' Literature in Senegal: The Example of Sërif Muusaa Ka, Poet and Biographer," *Research in African Literatures* 28, no. 3 (1997): 163–82.
4. Alice Chaudemanche, "Bépp Lakk Rafet Na (Toute Langue Est Belle): Imaginaire et Écriture Des Langues Dans La Littérature En Wolof," *Journée d'études Fabienne Leconte. Sociolinguistique et appropriations plurilingues : itinéraire d'une chercheuse engagée*, Université de Rouen, February 12, 2024, <https://webtv.univ-rouen.fr/permalink/v12688ad4a6e5sdx90p5/>.
5. Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of Ajami and the Muridiyya*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2016); Lienau, *Sacred Language, Vernacular Difference*.
6. The linguistic pluralism of these lines is broadly consonant with Ka's attitudes toward languages, especially as expressed in his poem *Taxmiis*. Nicholas Judt, "The Fragrant Secret: Language and Universalism in Muusaa Ka's The Wolofal Takhmīs," *Open Theology* 11, no. 1 (2025), doi:10.1515/opth-2025-0038. Ka's views in this regard had a Quranic basis, though interestingly that is not made explicit in this widely circulating citation.
7. I am very grateful to my colleagues Fallou Ngom, Alice Chaudemanche, Sana Camara, and Jeremy Dell, who each replied thoughtfully and helpfully to my queries.
8. Tobias Warner, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination: Decolonizing Literary Modernity in Senegal* (Fordham University Press, 2019), 144.
9. Boroom Yoon, "Ubbi," *Kaddu*, no. 1 (December 1971): 3.
10. Pathé Diagne, *Grammaire de Wolof moderne* (Présence Africaine, 1971).
11. Pathé Diagne, *Teerebtanu Ladab Ci Walāf: Anthologie Wolof de Littérature* (Université de Dakar, 1971), 60.
12. Boubacar Boris Diop, "Langues africaines et création littéraire," *Rubriques, Africultures*, August 25, 2010, <https://africultures.com/langues-africaines-et-creation-litteraire-9658/>.
13. Ivy Mills, "Sutura: Gendered Honor, Social Death, and the Politics of Exposure in Senegalese Literature and Popular Culture" (PhD Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2011).
14. Lienau, *Sacred Language, Vernacular Difference*, 280.