

Performing Realization

The Sufi Music Videos of the Taalibe Baye of Dakar

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بِالْأَوَانِ، فِي الْعَفِيقَةِ، تَابِعٌ لِلصَّبِّ الْمَعَانِكِ وَالْمَعَانِكِ بَعْدًا تَنْمُو
وَقَعَ التَّعْبِيرِيُّ، وَالْكُلُّ وَاجِدٌ، فَأُرْوَحْنَا خَمْرًا وَأَشْبَحْنَا كَرْمًا

*The subtlety of vessels, in reality, comes from the subtlety of the meanings they contain
And these meanings are heightened by the subtlety of their vessels
Things have been made different, while all is yet one
For our spirits are wine and our forms are vine*

—Ibn al-Fārīd
Khamriyyah

وض وقافية معنى نسجد
به سرظني دون معنى نكسجد
ني سرگز اندر حرف ناید
که بحر قلزم اندر ظرف ناید

*Metre and Rhyme cannot contain meaning
For not every vessel can hold every meaning
Meaning can never be contained in speech
The Red Sea cannot be held in a jug*

—Mahmūd Shabistari
Gulshān-I Rāz

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The Sufi communities of Dakar have begun to receive serious scholarly attention for their remarkable artistic traditions. Roberts and Roberts's groundbreaking work on the visual arts of Dakar (2003), work by McLaughlin (1997, 2000), Niang (2009), and Hill (2006) on Sufi influences in popular Senegalese music, and Buggenhagen's work on Mouride pilgrimage videocassettes and DVDs (2010) have begun to bring these traditions the wider scholarly attention and appreciation they deserve. In addition to these art forms, at the turn of the century, a new genre of Sufi art began to emerge in Dakar, Senegal: the Sufi music video. This new genre of Sufi art differs significantly from older videos of performances of Sufi poetry or music, in that it utilizes the features of the music video genre instead of merely being a recording of a performance of a different genre (e.g. the widely available video recordings of poetry recitations and musical concerts).

I was introduced to these videos by disciples of the branch of the Tijaniyyah founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1975), known as Baye Niasse, during a research trip in which I interviewed *shaykhs* and disciples in Dakar and Medina Baye between January and May 2014. This branch of the Tijaniyyah is the most popular Sufi order in West Africa, and is known for its controversial practice of *tarbiyah*,¹ in which disciples are given an intense regimen of formulas to recite until they experience *fanā'*, annihilation in God. When I asked disciples about their experiences of this intense spiritual training, many of them told me that they couldn't describe their experience in words, but that these music videos could express things better than words could. Later, I learned that many disciples systematically watch these videos as a way of reminding them of their experiences of annihilation in God (*fanā'*) and of cultivating a particular ethical/ psychological/spiritual disposition of focusing on (*tawajjuh*) their spiritual master (*shaykh*), the Prophet, and God. The Sufi tradition is replete with examples of artistic forms that serve similar functions—expressing ineffable spiritual realities and inducing/cultivating certain states and dispositions in their audiences—but these music videos mark the transition of this tradition into a new artistic genre.

1 Screenshot from Aïda Faye's "Delül Ci Yalla" music video, directed by Noël Gueye.
Photo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI>



In this paper, I will analyze two of the most popular of these Sufi music videos, "Delül Ci Yalla" by Aïda Faye and "Baye Your Side" by Maxi Krezy featuring Fadda Freddy and Ndongo D, examining the various discursive and nondiscursive strategies they employ to express and perform the ineffable experiences of spiritual realization and sanctity. As in most Sufi texts, the lyrics of both songs are studded with dense allusions to the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, classical Sufi poetry, and Sufi doctrines and symbols. However, perhaps even more interesting are the visual symbols these videos employ to allude to, embody, and perform these ideas, practices, and experiences.

For example, in Aïda Faye's video, she actually "performs" the practice of *tarbiyah*, sitting on the beach (the favored site of these practices among younger disciples in Dakar) with her prayer beads, adopting many of the physical postures and facial expressions evinced by disciples undergoing *tarbiyah*, all while employing richly layered visual symbolism to illustrate the different states (*aḥwāl*) disciples experience during this process. These images are skillfully combined with lyrics partially derived from the invocations used during the process of *tarbiyah* and from the poetic oral traditions of Wolof/Arabic Sufi teachings alluding to *fanā'*. In her performance, Faye mainly relies on these allusions and visual symbols instead of direct lyrics because the experiences of *tarbiyah* are understood to be ineffable by nature.

Maxi Krezy's "Baye Your Side" is a sampling and remix of Bob Marley's "High Tide or Low Tide." The song's title and chorus come from a pun on the refrain of Marley's song, "I'll be by your side," which in the remix becomes, "I'll be Baye your side," "Baye" ("father" in Wolof) being the term of affection by which disciples refer to Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. While this rap video is more discursively oriented than Aïda Faye's, it also employs a number of fascinating visual effects and symbols to illustrate the experience of annihilation in the *shaykh* (*fanā' fi'l shaykh*), while the lyrics employ a wide array of esoteric symbols and concepts to petition and praise Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and expound his doctrines.

I will attempt to elucidate the immanent "performance theory" at work in these two videos, with reference to contemporary and classical Sufi texts of the tradition, in order to better understand the aesthetic choices and strategies employed. I will further argue

that these music videos, and the genre as a whole, are perhaps best understood as a "remix" of the popular local genres of *zikrs* and poetry recited at Sufi gatherings throughout Senegal, as they share many of the same formal features, functions, and aesthetic/performance theory. Finally, I will discuss how these videos are used as a part of a conscious program of ethical and spiritual self-cultivation, and the implications of this and other new-media practices for studies of contemporary African art, as well as Sufi and Islamic studies.

This study is intended to be a "close reading" of the symbols and symbolism of the two music videos, and so will only address the social contexts of the performers, the artistic intent and process of the performers/producers, and other issues when directly relevant to unpacking the visual and lyrical symbols and allusions of the two pieces. Readers interested in the history of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's branch of the Tijaniyyah are encouraged to consult Rüdiger Seesemann's excellent work, *The Divine Flood* (2011), as well as Zachary Wright's insightful *Living Knowledge in West African Islam* (2015), and especially Joseph Hill's dissertation *Divine Knowledge and Islamic Authority: Religious Specialization among Disciples of Baay Nas* (2007) and his recent article "Baay Is the Spiritual Leader of the Rappers: Performing Islamic Reasoning in Senegalese Sufi Hip-Hop" (2016) for a deeper description of the contemporary social, political, and religious contexts in which these videos were produced. The present study, however, is meant to serve more as a commentary upon these two intertextually dense and richly allusive music videos than a description of the social scene in which they emerged.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, I hope it can serve as a kind of corrective (extending Asad's [2009] recommendations to these not-merely-discursive artistic traditions) to the tendency of anthropological studies of the Sufi arts of Senegal to miss or gloss over the allusions to wider traditions of Islamic literatures and symbols, often quoting *ḥadīth* and famous Arabic Sufi sayings and verses of poetry as "local Wolof proverbs." Secondly, this study will present the aesthetic theories of meaning and performance current among the audience and performers of these music videos, instead of merely subjecting the videos to the lens of contemporary Western theories of performance. Relatedly, it will examine the creative strategies which these artists use to perform,

not only their particular urban, Muslim, and Tijani identities, but also their experiences of spiritual realization, as well as the ways in which these videos are used by other Tijani disciples as a reminder (*dhikr*) to provoke or cultivate certain spiritual states and dispositions. These music videos represent a significant new dimension of the artistic landscape of the increasingly transnational communities of African Sufism, and I hope this study is but the first of many of this new tradition.

AIDA FAYE'S "DELÛL CI YALLA": PERFORMING THE INEFFABLE

How do you communicate an experience to someone who has never had it? Or relatedly, how do you translate one form of personal experience (a sight, a smell, a feeling, a taste) into another form (speech, writing, music, images, etc.) that others can appreciate? Poets and painters, composers and critics, philosophers, actors, and really all of us creatively struggle with these basic questions each and every time we attempt to communicate even the most everyday experiences and feelings. If this is true of the frustration of standing in line or the taste of chocolate, how much more so of that which is ineffable, impossible to define or share? Sufi artists such as Aida Faye have the added creative challenge of attempting to communicate the experience of that which has no likeness. The famous Andalusian Sufi theorist, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), whose writings are often cited by and had a strong influence upon the Tijani tradition, explains the seeming impossibility of this task:

The science of tastings is the science of qualities. Tastings cannot be told about except by those who experience them when they come together on a designated technical term. However, when they have not come together on a term, the tasters cannot communicate their tastings. This concerns knowledge of those things other than God which can be perceived only through tasting, such as sensory objects and taking pleasure in them and the pleasure which is found through knowledge acquired by reflective consideration. It is possible to establish technical terminology in all of this in an approximate manner. As for the tasting which occurs during the witnessing of the Real, in that there can be no technical terminology. That is the tasting of the mysteries/secrets (*al-asrār*) and lies outside considerative [rational] and sensory experience. The reason for this is as follows:

The things—I mean everything other than God— have likes and similarities. Hence it is possible to establish technical terminology

concerning them in order to make oneself understood to everyone who tastes their flavor, whatever kind of perception it may be, but as for the Author [God]—"There is nothing like unto Him" (42:11). Hence it is impossible for a technical term to tie him down since that which one individual witnesses of Him is not the same as what another witnesses in any respect. This is the manner in which He is known by the gnostics. Hence no gnostic is able to convey to another gnostic what he witnesses of his Lord, for each of the two gnostics witnesses Him who has no likeness, and conveying knowledge can only take place through likeness. If they shared a form in common ... they would establish a technical term as they willed. If one of them accepted that, then everyone could accept that.

The gnostics among the folk of Allah know that "God never discloses Himself in a single form to two individuals, nor in a single form twice." Hence for them the situation does not become tied down, since each individual has a self-disclosure specific to himself, and man sees Him through himself Hence he cannot designate a technical term concerning this through which any positive knowledge would accrue to those who discuss it.

So the gnostics know, but what they know cannot be communicated. It is not in the power of the possessors of this most delightful station, higher than which there is no station among the possible things, to coin a word which would denote what they know (Ibn 'Arabi quoted in Chittick 1989: 353).

So what is a Sufi artist to do? How can one communicate the experience of the Real which has no like and is never experienced in the same way twice? Like the false-color images of infrared cameras or deep-space telescopes, various traditions of Islamic (especially Sufi) art have found ways to present various concepts and intangible spiritual realities to the senses, but what can one do when it comes to The Real Itself, or even one's necessarily unique experience of that which has no likeness? Even the Qur'an is remarkably laconic about the Prophet's experience of the Divine Reality at the apex of his heavenly ascent (*mi'rāj*): *He revealed unto his servant what He revealed. The heart was not untrue in what it saw When enshrouded the lote tree that which enshrouded it, the eye swerved not nor went astray* (53:11–12, 16–17).

The answer to this paradox lies in the second half of the verse, *There is nothing like unto Him* (42:11), which reads, *and He is the Hearing, the Seeing*. Like many Sufis before and after him, Ibn 'Arabi "resolves" this seemingly paradoxical verse (how can



3 Integration of multiple selves
Aida Faye, "Delül Ci Yalla," directed by Noël Gueye
Photo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI>

something without likeness also be “seeing” and “hearing”—since these are likenesses, being attributes that we and many animals share?) by explaining that God’s transcendent incomparability (*tanzīh*) actually necessitates His immanent comparability (*tashbīh*). The argument basically goes: If you declare God to only be completely transcendent, that actually limits Him, since you are saying that He cannot be immanent. But if God is truly transcendent, then He cannot be limited, even by transcendence, and so He must also be immanent. In short, God transcends His transcendence and is thus Immanent; His incomparable incomparability incomparably encompasses similarity. This is the foundation of the special Sufi science of allusion (*ishārah*), sign (*ayah*), and symbol (*ramz*).

As with many Sufi artists before her, Aïda Faye (along with the video’s director, Noël Gueye) relies on this special, evocative form of symbolism in order to communicate, or more precisely, evoke a particular experience of the encounter with the Real, *fanā’* (Fig. 1). It is important to note that in these Sufi discourses, such symbols, whether verbal, visual, or both, operate in a manner that is very different from that of stop signs, mascots, logos, or other signs that we commonly call “symbols.” Within such Sufi discourses, the symbol (*ishārah*, *ayah*, or *ramz*) is not an arbitrary signifier linked to its signified through convention, but is rather ontologically continuous with that which it symbolizes. Like the tip of an iceberg, the symbol is the symbolized as it appears in a particular domain. Because of these ontological connections, such symbols are understood to convey the presence (*ḥaḍrah*) of that which they symbolize, and thus evoke or provoke an encounter with it. As in the above quotation, Sufi authors often use the term “tasting” (*dhawq*) to refer to direct experience, and so the symbol or sign can be likened to aroma, perfume, or scent (*rīḥ*, *shamm*), as it often is in Sufi poetry. Just as an aroma has an actual physical continuity and identity with its source and provokes a reaction in those with a functional sense of smell (salivation, hunger, etc.), so too do symbolic Sufi allusions have an ontological continuity with the experiences or realities they embody, and they also evoke responses in sufficiently sensitive audiences.

Having succinctly outlined this approach to symbolism, we will now examine how it is employed in Aïda Faye’s music video as a means of communicating the experience of *fanā’*. (The video can

be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI>)

We will begin by commenting upon the lyrics of the song before turning to the visual symbols of the music video. The song is sung in Wolof with numerous Arabic quotations and phrases (in bold below) and its lyrics can be translated as:

There is no god but God, There is no god but God

Chorus: Return to God, before you are returned to Him

Allāh, Allāh, Allāh. There is no god but God, God.

There is no god but God

You must know God before death comes.

Chorus: Return to God, before you are returned to Him.

If you don’t return to God until you die,

Chorus: Return to God, before you are returned to Him.

You must die before you die.²

Chorus: Return to God, before you are returned to Him.

He is the One and Only

Purity, but not water, subtlety, but not air

Light, but not fire, spirit but not body³

Allāh, Allāh, Allāh. There is no god but God

You threw not when you threw, but rather God threw⁴

Allāh, Allāh, Baye, There is no god but God

Chorus: Return to God, before you are returned to Him.

There is no god but God

Chorus: Return to God, before you are returned to Him.

Allāh, Allāh, Allāh

There is no god but God

God is God⁵

ANALYSIS OF THE LYRICS

Shahādah. The invocation of the *shahādah* (“there is no god but God”) is part of daily Tijani practice, and the repetition of this phrase is an integral part of the process of *tarbiyah*. In these contexts, the recitation of the *shahādah* is understood to erase the awareness or consciousness of anything other than God, leading to the state of *fanā’* that is the goal of *tarbiyah*. Aïda Faye is famous for her powerful recitations (*zīkr* in Wolof, *dhikr* in Arabic) of the *shahādah* at Tijani gatherings, which frequently send listeners into ecstatic states (*ahwāl*), and seldom leave dry eyes in the audience. (One such performance can be heard at <https://www>.

4 Trees coming together
Aïda Faye, “Delül Ci Yalla,” directed by Noël Gueye
Photo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI>



youtube.com/watch?v=dPjdxRloLr8). As in this song, public recitations of poetry at Sufi gatherings (*gammu* in Wolof) often emerge in the midst of, and are interspersed with, *zikr/dhikr* of the *shahādah*. Thus the repeated motif of the *shahādah* connects the song with the daily invocation of the *shahādah* during the performance of litanies (which can be public or private), its private invocation during the process of *tarbiyah*, as well as its public invocation in *zikrs* at gatherings.

This close connection between the repeated refrains of the song and the repetition of Qur’anic phrases and prayers (such as the *shahādah*) in private and public spiritual practice is important, as it reveals a shared aesthetic and methodology of repeated invocation (*dhikr/zikr*). The prolonged repetition of a phrase, whether in a song, poem, or litany, invites the performer and listener to consider its different meanings. Each new invocation or repetition represents an invitation to a new and fresh approach to—a new revelation of—the same reality in a new context.

According to the celebrated Sufi doctrine of *tajdid al-khalq fi kulli anāntin* or “the renewal of creation at each instant,”⁶ everything in the cosmos participates in this perpetual and instantaneous revelation from and return to God. Like the images from a projector or on a TV screen, everything in the world is created anew at every instant, producing the appearance of continuity. Thus, in this cosmology, although you may seem to be repeating the same thing over and over again, the reality is that each recitation is new and distinct because you yourself are new and distinct at every instant. This perpetual creation in the domain of the cosmos is mirrored in the persistent repetition of invocation in the domain of language, and is one of the reasons why repetition features so prominently in *zikrs* and songs such as this one.

Chorus: Return to God, before you are returned to Him. The motif of return runs through the music video’s title, verses, images and is repeated over and over again in its chorus. The theme of “returning to God” is also major motif in the Qur’an, which is studded with verses such as *Verily from God we come and to Him we are Returning* (2:156) and *To Him the whole affair is returned* (11:23). Now, a “return” implies an original “coming from,” and this cycle of descent from and return to God is often described and depicted as two “arcs”⁷ (Diagram 2).

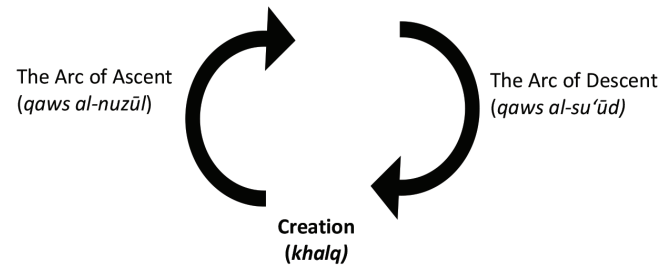


Diagram 1 Arcs of creation and return

This process of descent from and return to God is understood to occur cosmically, with the creation of the universe; individually, with the birth and death of each person; spiritually through spiritual practices that lead to *fanā’*; and instantaneously through the perpetual renewal of creation described above. Thus the chorus of the song can be understood as calling the audience to undertake the voluntary, spiritual return to God, before the involuntary eschatological return takes them back to God. While the song’s lyrics focus on these spiritual and posthumous returns to God, as we will explore later, the images of the music video allude to the cosmic and instantaneous returns, which form the metaphysical background of the other two returns to God.

“You must know God before death comes.”

Combined with the chorus, this verse equates knowledge of God with the voluntary, spiritual return to Him, and underscores the fact that it must take place before the involuntary return of physical death.⁸ The next verse equates this return of knowledge with death:

“If you don’t return to God until you die, you must die before you die”

This verse cites the famous *ḥadīth*, “die before you die,” to underscore and prove the equation begun in the previous verse:

Knowledge of God = Return to God = Death

Clearly the Prophetic injunction to “die before you die,” indicates that this first “death” is different from the second. Within



5 “Allah” appearing on a rock beneath Faye’s knees
Aïda Faye, “Delül Ci Yalla,” directed by Noël Gueye
Photo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI>

Sufism these two deaths are commonly known as voluntary (spiritual) death (*al-mawt al-ikhtiyāri*), and involuntary (physical) death (*al-mawt al-ijbāri*). While the second death is commonly known, this first death, which is equated with *fanāʿ* is less commonly experienced and understood. So what is *fanāʿ*? Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse describes it as the state in which the disciple

doesn't see himself, he doesn't see other than Him, and nothing of the created things, he doesn't see anything except for the oneness of God in everything, and this is what is referred to as Real Unlimited Being, where there is no name, no attribute, no action, and no trace, and he becomes veiled from them [created things] by God just as before he was veiled from God by them (Niasse 1981: 391).

This state is the culmination of the process of *tarbiyah*, in which disciples experience everything, including their own consciousness, as God. Thus they often make ecstatic utterances such as “I am God,” or “everything is God,” as all traces of multiplicity are erased. However, this is not the end of the process. In coming to *fanāʿ*, the disciple is taken from multiplicity to unity, but the next step is to unite this unity with multiplicity in a station which is known as subsistence (*baqāʿ*) or the annihilation of annihilation (*fanāʿ al-fanāʿ*).⁶ In this station, the disciple is neither veiled from God nor from things, but rather sees things in God and God in things. The next verse continues the argument begun above by declaring, *He is the One and Only*. This verse not only describes the unity experienced in *fanāʿ*, but on a more practical level extends the argument begun in the previous verses. In the most basic Islamic understanding, God being “One and Only” means that everything comes from Him and must eventually return to Him. As the One and Only, nothing and no one can escape Him, so here the artist can be read as exhorting the audience not to postpone the inevitable return to God, but rather to embrace it. When combined with the previous verses, the message seems to be: you can go either kicking and screaming or with open arms, so get to work and return to God. With this argument complete, the lyrics now turn to a description of the ineffable state experienced at the end of the return, *fanāʿ*.

*Purity, but not water, subtlety, but not air
Light, but not fire, spirit but not body*

This is a verbatim quotation of one of the most famous verses of Sufi poetry, from the celebrated wine-ode (*al-khamriyyah*) by the Egyptian Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235). This verse (and the poem as a whole) is variously interpreted as a description of the Divine Essence, the remembrance/invocation of God (*dhikruLLāh*), and the pre-eternal light or reality of the Prophet Muhammad (*nūr Muḥammadi* or *ḥaqīqah Muḥammadiyah*)—the logos-like reality that is described as the first creation of God through which all of creation came into being. In this verse, the qualities of the four elements (water, air, fire, and earth [body]) are invoked and then negated, leaving an apophatic unity of quality or meaning (*maʿanā*) beyond separate elements or forms (*ṣuwwar*). This apophatic turn is reiterated in the next verse, a direct quotation from the Qurʾan:

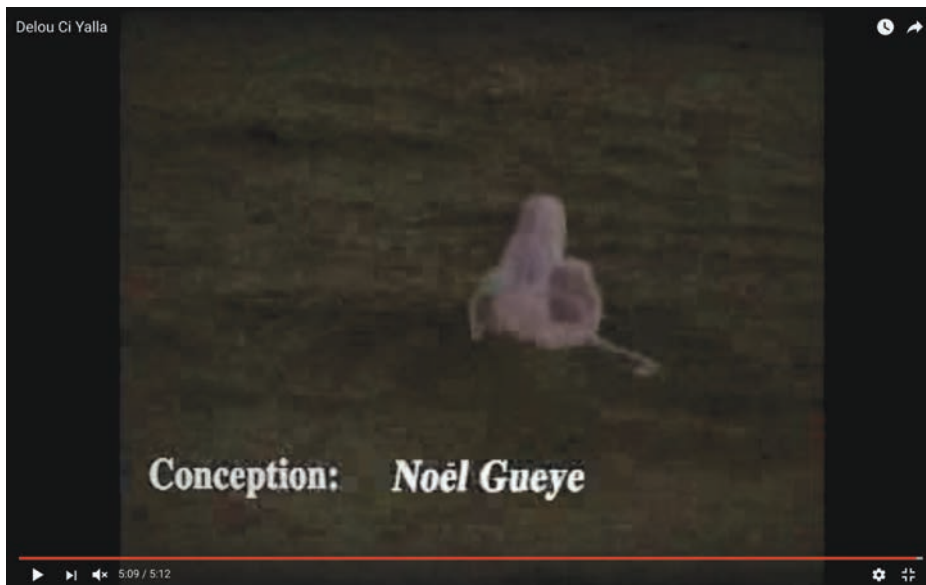
You threw not when you threw, but rather God threw (8:17)

This verse describes the beginning of the battle of Badr, in which the Prophet hurled a handful of stones at the larger army of Quraysh, symbolically destroying them. Ibn ʿArabi and other Sufi authors, including Shaykh Ibrahim, often quote this verse to illustrate the fact that God is the only real “agent” behind all actions (see Niasse 2010: 2:367) and to illustrate the special state of annihilation that is identified with the Prophet and described in a *ḥadīth* in which God is said to become the “hearing, sight, hand, and foot” of his beloved servant (see Chittick 1989: 325–31). In the paradoxical meeting of human and Divine which is *fanāʿ*, God is identical with His servant from one perspective, and yet is not, from another. As one scholar notes, quoting Ibn ʿArabi:

“*You did not throw*, so He negated, *when you threw*, so He affirmed, *but God threw*, so He negated the engendered existence (*kawn*) of Muhammad, and affirmed Himself as identical (*ʿayn*) with Muhammad...” reveal[s] the truth that it is God alone who is the agent of all acts, the agent who acts through all the faculties of man. This truth is affirmed by Ibn ʿArabi by reference to the words of the famous *ḥadīth qudsi*, known as the *ḥadīth al-taqarrub*, “drawing near,” in which God says that when He loves a servant, He is “the hearing with which he hears, the sight by which he sees, the hand with which he strikes and the foot whereon he walks.” Ibn ʿArabi draws attention to the important fact that God speaks in the present tense, saying “I am his hearing, his sight, and his hand,” “God’s words ‘I am’ show that this was already the situation, but the



6 Eyes opening and closing
Aïda Faye, “Delül Ci Yalla,” directed by Noël Gueye
Photo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI>



7 Disappearing into the ocean
 Aïda Faye, “Delül Ci Yalla,” directed by Noël
 Gueye
 Photo: [https://www.youtube.com/
 watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI)

servant was not aware. Hence the generous gift which this nearness gives to him is the unveiling of the knowledge that God is his hearing and his sight (Shah-Kazemi n.d.)

This unveiling or realization occurs during *fanā'*, which is the culmination of the process of return and the means through which it is achieved—the disciple realizes that it was never him or her, but rather God all along. As Rumi famously wrote, “For years I knocked at the door, but when it finally opened, I found I had been knocking from the inside!” This theme is reinforced in the final verse of the song which states, “God is God”—the final realization of *fanā'*.

ANALYSIS OF VISUAL SYMBOLS

Having explored some of the allusions in the lyrics of the song, we will now analyze some of the visual symbols of the music video. As with the lyrics, most of these revolve around the theme of emanation from and return to God, and the related process and experience of spiritual realization.

Opening Sequence. The evocative opening sequence of the music video is an illustration of several popular Sufi cosmogonic accounts. A small dot expands to form a white circle, which is then replaced by the Arabic letter *bā'* (ب), which then vanishes in a brilliant explosion of light from which the earth emerges. Then the screen cuts to an image of a sunrise and the letter *bā'* flies into place in front of the sun. This sequence makes reference to a number of Sufi doctrines regarding the origin of the cosmos, such as this one from a twentieth-century, South Asian Sufi author:

Allah placed his grace (the *Nūr*, which shines with the resplendence of millions of millions upon millions of suns), all of His mysterious secrets, and the eighteen thousand universes, both seen and unseen, within His essence, His *dhāt*. One part of that essence He made into a circle (*sukūn*), made that circle into a dot (*nuqtah*), made that dot atomless (without limit [or extension] in time or space), made that atomless thing into the mystery called *Rahmatul-ālamīn* [mercy of all the worlds—a Qur'anic title of the Prophet], that mystery into *Rasūl* [the Messenger], the *Rasūl* into the secret (*sirr*), and that secret into the *mīm* [م], and then placed the *mīm*, along with the complete essence, attributes, and secrets of His creations within man's heart¹⁰ (Muhaiyadeen 2001: 317).

The primary written source of Tijani doctrine, the *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, records a similar cosmogonic account attributed to Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī (d. 1815), the founder of the Tijaniyyah:

Know that the Real took out a portion of His Divine Light of the utmost purity and made it a substance, then he placed in that portion what He willed ... and He made that portion of Light the site of the outpouring of all the Divine Mercy that He apportioned for creation in His pre-eternal knowledge. Then he poured out upon His creation the knowledge and mercy he had deposited in the Muḥammadan Reality... This light is the Muḥammadan Reality and the mercy that flows through its essence, it pours out upon all existence, so nothing in existence receives mercy, except through his noble essence (*pbuh*) The first mercy is the outpouring of existence upon all existents so that they emerge from nonexistence into existence, and the second mercy is the outpouring of Divine mercies and blessings upon all beings through which they continue to enjoy existence (Sidi 'Ali Harāzīm Barrādāh 2011: 1410–13).

In both accounts, and in the video, the Muḥammadan Reality is described as the first creative act of God, a piece of His Light through which the rest of creation is brought into being, just as the earth is brought into visibility from invisibility by the rising sun. In the video, the sun is juxtaposed with the Arabic letter *bā'* (or the point beneath this letter) which, as the first letter of the Qur'an, is frequently used to symbolize this aspect of the Muḥammadan Reality in accordance with the traditions, “All that is in the revealed books is in the Qur'an, and all that is in the Qur'an is in the *Fātiḥah*, and all that is in the *Fātiḥah* is in the *basmalah*” and “All that is in the *basmalah* is in the letter *Bā'*, which itself is contained in the point that is beneath it” (Lings 1993: 148).¹¹ More prosaically, the idea is that just as all of the letters of a book are but a series of dots, or more precisely, just as the ink of this dot flows through all letters (which themselves emerge from the dot of ink of the pen's nib),¹² so too does the light of the Prophetic reality flow through and constitute the reality of all existent things. Thus the opening sequence of Aïda Faye's video combines the symbolism of light and letters to illustrate the emanation of the Muḥammadan Reality from the inscrutable Divine Essence, and the emergence of the cosmos from this Muḥammadan Reality.

Clouds. The very next image to appear is that of clouds passing

8 The artist “performs” *tarbiyah* on the beach
 Aïda Faye, “Delül Ci Yalla,” directed by Noël
 Gueye
 Photo: [https://www.youtube.com/
 watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj-jZTqCgUI)



in front of the sun. This image continues the theme of manifestation or creation begun in the opening sequence, and is probably a reference to the Qur’anic verse “and you see the mountains which you deem fixed, but they are passing away like clouds” (27:88), which Shaykh Ibrahim quotes as an illustration of the perpetual transformation of God’s manifestations, “Allah may manifest in a tree, but the next moment, this manifestation may move to another tree, or something else. The manifestation of Allah are constantly evolving and never at a standstill ... Allah says in the Qur’an, *You see the mountains you deem to be solid, but they are moving like clouds* (27:88)” (Niasse 2006: 97).¹³ Thus clouds symbolize the evanescence of creation, and the image of clouds in front of the sun illustrates the veiling nature of these Divine self-manifestations, which must eventually vanish, revealing the face of the Sun. As the Qur’anic verse that is probably the origin of the Sufi terms *fanā’* and *baqā’* says, *Everything upon it is passing away, and there remains the face of your Lord* (55:26).

Ocean and Beach/Reverse Waves. The next image to appear in the music video is of the artist walking towards the beach, prayer beads in hand. Many of the disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse in Dakar perform their long litanies of *tarbiyah* on the beach—not only because of its beauty and solitude, but also because of its symbolism. The beach is significant because it is a liminal zone, or *barzakh*, between land and sea, earth and water, and is thus natural symbol for the transition between the outward/sensory (*al-Zāhir*) and the inward/spiritual (*al-Bāṭin*) that *tarbiyah* represents.

Furthermore, the ebb and flow of the waves and tides of the ocean is an oft-cited symbol in Sufi poetry and prose of the perpetual emanation from and return to God.¹⁴ The video highlights this through the arresting image of waves running in reverse, and the repeated motif of the artist wading into the ocean.

Moreover, as in the previous sequences of images, this ocean scene extends the narrative of creation and return by alluding to Islamic cosmogonic accounts in which the ocean symbolizes the “primordial waters” that predate the creation of the world. As one of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s sons explained:

Before, only God existed. When he wanted other beings to come to existence, he manifested himself in himself. From the being that was his manifestation, God created the Muḥammadan Reality.

From the Muḥammadan Reality, God created the sea. From the sea, God created foam. The sea cannot be quiet because it was created from a living being and reflects the manifestation of God ... Of all creatures, the sea is the one that resembles God most in richness, wideness, and generosity. In the sea, we find fish and pearls; boats can circulate without harming the sea in any way. From foam, God created earth. From earth, God created Adam and Eve. That is why Shaykh Ibrahim said that: “Only God existed before anything else existed, and even now that other beings seem to exist, in fact, only God exists” (Shaykh Hadi Niasse, cited in Kane 2016: 75).

Thus, the previous images of exploding light and letters represent the emergence of Muḥammadan Reality, while these images of the ocean represent the next phase in the process of creation and their reversal, as the artist—an earth-made daughter of Adam and Eve—returns into the sea and the Divine Reality.

Integration of Multiple Selves. On the beach, we are then shown seven ghostly images of the artist that disappear into the artist herself (Fig. 3). These seven images seem to represent the seven ascending levels of the soul described in written and oral Sufi doctrines—the soul that commands to evil (*naḥs al-‘ammārah*), the blaming soul (*naḥs al-lawwamah*), the inspired soul (*naḥs al-mulhamah*), the tranquil soul (*naḥs al-muṭma‘innah*) the content soul (*naḥs al-rāḍiyah*) the pleasing soul (*naḥs al-marḍiyah*) and the perfect soul (*naḥs al-kāmilah*)—all being integrated into the artist as she advances through these stages in her spiritual journey.

Trees Coming Together. Next we see two baobab trees merge into a larger tree (Fig. 4), much like the images that are produced when you push your eyes together and then release them. One disciple told me that this image reminded him of the experience in *tarbiyah* “when you realize The Outward/Apparent (*al-Zāhir*) and Inward/Hidden (*al-Bāṭin*) that seemed different, are just one reality.”¹⁵ This image underscores the theme of the unity emerging from duality or multiplicity simultaneously developed in the lyrics.¹⁶

“Allah” Appearing on a Rock. Another image that evokes a common set of experiences reported during *tarbiyah* is depicted in Figure 5, in which the word “Allah” appears on a rock atop which the artist is singing the *shahādah*.¹⁷ Disciples commonly described “seeing God everywhere” or “in everything” during *tarbiyah*, which led them to reevaluate the meaning of verses of the Qur’an such as *there is nothing that does not hymn His praises*,

9 Maxi Krezy and Fadda Freddy in their “Baye Your Side” video
 Maxi Krezy featuring Fada Freddy n Ndongo,
 “Baye Your Side”
 Photo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vpn1PXJcWk>



but you understand not their praise (17:44)—“their praise” being their very existence in/as God, which is only understood as the disciple begins to enter *fanā*’.

Eyes Closed/Eyes Open. As Aïda Faye continues to passionately sing the *shahādah* on the beach, we are shown close-up shots of her tearful eyes closing and then opening, representing the artist turning away from the world of appearances and opening her eyes to the world of reality (Fig. 6). Consistent with broader Islamic embodied responses to the sacred, disciples who have undergone *tarbiyah* often report that they cried during and/or after their experience, and several teared up even recounting their experiences to me or while watching the video, explaining that “it takes me back there, to when I did my *tarbiyah*.”¹⁸

Disappearing into the Ocean. As the singing and music begin to fade, the artist is now no longer on the shore, but waist-deep in the ocean and sinking out of sight (Fig. 7). This is a clear and powerful symbol of the self vanishing in the Divine, of the completion of the process of *fanā*’. Thus the artist completes the cycle of creation by vanishing into the dark depths of the sea, returning to the original blackness in which the music video began.

Performance and Reminder. Through these symbols and lyrics, the artist takes the audience from pre-eternity (*azal*) when according to the *ḥādīth*, “God was and there was nothing with Him” (see Chittick 1998: 435 and Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī Book 54, *ḥādīth* 414) to the creation of the cosmos through the emanation of and from the Muḥammadan Reality, to the process of spiritual return through *tarbiyah* and *fanā*’ in which the artist comes to existentially realize the commentary upon this *ḥādīth*: “it is now even as it was” (see Chittick 1998: 435 and Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī Book 54, *ḥādīth* 414). The artist actually performs this process of spiritual realization and *fanā*’ by singing lyrics used in *tarbiyah*, by shooting the music video in a location commonly used for *tarbiyah*, and by actually adopting many of the postures and expressions disciples commonly adopt in *tarbiyah*, all while carrying the prayer beads used during this process (Fig. 8). Furthermore, the lyrics creatively draw on Qur’anic verses, *ḥādīth*, and Sufi traditions and literature used to explain *fanā*’ and *tarbiyah*, while the visual sequences allude to the various states disciples report experiencing, as well as symbols the Sufi tradition commonly employed to describe these experiences.

The music video’s performance of *tarbiyah* and *fanā*’ is something quite different from a discursive description of it, as the performance elicits an almost reflexive sympathetic/mimetic response. It’s one thing to hear about someone yawning or getting shot, it’s quite another thing to see it. The latter almost always provokes a reflexive response—and this seems to be the function of this performance of spiritual realization: to serve as a reminder to those who have undergone this process, and as an encouragement or provocation to those who have yet to do so.

BAYE YOUR SIDE: PRAISE AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ANNIHILATION IN THE SHAYKH

The song “Baye Your Side” by Maxi Krezy, Fadda Freddy, and Ndongo D (Fig. 9) is primarily a song praising Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, the founder of their branch of the Tijani order, and praying for his protection and assistance on the spiritual path. Before delving into the remarkable lyrics and fascinating visual imagery employed in their video, it is important to understand a bit about the wider genres of praise-poetry that influence it. The song and music video of “Baye Your Side” are a remix not only of a Bob Marley song and certain musical and visual hip-hop tropes, but also of the more traditional *madiḥ* genres of Arabic Sufi poetry and Wolofal praise poetry that extol the virtues and attributes of great *shuyukh* and *awliyā*’ (saints), exhibit their esoteric doctrines (and the performer’s knowledge of them), and implore their succor and protection (The video can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vpn1PXJcWk>).

As Islam and Arabic literary genres entered West Africa, they entered a region with a plethora of robust and rich traditions of praise poetry, many of which continue to thrive to the present day.¹⁹ These genres of praise poetry usually invoke the memories, feats, and attributes of ancestors and/or mythical heroes. Moreover, and possibly relatedly, the most popularly performed (and produced) genre of Arabic-language literature is praise poetry (*madiḥ*). These poems in praise of the Prophet, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, and various Senegalese *shuyukh* such as Shaykh Aḥmadu Bamba, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, and al-Ḥājj Mālik Sy frequently invoke esoteric doctrines to describe and praise the spiritual attributes and realities (*ḥaqā’iq*) of these figures, as well as their manifestations in their temporal features and actions. This dimension is not absent from



11 Annihilation in light
 Maxy Krezy featuring Fada Freddy n Ndongo,
 “Baye Your Side”
 Photo: [https://www.youtube.com/
 watch?v=7Vpn1PXjWk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vpn1PXjWk)

traditional West African oral genres, which are more than mere flattery or historical epics, but also describe mythical and meta-physical realities. For example, Karin Barber describes the Yoruba tradition of *oriki* as “collections or strings of name-like attributive epithets, ‘praises’ which are neither narrative nor descriptive, but vocative. They are addressed to their subject or ‘owner,’ and are felt to encapsulate, and evoke in some way that subject’s essential powers and qualities” (Barber 1991: 1). The name of this unique Yoruba genre of orature is derived from the combination of *ori* (source, head, destiny/inner self) and the verb *ki* (to greet, salute, or even provoke/evoke), and thus it means to salute and evoke one’s origin or inner self. Thus both forms of praise-poetry, the *madih* and the traditional praise genres, despite their many differences, both invoke and evoke their audience’s inner potentialities and realities, which are identified with spiritual, biological, or cultural ancestors. Relatedly, in both types of genres, the recitation or performance of these works is thought to invoke the presence (*ḥaḍrah*) of those named and described in them. Despite these similarities, these two traditions have remained largely separate, despite existing side by side for centuries; however, they appear to converge in contemporary popular music such as Fatou Guewel’s (herself from a *gewel* family) songs in praise of Shaykh Aḥmadu Bamba and his mother Mame Diarra Busso. This union of praise genres extends even to more pop-oriented songs, such as “Baye Your Side.”²⁰

In the music video, the disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse employ the invocatory/evocatory dimensions of these traditions to recall, perform, and perhaps even induce the state of annihilation in the *shaykh* (*fanā’ fī shaykh*), who, like the Prophet, is understood as being a profoundly inner spiritual reality of his disciples. In the cosmology and anthropology of Shaykh Ibrahim’s branch of Tijani Sufism, everything and everyone in the cosmos comes from God through the logos-like spiritual reality of the Prophet, through the spiritual reality of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijani, and then through Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and his representatives. Since everything in the cosmos comes from these realities, they must also return to these realities, and in a sense essentially are these realities.²¹ As already mentioned, the return to God through these realities is of two types: voluntary and involuntary. The involuntary return is through physical death, and the voluntary return is spiritual and is described as a kind of death

or annihilation (*fanā*). Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse described his own experience of annihilation in these realities in the following way:

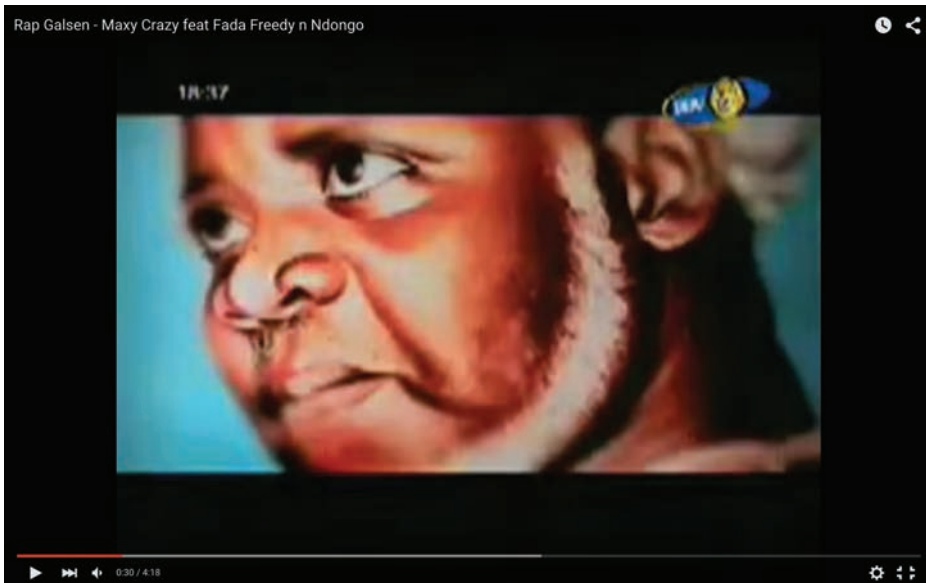
A momentous occurrence happened to the humble servant writing this in the year 1350 after the Hijrah of Muḥammad, upon him be blessings and peace. It was this: I came to abide for a hundred thousand years among the days of the Lord. There I heard the purest, pre-eternal speech in intimate conversation. I became bewildered and restless, as both rapture and aching were joined in me.

Then I plunged headlong into the Divine Presence, and I witnessed there the reality of the reality of the reality of the reality, in utter essentiality, exclusivity, and blind effacement. Nothing was left of sensory feelings. I dwelled like this for two thousand years.

Then something was with me. Existence emerged from me like shadows or smoke. And I sought after this existence, and then I was with the Messenger of the Divine Essence, the servant of the Divine Essence and Its secret. And he came close to me and stayed suspended until I disappeared in him. He became my essence. Then I was overcome with joy, for I was the beloved of the Divine Essence, Its secret, Its desire. I was he who held Its comprehensive station, to whom the perfection of the Divine Essence was manifest. I resided in my state of rapture for one million years.

In this manifestation in the unseen, I did not find any servant of the Divine Essence except myself. But then there was another manifestation, in the unseen of the unseen, and I saw the Divine Majesty in the Divine Beauty. In this presence of the unseen of the unseen, I was called and named, “O Aḥmad al-Tijānī!” I knew for certain that the Real had no desire for anything, after the secret, except for me. I kept company with this servant of the Divine Essence, and I helped him and aided him for two million years.

Then God made me the father of humanity, and the spiritual support for the entirety of existent beings, the Adam of souls and spirits. I carried the trust (*amānah*), and I was addressed with, “O Dāwūd, surely we have made you the vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on the earth” (38:26). I looked at the earth, and saw its state, the worlds of sense and of meaning, and then the celestial gathering. “We built the heaven with might, and We it is who made the vast expanse. And we have laid out the earth. Gracious is He who spread it out! And all things We have created in pairs, that haply you may reflect. Therefore flee to Allah, I am a warner to you from Him. Set up no other gods besides God. I am a warner to you from Him (51:41–51). So I came back to my sensory feeling, and it was as if the time period of its occurrence was [no more than the distance between] the even and the odd. Glory be to God the Majestic. He selects whom He will for what He wills, and no one outstrips His wisdom. “And He is not asked about what He does, but they are the ones asked?” (21:23) (Cissé 2014: 95–97).



12 Portrait of Shaykh Ibrahim Maxy Krezy featuring Fada Freddy n Ndongo, "Baye Your Side"
Photo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vpn1PXJcWk>

The disciples' experience of annihilation in Shaykh Ibrāhīm, which is performed in the music video of "Baye Your Side," is understood to be possible because of Shaykh Ibrahim's status as the "father of all humanity and the spiritual support for the entirety of existent beings." It is because Shaykh Ibrahim is understood to be already identical with the inner realities of these disciples that their *fanā' fī'l-shaykh*, their existential recognition of this identity, is possible. In Tijani sources,²² these relationships are often illustrated in diagrams depict two complementary perspectives of the Real, such as the Innermost/Hidden (*al-Bāṭin*) and the Outermost/All-Encompassing (*al-Zāhir/al-Wāsi'*). The emanation (*faḥḥ*) from one level of being/consciousness (*wujūd*) to the next is complemented by the *fanā'* of one level in the next (Diagram 2).

With this background, we will now turn to an analysis of the lyrics of the song "Baye Your Side," before turning to its visual symbolism, and conclude with a comparison of these two videos and suggestions for future research.

LYRICS

Title. First of all, like the song's sample, the title of "Baye Your Side" invokes and puns on the chorus of Bob Marley's "High Tide or Low Tide." This kind of bilingual punning is a common feature of contemporary Sufi hip-hop in Senegal. For example, another Senegalese hip-hop group calls itself Pinal Gang, an obvious pun

on the criminal-sounding English "penal gang." However, *pinal*, in the local language of Pulaar, means "to wake up," and the group glosses "gang" as an punning abbreviation of the Wolof word *gangoor*, meaning, "group or crowd." The invocation of Marley in the title and song sample is also significant, since he, reggae music, and Rasta style and culture have become important markers of a kind of black Atlantic, musico-spiritual counter-culture (often with Pan-Africanist overtones) that has become popular in coastal Senegal, Ghana, and Morocco, among other countries (for example, see McNee 2002; Morris 2014).

Chorus and Verse 2. For the sake of brevity, we will only examine the chorus, second verse, and outro of the song before moving on to discuss the images employed in the music video. The chorus of the song goes:

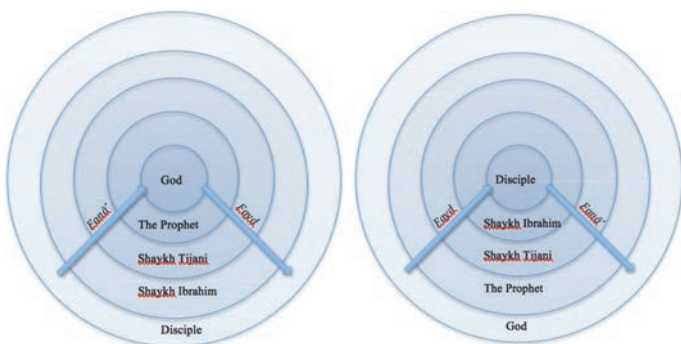
We're praying to God, to be crazy for Baye
Niasse Coumba Abdallah.²³
I'll be Baye your side.
Barham,
We're praying to God, to be crazy for Baye
Niasse Coumba Abdallah.
I'll be Baye your side.

The term for "crazy" in Wolof, *duff*, is often used by Taalibe Baye (disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse) to refer to describe themselves during and after the process of *tarbiyah*, in which they experience annihilation in God, the Prophet, Shaykh Tijāni, and sometimes Shaykh Ibrahim. This term is affectionately used to describe the radical transformation of consciousness this process entails—thus the chorus can be glossed as a request for the "Divine Madness" of annihilation in Shaykh Ibrahim (*fanā' fī'l-shaykh*) which results in him ("Baye") always being "by your side," just as annihilation in God and the Prophet imply perpetual nearness and identity with them (see Hoffman 1999).

In the second verse, Maxi Krezy raps:

You're the souls and the places.
You're skies and the earth and the seas.
You're the times and the spaces.
You're the master of the skies who brings the light
In the universe.

Diagram 2 Emanation and annihilation, microcosmic (left) and macrocosmic (right).



So Baye, be my love.
 I've followed you from pre-eternity (*Azal*)
 And the light, that lightning in the heaven, when the angels were
 glorifying Adam, which is when the enemy refused to bow.
 That's when Iblis was cursed and was cursed,²⁴
 Then Adam's flood of light moved to his son [Seth], that's why he
 came alone without a twin like his brothers [Cain and Abel].
 ...
 Your light was the one that was put into the father of all Muslims,
 and then the fire became coolness and peace to Ibrahim,²⁵
 and the light passed through Yunus to Yusuf, Idrissa, Harun, Musa,
 Nuh, Ayyub, Mariama the virgin to 'Isa, then that light moved to
 the Noble city of Mecca
 (*Makkat al-Mukarramah*) and call itself Muḥammad ibn 'Abdallāh
 [the name of the Prophet],
 Then the Muḥammadan Reality (*Ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyah*)
 continued to soar over to Medina Baye²⁶ and called itself Ibrahim
 ibn 'Abdallah [Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse].²⁷

These verses summarize the Tijani (and general Sufi) prophe-
 tology in which God first creates the Light of the Prophet (*nūr*
Muḥammadi),²⁸ which is then passed on through the line of Qur'anic
 prophets until it comes to the Prophet Muḥammad; the lyrics then
 identify this light as being manifest in the person of Shaykh Ibrahim
 Niasse. This particular doctrine is also alluded to in the passage by
 Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, where he identifies it with the Qur'anic
 "trust" (*amānah*) and vicegerency (*khilāfah*). The "lightning in the
 heaven" is an allusion to the description of the pre-existent reality
 of the Prophet found in the Tijani prayer the *Jawharat al-Kamāl*
 (recited several times daily as a part of the Tijani litany), whose first
 sentences describe the Muḥammadan Reality as:

O God, blessings and peace be upon the source/essence/spring
 ('*ayn*) of Divine Mercy,
 The realized ruby that encompasses the center of understandings
 and meanings,
 The light of the existentiated existents,
 The Adamic possessor of the Divine Truth
 The brightest flash of lightning that fills the rain clouds of blessing.

Outro. The song then builds to the outro, in which Fadda
 Freddy sings:

The Awliyā' (saints) are the sons of Baye Niasse.
 The owner of the staff that splits the seas is Baye Niasse.
 Bismillāhi starts with the letter of *Bā'*. Baye Niasse
 And the point that is under the letter of *Bā'* said: "Baye Niasse."
 The birds are tweeting and singing for Baye Niasse.
 Baye, he cracked open our hearts and put secrets in them
 And he melted us in the deepest oceans.
 The greatest teacher is Baye Niasse.
 And the greatest doctor of the hearts is Baye Niasse.
 Sheik Mamour Insa is Baye Niasse.
 See all our paths are Baye Niasse
 See, even our hands and eyes are Baye Niasse
 Oh our families are Baye Niasse.
 And even our ears are Baye Niasse.
 And all we are is Baye Niasse.
 Maxi Krezy is Baye Niasse.
 Fadda Freddy is Baye Niasse.
 Oh, Nongo D also is Baye Niasse.
 Baye ... Baye ... Baye ... BAAAAAYE.

The first verse is an expression of the Tijani conception of saint-
 hood, derived from Ibn 'Arabi's theories in which all saints receive
 their sanctity from the seal of Muhammadan Sanctity (*khatm*
al-wilāyah al-Muḥammadiyah), who in the Tijani tradition is
 identified with Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī. In Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's
 branch of the order, Shaykh Ibrahim was called the "seal of the
 seal" and was believed to be the intermediary between Shaykh
 Aḥmad Tijānī and all other saints, who are thus his "sons." The
 second verse is an allusion to the Qur'anic verse *Then We inspired*
Moses, saying: Smite the sea with thy staff. And it parted, and each
part was as a mountain vast ... (26:63) and the common mystical
 interpretation of the story of the Exodus as symbolizing the soul's
 passage from darkness and oppression (*zulmah*) into light (*nūr*).
 Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse is here likened to the prophet Musa, as
 being the one who has the God-given means of blazing and lead-
 ing souls along the path from the "slavery" of sin and ignorance
 into the "promised land" of sanctity and knowledge. The next
 verses employ the same symbol of the letter *bā'* and the *bismillah*
 discussed above, except that here, Shaykh Ibrahim is described as
 being a word spoken by the dot underneath this *bā'*, underscoring
 the doctrine of the emanation of his spiritual reality from that of
 the Muḥammadan Reality, which is identified with the dot.

Downloaded from http://direct.mt.edu/afar/article-pdf/51/3/26/1745767/afar_a_00414.pdf by guest on 15 May 2025



¹³ Performers overlaid with portrait of Shaykh
 Ibrahim
 Maxy Krezy featuring Fada Freddy n Ndongo,
 "Baye Your Side"
 Photo: [https://www.youtube.com/
 watch?v=7Vpn1PXJcWk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vpn1PXJcWk)

The following verses poetically describe the process of *tarbiyah* and identify the artist's own *shaykh murabbi* (initiating *shaykh*), Shaykh Mamour Insa, with Shaykh Ibrahim. Then begins a series of identifications with Shaykh Ibrahim which echo the famous *ḥadīth nawāfil*, which reads, "My servant does not cease drawing near to me through supererogatory acts of worship until I love him. Then when I love him, I become his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks ..." (see Chittick 1989: 325–31 and Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī Book 81, *ḥadīth* 91). This *ḥadīth* is commonly cited by Sufi authors as a description of annihilation in God (*fanā' fī Llāh*), and thus the similar language found in this verse can be understood as a description and declaration of the artists' annihilation in Shaykh Ibrahim (*fanā' fī'l-shaykh*).

IMAGES

Right after this description of the artists' eyes, hands, and ears being Shaykh Ibrahim, the video cuts to an evocative image depicting the artist's head enshrouded or completely annihilated in light (Fig. 11). This serves as a powerful visual illustration of and commentary on the verses of the song describing annihilation. Moreover, this theme of annihilation in the *shaykh* is underscored by the repeated and almost subliminal flashes of images of Shaykh Ibrahim (such as at 3:34 of the music video) and the artists own *shaykh*, Shaykh Mamour Insa Diop (3:31 of the music video). These repeated and unexpected appearances of the images of the *shuyukh* parallel disciples experiences during *tarbiyah* of "intermittent flashes of light" that eventually become more stable and permanent as they fully experience annihilation.²⁹ Moreover, they give the viewer the impression of getting brief glimpses of the omnipresent realities of the *shaykh(s)*, and the fading in and out between the images of the artists and those of these *shaykhs* illustrates the relationships of identity and annihilation between them.

Even more subtly, in several scenes (often during the chorus), what appears to be a magnified version of a popular picture of Shaykh Ibrahim (Fig. 11) is overlaid with footage of the artists performing, giving the appearance that they are actually inside of or surrounded by Shaykh Ibrahim (Fig. 12). This is another subtle but powerful and evocative symbol of the artists' relationship with Shaykh Ibrahim, as depicted in Figure 10.

When disciples played this video for me, they often teared up or explained that it took them back to their experiences of *tarbiyah*, "made them feel close to Shaykh Ibrahim," or reminded them "who they really were, and the mystery/secret (*sirr*) of who Shaykh Ibrahim really is."³⁰ Thus we can see how this video represents a performance of a particular mystical experience or state (the *ḥāl* of *fanā' fī'l-shaykh*) that simultaneously serves as a reminder (*dhikr*), an invocation/evocation, and even a provocation of this state for those who have experienced it, and an invitation to those who have yet to do so. The performance both comes from and leads back to the state of annihilation in Baye Niassé, just as Aïda Faye's music video is a performance of annihilation in God (*fanā' fī'l Allāh*) that is understood to spring from and lead back to this state.

CONCLUSION

These two videos illustrate how such "Sufi music videos" draw upon well-established traditions of *zikrs* and praise-poetry, creatively extending the characteristic features, symbols, and

theories of these genres into a new medium. Both videos employ performances and richly layered visual symbolism instead of direct lyrics (especially in the case of Faye's video) in part because the states of *fanā'* (annihilation in God in "Delül Ci Allah" and annihilation in Shaykh Ibrahim in "Baye Your Side") are understood to be ineffable, so the artists avail themselves of symbols and images common to Sufi discourse and perform the experience of *tarbiyah* and annihilation in Shaykh Ibrahim (respectively) common to many in their audience. This serves as a reminder (*dhikr*) to the initiated and an encouragement to the uninitiated, much as the various local genres of Sufi poetry are used.

This kind of intertextuality is characteristic of music videos more generally, as Darley notes:

In common with other genres of contemporary visual culture at issue here, music video exists as a form that refers primarily to other texts ... music video is part of an accelerating tendency to take already (re)produced signs themselves as the subject of reference or as material for 'new' or further instances of (audio) visual textuality (Darley 2000: 128).

This postmodern proliferation of free-floating signifiers characterizes situationist analysis of new media in general. As Lawrence Law writes (building on Guy Debord's theory of "the spectacle"):

We live in a spectacular society, that is, our whole life is surrounded by an immense accumulation of spectacles. Things that were once directly lived are now lived by proxy. Once an experience is taken out of the real world it becomes a commodity. As a commodity the spectacular is developed to the detriment of the real. It becomes a substitute for experience (Law 2009).

However, these music videos, which come from a very different theoretical and social context than that from which situationist theory emerged, function in a very different way. These Sufi music videos point their audiences not only beyond the domain of media spectacles, but also beyond the spectacle of everyday life towards the direct experience of the Real itself.

These music videos are often used to serve similar functions as *zikrs* and praise poetry: to invoke and evoke spiritual realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) and provoke spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) as a part of a conscious program of ethical and spiritual self-cultivation. Some disciples reported semi-regularly watching these videos on their phones, complementing their daily practice of prayers, litanies, and recitation of poetry. This new genre of music video coexists with and complements the Wolof, Pulaar, and Arabic poetry of Senegalese Sufism in some senses, extending these genres onto the smartphones and screens of twenty-first-century urban youth. I hope these Sufi music videos attract more scholarly attention and commentary, although the academy is only now beginning to pay serious attention to the older art forms upon which these music videos are based. Nevertheless, future studies should also focus on the musical elements of these music videos, which for reasons of brevity, I was unable to seriously address in this paper.³¹ Although this genre and medium are new, its intended function is the same as all Sufi art, to imitate the Divine creative act by reaching out into the world of form and metaphor to return it to the world of spirit and meaning.

Notes

- 1 On the controversies surrounding Shaykh Ibrahim's *tarbiyah*, see Seesemann 2011: ch.2–3, Epilogue.
- 2 A ḥadīth of the Prophet not found in canonical sources but commonly cited by Sufi authors.
- 3 *Al-Khamriyyah*, Ibn al-Fārīd.
- 4 A verbatim quote of Qur'an 8:17.
- 5 I am grateful to Mahmoud Oumar Thierno Athie for his help in translating the lyrics of this song.
- 6 Based on the Qur'anic passages, *Every day He is upon a [new] affair* (55:29) and "they are in doubt about a new creation" (50:15).
- 7 An allusion to the Qur'anic description of the Prophet's proximity to God at the height of his Nocturnal Ascent (*mi'rāj*) in Surah Najm, *two bows length or nearer* (53:9). See Chittick 2014.
- 8 It is also reminiscent of the *ḥadīth* (possibly spurious) oft-cited by disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé in which God says, "Seek to know Me before you worship Me, for if you do not know Me, how could you worship Me?" (M.D., interview with the author, March 19, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French/Arabic. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author).
- 9 One could even call this the "return of the return," which would complete the cycle in Figure 2: from creation to the Real, and then back to creation.
- 10 Likewise, in the *Ibriz* of 'abd al-'Azīz Dabbāgh, an important sourcebook of Tijāni doctrine, Shaykh Dabbāgh describes the cosmos as emerging from the egg of the Muḥammadan Reality. See O'Kane and Radtke 2007: 752.
- 11 These ḥadīth are quoted by the Yemeni Sufi author and prominent commentator upon Ibn 'Arabi, 'abd al-Karīm Jīlī (d. 1424) in his treatise commenting upon them, *al-Kahf wa'l-Raqīm*, which was most likely the basis for this work of the Algerian Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawī.
- 12 The Muḥammadan Reality is also frequently identified with the Qur'anic "Pen" due to the *ḥadīth*: "the first thing God created was my light" (*Bihār al-Anwār* 57:309) and "The first thing God created was the pen" (*Tirmidhī*, *ḥadīth* 94).
- 13 In his *Jawāhir al-Rasā'il*, Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé cites this verse as an allusion to the previously discussed doctrine of *tajdīd al-khalq*, the renewal of creation at every instant. See Niassé n.d.: 2:126.
- 14 In his earliest-known work, *Rūḥ al-Adab*, Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé advises Tijāni disciples to sit on the shore and contemplate the waves rolling in (verse 94). While in other Taalibe Baye Music videos (e.g., Lingstar and Maxi Krezy's "Dieuredief Baye": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfkjCDEBg>), the ocean can be employed as a symbol of the celebrated *ḥaydah* or flood of spiritual illumination which Shaykh Ibrahim brought, I do not believe this is the primary referent of the symbol of the ocean in this video.
- 15 M.D., interview with author, March 12, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French.
- 16 This is also possible an allusion to the *lote* tree of the uttermost end (53:14, 16), which marks the zenith of the Qur'anic accounts of the Prophet's *mi'rāj*, itself often taken as a symbol of the mystical journey to *fanā'*.
- 17 It is also reminiscent of Luke 19:40, "I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out."
- 18 M.D., interview with author, March 12, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French; S.D., interview with the author, February 16, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French and English.
- 19 In the western Sahel, the practice of these traditions was often hereditary, and in Senegal, their custodians were known as *gewel* in Wolof societies and *awlube* (singular *gawlo*) in Peul (Fulbe/Fulani) societies.
- 20 McLaughlin writes, "the direct public address of a praise song to a marabout by a *gewel* is a somewhat rare occurrence; the same function is fulfilled, however, by the Islamic popular song" McLaughlin 1997: 565.
- 21 For example, in the famous Sufi saying or *ḥadīth*

quoted above: "God was and there was nothing with Him," and its commentary, "It is now as it was then."

- 22 For example, the Tijāni classic of al-ḥājj 'Umar Tall, *Rimāḥ ḥizb al-Raḥīm 'alā Nuḥūr ḥizb al-Rajīm* (1876–1878) contains several such diagrams, one on p. 30.
- 23 This is a traditional Senegalese "praise title" for those of the Niassé family. I am grateful to Fatoumata Seck for bringing this to my attention.
- 24 An allusion to Qur'an 2:34.
- 25 An allusion to Qur'an 21:69, *We said: O fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham* (Pickthall translation).
- 26 The home and burial place of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé and physical center of his branch of the Tijāni order.
- 27 I am grateful to Mahmoud Oumar Thierno Athie and Fatoumata Seck for their help in translating the lyrics of this song.
- 28 Based on and alluding to the *ḥadīth*s, "I was a prophet while Adam was between water and clay" (variant cited in Bayhaqi n.d.: 1:83, *ḥadīth* 110) and the previously cited, "The first thing that God created was my light."
- 29 M.D. and other *taalibes*, interview with author, March 12, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French.
- 30 M.D. and other *taalibes*, interview with author, March 12, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French.
- 31 If a picture is worth a thousand words and music is the universal language, it would seem completely futile to try to discursively capture a music video, and thus many fascinating aspects of these videos (including their musical dimensions) had to be excluded from this paper for the sake of brevity.

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