

Ndeye Diop

Professor Anna Preus

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Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba and Poetic Encoding in TEI

Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba was an Islamic poet, leader, and activist who was born in the 19th century during the colonial period of Senegal's history. He was well known for his efforts to unify the Senegalese people and the broader Islamic community through his sermons and writing. He wrote a multitude of poems during his time living under French occupation, and these poems are still recited within the Mouride brotherhood that he established in 1883.

This project aims to allow readers to engage with Bamba's work holistically while introducing a new way to preserve his writing digitally through TEI/XML. Encoding in TEI helps users understand the structural analysis of the work transcribed. In its nature, "TEI is descriptive markup—that is, it is primarily focused on noting the structural or formal features of a text" (Gailey). From the organization of the stanzas to the repeated tagging of specific words, TEI text can help readers truly understand the depth of the work they are analyzing. Onlookers will also be able to closely read Bamba's poems utilizing specific TEI features while also looking at a more visually concise and aesthetic version of the writing.

For this digital project, three of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba's poems were selected for encoding: "Sindidi", "Futzi", and "Kun Kaatiman". Each poem was chosen for separate reasons, as they all bring unique backgrounds and historical aspects to the project. Futzi, also known as Futuhat al-Makkiyya, roughly translates to "The Meccan Revelations". Published by the Harvard Blog, this poem focuses on Bamba's spiritual journey, his devotion to Islam, and his transcendent experiences across the African continent. Sindidi, one of Bamba's most popular works, touches on the character and virtue of the Prophet Mohammad (saw) in Islam. Lastly, Kun Kaatiman, published by the Seekers Guidance, focuses on the ethical and moral lessons man should follow to be complete, or whole, spiritually.

Two of the three artifacts, Sindidi and Futzi, were taken from the Harvard University Blog archives. The blog archives is a website that hosts different blogs written by students, faculty, and alumni of the university. The last artifact, Kun Kaatiman, was retrieved from The Seekers Guidance, a non-profit online academy dedicated to providing diverse knowledge to the Muslim community. Of the many sites I reviewed, these two sites were chosen as sources because of their multiple advantages. They both provide English translations of Bamba's poems, descriptions of how the poems came to be, as well as the circumstances under which Bamba wrote them. Despite these advantages, a common limitation between the two sources was that they did not offer a broad selection of poems to choose from. Unlike other websites, this constrained my selection and forced me to prioritize these sites over others because of their values.

As TEI text, this will allow for easy access and analysis of Bamba's work. I went about pursuing this project by first selecting which of Bamba's poems to encode. Of his many works, I

personally enjoyed Sindidi, Futzi, and Kun Kaatiman the most. I then compared different English translations of each Poem and went with the most common translation out of the multiple sites I visited. Lastly, I encoded the poems into TEI, utilizing tagging functions to help describe the different characteristics of the text. One of the main tags I used was “<persName>”. I felt that this was an important tag to use because those who are unfamiliar with Bamba’s work or the Abrahamic religions may not have otherwise understood what those names are or who they refer to.

Prior to completing this digital project, I never understood the depth of how intertwined the three Abrahamic religions are in West Africa. Within Senegal, Bamba’s poems are recited by Muslims, Christians, and the Jewish community. Common themes of peace, love, devotion to God, and servant leadership were noticed between all three of the poems. Bamba’s strong aptitude for leadership and unification was also something I noticed. I would have never discovered these findings without completing this project, and it undoubtedly assisted in being able to analyze his work and understand it on a deeper level.

With each of these poems drawing heavily on Mouride, Sufi, Islamic themes, and symbolism, it is clear how these cultural artifacts are still relevant to humanity’s concerns (for example, unity vs division) around the world and hold stakes in them. One thing at stake is that it resonates with the larger topic of African Islamic poetry. Within the Muslim community, there is a larger conversation about West African practices and how they do or do not conform to traditional Islamic ideologies. The way African Islamic poetry is recited is the cause of contention in the Muslim community, although the meanings of the poems bring nothing but unity. Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba’s poems are a testament to how poetry can be used to unify

groups of people despite their differences. Bamba's poems are recited all over the continent of Africa and abroad.

This project has helped uncover a multitude of new findings and has answered many previous questions. A major question surrounds the cultural nuances that Bamba's work discusses. Through the tagging and encoding in TEI, I was able to discover that the nuances were the communities, values, and beliefs Bamba addressed in his poems. He spoke a lot about his cultural and religious obligations, but also his societal obligations and his role as a human on this earth.

As our world becomes more digitized, tools like TEI are essential to the preservation of cultural heritage. With the encoding of these poems, I also hope to exemplify how "These technologies aim to achieve better protection, research, and promotion of cultural heritages."(Zhou). TEI technology and encoding contribute to a deeper understanding of his work and a broader scholarly conversation about preservation, cultural artifacts, and humanities concerns. In conclusion, Bamba's poetry serves as a testament to the multifaceted nature of his writing. This digitized project has added a cultural understanding of his work, as well as a technical understanding of how TEI works. Through this process, we can continue to be used for generations to preserve, analyze, and reflect on poetic writing.

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