

Traditional Poetry in Contemporary Senegal: A Case Study of Wolof *Kasak* Songs

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Introduction

This essay examines the contextual frame in which Wolof *kasak* songs are performed, the system of values they convey, and the artistic quality embedded within this poetic genre. It goes on to examine the change of the form as well as the factors that have contributed to the disappearance of the poetic genre in contemporary Wolof society. I claim that this traditional poetic culture, in spite of the disappearance of the cultural institution that birthed it, is being transformed, revived, and recuperated in novel forms in accordance with modern, urban realities.

Kasak is a poetic genre performed by Wolof and other Senegalese ethnic groups in the framework of circumcision initiation (Tandia 1999; Faye 2006). The choice of *kasak* songs may be justified by the desire to contribute to the exploration and preservation of a poetic form hardly known because of its esoteric features. In order to ground our work on a corpus collected from authentic sources, I have traveled to various villages to meet different people who were able to supply original oral texts. I used participant observation in one *kasak* performance and relied on my personal recollections as a former young initiate in a semi-urban setting. I watched video recordings of urban-based *kasak* events in Dakar and Thies, Senegal. This method has been adopted to analyze patterns of change from the rural to urban setting. My corpus, however, is composed of *kasak* songs essentially collected in the Saloum region, particularly in the Kaffrine Department where the Saloum-Saloum dialect is predominant throughout the songs. In spite of the modernization of the country, it still remains much attached to old Wolof oral traditions.

African oral poetry, especially West African, is marked by a genre called “panegyric” that is pervasive among traditional communities (Biebuyck 1972; Guèye 2010). Other genres, no less important, encompass heroic poetry—songs related to some professional activity, to household life, and to major rituals and entertainment events. Local taxonomies in each ethnic community differentiate the genres of oral poetry on grounds of themes, occasions, styles of delivery, and so on. Okpewho (1992) highlights the complex task of classifying that lies in endeavoring to classify the ethnic genres based on Western analytic categories, for many reasons. First, a vast number of genres are not easy to classify, and second, some of these genres overlap in many regards such as the performance style and structure. The high degree of intertextuality between genres renders the classificatory task ever more challenging (Ben-Amos 1976).

As for panegyric poetry, Ruth Finnegan (1970) assumes that this genre is the dominant one across the continent, although she provides evidence based on data only from South and West Africa. One of the explanative factors, she thinks, is the presence in a relatively recent history of powerful empires, like the Zulu Empire in South Africa and the Mande Empire in West Africa, alongside other numerous kingdoms. Finnegan teases out three major patronage systems regarding praise poetry: court patronage, religious patronage, and freelance or less specialized groups. The court patronage system comprises a group of highly trained professional poets in the service of an emperor or king who go through systematic training processes before being solicited by the royal family to keep a record of their genealogy. Their genealogies, sing their glories both in formal and informal gatherings. They constitute the collective memory of a whole community. In many West African societies, these are castes, for instance, the *gewel* among the Wolof and the *griot* among the Mandingo of Sierra Leone. The religious patronage is a group of singers and spokespersons of certain religious families, especially the Sufi brotherhoods. They sing Sufi texts and poems during religious ceremonies such as Maouloud or the Birthday of Prophet Muhammed. The freelance poets are semiprofessional poets who peregrinate from one social ceremony to another, begging by means of their songs. They benefit from a relative amnesty to emit innuendos or threats to some deviant public leaders, or simply to those who fail to reward them on appropriate occasions (Finnegan 1970). *Kasak* genre hardly fits these three categories. Although it requires special training and initiation, *kasak* is not under the patronage of any royal or religious authority, nor does it belong to a specific social caste.

Social and Cultural Context

Boys are regarded as ambivalent beings in the African worldview; they are both male and female before circumcision. To eradicate this state of ambiguity, the foreskin must be cut. In the Wolof world, circumcision is a pre-Islamic practice reinforced by the arrival of Islam (Erny 1987:38). Despite the Islamization of *kasak*, it has retained much of its African oral tradition that it apparently shares with other African societies. Although there is not a single African culture, nevertheless, as suggested by Cheikh Anta Diop, some common features indicate a general cultural unity (Erny 1987).

Circumcision, during which *kasak* poems are performed, is a rite of passage that marks the integration of boys into the sphere of manhood. In Africa, boys' initiation traditionally occurs in the wild that, for the villagers, represents the other world where the devils, the *jinn*, and the ancestors meet. This estrangement severs the affective ties of the boys to their mothers to introduce him into the rigorous world of manhood (38).

Among the Gikuyu in Kenya, circumcision was the passport to participate in battles, because of the physical and psychological mortification they were prepared to endure. Similar experiences are reported in Wolof initiatory institution. The choice of the wild bush to host the ceremony is to make the *njuli* ("circumcised children") capable of facing hardships later in life, to prepare them for a world traditionally dominated by rural activities (growing crops) and, often, battles. Initiation in the bush aims at molding the will of the candidate until it can bear any pain

or ordeal at any moment. Many former *kasak* ritualists such as Ibrahima Willane confirm this function of bush seclusion found among the Gikuyu (Lo 2010).

Being one of the most commonly shared rites among the Senegalese ethnic groups, circumcision ritual songs are almost invariable in terms of content. Notwithstanding, their mode of performance changes. Interestingly the ceremonies accompanying the circumcision are the same among Sereer, Lebu, and Wolof and the terms used in the ceremonies are exactly the same: *kasak* to designate the ceremonies of songs and dance held at night, *njuli* to designate the circumcised boys, *selbe* to designate the supervisors, and *lengé* to designate the wooden sticks the circumcised carry in their hands.

The process of circumcision may last fifteen days to a month. But according to Ibrahim Willane, the *mbaar*¹ (“tent”) could take months before the arrival of modern medicine to the villages. The *ngaman* carries out the operation and when he is endowed with mystic knowledge to protect the circumcised boys, he becomes *Xumux*. In other words, the operation is performed by an adult male named *ngaman* who is selected for his wisdom and skills (Ndiaye 1986:33-34). The blacksmith caste often provided the adequate circumciser. Also, the *selbe* must be a competent supervisor who knows the secrets and the interpretations of the esoteric songs.

Another important figure of the *mbaar* is the *Maam*. He appears periodically, masked with burning fire from his mouth, and holding burning swords. Ibrahima Willane asserts that the *Maam* makes his appearance every two weeks. The *njuli* are made to believe that the *Maam* is a demon who eats human flesh, particularly that of the *njuli* unless they provide food and valuable belongings. Thus, the *selbe* can mischievously collect, as many as they can, things from the *njuli*. This fictional character heightens the emotions and feelings of stress in the initiates. Loading the rite with maximum emotional intensity insures the psychological metamorphoses among the candidates (Erny 1987:226).

The number of *njuli* often exceeds twenty. The clothes of the *njuli* are called *mbubu njuli* in Wolof but have a special term in Pulaar, *wiyeng*. Like a bride’s clothes, they are usually white, made of cotton, and sewn like a long dress, with a long hat around which small sharp skips are woven called *yamb* (“bees”). They serve to scare the uninitiated boys and the women. The *njuli* should hold permanently a *pakk*, that is, a straw round plate 120 centimeters in diameter, with a hole in the middle. A couple of sticks of approximately 60 centimeters known as *Samba Solde* are tied on it. These sticks serve each to mark respectively the number of days spent in the *mbaar* and the number of goat and sheep slaughtered during the initiation period. The *pakk* could be used as a plate to eat on, but its essential role was to protect the *njuli*’s face as a mask when strangers or women met them on their way.

They should be strongly protected against the roaming evil spirits; thus they bedeck their bodies with talismans. They are also granted the freedom to kill any domestic animal for food that they find on their way. Victor Turner (1982) calls this phase the “liminal phase” or “liminality,” which licenses participants to invert the social structures and to break taboos and norms. Each *njuli* is accompanied by a *selbe* who is asked to support him in understanding and memorizing the songs. The latter are called *selbe roŋ’a roŋ*, and among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, they are called *mwitsi* (Dierterlen 1965:275). Incantatory songs are sung not only to

¹ *Mbaar* is used as metonymy to mean the ritual activity of circumcision.

exorcise the *jinns* (spiritual beings with malefic power) but also to heal diseases through its therapeutic effects that appease pains. The final date must be searched out through divination and is celebrated in a huge feast in the course of which the candidates are reminded of the lessons acquired in the *lël* or *mbaar*.

Materially speaking, the *mbaar* is a tent built with wooden sticks to shelter the initiation activities. It has a door, and behind it is a prison made of thorny wood. The main pillar of the *mbaar* is called the *kenu*, a word derived from *yenu* (“carry on one’s head”). This pillar is also designed to serve as a hand-cleaner after meals. Next to the tent is a long picket of around eight meters on the edge of which is a burning ash bin. Such a picket is named *Soccu Maam*, the toothpick of grandfather. The *Soccu Maam* has two significations: first, it serves as a guide, indicating the nature of the place where the initiation activities occur; and second, it plays a liturgical function as a mystical tool used to chase away the evil spirits. According to Ibrahim Willane, only someone who possesses the required esoteric knowledge can do the implantation of this picket. During the *lël* or the ritual activities, a very important event usually takes place: the *Sus*. The *Sus* consists of pulling a fictional worm from the penis of the *njuli* with a burned iron tool. This operation is purely fake and is just designed to test the candidate’s courage. On that day, the *njuli* are lined up before the door and escorted by the *selbe*. One by one, they enter the *mbaar* in which a great fire is made. The *njuli* who have already discovered the trick are convened, in connivance, to behave as if the *Sus* is real so as to make those who have not entered shudder with fear. This dramatic event serves to heighten the dreadful atmosphere that prevails in the *mbaar*. On the fifteenth day, some symbolic cakes (*ngukutu*) are made for profit for the whole *mbaar*. The community offers them free of charge. Yet, the *njuli* must be content with what their mothers provide them, whereas the *selbe* can eat the rest of the cakes without restraint. This discrimination is, according to Ibrahim Willane, to protect the *njuli* from the witches who sneak in and give lethal cakes to innocent, vulnerable *njuli*.

The *mbaar* is also organized in the image of a real-life situation. Therefore, it resembles a model society in miniature in which all aspects, at least many aspects of life, are represented, despite its relative degree of permissibility. There is a king called *botale*, a treasurer or *jaraaf*, policemen, and a doctor. The doctor always holds bitter syrup made of soot (*mboldiit*) taken from the traditional kitchen and mingled with lemon juice, red pepper, and salt. He administers this syrup to any strangers suspected of disrespecting the regulations of the ritual space. The individual, *njuli*, *selbe* or anyone, who infringes the regulations that determine the functioning of the *mbaar* is judged and punished, if necessary. The aforementioned prison purges the sentences of wrongdoers. The *jaraaf* is in charge of the gifts offered to the *mbaar*; his nomination depends on his credibility. A thief is even chosen among the *njuli* for his athletic qualities, such as speed. To track him down, a fast *selbe* is designated to pursue him. Physical fitness is part of the overall training. The *lël* is also a period when not only through songs but also through practices wisdom, technical prowess, intelligence are instilled in the *njuli*. Erny (1987) states that children know the social importance of these facts, but without realizing their scope and implications: the time of circumcision allows them to re-experience the genesis of the universe and to become contemporaneous of the gestation of the world. These practices, for Willane, initiate the *njuli* into what lies in wait for them in real life (Lo 2010). The corpus analysis discloses moral values added to the poetic riddles to contribute to the total system of the circumcision period and on this

basis the children's socialization and personality-building strategies, started at early age of childhood, are institutionally complete.

Passing the Rite: Circumcision

The circumcision initiation, as a "rite of passage" comprises three major stages. The first stage is the physical estrangement from society. Children, ranging from seven to fifteen years of age, are separated from their mothers and fathers at home, and brought to an initiation place, from where they cannot return home. The second phase is the initiation period *per se*, encompassing all the different activities used to educate the initiates. This phase is generally known as liminal one, a period of indeterminacy, reversal of roles, and "antistructure" (Turner 1982). Younger initiates are permitted to insult and beat older uninitiates; theft of pets and other things is condoned, as are other socially forbidden practices. The third and final stage is the initiates' reintegration or incorporation into society with an upgraded social status. For instance, circumcised boys back in society are given much responsibility. Traditionally they can attend certain meetings concerning political affairs, and they are prepared to enter conjugal life and raise their own children, things that were impossible prior to circumcision. Songs of *kasak* need to be comprehended from this perspective.

A Performance-Centered Approach

The following section examines the performance techniques of *kasak* genre, contrasting it with women's wedding songs (*xaxar* and *taasu*). The breakthroughs in the study of human communicative systems in linguistic anthropology and folklore have shifted the focus from structural studies of language to the notion of performance, as pioneered by scholars such as Roman Jakobson (1960:377). Dell Hymes (1975; 1989) and the adherents of his ethnography of speaking school have deepened our understanding of performance as intrinsically connected to context or the situation of its realization, by critiquing, revamping, and building upon Ervin Goffman's (1979) ideas of interactional framing and keying which are set to clarify the interpretative structure of a communicative message, such joke, quotation, and so forth.

Performance-centered study has also drawn upon works by theater and ritual scholars who have complicated the structural approaches to human communication within particular ritualized and dramatized occasions (Turner 1982; Schechner 1985). This performance-centered approach, especially in the framework of verbal performance, as defined by Richard Bauman, is a mode of verbal communication that "consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (1977:11).

The performances of the songs studied here occur on specific cultural occasions: marriage and circumcision. Outside of these occasions, the circumcision songs of *kasak* are not vested with any social meaning. Even the circumcision songs were prohibited outside the cultural framework in which they were destined to be sung or recited. In fact, at least with the Wolof of Saloum, the spatial and temporal setting is fixed to night and within the *mbaar* perimeter. One

informant told me that his circumcision initiation took place in a house in the small town in a region called Kaffrine in 1992. His initiation was held in a house where as a young initiate he learned to sing *kasak* songs during nightly performances. According to him, they were never enjoined to sing the songs outside this ritual context. After the initiation period was over, however, they would playfully sing *kasak* songs they remembered without the ritual meanings conveyed in the *mbaar*. Compared to women's wedding songs, however, we have slightly different restrictions.

In general, wedding songs performances occur in "fixed" and "unfixed" settings, depending on stages of the wedding celebration. The setting or backdrop of the poetic performance can be said to be fixed when the songs are sung in one place, for instance, in either the groom's house or the bride's house before her departure. In this case, singers and their audience sit somewhere in the yard, gathering in a circular-form. The nuptials and the *xaxar* songs are often sung in a fixed place. In contrast, the setting of the performance is viewed as unfixed if the performers and audience alike are obliged to move, following the nuptial cortege or transported by a horse-drawn cart or a car towards the new bride's home, that is at her husband's household. Some wedding songs such as the *taasu* are enacted in the day, whereas *xaxar*, the satirical songs, are sung at night while the bride is preparing to embark to join her husband's house.

In fact, *kasak* songs are performed only in the *mbaar*, which is the fixed place where the ceremony takes place. The *mbaar* was always situated in the bush, away from the community's eyes. The choice of the bush is not fortuitous, insofar as it is the realm of the ancestors and the spirits. The sanctity of the place, symbol of communion between the living and the dead, confers a dose of sacredness on the performed songs. Therefore, the nature of the performance setting in Wolof oral poetry can be said to vary from genre to genre. Unlike the Wolof, in Soninke society circumcision songs are performed at night as well as in broad daylight (Tandia 1999). One could argue that no generalizable conclusion regarding the context and occasion of performance in ritual songs performances can be offered, since they vary along generic and group or ethnic lines. From a performance-centered approach, however, it is crucial to insist that the temporal and spatial dimensions plus the occasion play a role in unfolding images, symbols, and messages, and they constitute the arena where performers and co-participants or audience members work up the meanings behind these texts.

Examining one wedding song (*taasu*) will illustrate how it contrasts with *kasak* songs. The performers of the wedding songs are, in general a group of women, among whom are *geer* (non-caste group), *gewel* (speech, artists and drummers), and *neeno* (cobblers and blacksmiths) (Diop 1981). Such precise terminology is interesting since singing in Wolof society is culturally attributed to the *griot*, who is the *gewel*. But, for this category of songs, no clear-cut distinction is made between *griots* and non-*griots* (Mbaye 1989). The status of the performer is then not judged on the basis of her social caste, but rather on her mastery of the songs, the quality of her voice, and, probably, her kinship with the marrying families. The singers of this oral poetry do not receive training in a socially accredited institution, rather, by dint of attending ceremonies or imitating famous singers, they themselves become good performers. The wedding poet-singers may be invited to the wedding ceremony or may attend without an invitation. Although the performers and the audience of this category of poetry are exclusively women, the messages,

which are designed to reinforce ethical values of womanhood, are often “resistance” strategies against the patriarchal system and men’s chauvinism (Guèye 2010:166). The efficacy of such criticisms is difficult to gauge, although they reach men who are often within earshot. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

<i>Yanul sa ndaali</i>	Carry the canary on your head,
<i>Gàddu sa gob bi</i>	Pick up your hoe,
<i>Aw sa yoonu tool</i>	And take the path to your field.
<i>Genn góor loy sèggam</i>	Lonely man why are you so sad?
<i>Yaa jaay sa doom ju jigéen</i>	You who have sold your daughter!

In fact, here the performers directly address the father of the bride, accusing him of selling his daughter. They ironically summon him to go alone to his field without his daughter’s help. Although he is not present at the performance, the father of the marrying girl may hear the allusive words leveled at his person. Composed of the eligible marrying females, and of a few old women, the audience is “active-receptive,” engaged in the performance, often challenging or adding to the refrains. The performer sings solo, in a duo, or is accompanied by a chorus. She or they may invite audience members to dance in the middle of the circle. Most of the songs are accompanied by musical instrument, such as reversed bowl in a basin of water, calabashes, or drums. The music accompanying these songs delights both public and singer. The musical instruments contribute to the symphonic organization of the performance, the words arrangements, and so on. The musical accompaniment has two major functions: it facilitates harmonization of words with rhythms, while inspiring participants to repeat certain phrases (Okpewho 1992:9-12). Audience participation is highly expected through the dance and applause.

In contrast to the wedding song poets, the circumcision poets receive formal training during initiations. Those who master the songs and their interpretations often become the best performers. This class of poets is professional and possesses a monopoly over the meanings and function of these songs. As is the case with the wedding songs performers, social caste is not a consideration for the professional circumcision singers.

Unlike the audience of the wedding songs, that of the circumcision songs is heterogeneous, two types of participants are easily distinguished: the *njuli* and the *selbe*. The *njuli* comprise part of the listening public, addressees of most of the songs. They are often asked to decipher the meanings of the songs or simply to repeat partially or integrally a song sung or recited by a performer. Performers come from the *selbe*, but not all *selbe* are performers. Some may master the songs, but play an auxiliary role helping the *njuli* master the songs and their interpretations. These participants are termed *selbe roŋ’a roŋ*.

Among other performance keys, the occasion, the setting, the status of the performers and audience members, and the cultural legitimacy of the events appear clearly as conditioning factors on the songs. As Hanna states: “these contextual conventions, so different from the rules governing every day speaking, set up expectations for the aesthetic performance”(1983:59). Such formal considerations can be supplemented by the nature of the interactions, that is, the call and response between performer and audience.

Whether the performance-audience connection is passive or active depends on the oral literary genre or the type of song. In the framework of our study of Wolof wedding and circumcision poetic performances, we find both passive and active connections. Unresponsive audience members of the public, for instance, confront an unskilled performer: the audience may laughingly chide him to stop the performance. The way the musical instruments are played may also indicate that the performance should stop. An active connection, involving the audience members' participation, seems to predominate in oral literature. Three kinds of interactions can be observed in an active connection: a "co-operative" interaction, a "confrontational" interaction, and simply a "dialogic" interaction. There is co-operative interaction when the performer and the audience are engaged in a performance in which the audience recites a sequence or the whole song in a supportive manner:

<i>Tëgg ci mboob</i>	A Blacksmith in a bush.
<i>Diyamo</i>	<i>Diyamo</i>
<i>Lekkul mboobee</i>	Never eats hay.
<i>Diyamo</i>	<i>Diyamo</i>

In this passage, for example, the audience is expected to recite the bold patterns, thus marking the rhythm. The word "*diyamo*" is untranslatable, probably coined or borrowed from archaic constructions. It functions to integrate the rhythm. A similar choral response occurs in the following excerpt with the repeated syntagm "*ay waay samba*" meaning "so far so good":

Ay way leen ñu xëy gonto roño	Let's move out day or night.
Ay waay leen ñu xëy gonto roñon	Let's move out day or night.
Ay waay Sàmba	So far, so good!
Jigéen ñakk a ñakk solo	Women are so valueless.
Ay waay Sàmba	So far, so good!

The audience members back up the performer in her lamentation of women's condition in their male-dominated community. Here the performer-audience connection is active and cooperative. Such cooperation may be accounted for by the fact that the women involved in the performance belong to the same age group as the bride. Whereas, in the confrontational interaction performer and audience exchange contradictory ideas which may be expressed by their gestures as well. The confrontation may be a contradictory verbal exchange or simply criticisms as the following excerpts illustrate:

A. <i>Yaay yaa neegoo</i>	Mother is so pitiless!
<i>Yaay yaa neegoo</i>	Mother is so pitiless!
<i>Yow mi jur di jaay</i>	You who give birth and sell,
<i>Jënde guro</i>	Just to buy cola nut.
B. <i>And war na</i>	partnership is necessary,
<i>Doom bay</i>	Paternal Cousin,

<i>And war na</i>	Partnership is necessary,
<i>Moroom ma ngii</i>	And here is a partner.

This is a one song that is composed principally of two strophes, each conveying a specific idea. In strophe A the performer and chorus criticize the ruthlessness of the mother who gives birth to girls and sells them just for cola nuts, which could be money or any wealth metonymically. Strophe B replies to strophe A on behalf of the mother and justifies the marriage by asserting that it is necessary for a girl to marry when a partner is found. Here, the interaction is confrontational and dialogic. The dialogic verbal exchange can be also authoritative or egalitarian. The authoritative verbal exchange is often characteristic of the performance of circumcision songs. Most often the performer is a *selbe*, that is, a supervisor whose authority emanates from his age, generally older than the *njuli*, and from the fact that he is already initiated and circumcised. Analysis of the interaction between singer and audience leads to consideration of the aesthetics of the performance itself, the combination of the visual bearings (gestures), the musical setting, and the vocal somatic handling, since what is normally classified as poetry in African oral literature is meant to be performed in a musical setting and the musical and verbal elements are thus interdependent (Zumthor 1990:141-53). An appreciation of these sung forms (and to some extent the chanted ones too) depends on some awareness of the musical material on which the artist draws: we cannot hope to fully understand their effect or subtlety by considering only the words on a printed page. A great part of oral poetic aesthetics cannot be rendered by a written text. A tape-recorded performance, despite its usefulness, presents serious deficiencies as it cannot communicate the visual attitudes of the performer and audience. Eyewitness and accounts by reliable witnesses provide some confidence that the following descriptions are as accurate descriptions of the original performances as is possible.

Verbal and non-verbal representations of the performance convey the overall beauty of these oral texts in Wolof society. The visual bearing of the performer of the the wedding songs in terms of her accoutrements seems to play a minor role. The singer usually wears ordinary clothes and is not enjoined to hold any object that would contribute to the success of the performance. She should demonstrate to the best of her ability a good vocal quality and attractive facial and hand gestures.

Some songs require the singer to soften her voice to highlight patterns or motifs of sadness, while in others the message conveyed needs to be accompanied by a rather strong tonal voice. In *kasak* genre, “Poetic speech, voice, melody—text, energy, acoustical form—actively united in performance cooperates in the singularity of a meaning” (Zumthor 1990:147). This is what Okpewho (1992:9) terms the “vocal-somatic element”:

<i>Amy yaa ngi dem Amy</i>	You are going,
<i>Amy yaa ngi dem Amy</i>	You are going,
<i>Sa dem neexu ma</i>	Your departure displeases me.
<i>Foo jëm Yàlla na fa yiw Yàlla jublu</i>	May God’s bounty be where you go.

In this passage the singer strives to stress the sadness of the bride’s departure, an elegiac motif, by dexterously handling her voice in a soft, low-pitched fashion. In contrast to this sad song,

which can be understood only in terms of the developed theme of departure of the following nuptial song is sung with a vigorous high-pitched voice:

<i>Suma doon góor Suma doon góor</i>	If I were a man, if I were a man,
<i>Du ma genn kër bay</i>	I would not go out of father's home.
<i>Suma doon góor Suma doon góor</i>	If I were a man, if I were a man,
<i>Gàddu fetal baa jaasi</i>	I would take a gun or a sword.

Here the singer expresses on behalf of the bride her reluctance to leave her father's home. This is why she regrets that she is not a man. The success of the singer in both passages is reflected by the way she adapts her voice to "express and arouse feelings of sadness among her audience members" (Okpewho 1992:9). We can conclude with Okpewho that "here again, the somatic underpinnings of the performance of such poetry count a great deal in its effectiveness as oral poetry" (1992:9). Beside these vocal aspects, the aesthetics of the performance contribute to fashioning gestures or kinetic features displayed by both performer and audience.

During the delivery of circumcision songs, both singer or reciter and the audience are engaged in a complex network of bodily demonstration. The performer, if necessary, is expected to practice subtle technical gestures to enthrall his audience in pain or in joy: "there are essentially two ways in which a piece of poetry can affect us. One is by touching us emotionally so that we feel pleasure or pain" (Okpewho 1992:8). Okpewho is surely alluding to the effect of words, but oral poetry is not composed of words alone: the physical interaction between poet and listener is crucial:

<i>Mbaroo bama fekkee yet sa</i>	<i>Mbaar</i> when I picked the stick,
<i>Ba daw akk moom</i>	Till I ran with it.
<i>Mbaar samba ni la doon daago</i>	<i>Mbaar samba</i> here was my gait,
<i>Ba daw ak moom</i>	Till I went with it.

In the delivery of this short song, the performer apes a gait that will incite the audience to laugh. The performer is free to choose an odd way of walking; what is expected is the capacity of the gesture to amuse the spectators to a high comic degree which will be the yardstick whereby his artistic talent is measured. In this next song, the singer mimics a flying bird and imposes the *njuli* to do the same:

<i>Naaw naaw</i>	Fly fly!
<i>Naaw fori ngombo</i>	Fly to glean <i>ngombo</i> .
<i>Naaw leen ca kaw</i>	Fly high and higher
<i>Góor day naaw</i>	A man should be swift.

According to Mor Wilane, an informant, the *selbe*-singer can beat the *njuli* who fail to perform accurately the demanded movement (Lo 2010). I have witnessed on more than one occasion the *selbe* chasing some audience members with a stick. The violence integrated into the performance does not underplay the beauty of *kasak* song. As Harold Scheub (1977:4) argues that one of the

ways the performer holds a firm control of his delivery “is achieved through securing and sustaining the participation of the audience in the non-verbal and verbal aspects of the production.” Moreover, the singer, before being authorized to perform, must negotiate the *lengé*, a wooden stick that is regarded as the license to perform. Holding a wooden stick is a sign of authority in religious contexts, namely in churches, mosques and synagogues, where pastors, *imams* (Muslim prayer leaders at mosque), and other individuals of high standing usually have a stick as a sign of leadership. Further studies are needed to arrive at stronger conclusions concerning the provenance of the *lengé* in the context of Wolof initiation events. *Lengé* are extensions of the body, tools utilized to achieve certain ritual or practical goals, especially when the use of bodily limbs is limited. *Kasak* songs, however, imply ample use of bodily actions. Acrobatic demonstrations are often required when performing certain songs such as this following one:

Guy yo guy sanga ngaar
Guy yo guy sanga ngaar

Baobab² oh baobab upside down
 Baobab oh baobab upside down!

Indeed the singer should be upside down as indicated in the song; that is, he must put his head to the ground with his feet up in the air. This position is a puzzle posed to one of the audience members who, to answer it, should plant a small wooden stick to the ground; otherwise, the singer can beat him. A *griot* informer who has been animating *kasak* drumming for years recited this song for me and described the technique of its performance, including the bodily riddle. All this happens within commonly accepted rules. In sum, aesthetics of the African oral poetry and the Wolof poetry in particular emanate, in large measure, from a performance process often involving kinetic or bodily stunts. All of this conveys specific functions and bears patterns of intertextuality. At one *kasak* performance I attended, the *selbe* requested some audience members to mime a sexual act. On hearing this, shy people would run away to avoid being designated for the dance. The authoritativeness of the performers is crucial for the efficacy of these performance requirements. This particular performance, which was held in an urban environment, enjoined a girl and a boy to perform the dance together, under the joking laughter of the audience. Generally audience members cooperate and execute the performers' commands. Curiously enough, in the bush, where feminine presence is proscribed in terms of ritual taboo,³ this obscene dance would not have been possible.

Initiation, manhood and the behavioral ethics

The initiation ritual songs convey a set of ideas, that is, certain cultural norms or regulations that sustain both the songs and moral content's organization, while they also covertly

²A baobab is a big tree, scientifically called *adansonia*, and is one of the symbols of Senegalese national identity.

³Some interpretations posit that the feminine presence can cause an erection among circumcised boys, which will delay healing of their penis.

or overtly develop and inculcate behavioral ethics and values on which manhood is constructed. Due to the sacredness of circumcision initiation described throughout the oral texts, it bears a degree of mystery and of esoteric patterns. It is the sole traditional institution in Wolof society through or by which the child is integrated adulthood and manhood is formalized. In fact, starting from infancy, the child's socialization follows a long process; yet the initiation that occurs at this juncture—circumcision—confers an official finalization of the process. It is from this perspective that Pierre Erny states that traditional education reaches its highest degree of conscience at the moment of initiation (1987:39). The ritual integration into the adult world should be followed up and completed by an updating of knowledge, aptitudes, and behaviors. The individual should be subjected to an ordeal, that is, examined and strengthened for what is expected of him in the future. The mysteriousness of the initiation manifests itself in multifaceted dimensions: the linguistic format, the rituals performed in the *mbaar*, and so on. Our concern here is the ritual aspects of the initiatory role's organization. Circumcision initiation holds secrets hidden from both the uninitiated and women. Without secrecy there is no initiation. This encompasses everything that transpires in the exact nature of the masks and the rhombs, and the fact that the initiation death is not a physical one, as may be believed or seem to be believed by outsiders. It is concretized through formulae, codes, passwords, names and, above all, a language learned during the training that unites all the initiated boys. These songs urge the *njuli* not to sing or unveil the secrets of the initiation to the uninitiated or women:

<i>Du ma way puriit</i>	I do not sing for an uninitiated.
<i>Puriit way ko aat</i>	If you sing for the uncircumcised,
<i>Aat way ko jigeen</i>	The uncircumcised will sing for woman.
<i>Jigeen yobu teen</i>	Woman will take it to the well.
<i>Teeno teen</i>	O well, o well!
<i>Teen buur njaay la</i>	The well is for kings.
<i>Jigeen du fa root</i>	Woman should not fetch water there.
<i>Aat du ko yërndu</i>	The uncircumcised should not see it either.

In this song, which I collected verbatim from an active *kasak* performer, the singer vows not to sing for an uninitiated boy because were he to do so the uninitiated might reveal the secret of the initiation to women and the latter will discuss it at a well, where traditional women make their own secret's public. The term "well" repeated in the sixth verse stands for the initiation secret, which should not be known by the uninitiated people or women. Uncircumcised boys uninitiated into the traditional secrets should not be informed of the songs' teachings; at this stage, because of their ignorance and their gender indeterminacy, they are confused along with women. A Bambara circumcision song goes: "until now you were in the darkness of childhood; you were like women and you knew nothing" (Erny 1987:39) As for women, their apparent marginalization from the initiation secret accounts for their belonging to a different gender category.

Still, the mysteriousness of the initiation ceremony may be linked to a belief in witchcraft, sorcery, or the presence of *jinn*. Indeed, Wolof traditional circumcision is cloaked with superstitious practices. The *njuli* are believed to be like grilled fish: they exude an attractive

odor for witches, or *jinn*, and as such they need a high mystical security arsenal. The use of the *pakk* as a mask evolves along this line. The *pakk* serves to ward off evil spirits. This aspect of the initiation is visible in the songs. For instance, in this following text, the performer stresses the negligence of the *selbe* in looking after and protecting the *njuli* against the evil spirits, the sorcerers who seek to devour them. I have heard this song sung many times. However, it was nearly impossible to understand its hidden meaning until a fifty-five year old man agreed to interpret it for me:

<i>Tokku mbel-mbel</i>	Little boy screams, screams.
<i>Xandal ma sa lenge</i>	Fling hurl me your <i>lengé</i> ,
<i>Ma lakk suma lakki neeg</i>	I'll mend the fence of my room,
<i>Bukkeeg béy</i>	Hyena and goat,
<i>Bukki di lëm béy damm ci mboob</i>	Hyena attacks goat breaking the hay,
<i>Bukki di nexal bëy di luur</i>	Hyena howls while goat trembles.
<i>Wallukatubéy jaar si bopp ba</i>	Goat rescuer jumps over its head.
<i>Dëgg sa biir ba</i>	Kicks its belly!
<i>Su ngeen weere wer njul</i>	If you expose the circumcised
<i>Tay ma laaleek selbe yii</i>	So I will fight you supervisors.

The song paints a scene in which a *bukki*, or hyena, a symbol of sorcerer or an evil spirit, assaults the goat, the *njuli*, in an attempt to kill them. According to the performer, the *ngamaan* defends the *njuli* by vanquishing the intruder in a fierce fight. At the end of the battle, he warns the *selbe* to be more vigilant and watchful. This song is indicative of the effort to induce in the *njuli* a firm belief in the existence of an invisible world beyond the visible one. Owing to this mystical dimension, no foreign *selbe* is accepted unless he has a good command of the canonical initiation, that is, he must be able to decipher the songs and riddles and to understand, from experience, the cultural practices. The following example highlights a foreign *selbe* who demonstrates to the welcoming *lël* that he is experienced enough to take part in the ceremony:

<i>Nikilin ñakalan</i>	Nikilin nakalan.
<i>Janum ñagoor</i>	O adder.
<i>Mate may nug</i>	You have bitten May Nug.
<i>Mate buur</i>	You have bitten the king.
<i>Ngaman na ngoog</i>	Here is Ngaman.
<i>Sumpu salumee</i>	Hey Sumpu Saloum.
<i>Man jaaru na</i>	I am already circumcised
<i>Daxar mbeler</i>	Hey Daqar Mbeler.
<i>Man sami na</i>	I have been initiated.

Here the poet praises himself as someone who is like an adder which has bitten May Nug and the king, a sign of his uncontested talent. He affirms that he has already undergone the initiation. The verse “I have already been circumcised” is illustrative of the skill and experience he attempts to demonstrate to his fellow co-supervisors. Initiation is an arena of entertainment and violence.

Closely examined, the texts show the entertaining mood that prevails during the nights of *kasak*. Dancing, singing, and so on mark this period, in the course of which most of the songs are sung to increase the entertainment mood. Some songs dictate that the *lël* be animated, lively, and musical. Current *kasak* performances filmed by television crews stress the entertainment side of the genre:

<i>Njulu si njaayo naam fati</i>	O <i>Njuli Njaay!</i>
<i>Selbe joobe naam Jóob</i>	O <i>selbe</i> job! Yes, Joob.
<i>Mbaar mi foh akk ree la</i>	This <i>mbaar</i> is for fun and smile.
<i>Budoon suñu mbaar njaay</i>	If it were ours,
<i>Junjun yaa ngi riiti</i>	The drums would be banged,
<i>Xalam yaa ngi riitithe</i>	And the <i>xalam</i> would be played.

Yet, as mentioned above, the songs are often accompanied by violence since the *njuli* not only can be beaten when they sing badly or fail to repeat some sequences requested by the performer. Performance disclaimers are discouraged in traditional *kasak* performance, because they denote a lack of seriousness in the learning process. Developing the child's memory appears to be a key in the transmission of the repertoire across generations, given that today's initiates will be tomorrow's initiators:

<i>Waa kër gi yo</i>	O house members!
<i>Njaay Wali Njaay</i>	Njaay Wali Njaay,
<i>Gonay Ata Mbaay</i>	Children of Ata Mbaay,
<i>Cow leen mu riir</i>	O shout out loud!
<i>Man geena cow</i>	You can shout out loud.
<i>Bañ geen a cow you</i>	If you refuse to shout out loud,
<i>Sutu ma leen baat</i>	Because my voice is not louder,
<i>Da ma leen i dóor</i>	So I will beat you up.

The poet-singer sings while ordering the *njuli* to repeat after him as loud as he does, otherwise he will beat them. According to Mor Willane, certain songs are feared by the *njuli* as they herald a violent performance, punctuated by beatings or other humiliating acts. It is in this sense that Pierre Erny wonders whether violence, brutality, and mutilation contribute to mortifying and symbolically containing the overt rivalry and the propensity to revolt against the authority of the elders of the society (Erny 1987:236). In short, the songs are an occasion to lay bare the significance and quintessence of the initiation for the comprehension of its cultural meaning within the Wolof society. They also serve as a means of building the personality of the *njuli* through the moral lessons, the recommendations that run throughout the songs.

Kasak utterances, which are sung or recited, serve as strategies for constructing a model of behavior and attitude as befits this society. Being dependent on the evolution of Wolof socio-cultural contexts, the themes conveyed in these songs can be reduced to four: *mun* ("patience"), *jom* ("endurance"), *yar* ("discipline"), *dimbalante* ("solidarity to fulfill the expected criteria of manhood after circumcision"). As Assane Sylla astutely observes, to humiliate a man in Wolof

society, it suffices to compare him with a woman, because, he argues: “si cela est choquant, c’est que durant toute son enfance, le garçon avait subi une éducation qui mettait l’accent sur le comportement viril qui doit être le sien en toute circonstance. Il a grandi avec la conviction qu’il y a des qualités qui appartiennent à l’homme: courage, endurance, tenacité, virilité etc”⁴ (1978:128). Manhood, relatively speaking, was seen as the integration of a number of values culturally and intrinsically linked to the male gender in a patriarchal community. It was obtained after traversing the difficult rite of passage: circumcision. In the traditional Wolof worldview, entering the *mbaar* has been the necessary step towards manhood:

<i>Biri mbott</i>	Biri frog,
<i>Mbottu yabul ngañaan</i>	Frog fears injury,
<i>Rikinim rakanam</i>	<i>Rikinim rakanam</i>
<i>Mbamba nàmm ci waañ</i>	Mbamba sharpened the kitchen knife.
<i>Mbotu war warale</i>	Frog trembles strongly.
<i>War jaami ngukam</i>	Riding the slave of <i>ngukam</i> .
<i>Xàll mbaar yereet</i>	Please open <i>mbaar</i> wide.
<i>Sukaabe mbay lam</i>	<i>Sukaabe mbay laam</i>
<i>Mbottañ ci jànj</i>	Frog is up hill.
<i>jànj jañ si ngeeraan</i>	Hill is behind <i>ngeeraan</i> .
<i>Sibi goor wàlli goor</i>	<i>Sibi</i> what is man’s duty?
<i>Wàlli goor ci mbaar</i>	Man’s duty is in <i>mbaar</i> .

In this passage, the uncircumcised boy is portrayed as a reluctant individual who trembles on seeing the sharpened knife. He is encouraged to enter the *mbaar* where he attains the honor of being considered a man. The two last lines “*Sibi* what is man’s duty/Man’s duty is in *mbaar*” are telling in this respect. In addition, manhood should rest on knowledge, in other words, to be a man is to be imbued with some cultural background capable of providing guidelines of conduct vis-à-vis the community as a whole. This amounts to the importance given to initiation:

<i>Aatoo</i>	O uninitiated,
<i>Bama doon Aatoo</i>	When I was uninitiated,
<i>Xaw ma dara</i>	I knew nothing.
<i>Aat samba Ndegam ma ko weesu</i>	<i>Aat samba</i> as I passed now,
<i>Xam na ci dara</i>	I learnt something.

A performer acknowledges his ignorance before being initiated and his knowledge after the initiation. Moreover, the uninitiated man who is old enough to undergo this rite of passage and does not is traditionally regarded as a donkey who saunters his way in human society. This is sustained in the following excerpt:

⁴If this is shocking it is because during his childhood, the boy received an upbringing that laid emphasis on the virile attitude which he should have under all circumstances. He grew up with the conviction that there are qualities belonging to man: courage, endurance, tenacity, virility, and so on.

<i>Dama deemon mbubeen</i>	I went to <i>mbubeen</i> .
<i>Dëpiti ngeen njaa jaan</i>	<i>Njaajaan</i> is back.
<i>Mbitir mbitir mbitir</i>	<i>Mbitir mbitir mbitir</i>
<i>Rëpël dem ba mbaaree</i>	Walk to <i>mbaar</i> .
<i>Paaxe mbaam mi ñaw na</i>	The uncircumcised donkey has come.

In the last line of this passage the word “*paaxe*” refers to someone who is uncircumcised. The metaphor compares an uncircumcised man to a donkey, a symbol of silliness and stupidity. Because of the pain of such an operation, songs of exhortation are profuse: exhortations to face the knife, to endure the aches, and to avoid behavior that may delay healing. Exhortations are achieved through songs sung before the operation is carried out or even during the healing period. Recited before the operation, the following song arouses and tests the courage of the candidate by referring to the knife’s small yet sharp appearance:

<i>Sengoo</i>	Oh dear cutter!
<i>Sew ta diis sa ngo goo</i>	How slim you are!
<i>Bara njaay</i>	<i>Bara njaay</i> .
<i>Sa weexe kuñ ko teg nga yuxoo</i>	Shining, whomever you touch will shudder.
<i>Bara njaay</i>	<i>Bara Njaay</i> .

The *njuli* timid and afraid is compared to a bird (*yara*) who flies leaving behind his feathers, that is, his courage and honor, while his comrades, the other birds, take theirs with them. Assistants who keep their respective initiates safe whisper the song’s interpretation:

Parrot is flying.
Crow is flying .
Yara is flying, but forgets its feather.

Among the Seereer, the candidate recalls the image of lion to touch his heart (Raphael Ndiaye 1986:35). Lions in Seereer society and Wolof society symbolize bravery and courage and their usage prompts the hesitant boy to willingly accept the ordeal. The pedagogical intent is the same in different ethnic groups, but the symbols differ in function:

O lion, the date can’t be postponed !
Husband of Ami does not accept,
The date can’t be postponed!
Noxor Saar ,a king, O Saar lion the date can’t be postponed!

These exhortations bring the *njuli* to a point where he becomes conscious of the dangers of fleeing or showing any sign of cowardice that would dishonor his family. Analyzing the Soninke initiation utterances, Tandia (1999:280) affirms that this exhortation strengthens the boy’s heart by extirpating fear and leading him to acquire the courage necessary to honor his family. In addition, because of the lack of modern medicine in traditional Wolof society,

precautionary measures are transmitted through songs to prevent the *njuli* from scratching their unhealed penises. The singer warns the *njuli* about the risk of scratching their itching injuries:

<i>Gor na kàdd</i>	I felled the <i>Kadd</i> ,
<i>Toun njay lawbe</i>	In the place of <i>lawbe</i> , [social caste of carpenters and sculptors]
<i>Tij na lawbe</i>	I hurt <i>lawbe</i> .
<i>Bentej jaayu naa</i>	<i>Benteng</i> has swayed.
<i>Semeñ dellu mbaar</i>	The axe went back to <i>mbaar</i> :
<i>Bentej bentej ngee</i>	<i>Benteng benteng!</i>
<i>Bentej si mbeex</i>	<i>Benteng</i> in water.
<i>Xat nyaale gi</i>	The poor penis,
<i>Ku la njoli seen</i>	Who parts you see.
<i>Pësi yaw lañ jeeñ</i>	<i>Pesi</i> , you are accused.

This highly esoteric song is a medical warning directed at circumcised children who neglect the prescriptions of the circumciser: a circumcised boy carelessly hurts himself and must be treated again. The song advises the *selbe* to take better care of the *njuli* so as to prevent them from delaying their healing. In other words, the initiation songs serve as a medium of communication whereby recommendations for the health and healing of the *njuli* are conveyed. In addition to these exhortations, the songs transmit a model of moral conduct that the *njuli* should adopt to fit harmoniously into society. As in the wedding songs, patience and endurance constitute the backbone of the moral values instilled among the *njuli*. These values are indirectly transmitted and implicitly codified in the songs. The initiated *selbe* then deciphers and interprets the meanings to the audience. The *njuli* are encouraged to persevere and be patient in not only current difficulties of the initiation, but also future hardships:

<i>Njule muñël</i>	<i>Njuli</i> , be patient.
<i>Muñ leen ka goor</i>	Endure it, men.
<i>Luñ muñ mu jeex</i>	All what you endure will end.
<i>Muñ yagul mbaar</i>	Patience is not long <i>mbaar</i> .
<i>Am yaay di ree</i>	With mother you laugh.
<i>Ñàkk yaay di joy</i>	Without mother you cry.
<i>Jirim boo génnee</i>	Orphan, when you go out,
<i>Ku lay sargal mbaar</i>	Who will welcome you ?

The *Njuli* learn patience, because, through this virtue, they overcome obstacles and pains encountered in the *mbaar*. Similarly other songs, filled with metaphors, warn the *njuli* that impatience, whether in the *mbaar* or in society at large, is always a source of frustration and failure. The following excerpt illustrates this conception:

<i>Mbotu mar na naan, Daw tabbi teen</i>	Frog is thirsty and rushes into a well.
<i>Ba bett sebbe, muy daw di jooy</i>	When rain came, it ran crying.

The frog symbolizes the loss of patience in life. Like the frog, a man who is too impatient to engage in certain undertakings, without prudence and lucidity, may fall victim to bitter disappointment after realizing his mistake. The notions of discipline and respect can be added to this set of morals conveyed in *kasak* songs. Wolof society pays too much attention to the discipline and respect of the different members within the community. For instance, in this following passage, children are exhorted to respect the moral conduct of the community in order to honor their families:

<i>Guy meñi rëloo</i>	Baobab has produced fruit.
<i>Guy meñi rëloo</i>	Baobab has produced fruit.
<i>Reloo sabi ñoro</i>	Fruit is misbehaving.
<i>Sabaani ñoro</i>	If fruit misbehaved,
<i>Guy sabi nga waw</i>	It is not Baobab's fault.
<i>Guy amul deeggo</i>	Because <i>Baobab</i> has no thorn.
<i>Sagal a ko yóbboo</i>	Sagal has brought it [thorn] there.
<i>Kaddu sañu na</i>	As the saying goes:
<i>Doomu ñay du raay</i>	A child of an elephant should not shirk.

Baobab stands for the parents, whereas the fruit stands for the children. When children deviate from their parents' morality, they are guilty in the eyes of the society, but their parents are irreproachable: "Baobab has no thorn, Sagal has brought it there." The two last lines, proverbially insist on the need for children to be like their parents since "a child of an elephant" should also be an elephant. The notion of respect is strongly recommended to the *njuli* who should scrupulously comply with, first of all, his parents' advice, accomplishing any tasks or services assigned to him by them. This attitude is expected of him by older members in the society. Good behavior is required of him in regards to eating, entering adults rooms, and so on. In short, the child is inculcated a system of values through the didactic function of advice and songs. Erny (1987:16) states that, thanks to traditional education, the *njuli* is given a language, a body of knowledge, a set of values, a broad frame of thinking and reference, a sensibility, an "ethos," and a model of living. This set of values is better manifested in the following song. Woven with untranslatable patterns, the song is performed at the end of circumcision ceremony, according to Youssou Mbaye, an informant and *griot* who used to perform *kasak* songs (Lo 2014). The performer can improvise moral suggestions, but his freedom is limited by the repeated patterns:

<i>Sa ngaari ngaarañ</i>	<i>Sa ngaari ngaaran,</i>
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri.</i>
<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>Yaw njul si njaayo</i>	<i>O you njuli Ndiaye!</i>
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>
<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>Bula sa yaay yonne</i>	When your mother asks you a service.
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>

<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>Dawal ba dam ca</i>	Run until you break your leg.
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>
<i>njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>Bula sa bay yonne</i>	When your father ask you a service.
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>
<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>Dawal ba dam ca</i>	Run until your break your leg.
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>
<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>So deme gore</i>	When you go out man.
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>
<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>Sa maas makk yi</i>	Your older brother's age class.
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>
<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>
<i>Ngala defal maleen makk ye</i>	Please regard them as older brothers.
<i>Ngari ngañ nguri</i>	<i>Ngari ngan nguri,</i>
<i>Njaga racc</i>	<i>Njaga racc!</i>

The songs reinforce attitudes and behaviors that help the *njuli* to assert his place in society and to be successful in life. The ideal person is one endowed with the abilities to communicate, and to help and be helped by others. This interpretation is exemplified in the following esoteric song:

<i>Yum yum cēlee</i>	<i>Yum yum celee.</i>
<i>Njaa jaan</i>	<i>Njaa jaan celee.</i>
<i>Walam yum ngaar</i>	<i>Walam yum ngaar.</i>
<i>Li ñaanut lay</i>	there is no excuse.
<i>Pësin ba nga ñarala</i>	The fortune is in <i>ngarala</i> .
<i>Sam lagee waay</i>	Yes, <i>Sam lagee</i> .
<i>Yëxumlu li ci mbaar</i>	If you're looking into <i>mbaar</i> ,
<i>Ku la jam sëgeem</i>	Whoever pierces you will be ashamed.
<i>Njay bërki yoo</i>	Just yesterday <i>njaay</i> ,
<i>Bërkatu njaay</i>	The very previous day,
<i>Ku fa daagu naan</i>	Whoever came there would drink.
<i>Dem njaay cēleet</i>	Go to <i>njaay celeet!</i>
<i>Wamba yeroo</i>	<i>Wamba yeroo!</i>
<i>Wamba yeroo</i>	<i>Wamba yeroo!</i>
<i>Ku sa gawlo miin</i>	If your <i>gawlo</i> knows,
<i>Nganee mbara neex</i>	<i>Mbar's</i> hospitality is good.

In the same line, the *njuli* are told to be active, that is, to strive to succeed in life. One can reach one's goal when one resolutely makes efforts to be tenacious. Lessons within the songs sharpen the *njuli*'s intelligence and shrewdness. An initiated man who has learned many things in the *mbaar* should not let himself be deceived or misled by young people or uninitiated men. In the following song, an uninitiated man interprets the song as someone who is initiated and then outwitted, which is a source of amazement for the performer. Another interpretation: when a boy misleads an adult, either the adult (elephant) is too stupid or the boy (*ngeeran*) is a genius:

<i>Jomi na jomeet</i>	I am too mesmerized!
<i>Ñay wu takk si ngeer</i>	An elephant is tucked a <i>ngeeraann</i> [a small plant]
<i>Ben ñay wa tuuti lool</i>	Either the elephant is too small.
<i>Wala ngeer wa rëy loo</i>	Or the <i>ngeeraan</i> is too big.

Based on the interpretation of this song, an initiated man should not let himself be misled by an uninitiated man, or an adult should not be misled by a young man. One of the circumcision songs of the Soninke expresses the need of the *njuli* to help themselves and the strangers. Because of the similarities between the Soninke and the Wolof, this sense of solidarity indicates that the *njuli* are expected to bring as much support as they can to any needy people in society, especially immigrants (Tandia 1999:291):

<i>Maxa yige tera renme</i>	Don't eat alone under the traveler's hungry eye.
<i>Maxa mini tera renme</i>	Never quench your thirst alone, forgetting the stranger.
<i>I be su renme na tere</i>	Know that someday one of yours will travel.

According to Assane Sylla (1978:202), this method of education urges the *njuli* to have control of themselves without which they may become tempted; to adjust their bodies and spirits in order to fortify their will; to develop qualities such as endurance, moderation, serenity necessary for a spiritual, and moral ascension—objectives of circumcision ritual for children. These texts combine artistic quality, expressed through performance and imagery, and messages conveyed to reinforce Wolof worldview.

Change, Adaption, and Traditional Culture

Linguistic and performative systems of the Wolof have undergone major changes. The movement of people back and forth from rural to urban areas and technological innovations, such the radio and television, are re-shaping and re-adapting oral traditions into new forms of performance. With urbanization and the emergence of modern medicine, traditional circumcision is disappearing. Many parents have their sons circumcised at infancy, or at least, prefer to take them to a medical center nearby. Those living in villages are unsurprisingly spared these changes. Nearby dispensaries are a major factor in the extinction of bush-based circumcision, which is imperative for “authentic” *kasak* performances. The corollary of these radical social

transformations is arguably the disappearance of rites of passage and initiatory ceremonies such as *kasak*.

Observing this change, Bay Samba, an informant, states that the disappearance of this ancestral practice (initiation) in cities is regrettable (Lo 2014). These nostalgic overtones conceal the ability of oral tradition to be “decontextualized” and “recontextualized” in different environments (Bauman and Briggs 1990). When traditional folklore genres are decontextualized and recontextualized, they create “intertextual gaps” (Bauman 2004:8) from which emerge hybrid genres. Through these two processes, the genre is mediated and enters into dialogue with other genres typical of the contemporary modern world. To illustrate, musical instruments, video filming, and the participation of formerly excluded gendered groups such as women, along with their feminine repertoire (*taasu*), factor into recontextualized *kasak* performances organized by state agencies or private entities in cities. The view of Schechner (1985) and Bauman (2004), which I share, is that performance is always new, whether in a given performance or across successive performance contexts. The move of *kasak*, for instance, from rural contexts to urban spaces, whether mediated or unmediated by communicative technologies, is inscribed in a continuous sociohistorical change or process, constantly negotiated between performers and their audiences.

Arguably, new forms of cultural recuperations keep us from declaring these traditions as completely extinct. Oral traditions, including *kasak*, are an object of recuperation to fulfill needs that differ from those linked to archaic rites, ranging from festivalization (the process of transforming a ritual event into a folkloric festival for reasons other than ritual) and sensitization campaigns to implicit political rallies. Similar processes are documented in linguistic uses of Wolof orality in urban contexts (Irvine 2011:16-37), in political rhetoric (Seck 2011:120-49), and other public events. Zumthor portrays these transformations, referring to the extinction of the ritual institutions of oral poetry; he states, “rite has ceased to contain it. Its dynamism, now liberated propels it toward the confused horizon of possibilities, avidly seeking action” (1990:213).

In 2009, the Senegalese Agency for the Promotion of Tourism (ANTP) initiated the second year of *kasak* ceremony themed “*Kasak* and African Renaissance.” Held in collaboration with the zoological Parc de Hann in Dakar, the initiation lasted fifteen days and included seventy-seven male participants. Former initiated boys, experienced campers, and paramedics were employed to run the program. Ritual songs, storytelling, and puzzle sessions were performed to reconstruct the traditional atmosphere of these events. Although the initiates were circumcised at the hospital, the rituals were pre-arranged to re-valorize the traditional culture. The Chair of the organizing agency, Mr. Seck, said that it has been a continuation of a product, a program initiated in 2007 that consists in utilizing *kasak* in its cultural dimension, which has become an industry. He added: “it is an innovation, and we have our cultural realities that no one must forget” (Lo 2010).

In addition to tourism agencies’ contribution to the re-adaptation of this poetic and ritual event, political leaders and municipal authorities were also involved. Richard Toll, a commune in Senegal, can be illustrative in the political appropriation of *kasak*. In 2013, the local representative of the political party in power, along with the municipality, organized a massive initiatory rite and *kasak* for over 500 boys. This politicized *kasak* mobilized huge funds and

made the event free for young participants. Waalo Lël, the organizing committee, adopted as their slogan: “Revisiting Waalo Folklore.” Nocturnal *kasak* ceremonies, presided over by politicians, were also organized. In addition, reflection and scholarly debates were also carried out to appraise the revival processes. In Guejaway, a Department of the Dakar region organized a colloquium at which local scholars and folklorists convened to discuss the place and function of initiatory rites in contemporary Senegal. Values embedded within and conveyed through circumcision were discussed: “Circumcision, from Yesterday to the Present.” The Lébou have an annual festival called “fespence”⁵ during which *kasak* songs are performed to preserve them. These initiatives have the same goal: the re-valorization of circumcision rites for cultural identity and touristic and nostalgic purposes. *Kasak* becomes then a national heritage that groups and individuals seek to revive.

Neo-traditional and modern musicians are also very active in recycling initiatory songs on which they capitalize for their alternative musical inspiration and renewal of the melody to their own melody, lyrics, and rhythms. Mbaye Ndaak (2008), a former *kasak* performer, is a local folklorist whom I qualify as adhering to neo-traditional trends. He has a large collection of *kasak* songs, folktales, and proverbs. As a secondary teacher of history and geographer, Ndaak has capitalized upon his personal resources, which he has enriched through his numerous trips across the western and central regions of Senegal. Thanks to his essays and public lectures at local associations and urban cultural centers in Dakar, Ndaak has received growing fame. While attending conferences in Europe, particularly in Germany, he met another musician named Jacek Rabinsky. The latter expressed his desire to explore *kasak* repertoire and melody, and from their collaboration a video was released online.



Example of neo-traditional revalorization of *kasak*.
Video: courtesy of Babacar Mbaye Ndaak.
<http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30i/lo>

Ndaak thinks that ambitious individuals should re-valorize folksongs and the cultural heritage of past generations. He lauds his commitment to the revival of traditional culture, and thinks that there is no difference between tradition and modernity. He disparagingly critiques modern musicians that imitate western melodies, leaving behind the vast local reservoir of oral traditions. Certain modern musicians, however, are making recourse to oral songs to enhance their originality and rootedness in African culture.

Many popular musicians are inspired by the traditional poetic repertoire. Omar Pene (2013), a Senegalese national musician, has particularly worked on *kasak*, especially with his popular album called *Njuli*, “The Circumcised.” This album is a “meta-song”⁶ that highlights aspects of *kasak* tradition such as the need for patience and endurance within young *njuli*. Pene utilizes his own memories of *lël*, the ritual ceremony, and performance of the songs. His interest

⁵“Fespence” is a coined word from festival and *penc* which is a Wolof term meaning public place.

⁶“Meta-song” refers to *kasak* song used to reflect upon *kasak*’s extinction process that is emphasized in the video clip.

in this poetic genre stems from the environment in which he was raised, as his father was a *kasak* singer. The connection between modern music and traditional repertoire and folksongs deserves investigation. Revivalists utilize innovative strategies to blend traditional culture with modern resources. Irele Abiola (1993:71) suggests that popular African musicians are more successful at blending foreign musical elements (electronic instruments, for instance) with musical resources grounded in African indigenous folk culture.

Until recently anthropologists and folklorists were preoccupied with the authenticity of folk traditions, criticizing the commercialization and modernization upon them. To re-valorize folk cultures in urban settings, state and private initiatives were negatively portrayed as “folklorizing” culture, that is, staging and decontextualizing folklore materials for purposes other than their functional roles in pre-modern and peasant folk groups. John H. McDowell defines “folklorization” as “to remove traditional expressive culture from an original point of production and relocate it in a distanced setting of consumption” (2010:182). Regina Bendix (2009) terms such a process as “heritagization.” This romanticization of a fading folk culture was later viewed as misrepresenting the flexibility of cultural forms that enter into conversation with, borrow from, and relate to differing communicative modes that depend on new contexts of “relocation” (McDowell 2010:182). Folklorization, for commercial or political agenda, does not necessarily entail corruption of folk cultures reproduced in new contexts and settings. These songs could create new spaces of sociality in which they fulfill functions in conformity with the urban milieu, and could be accepted by performers and their audiences as legitimately meaningful. Nevertheless, contemporary recontextualization calls for further investigation to shed light on their new forms.

Conclusion

In this study I have endeavored to translate the folksongs by being faithful to the artistic poeticity of the original texts. Attention has been accorded to extratextual parameters such as the visual bearings of the performer/audience, the musical accompaniment, dances, and other interactions implied during the oral and visual rendition of the songs. African oral poetry’s aesthetic cannot be evaluated based on western standards such as alliteration and rhyme. Although it does not exclude these techniques, its artistic quality resides in its ability to stir emotion and influence behavior (Okepwho 1992:8). The psychological impact of the songs upon circumcised children has not been privileged here, but such an approach would shed light on it.

Today, rampant urbanization, construction of modern hospitals, and other socioeconomic factors are presumably putting these cultural institutions and rites of passage at risk. Children are circumcised earlier in life and at hospitals, thereby rendering these initiatory practices irrelevant. The ways in which these traditional pedagogic institutions have affected and contributed to the character of the young Wolof, and by extension, other Senegalese, are being felt with the lack of respect toward elderly people, of solidarity within age groups, and other unethical trends such as depredation, aggression, and early sexuality. Because of the increased extinction of circumcision songs and rituals, the national media and other traditionalists decry the lack of civism and sensitivity to traditional taboos. Babacar Mbaye Ndaak, a local historian, confessed that the loss

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