Research Article

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The Fragrant Secret: Language and Universalism in Muusaa Ka's *The Wolofal Takhmīs*

Abstract: Are all languages equal? Does the revelation of the Qur'an in Arabic elevate that language above all others? What is the goal of using language, and particularly of using it Islamically? The early twentieth-century Wolof-language poem *The Wolofal Takhmīs* takes on these questions in verse. In arguing that Wolof and Arabic are equally viable languages for Islamic poetry, the Senegalese Sufi poet Sëriñ Muusaa Ka intervenes into longstanding theological debates about the provenance and purpose of language. The primary goal of this article is to illuminate Ka's theory of language through analysis and translation of *Takhmīs*. Ka implies that the root of all languages is the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*, the nonphysical reality of the Prophet Muḥammad, and thus he claims that all languages share an equal potential and an ultimate purpose: to regain the "fragrant secret" of their Muḥammadan essence. *The Wolofal Takhmīs* offers a universalist theory of language that avoids the pitfalls of provincialism and chauvinism. I consider the potential impact of this theory on both intra-Islamic theological debates about language and contemporary academic conversations about the viability of "universalism" after European colonialism.

Keywords: Sufism, Sufi poetry, African literature, philosophy of language, universalism, postcolonialism, Murīdiyya, Shaykh Amadou Bamba, Senegal, Wolof

Universalism is out of fashion in the Euro-American academy. This is not new: twenty-five years ago, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu was already writing that "there is…increasingly skepticism regarding… the possibility of universal canons of thought and action."[1] This skepticism is historically well-founded, as "more often than not, the alleged universals have been home-grown particulars. Not unnaturally, the practice has earned universals a bad name."[2] Wiredu is referring to the longstanding (and still ongoing) tendency amongst Euro-American thinkers to treat Western cultures as universal reference points to which all others ought to aspire – a stance summarized by Hegel's famous claim that Western Europe is "the land of the elevation of the particular to the universal."[3] This chauvinistic faux-universalism was (and is) frequently tethered to assumptions about the superiority of European *languages*. Per Souleymane Bachir Diagne, the line of thinking goes as follows: "we can stipulate that a given language is universal and thereby overarches all the others. This stipulation involves declaring that the Greek language [and its supposed European descendants] is the Logos (simultaneously the Word, Reason and Being) outside of which other languages are merely

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1 Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 1.
2 Ibid., 2.
3 As cited and reproduced in: Ogunnaike, "From Heathen to Sub-Human," 799.

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'blah blah blah', which is why we call them 'barbarian.'"[4] Thus "in general, an imperial language frames itself as the center, as the incarnation of the logos."[5] European thinkers like the twentieth-century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas therefore argued (in Diagne's paraphrase) that "cultures must be 'oriented' by the universal, which is necessarily situated in the dimension of 'verticality', above them. And what comprises the exceptional character of 'Western civilization', what prevents it from being just one 'province' among the provinces of the world, is the fact that it alone stands vertically, in the direction of the universal."[6]

In response to this chauvinism-as-universalism and the horrors it has wrought, many postcolonial thinkers have recoiled from claims of "universalism." As Wiredu puts it, "a successful exercise in conceptual decolonization will usually be an unmasking of a spurious universal."[7] With regard to language, the French literary critic Pascale Casanova goes further: "there is only...one way to effectively fight back against a dominant language, and this is to adopt an 'atheist' position and, therefore, to not *believe* in the prestige of this language, to be persuaded of the total arbitrariness of its domination and its authority."[8] But while such suspicion of universalism is understandable in light of European abuses of the concept, it has led to an ironic and disturbing turn in Euro-American scholarship, particularly in the fields of African and Islamic Studies. Many ostensibly well-intentioned Euro-American scholars, eager to correct the faux-universalism of their predecessors, have elevated the principle of *anti*-universalism to the status of a new universal principle. Because past European "universals" turned out to be particulars in disguise, it is assumed that *all* universals are only dressed-up particulars. Anyone who insists on a universal claim (other than the claim that all universals are particulars, of course) is considered to be either naïve or ill-intentioned. A Muslim says that "there is no god but God" – and rather than asking what she means by this evidently universal claim, many Euro-American scholars ask how her social conditioning *produced* this belief. This approach ironically replicates the paternalistic dynamic that it was meant to neutralize: universal claims made by African or Islamic scholars are not taken at face-value, but instead are downgraded to the level of contextually determined particulars, no matter how clearly the African or Islamic thinkers in question insist that they mean what they say.

We are thus faced with a challenge: to come up with a way of thinking about "the universal" that does not reproduce European imperial patterns of thought. Wiredu took up this challenge in his 1996 book *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, and Diagne and Jean-Loup Amselle grappled with it more recently in their exchange *In Search of Africa(s): Universalism and Decolonial Thought*. Diagne is one of the few scholars in the Euro-American academy to take the challenge seriously and propose a possible resolution: a *universalism of translation*. In Amselle's accurate description, Diagne's "universalism is based on the possibility of a translation, that is, on the infinite translatability of all cultures into one other."[9] Diagne follows in the footsteps of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who (per Diagne) argued that "we are now living in a world (what I call the post-Bandung world) where there is no longer any 'overarching universal', but where we need to aim for a 'lateral universal', based on encounter and reciprocity."[10] In "the post-Bandung world" (the world after European faux-universalism), the question of the universal must be "flattened out"; we must "[leave] behind the universalism of the *Logos*."[11] On this point, Amselle agrees: "this is the new 'matrix of universalism', with its postulate of principles common to many cultures, that I would like to propose, based not on some speculative reflection, but on the study of concrete situations tackled both by empirical field study and by a close analysis of the texts that discuss it."[12] Wiredu takes this "lateral" universalism further, arguing that "it is...nothing other than our common basic biology that underlies the particular mental affinity of all the

4 Diagne and Amselle, *In Search of Africa(s)*, 20–1.

5 Diagne, *De Langue à Langue*, 17. The translation from French, like that of all quotations from *De Langue à Langue*, is my own.

6 Diagne and Amselle, *In Search of Africa(s)*, 23.

7 Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 5.

8 As cited and reproduced in: Diagne, *De Langue à Langue*, 17.

9 Diagne and Amselle, *In Search of Africa(s)*, 12–3.

10 Ibid., 24.

11 Ibid., 24–5.

12 Diagne and Amselle, *In Search of Africa(s)*, 16.

members of the human race."[13] There is no universal *above* humans; there is only the universal *between* humans.

But Diagne also identifies (via the Islamic tradition) a *vertical* axis of translation – and here he differs significantly from Amselle and Wiredu. Amselle writes that "Diagne defines two kinds of translations: a vertical translation and a horizontal translation. The former concerns the reception of the suras of the Qur'an by the prophet Muḥammad, this revelation being conceived as a translation of the divine language. The latter relates to the translation of different cultures and languages into one another."[14] In Diagne's Islamic theory of vertical translation, the universal aspect of humans and our languages is found not in the relationships between them, but rather in their common point of origin. This Islamic vertical axis is crucially different from the one peddled by European faux-universalism. The post-Enlightenment European model elevates one particular to the status of the universal (and thus to the top of the vertical axis), while the Islamic model posits a universal that contains within it *all* particulars, without privileging or flattening any of them. As Oludamini Ogunnaike writes, the peak of the European vertical axis is an "immanent ideal," and as such it "has to overrepresent itself as universal and thus define itself over and against other immanent forms." The peak of the Islamic vertical axis, by contrast, is a "transcendent ideal," and thus it "can admit equal participation by different forms. The colors of the rainbow are all equally light, but not equally red; the points on the surface of a sphere are all equidistant from the sphere's center, but not from its north pole."[15] The Martinican philosopher and poet Aimé Césaire draws the distinction beautifully: "there are two paths to doom: by segregation, by walling yourself up in a particular, or by dilution, by thinning off into the emptiness of the 'universal.' I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all."[16] It is this vertically positioned universal that makes lateral communication possible. Different languages are like branches of the same tree, and their universal source is the trunk, which contains within it all the possible shapes expressed in each branch. Attempting to translate between languages without going through their source is like trying to make branches touch without going through the trunk. Translation cannot go directly from language to language; it must go from language *to source* to language.

But although Diagne introduces the concept of "vertical translation," he finally chooses to seek the universal laterally. He returns to the argument that we should "decenter in order to open ourselves to the principle of humanity,"[17] that "we must start work on a universal of the encounter, a result of the plurality of languages."[18] The possibility of vertical translation remains in the background, but Diagne does not make it the premise of his search. Perhaps this is because many of Diagne's interlocutors (particularly in the French academy, in which both works that I cite were originally published) are unwilling to listen to his discussion of the vertical. Amselle makes this clear: "regarding the descent of the Qur'an, Diagne elaborates a whole set of theological ideas which it is not within my competence to judge and which, as I said before, do not concern me at all since I am not a believer."[19] This is an extraordinarily inhospitable and revealing response. Amselle assumes that Diagne's Islamic ideas (his "vertical" ideas) can only speak to "believers," whereas his European secular ideas (his "horizontal" ideas) can speak to everyone. If we are to discuss the universal, we must do so on the terms of Euro-American epistemology, for this is the universal epistemology. How different is this really from Hegel's claim that Europe is "the land of the elevation of the particular to the universal?" Old wine has been put in a new bottle, and whereas the label used to say "civilizing mission," it now reads "secular postcolonialism."

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13 Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 34.
14 Diagne and Amselle, *In Search of Africa(s)*, 13.
15 Ogunnaike, "Al-Hayā'."
16 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Ogunnaike, "All Muhammad, All the Time," 106.
17 Diagne, *De Langue à Langue*, 166.
18 Diagne and Amselle, *In Search of Africa(s)*, 50.
19 Ibid., 69.

Writing in Senegal in the early twentieth century, the Wolof-language Islamic poet Sëriñ Muusaa Ka was not subject to Amselle's terms. As a young man, Ka became a disciple of the Senegalese Islamic poet, scholar, and saint Shaykh Amadou Bamba (known in Wolof and in this article as Sëriñ Tuubaa), founder of the Murīdiyya Sufi order (*ṭarīqa*). Ka was trained in the art of Islamic poetry by Sëriñ Tuubaa, and initially he planned to follow in the footsteps of his *shaykh* and write poetry in classical Arabic. Upon Sëriñ Tuubaa's request, however, Ka instead wrote in Wolof. Ka felt no need to justify the concept of a vertical axis, as its existence was assumed by his Muslim audience. But Ka did encounter a different inhospitable assumption: that Arabic is a superior language in which to compose Islamic poetry. In the early 1930s, the scholar Aadi Ture wrote a Wolof-language poem in which he explicitly argued that "Arabic is gold, while Wolof is copper."[20] In response, Ka wrote *Takhmīs bub Wolofal* (*The Wolofal Takhmīs*).

On first glance, *Takhmīs* has the appearance of a polemic. Ka proclaims in the first stanza that "the likes of Bamba, a Wolof, the Arabs simply don't have it,"[21] and goes on to say that "when we gather on Judgement Day, the Arabs' speech will be vain/But when I speak of Sëriñ Tuubaa, the Arabs will lose their refrain."[22] Such lines have led some scholars – both in West Africa and in the Euro-American academy – to read *Takhmīs* as an early example of Senegalese linguistic nationalism. Saliou Ndiaye tells us that *Takhmīs* has "long been considered a poem through which the author [Ka] makes himself the defender of his national language,"[23] and that "the first impression [of Ka's project] is that he is defending the Wolof language against those who scorn its use in writing."[24] A close reading of the poem within its Islamic context, however, reveals that Ka has bigger things on his mind.[25] As Ndiaye writes: "resituated in its context of the quest for the Essential Reality (*al-Ḥaqīqa*) of *Tasawwuf*, [the poem] seems to be the vehicle for a more elevated message, even a more *universal* one, than that which presents itself in the initial reading. Does the poet not suggest, in raising his Black master to the summit of all the spiritual values of the revealed religions, the meaning of a certain universalism?"[26] What is Sëriñ Muusaa Ka's universalism, and what role does language play in it?

A cursory reading of the poem might yield the following response: all languages (and all people) come from God, and therefore they are all equal. This view has some significant precedent in the Islamic tradition. The twelfth-century Persian theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī took the Qur'anic verse which says that God "taught Adam the names, all of them"[27] to mean that "Adam indeed was taught all the languages of the earth, and his descendants came to prefer one over the others in the course of time."[28] The eleventh-century scholar Ibn Ḥazm made a similar argument.[29] But Ibn Ḥazm and al-Rāzī were in the minority amongst medieval Islamic scholars. As Kees Versteegh writes, "the religious role of Arabic as the language chosen by God for His last revelation" generally meant for medieval theologians and grammarians that "the superiority of this language was therefore taken for granted."[30] Nevertheless, some modern scholars have taken up al-Rāzī and Ibn Hazm's view, such as the Moroccan writer Abdelfattah Kilito: "all languages are equal in God's eyes. The Quran is clear on this point: each people has its own language and each prophet delivers his message

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20 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World*, 262.

21 Ka, *Takhmīs bub Wolofal*, 1:5. For all citations from *Takhmīs*, I list stanza and verse numbers rather than page numbers, as the page numbers for different editions vary. All translations are my own, and a full translation of the poem can be found at the end of this essay.

22 Ibid., 8:1–2.

23 Ndiaye, "Le Poème 'Taxmiis,'" 24. The translation from French, like that of all quotations from Ndiaye's essay, is my own.

24 Ibid., 34.

25 Linguistic nationalism did not become a major theme in Wolof literature until the middle of the twentieth century. French schooling had to take root before the demand for Wolof linguistic nationalism could become apparent, and anticolonial politics had to build power before linguistic nationalism could emerge as a movement.

26 Ibid., 24.

27 Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, sura 2:31.

28 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: ibid., commentary on sura 2:31.

29 Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III*, 175.

30 Versteegh, "The Arabic Linguistic Tradition," 205.

in the language of his people: 'We sent no Messenger except with the language of his people, that he may enlighten them' [14:4]."[31]

There are lines in Ka's *Takhmīs* that can be used to support this theory, like the following rhetorical question: "is it not because of God's loving-mercy that languages separate?"[32] But a closer analysis reveals a subtler theory. Consider the following line: "all that ascends for the Messenger of God a fragrant secret will regain."[33] In context, the word "all" refers to all languages, or alternatively to all uses of a given language. Per Ka, the purpose of language is to "[ascend] for the Messenger of God." To make sense of this claim, we must begin by asking what exactly Ka means by "the Messenger of God." A clue lies in the poem's final stanza, in which Ka describes the Prophet Muḥammad as "the reason why his Lord told the children of Adam, '*Be!*'"[34] Here, Ka is invoking what Sufis refer to as the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*, the essential, nonphysical reality of the Prophet Muḥammad. According to Michel Chodkiewicz, the concept "assigns [the Prophet] a cosmic function beyond his historical role."[35] This "cosmic function" is that of the *logos*, the "reality out of which all things were created."[36] Sufi thinkers ground this idea in a variety of scriptural sources: the Qur'anic verse which says that God "created you [every person] from a single soul"[37]; the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet says that "I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay"[38]; and the *ḥadīth qudsī* (a statement of God revealed by the Prophet) in which God tells the Prophet that "but for your sake I would not have created the spheres!"[39] Ka refers directly to this *ḥadīth qudsī* when he says that Muḥammad is "the reason why his Lord told the children of Adam, '*Be!*'" While the phrase *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* does not appear in the Qur'an or canonical *ḥadīth* collections – which led polemicists such as the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century thinker Ibn Taymīyya to label it a reprehensible innovation (*bid'a*) – the concept has been invoked by prominent Islamic scholars ever since the first centuries of Islam.[40] In the eighth century, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq identified the Prophet with "the light of pre-eternity out of which God created all beings."[41] In the ninth century, Sahl al-Tustarī echoed the same idea.[42] So while it is true that the twelfth- to thirteenth-century thinker Ibn 'Arabī and his subsequent interpreters were the first to use the term *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* and unspool its theological implications, Ka would undoubtedly contend that the concept has been present in the Islamic tradition since its inception.

Ka's unmistakable invocation of the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* in the final stanza must be read back into his entire poem: every time Ka mentions the Prophet Muḥammad, he is referring not only to the historical figure who lived in sixth- to seventh-century Arabia, but also (and primarily) to the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*. Ka's claim that the purpose of language is to "[ascend] for the Messenger of God" must therefore be understood in light of the profound theological implications of this Islamic *logos*-doctrine. Ogunnaike explains that "because everything is created from God, everything is God. Because everything is created from the light of the Prophet...everything is this light...In this perspective, the fact that the many comes from the One means that the many are still but one...The Muḥammadan reality, as the Logos...is the key to understanding this relationship: the presence of the many in the One and the One in the many."[43] While some theologians argue that these claims jeopardize the principle of God's incomparability – as reflected in the Qur'anic claim that "naught is like unto Him"[44] – Ibn 'Arabī and the theological school which followed him respond that the

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31 Kilito, *The Tongue of Adam,* 22.

32 Ka, *Takhmīs bub Wolofal*, 9:1.

33 Ibid., 8:4.

34 Ibid., 23:3.

35 Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 66.

36 Ibid., 69.

37 Sura 4:1 in *The Study Quran*.

38 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 60.

39 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*, 125.

40 Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 60.

41 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: ibid, 65.

42 Ibid., 65–6.

43 Ogunnaike, *Deep Knowledge*, 157.

44 Surah 42:11 in *The Study Quran*.

Prophet is the liminal reality (*barzakh*) that paradoxically bridges God's transcendence (*tanzīh*) and immanence (*tashbīh*): everything is God and yet no one thing is like Him, for each maintains its delimited identity.

If everything is created from the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*, then it follows that all languages are created from this prime matter. The Prophet Muḥammad, in the words of a *ḥadīth*, possesses *"jawāmi' al-kalim,"* the gathering-together of all possible speech.[45] Ibn 'Arabī makes this explicit, writing that the Prophet Muḥammad is "the Word which divides and unites" as well as "the Word which totalizes."[46] Ibn 'Arabī's use of "word" (*kalima* in Arabic) has a double meaning. In Islamic cosmology, all existent things are God's *words*, because the Qur'an tells us that God creates via speech: "when He decrees a thing, He only says to it, 'Be!' and it is (*kun fayakūn*)."[47] Thus Ibn 'Arabī concludes that the cosmos "is all letters, words, chapters, and verses, so it is the Great Koran."[48] In one sense, then, for Ibn 'Arabī to say that the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* is the "Word which divides and unites" is just another way of saying that it is the source of all creation. It is also plausible, however, to read Ibn 'Arabī as using the more colloquial meaning of *kalima*: the *Ḥaqīqa Muhamadiyya* is the source of the words that make up our various languages. Ka's invocation of the Muḥammadan Reality thus implies an unspoken claim that all languages come from the Messenger of God. Furthermore, the liminal function of the Muḥammadan Reality allows Ka to affirm that although all languages have the same origin, each maintains its distinct identity – just like all people.

This theory sheds new light on Ka's rhetorical question: "is it not because of God's loving-mercy that languages separate?" The Wolof word that I translate as "loving-mercy" is *yërmaande*, which is frequently used in Wolof-language Islamic literature as a translation of the Qur'anic term *raḥma*. Far more than mere "mercy" (as it is often translated), *raḥma* is synonymous with the act of creation, of bringing something to life. As Ibn 'Arabī frequently notes, *raḥma* shares a root with the word for womb (*raḥim*). Pablo Beneito writes that "the notion of *raḥma* is therefore directly linked to maternity, and because of this, compassion is associated with the maternal condition on the natural plane and to the matrical, creative condition on the metaphysical plane."[49] Thus when Ka refers to God's *yërmaande*, he is also referring to God's act of creation, and so his rhetorical question can be re-rendered as: "is it not because of God's act of creation that languages separate?" And since we have established that creation occurs via the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*, we can re-render the line once more: "is it not because of the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* that languages separate?"

We are now ready to revisit the poem's central line: "all that ascends for the Messenger of God a fragrant secret will regain." The plain meaning of the line is that all languages are (or should be) *for* the Prophet. However, when we read "the Messenger of God" as the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*, we remember that all languages also *come from* the Prophetic Reality. Ka's line thus implies both a descent and an ascent: all language descends from the Prophet Muḥammad, and any language that reascends to its Muḥammadan origin realizes its inner beauty. This beauty is inherent from one perspective and conditional from another: all languages have the same origin and thus have equal potential, but each has the task of *realizing* its Muḥammadan origin. Here we can again draw an analogy between languages and human individuals. Every human being contains the potential for perfection – but this does not mean that every human being *is* perfect. Indeed, what makes the Prophet Muḥammad unique is precisely his full *actualization* of the human state. So it is for languages: every language has an equal *potential* for Muḥammadan perfection, but that does not mean that every language is always *actualizing* this potential to the same degree.

So how can a language regain its fragrant secret? One possible route is revelation: "And it's because of the language of Musa that the Torah tastes so sweet/And it's because of the language of Jesus that the Gospels are his finest feat/And it's because of the Psalms that David's tongue is like honeyed mead/Whenever they studied the Psalms, people, *jinn*, and spirits professed *tawḥīd*."[50] Per Ka, prophets' languages ennoble their revelations (Musa's Hebrew gave the Torah its sweetness) and their revelations in turn ennoble their languages (the

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45 Sunnah.com, "Sahih al-Bukhari 7013."

46 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 70–1.

47 Sura 2:117 in *The Study Quran*.

48 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabî."

49 Beneito, "The Presence of Superlative Compassion (*Rahamût*)."

50 Ka, *Takhmīs*, 10:1–4.

Psalms gave David's Hebrew the taste of "honeyed mead"). The other possible route is poetry, and particularly poetry in praise of the Prophet. Ka spends much of *Takhmīs* praising the Prophet; despite its polemical tendencies, *Takhmīs* properly belongs to the genre of Islamic praise poetry (*madīḥ* in Arabic, *tàgg/bàkk* in Wolof). Considering Ka's theory of language, we can assume that he wrote such praise poetry because he believed that it could help the Wolof language realize its Muḥammadan core. According to Ogunnaike, praising the Prophet is an efficacious way for a language to "find its origin" because praise is synonymous with being: "the act of Being itself is understood as a kind of ontological praise, and the Prophet, as the greatest of these acts of praise; so, in praising the Prophet, the poets are imitating and participating in this Divine act of existentiation itself. God praises Himself through the praise of the existence of the Prophet Muḥammad, and the Sufi poets respond in kind by praising God through the praise of the Prophet."[51] In praising the Prophet, Ka and Sufi poets like him mirror God's creative act; they throw their being and their language back to its point of origin. As Ka reminds us in the poem's final line, praise of the Prophet is not merely a human activity, but an angelic one.[52] It lifts the human up the vertical axis, bringing him closer to the Divine.

This helps to explain why Ka praises the Prophet – but why does he also spend much of *Takhmīs* praising Sëriñ Tuubaa? It turns out that the two acts are one. According to the members of his *ṭarīqa* (known simply as "the *murīds*"), Sëriñ Tuubaa loved and knew the Prophet so deeply that he became absorbed in him (*fanā'* in Arabic, *jeex* in Wolof). Various metaphors are used to explain this: *murīd* poets speak of Sëriñ Tuubaa drowning in the ocean of the Prophet, and a common colloquial metaphor in Senegal is that of sugar dissolving in hot tea.[53] Bamba's absorption in the Prophet makes it impossible to separate the two. It is thus understandable, Ndiaye argues, "that in the eyes of Muusaa Ka, the *shaykh* and the Prophet compose one single and identical person. The incarnation has been completed."[54] This is why Ka writes in *Takhmīs* that Sëriñ Tuubaa's "face resembles the Prophet's – even Meccans admit he's a clone!/The sweet scent of Muḥammad, servant of God, on Bamba's wind is blown."[55] To praise Sëriñ Tuubaa is to praise the Prophet, and to praise the Prophet is to elevate a language to its Muḥammadan origin.

Does the equal potential of all languages imply that each can realize its Muḥammadan origin through both Islamic and non-Islamic usage? Put differently, can an analogy be drawn between Ka's theory of linguistic parity (many languages, equal potential) and a theory of epistemic parity (many epistemes, potentially equal validity)? In Ka's almost-entirely Muslim milieu, this question was not urgent. But my goal in this essay is not only to summarize Ka's theology in *his* context – it is also to explore its potential implications for *our* context, namely that of the contemporary Euro-American academy. As Diagne has demonstrated, modern European claims of possessing a superior language are necessarily accompanied by claims of possessing a superior epistemology and intellectual tradition. Levinas' assertion of European linguistic uniqueness is complemented by his claim that "humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest – all the exotic – is dance."[56] So if we are to use Ka's theory of language to disturb claims of linguistic superiority, we should ask whether his theory likewise allows us to disturb claims of epistemic superiority.

The answer depends on how we conceive of the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya.* There are certainly similar *logos*-doctrines in other religious and philosophical systems, such as the Christian doctrine of Christ-as-*logos* and the Buddhist concept of Buddha-nature.[57] If we wish to read *Takhmīs* against the grain of epistemic exclusivity, we

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51 Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection*, 53.

52 Ka, *Takhmīs*, 23:5.

53 As an example of the metaphor of drowning, consider these lines from Ka's poem *Xarnu Bi:* "Bamba is an ocean that tumbles into an ocean/He found an ocean within that ocean which told him: 'here it is!'/He filled himself with lights until he became a self-evident light/He returns to soak the century." See: Ka, "Xarnu Bi," 131 (70:1–4). The translation from Wolof is my own.

54 Ndiaye, "Le Poème 'Taxmiis,'" 31.

55 Ka, *Takhmīs*, 16:2–3. The idea that a saint can carry the 'perfume' of the Prophet is also found in the Arabic-language poetry of Ka's contemporary and compatriot, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. In one poem, Niasse writes that all Muslim saints want "to catch a whiff of my fragrance/And why not? For my essence today, is the same as Muhammad's/His secret flows through my frame and visage." As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Ogunnaike, "All Muhammad, All the Time," 96.

56 Martley, *French Philosophers in Conversation*, 18.

57 Ogunnaike, *Deep Knowledge,* 40.

would have to argue that the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* is a translatable ur-reality: the very same *logos* that Sufis call the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* has different names in other religions, and "that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." If this is the case, then languages can realize their Muḥammadan origin without calling it by that name. The alternative is that the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* is not just one possible name for the *logos*, but rather that reality's *proper* name and inseparable essence: to be realized, the *logos* must be identified with Muḥammad. If this is the case, then all languages, though equal in potential, must be used Islamically to realize that potential fully.

Ndiaye argues for a reading that embraces epistemic (and religious) pluralism: "at bottom, does he [Ka] not hope to dissociate the jumble of habits, customs, and manners of speech from a quintessence, an essential reality (*Ḥaqīqa*) towards which all virtues extend?...the sacred has neither a single race nor language, it is simply expressed differently by different languages and different prophets. It is this *universal dimension of religions* that Muusaa Ka sings."[58] Ndiaye's main evidence is the stanza in which Ka praises the languages of Moses, Jesus, and David; though Ndiaye is fully aware that these are all prophets in the Islamic tradition, he nevertheless reads the stanza as a gesture towards the "universal dimension of religions." But Ka's invocation of multiple prophets can also be read in the other direction. Ronald Nettler explains that according to Ibn ʿArabī,

> each individual prophet...*is* a particular *kalima* [word]—or, each *kalima* a prophet...There is an exception, however, in the case of Muḥammad. Here, this prophet has been given 'all of the words, which are the referents of Adam's names' and, therefore, he incorporates in himself the entirety of meanings of the divine names...Muḥammad is here, then, the repository and expression of the full metaphysical truth, just as in the more obvious sense he is 'seal of the prophets' (unique in his *finality*)...If Adam is 'inferior' to Muḥammad in Ibn ʿArabi's scheme, it is in this sense.[59]

Chodkiewicz concisely summarizes this idea by saying that Muḥammad "is the sum of all the prophetic types and consequently integrates within himself the particular virtues of each."[60] All other prophets are "simply aspects" of Muḥammad.[61] Thus Moses, Jesus, and David are fully contained within Muḥammad, but Muḥammad is not fully contained in any of them. While a language (or an episteme) can be significantly elevated by infusion of the Mosaic, Christian, or Davidian aspects of the Muḥammadan Reality, full realization is only possible through an infusion of the Whole.

Whether Ka's theory of linguistic equality leads to a theory of epistemic equality thus remains an open question. But we should not need to definitively answer it in order to take seriously the new avenues that Ka's theology opens for our own intellectual debates. My goal in putting Ka's poem in conversation with the work of Diagne, Amselle, and Wiredu is to follow Henry Corbin's injunction to "bring Islamic philosophy [and theology] out of the ghetto of orientalism."[62] According to his student James Morris, Corbin was "referring above all to the fundamental need to 'translate' and communicate the universal masterpieces of Islamic thought into forms and contexts where they could again inspire a larger circle of properly apt readers, so that they could again serve the wider, perennial human purposes for which they had originally been composed and intended."[63] Ka's *Takhmīs* is one such universal masterpiece, and there is no justification beyond a rebranded commitment to Western epistemological hegemony to bar it from academic discussions of linguistic diversity and universalism. Nor should our engagement with the poem be limited to political and historical analysis, to reading *Takhmīs* as a "data point" to understand what was going on in Senegal in the 1930s. The reason to study Islamic theology is not merely to understand "what they thought then" – it is to reassess what we ought to think now. If we wish to take up this goal, then we must endeavor to create a new academic public through our work: a public that reads masterpieces of Islamic theology as contributions to conversations of universal importance; a public that rejects the needless self-denial of Amselle's assertion that Islamic ideas "do not concern me at all

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58 Ndiaye, "Le Poème 'Taxmiis,'" 36; my emphasis added.

59 Nettler, *Sufi Metaphysics and Qurʾānic Prophets*, 180.

60 Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 80.

61 Ibid., 87.

62 As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Morris, "Religion After Religions?," 29.

63 Ibid.

since I am not a believer"; a public willing to consider that while Sëriñ Muusaa Ka does not need us, we may need him. I hope that my translation of *Takhmīs* in the following pages of this journal serves as a small resource for this new academic public, which we might optimistically suggest is in the process of being born.

The Wolofal Takhmīs[64]
By Sëriñ Muusaa Ka

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Lovingly-Merciful
May the peace and blessings of God be upon our lord and master Muḥammad, and upon his family and companions, a complete and utter peace

If you listen today we will be charitable to those good folk
Who say Wolof[65] is no good. Arrogance debases: it is a yoke
That makes you boast your lineage, crow over your kinfolk.
Not us: we're humble, our pride's in Shaykh Bamba, his praises we invoke
And the likes of Bamba, a Wolof, the Arabs[66] simply don't have it.[67]

We renew our gratitude! Bamba has given a way
To devote ourselves, to stay by his side—if not, we'd surely stray
Like truth-concealers,[68] the treacherous ones, who wander till they decay
Not us: we're in Islam, we spread the word, we make beautiful whatever we say[69]
And what we say in our poems, the Arabs simply don't say it.

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64 In the Arabic poetic tradition, *takhmīs* is the name for two different types of poetry. The first is a poem written in units of five verses – hence the derivation from the Arabic root *kh-m-s*, meaning five. But *takhmīs* is also the name for a poetic form in which one poet inserts his own verses into a previous poet's work, thereby reinforcing, supplementing, or sparring with the original author's verses. Ka's *Takhmīs bub Wolofal* only technically abides by the first of these meanings: each stanza is composed of five lines, with the poem following a rhyme scheme of *aaaab, ccccb, ddddb,* etc. But while Ka's *Takhmīs* is not an insertion of new verses into another author's poem, it nevertheless flirts with the second meaning of the term. The poem is a direct response to verses by the Wolof-language poet Aadi Ture which proclaimed the superiority of Arabic over Wolof. While Ka does not quote Ture's verses, he can nevertheless be read as implicitly inserting his own words into a poetic debate, intervening in an ongoing scholarly conversation. See: Ndiaye, "Le Poème 'Taxmiis,'" 32; and Kennedy, "Takhmīs."
65 Saliou Ndiaye convincingly argues that *Takhmīs* leverages "two different usages of the word 'Wolof.'" The first possible meaning – which, per Ndiaye, is the one intended here in the poem's second line – refers to the Wolof language, and more specifically to the use of this language for writing Islamic poetry. Thus the people "who say Wolof is no good" are those who say that it is no good for Islamic poetry specifically. The second possible meaning of 'Wolof' in the poem is simply 'Black person.' Ndiaye writes that "in this language [Wolof], in opposition to white, the word 'Wolof' is also used to designate the Black person." Thus when Ka refers to 'Wolof' people, he is sometimes referring to speakers of the language and at other times to all Black Africans (or all Black African Muslims). See: Ndiaye, "Le Poème 'Taxmiis,'" 35.
66 When Ka refers to "Arabs" (using the Wolof word *yaaram*), he should not be understood as indicting all Arab peoples, and certainly should not be read as criticizing Islamic poets who write in Arabic (such as his *shaykh*, Sëriñ Tuubaa). Instead, Ka uses *"yaaram"* here to designate North Africans who look down on Wolof Muslims and their language. Furthermore, *"yaaram"* is also the Wolof word for saint (*walī Allah* in Arabic, a "friend of God"), a double meaning that Ka brilliantly exploits in this line: in addition to claiming that there is no Arab like Sëriñ Tuubaa, Ka asserts that there is no *saint* who can match his *shaykh*. The line is thus both a jab at those who take excessive pride in Arab identity as well as a repudiation of anyone who would exclude Sëriñ Tuubaa from the pantheon of the greatest Muslim saints.
67 Ka ends every stanza with the third-person singular pronoun *"ko,"* which means he, she, or it (Wolof pronouns make no distinction between the three). Ndiaye argues that this choice carries symbolic weight: "the poet consistently uses it [the pronoun 'ko'] to evoke or point to the object of his speech. This places him consistently in his preferred position, that of the speaker and griot (*géwel*)." I have tried to preserve this feature of the original poem by ending many stanzas of my translation with "it." See: Ndiaye, "Le Poème 'Taxmiis,'" 32.
68 I have translated the Wolof word *yééféer* (which is a derivation of the Arabic *kāfir*) as "truth-concealers" rather than the more commonly used "disbelievers." The Arabic word and its Qur'anic usage imply something far more than simply a non-Muslim.
69 The Wolof word *sàdd*, which I translate as "make beautiful," is the equivalent of the Arabic root *ḥ-s-n* (as in *iḥsān*).

And the servants ought to thank, for God said, *"fāshkurō"*[70]
And ought to keep on thanking, till our gratitude's all aglow
And the servants ought to endure, for God said *"fāṣbirō"*[71]
It's best to get going, get out of this world, for God said *"infirō"*[72]
So take refuge, thank, be patient: you'll have what our peers omit.

By God, I've made up my mind to cling to Aḥmadu
The greatest of God's creations[73]—that is Muḥammadu
No vessel holds him in, his scent spreads right on through
Take the advice of the masters, sing praise for Aḥmadu!
Tell those who disregard him, "I cling to him, we are knit!"

I try to keep it eloquent, but when I sing I feel happiness surge
Praise and tears merge, oh my champion! Heart-pounding, I'm on the verge
And just when tears become habit, then blessings flood out, I submerge
My breathing cuts off, my courage lies flat—then it spasms, let life reemerge
But now I'm alone, my companion has left me: we are split.[74]

Say to those who use poems to debase and make me maligned
Tell them, "indeed, all of you are deaf, and dumb, and blind!"[75]
The blind's impression is fleeting—if you can see, don't lose your mind!
Stretch your beggars' tins to Shaykh Bamba,[76] the one man of his kind
Don't sing for others or you'll miss him—they are all unfit!

And the poet sings of Muṣṭafā, though he surpasses all praise
We slam the doors of his detractors: they won't sing even one phrase!
As for Muusaa, the sea crashes upon him in waves of meaning that he relays
In this language: for you all are Wolof, though my Arabic could surely amaze
Bamba is a Wolof who surpasses the Arabs—more than just a bit!

When we gather on Judgement Day, the Arabs' speech will be vain
But when I speak of Sëriñ Tuubaa, the Arabs will lose their refrain
The Wolof body, the Arab body, all speech will be set on one plane
All that ascends for the Messenger of God a fragrant secret will regain[77]
The milk that I pour out, the Arabs simply can't muster it![78]

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70 *Fāshkurō*: "give thanks," second person plural imperative. This command appears many times in the Qur'an, though never with the *f* prefix that Ka has given it here. See: Qur'an 2:152, 2:172, 16:114, 29:17, 34:15. I have chosen to leave *fāshkurō, fāṣbirō*, and *infirō* in the original Arabic, as Ka does the same in his poem.

71 *Fāṣbirō*: "be patient," second person plural imperative. See: Qur'an 3:200, 7:87, 7:128, 8:46, 38:6, 52:16, 52:48.

72 *Infirō,* "go forth," second person plural imperative. See: Qur'an 4:71, 9:38, 9:41.

73 Here Ka uses Arabic: *"khayru khalqi Allāh."*

74 This line refers to Sëriñ Tuubaa's death in 1927, a few years before the composition of *Takhmīs*.

75 Here Ka uses Arabic: *"innakum 'amā wa ṣammun m'a al-bakum."* This is an adaptation of Qur'an 2:18, 2:171, 6:39.

76 This metaphor draws on the West African Islamic educational practice in which children in Qur'anic school go door-to-door begging in order to instill humility. For more on this practice, see: Ware, *The Walking Qur'an.*

77 In Wolof: *lu jog ngir Rasūl Allahi baatin ba saf xorom.* The word *"jog"* means to stand up or to rise, while the word *"ngir"* connotes the reason for which an action is taken. Thus Ka claims that any use of language which ascends to the *Ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* – which, as we have seen in my analysis, is also the *origin* of all language – realizes its true purpose.

78 In the Islamic tradition, milk is often a symbol for knowledge, and particularly for knowledge of God. This derives from a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet tells of a dream in which he was given a bowl of milk and explains that the milk symbolized knowledge. See: Sunnah.com, "Sahih al-Bukhari 7006."

Is it not because of God's loving-mercy that languages[79] separate?
If it were not to single out the Messenger, the tongues would all conflate
It was because of the Prophet's virtue that the Qur'an did emanate
In Arabic, the language of his ancestors, the tribe of the Quraysh
So the *furqān*[80] is the best of the Arabs: give full attention to it!

And it's because of the language of Musa that the Torah tastes so sweet
And it's because of the language of Jesus that the Gospels are his finest feat
And it's because of the Psalms that David's tongue is like honeyed mead
Whenever they studied the Psalms, people, *jinn*, and spirits professed *tawḥīd*[81]
If you understand what I'm saying, you won't talk down to a poet.

I learned at the river of Kayre and of Mbay Jaxate[82]
They waded in Bamba's ocean until sweet water sprayed
The *shaykh* whisked God's ocean till it thickened like marinade
The *shaykh* troubled the depths, blessings flowed without delay
Shaykh Bamba's the outer and inner[83]—he breaks the distinction to bits!

He doesn't strike women, doesn't anger the old, doesn't hurt anyone in town
He never has misunderstandings, his family don't drag each other down
The fruits of his appearance, the secrets of his core[84]—there's no separation to be found
He deprives no person of the depths, nor of what's above the ground
What he has—outer and inner—there's no one and nothing that can break it.

I have unfurled God's protection, oh you who cast me low
Now you know that it's for Shaykh Bamba that I've become a *griot*[85]
He uproots his enemies, makes them pure, leaves no filth left to show
Amongst all his people, be they servants or those who are free to go
I'm his: my job is to gather *murīds*, to follow and submit.

For when a wrestler rises above the rest, to him they all show respect[86]
Bamba's faith never broke, even when his hair with grey was flecked
And his religion and his wisdom made him the best in every aspect
His knowledge, his purity, his courage have left his enemies decked

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Fallou Ngom also notes that "milk is an important element in the food supply of the Moors of Mauritania," and thus with this line "Muusaa Ka mocks the view that true Islamic knowledge is only found among Moors by promising to reveal insights (some milk) that they do not have."
See: Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World*, 64.

79 Here Ka uses Arabic: *lugha*.

80 *Furqān*: the Qur'an.

81 The Wolof used here is *"bokk gëm,"* literally meaning "share in faith." I translate this as *tawḥīd*, the central Islamic concept of the oneness of God – and therefore also the oneness of faith.

82 Here Ka pays homage to two other Wolof-language Murīd poets who were his contemporaries and teachers: Sëriñ Moor Kayre and Sëriñ Mbay Jaxate.

83 *Ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, drawing from Qur'an 57:3: "He [God] is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner."
The translation of the Qur'anic verse is my own.

84 Ka once again uses the Qur'anic terms *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*.

85 *Griot* is a term used throughout West Africa for a traditional oral storyteller and praise-singer.

86 This line (and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the stanza) draws on Senegalese wrestling. For more on the ways in which Wolof Sufi poets metaphorically describe their *shuyūkh* as wrestlers, see: Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World*, 128 and 264; Ndiaye et al., "Beating the Drums."

He's the master of outer and inner—so we follow him and submit.

That's why I differ from arrogant men who to Wolof show disdain
We've disarmed the Mauritanians, though deep study is their domain
Bamba outdoes the Mauritanians, who gulp knowledge till the dregs are drained[87]
Now white people[88] crawl to him, and black people hurry to his lane
The likes of the *shaykh* who's appeared here, Mauritania simply doesn't have it.

If not for Shaykh Bamba's face, Wolof virtue would still be unknown
For his face resembles the Prophet's—even Meccans admit he's a clone!
The sweet scent of Muḥammad, servant of God, on Bamba's wind is blown
He's a refuge for the weak,[89] for artists and workers,[90] for those without a home
Whoever joins him returns to his people with unprecedented secrets to transmit.

This world's like a tree that's infested with lice, and gnats, and flees
But infested people, swollen bites festering, don't even know they've been seized
That's why I do my best to convert the rulers whose crowns swarm with flees[91]
Tell those who have problems with Bamba: "you're the ones causing all these!"
Bamba wrongs no one, and if you wrong him, he forgives: your sins he can acquit.

Brave men, kin, folks old and young, there's no man like him in the crowd
Gold or hard cash, goat or prized sheep, camel or stocky cow,
He gives all such prizes to any who ask, no follower of his loses out
Plant where the flood of his grace rains down, you'll be shocked by the harvest that sprouts
Whatever you ask, even the grandest thing, he plucks it and gives you the gift.

The face of Bamba and his tradition have shaken up everything
His allies in high places, his allies in low ones: God has made them all kings
Wolofs, Mauritanians, good people everywhere: now they all are kings
All the servants who stay by his side, he erases them, and makes them kings[92]

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87 This complimentary reference to the Mauritanians (*naar yi* in Wolof) demonstrates the difference in Ka's view between the "Arabs" (that is, chauvinistic Arabophones) and the "Mauritanians" (excellent Islamic scholars who have largely recognized Sëriñ Tuubaa's superiority).

88 In this context, "white people" should primarily be understood as referring to Mauritanians – though it does also reflect Ka's broader universalist aspirations.

89 Here Ka uses Arabic: *ḍāʿif.*

90 Ka here refers to the *lawbe*, a group of artisans and sculptors who are traditionally considered to be of low social status. Ndiaye describes them as "a subgroup of the Pulaar ethnicity. They often do not have strong ties in villages due to their Nomadic tradition." See: Ndiaye, "Le Poème 'Taxmiis,'" 35.

91 The corrupt rulers to whom Ka refers are the *dammel*s who scorned Sëriñ Tuubaa and in some cases betrayed him to the French colonial authorities. Sëriñ Tuubaa's refusal to put his Islamic scholarship in the service of these *dammel*s marked an important turning point in his spiritual path, distinguishing him from a previous generation of Islamic scholars (including his own father) who had worked for the rulers. Sëriñ Tuubaa explained his decision in a poem entitled *Qālū Liya Arkan (They Told Me to Kneel):* "they advise me to kneel [a symbol of submission and reverence in the Wolof culture] before those who hold power so that I may obtain earthly rewards that will forever enrich me! If refusing to comply with such a request is my flaw, it is a flaw that honors me. If I have a request to make, I will make it to God, the Lord of the Throne." Following his *shaykh*'s lead, Ka asserts that he will use Wolof in the service of God alone.
As cited, translated, and reproduced in: Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World*, 73.

92 This stanza celebrates how Sëriñ Tuubaa's movement broke down preexisting social hierarchies in Wolof society. Much to the dismay of local rulers, Sëriñ Tuubaa welcomed disciples from all castes; upon entering the *ṭarīqa*, disciples from ruling families could no longer claim superiority over those from low-caste backgrounds. Indeed, Sëriñ Tuubaa even bestowed upon some low-caste disciples the rank of *shaykh*. Though historian Cheikh Anta Babou cautions that the Murīdiyya has not entirely succeeded in

Bamba is a God-gifted visionary: if you love him, love him to the hilt!

If you take a glance at his people, it's nobility you'll see
He's given cars and planes, has the power of Sulayman's decree[93]
But they say, "isn't there more?" So he makes them royalty
And paves the paths for all his people to walk down easily
The train is speeding towards Touba, its course firm, it will hit the target.

Kayoor and Baol, Siin Salum, Futa, and Jolof[94]
All surge towards Mbacké[95] like the sea, in a trance, selfhood cast off
And they're right: when we say 'Mbacké,' it's God's work we speak of
Tell the insane who sideline Bamba: "all your minds have gone off!"
If they don't repent before they die, they'll go to hellfire, and remain in it.

But at last be quiet Muusaa, for the blind cannot discern
Night and day, light and dark: eyes shut, they'll never learn
And blind hearts are far worse than eyes, to *Surat al-Hajj* we turn:
"Hearts, not eyes, go blind": such hearts are parched, they burn.[96]
Nobody can guide a blind heart. We can offer a cane, and that's it.

So let's pray upon the Prophet, the best child of the Hāshimī
The father of Ibrāhīm, the measure of God's decree
The reason why his Lord told the children of Adam, *"Be!"*
Upon him be God's prayers, the start, the seal, the guarantee
Along with his family and companions[97]—the angels themselves say it.[98]

"undermining the deeply entrenched inequality of Wolof society," there can be no doubt that this egalitarian, even revolutionary approach was a defining principle of Sëriñ Tuubaa's movement.
See: Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, 100.
93 Here Ka is referring to the Prophet Sulayman's God-given ability to control the wind (see Qur'an 34:12). The fact that cars and planes arrived in Senegal during Sëriñ Tuubaa's life leads Ka to suggest that his *shaykh* likewise had authority over the winds. This should not be understood as mere metaphorical hyperbole. In Ka's Islamic cosmology, all of reality is perpetually created at each instant through the spiritual station (*maqām*) of the *shaykh* – so when anything changes on the material plane of existence (such as the invention of a new form of technology), it has necessarily been created from the prime matter of the *shaykh*.
94 Ka is referring to various regions of Senegal.
95 Mbacké is another name for Sëriñ Tuubaa.
96 Ka is referring to and paraphrasing Qur'an 22:46.
97 Here Ka uses Arabic: "'*alayhi ṣalāt Allāh bad'u bi-khātimi/m'a al-āli wa al-aṣḥābi*."
98 The final clause of the poem is a Qur'anic reference and a play on words. The Qur'anic reference is to 33:56: "truly God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O you who believe! Invoke blessings upon him, and greetings of peace!" The play on words lies in the term that Ka uses for "angels," which is "*yaaram*." As we have already seen, "*yaaram*" can mean both "Arab" and "saint" (see footnote 66), but its *third* meaning is "angel." In the final line of his poem, Ka ingeniously stacks these three meanings to drive home his point. His poetic praise of the Prophet is not an imitation of the Arabs (*yaaram yi*), but of the saints (*yaaram yi*) – and their praise is an imitation of the angels (*yaaram yi*) who join God in "[invoking] blessings upon the Prophet."
For the Qur'anic citation, see: sura 33:56 in *The Study Quran*.
For the triple-meaning of *yaaram*, see: Diouf, *Dictionnaire Wolof*, 304, 331, and 333.

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