

## Abdou Salam Niang

Abdou Salam Niang teaches in the Department of Modern Literature, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Université Abdou Moumoui, Niamey. His area of specialization is Nigérien and Comparative African Orature. E-mail: ibniang2001@yahoo.fr

# Reflections on Islamic values and the use of Arabo-Islamic vocabulary in the *Wakoki* of Maazou Dan Alalo

## The use of Arabo-Islamic vocabulary in the *Wakoki* of Maazou Dan Alalo

This paper proposes to reflect on the islamisation of Hausa poetry using the example of the *wakoki* (songs) of Maazou Dan Alalo. Maazou. Born between 1906 and 1910, at Kiyauka, Katsina in today's Nigeria, he died on 29 November 2002. Though not a *griot* by birth, he became the bard of the chief of his village and later court *griot* to the Sultan of Damagram (Zinder). Islam, introduced in African milieus and in their cultural expressions, generated new religious and linguistic elements, while also producing novelties in their artistic and literary creativity and productions. One example, in the case of Zinder and of Dan Alalo's *wakoki*, is the annexation of Islamic virtues in the praise songs of chiefs in Islamised African societies, in which political and religious time came to overlap. Islam was pressed into service to legitimise political rulers like the sultan. However, the socio-cultural and political role of the *griot* took on a particular hue under colonial rule. Public amusement, panegyric of the great and wealthy took place in the overcast conditions of colonial occupation. In this context, Dan Alalo's *wakoki* allow a close-up view of colonial history as lived experience, complete with a range of inside insights on social dynamics, including changes in the power pyramid, strategies of adaptation and preservation of the elite, of the community, and of people's dignity in particular. In this enterprise, the *griot* played – and was aware of playing – an invaluable role: in social commentary, censure and distraction. His multiple functions included providing a sense of continuity, protecting the dignity of local rulers and of the community as a whole, through the catharsis of humour, in particular. **Key words:** Islam, Arabo-Islamic vocabulary, Hausa poetry, "Waka/Wakoki" (Song), Zinder/Damagaram, Sultan of Zinder.

### Introduction

This paper proposes to reflect on the islamisation of Hausa poetry using the example of the songs of Maazou Dan Alalo. It will examine the use made of Islamic values and of Arabic expressions in the production of this Nigérien artist. As noted by Bassirou Dieng (2003: 117), Islam "has led to a profound transformation and has served to reinforce oral culture."<sup>1</sup> In fact, Islam introduced in African milieus and in their cultural expressions new religious and linguistic elements, while also generating certain novelties in their artistic and literary creativity and productions. Samba Dieng (1991: 68) notes that it also induced changes in the oral expression of *griots*: "griotic art was islamised at both the formal and thematic levels: religious subjects, quotations from the Koran, quotation of verses of the Hadith, use of Arab-Islamic lexicons."<sup>2</sup> Influ-

ences of this type can be noted in traditional Hausa poetry such as Dan Alalo's. In these songs, the influence of Islam takes the shape of Arabic quotations, generally from the Koran, sometimes modified or deformed, voluntarily in certain cases. An interesting fact is that these are usually introduced with the intent of magnifying the sultan, to whom the Islamic values evoked are attributed in the *griot's* songs of praise. These religious values include the innumerable qualities of the prophet Mohamed. They fall under six categories: (a) prayer, recollection and invocation; (b) the quest for knowledge; (c) respect and love of fellow believers; (d) reverential fear of Allah; (e) exhortation to follow and to persevere in the path of Allah and (f) non-interference in other people's affairs.

Such are the qualities attributed to the fervent believer, to the Muslim, who might then expect the *karama* or favours, clemency and grace of Allah. These superior qualities are, however, dependent on certain types of practices such as exhortation, religious teaching and dedication to one's work. Upon islamisation, these attributes entered the repertoire of the praise songs dedicated to chiefs. Moreover, they have been used by *griots* like Dan Alalo, in their social commentary on contemporary history, to censure and condemn individuals who lack them, by defining them as the radical and reprovéd "Other". But, as these values continue to coexist with other, ante-islamic values, we also note that "fervent Muslims" sometimes come in for severe criticism when deficient in other important values such as dedication to hard and honest (agricultural) labour. In the same way, envious persons, inveterate beggars and thieves come in for severe criticism.

Maazou Dan Alalo's verbal art can be considered as "songs", despite their patent poetic qualities and moral content. Of course, there are critics like Zumthor (1983: 38-39) who admit the moral qualities of poetry, but the use of this term poses a number of problems. In particular, due to the evolution of western poetry, it is difficult for this term to accommodate the complex creative processes and multiple actors surrounding the central figure of the *griot*, who performs in the oral medium accompanied by music and answerers, who plays with words for the sheer pleasure of such word play, but who also pays tribute to and flatters the great, criticizes society, comments on history of the past and in the making, amuses the public. Consequently, I have chosen to use the original Hausa words to designate the poet-singer, his production, assistants and collaborators. The terms *waka* (pl. *wakoki*) are both song and poetry. The singer-poet is called a *mawaki* (pl. *mawaka*), the ans-

werer is referred to as *dan amshi* and can be collective, as in a chorus (pl. *yan amshi*), Finally, the *san kira* or *dan kira* is the *griot's* panegyrist, who sings the praises of the *griot*, himself engaged in singing those of the sultan.<sup>3</sup>

### **Maazou Dan Alalo and the context of his performances**

Maazou Dan Alalo was born between 1906 and 1910, at Kiyauka, Katsina in today's Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> He died on 29 November 2002. His father was a renowned *marabout*<sup>5</sup> (or imam). Orphaned at an early age, he was brought up by the eldest of his paternal uncles, who taught him the Koran. Like Maman Shata, another famous Hausa *mawaki*, Dan Alalo's initiation in the verbal arts started with the vending of kola nuts. He later became the court *griot* or *mawakin fada* of the local village chief. But this role was disputed by the "legitimate" *griots* who, unlike Dan Alalo, had inherited this role "from father to son", in the usual manner. Nonetheless, Dan Alalo persevered and finally became the principal *mawakin fada* of the Sultan of Damagaram, (Zinder, in the eastern part of Niger).

During his performances, Dan Alalo called on the collaboration of several drummers or *makada*, *yan amshi* or chorus/answerers and of a *san kira* or personal panegyrist, who served as a link between the singer, assisting artists and the public. The *san kira* also collected the gifts offered by the public as tokens of pleasure and congratulations. These gifts served, furthermore, as an application for public praise. The *griot* usually complied by inserting the solicited praise in the course of performance.

As far as the context of performance is concerned, it is interesting to note that Maazou Dan Alalo usually made his appearances on certain occasions: during the *yamita* or *sara*, the traditional formal salutations addressed to the sultan by his court on Thursday evenings, that is on the eve of Friday, the Muslim holy day; prior to the voyages by the sultan; or on the occasion of Muslim holidays like Tabaksi, Ramadan or Mouloud. Obviously, the enturbanment of a new chief was also a golden opportunity for performances of this kind.

In general, it can be noted that these performances underline the overlapping of religious and political time in African Islam. Holy days are also days of particular recognition of secular leaders like the Sultan of Zinder, whose legitimacy was (and is) reinforced by his representation as a protector and propagator of the faith and as a model of Islamic virtue. The role of the *griot's* art and its integration of Islamic values and expressions are therefore obvious signs of the islamisation of social

and political life. Attention might also be focused profitably on the *griot* as an important actor in this process and on his various artistic and other (social criticism, implicit self-aggrandizement) strategies.

The reference corpus of this paper comprises four *wakoki* (songs), that I have entitled, based on the main theme: "Everyone in Birni reveres you" ("Duk kai suka so mutan Birni", 1930); "Baudot" ("Bodo", 1943); "Sultan Oumarou's voyage to Niamey" ("Zuwan Sarki Umaru Yamai", 1951) and "Sultan Oumarou's tour" (Rangadin Sarki Umaru", 1965).

The first *waka*, dedicated to Sultan Moustapha of Damagaram, greets the triumphal return of the sultan, after his battle against Ballama, a eunuch and bondsman imposed by the French colonial ruler as Sultan of Damagaram. The second is an anti-praise song, so to speak, censuring René Baudot, colonial administrator of Damagaram, from 1942-1943, who imposed the cultivation of peanuts as a cash crop. The third, dating from the 1950s, celebrates Moustapha's successor, Sultan Oumarou, and commemorates his long "Voyage to Niamey", 900 kms away,<sup>6</sup> upon the invitation of Governor of French West Africa (AOF), while the last concerns the Sultan's tour of his precincts (see Niang, 1999). My discussion of these texts will be articulated around two points of interest. Firstly, the role or specific uses of Islamic values in Maazou Dan Alalo's songs, and secondly, the effect produced by borrowed Arabo-Islamic formulae as theatrical procedures.

### **Islamic values in Dan Alalo's songs**

As mentioned earlier, these values are used as regal attributes in the praise songs composed for the Sultan and as an anti-praise device, that is as a technique of censure or criticism of merciless non-Muslim (like the French Administrator, Baudot), but also of certain Muslims (like *Cherifs* and imams) who use religion as a pretext for leading a slothful though prayerful existence.<sup>7</sup>

### **In praise of the Sultan**

Up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the region of Zinder or Damagram was mostly populated by pagans. Islam was introduced to this region at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a *marabout* from Bornou. The descendents of the latter unified the small villages of the region and thus founded the sultanate of Zinder (see Salifou, 1976). As of this period, Islam became not only the religion of the ruling elite but also that of the majority of the population, and the Koran their code of reference. Value systems

changed. Behaviour came to be appreciated based on Islamic laws. As underscored by Guy Nicolas (1975: 503):

The region of Zinder borders, in fact, the point of encounter between two movements of islamisation. The first, most ancient and most orthodox of the two, extends from east to west, while the second bore a greater Berber influence, visible in the Fulani *jihads*, the ultimate mark of this culture. When they attacked the king of Bornou [origin of the Zinder Sultanate], the second came upon a Muslim tradition more orthodox than their own. The Bornou, or what remained of it at the end of the last century, after multiple historical vicissitudes, resisted these onslaughts victoriously. The city of Zinder, founded by a learned man of Beriberi origin, became the advanced citadel of this empire, and countered attempts of conquest by the Fulani, who did not enjoy the privilege of Islamic purity.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, this purity is an indication of the degree of faith. For *imani*, or faith in Allah, is recognized as the cardinal virtue, above all sublime, on which hinges all the other qualities of a good Muslim. The word *imani* takes on a wide variety of meanings in the Hausa language including faith, mercy, fear of God, piety and reverence, generosity and decent (moral) behaviour, all of which inspire respect and admiration in society. It is therefore no wonder that Dan Alalo attributes these sublime virtues to traditional chiefs in his songs of praise. In his *waka* on Sultan Oumarou's voyage to Niamey, for example, the *marwaki* declares:

Here is a Sultan graced with piety  
neither envious nor crooked.  
Let each man attend to his own affairs.<sup>9</sup>

According to Dan Alalo's portrayal, Sultan Oumarou is therefore the epitome of Muslim leadership, graced with all the categories of virtues outlined in the introduction, including that, thrown in the last line, by the *san kira* or answerer, of minding one's business. Thus, the Sultan is offered as worthy of public admiration and emulation, based solely on religious arguments, as opposed to the more virile and martial attributes noted in other types of panegyric of kings.

In the same way, the voyages and tours of the Sultan, usually of a socio-political character, are infused with religious connotations. In the *waka* on Sultan Oumarou's tour of the sultanate (in order to obtain first-hand information on life in his precincts, to impose his physical

presence and receive homage), Maazou Dan Alalo turns this trip into a peaceful *jihad*, meant to convert the pagans in surrounding villages to Islam.

Oumarou the Conqueror, friend<sup>10</sup> of the white man,  
by persuasion converts pagans to Islam.  
Teach them to do ablutions.  
("Sultan Oumarou's Tour", lines 165-167).<sup>11</sup>

Once again, Dan Alalo presents Oumarou as the perfect Muslim, a chief who converts not through violence but through persuasion and good example. For, Islam is against violence, and exalts teaching and exemplary behaviour.

In his *wakoki* dedicated to Sultan Moustapha, Oumarou's predecessor, the self-made *griot* glorifies the chief's reputation of piety. The people of Birni, his city, admire him because of because he is "Pure like the egret, washed by Allah" ("Tsarkake: Balbela wankan Allah", line 26). All in all, Dan Alalo's performances, coinciding with holy days or important events in the political life of the sultanate, served to link the religious and the political. The traditional role of praise singing for the great thus integrates Islam, both in the use of language and through references to its value system. Consequently, the sultan is praised not primarily for his military feats but for his zeal and perfection as defender of the faith. This is both a sign of the pervasiveness of Islam and of the new political order that obtained under colonial rule; superior military and political strength having been demonstrated by the colonizer, the sultan's "reigns" under a foreign power, with the blessings of the conqueror. In this context, Islam becomes a counter-value system, the ultimate bastion of discursive or perceived (moral) superiority. Pious and full of *imani*, the sultan corresponds to Zinder's version of what Danielle Buschinger (2004: 6-7) calls "le bon roi" (the good king).

### **Censure and condemnation of the non-Muslim**

Maazou Dan Alalo uses Islamic values to shed a negative light on the behaviour of individuals who do not possess these virtues. The *waka* censuring the French colonial administrator Baudot provides an excellent illustration of this socio-cultural strategy, for the foreign overlord is portrayed as the exact opposite of the Islamic model. In particular, he lacks clemency and compassion, cardinal virtues of a good Muslim, persevering in the path of Allah, continuously praised as the Clement

and the Merciful in Islamic worship. In daily practice, these cardinal virtues translate as mercy towards women, elderly and handicapped persons by sparing them excessive burdens and fatigue. But Baudot, in his indiscriminate application of colonial forced labour, accelerated by the strictures of World War II, spares no one, shows mercy to none, makes no distinction; everyone must work, all are expected to labour in the fields:

The Nazarene does not spare married women, for he is an unbeliever  
Doesn't spare young women vending on the run  
Doesn't spare butchers, or trinket sellers.  
Nor the impotent, the blind, the leper,  
No, Baudot has not exempted them.  
The woman who sells peanuts is not exempted,  
The pagan spared no one.  
Even the old woman with her long stick, selling little heaps of peanuts,  
Baudot says:  
She will not be exempted, she is able-bodied,  
And even if she has to draw herself on her behind,  
He, Baudot, will show no mercy.  
("Baudot", lines 33-48).<sup>12</sup>

As illustrated in this extract, the *mawaki* explains Baudot's appalling conduct by the fact that he is an unbeliever, recalcitrant to the ways of Allah, an infidel. His radical non-Muslim otherness is defined in two, apparently contradictory, ways. First, he is presented as a "Nazarene" (Christian), secondly, as an animist. In a context where religious belief is taken for granted and Islam is perceived as a superior ideal, Baudot is supposed to adhere to and exemplify the white man's religion, Christianity. On the other hand, he is associated with the local religious infidel, the animist, a censured "Other", much closer to home, equally devoid of the saving graces of Islam. Hence, the colonial administrator is seen as belonging to a foreign or reprobated universe, diametrically opposed to an idealized, familiar and approved environment, implicitly presented as obedient to Islamic laws. In the context of colonial humiliation, Islamic values exalted by the *mawaki* are used to construct the ideal collective identity of a victimized society, brandishing in a language inaccessible to the colonial ruler (Hausa, ennobled by Arabo-Islamic expressions, not French) canons of dignity and of superior distinction. The *griot's* art allies, in this case, historic commentary, social outcry, public censure and collective self-valorisation.

But Baudot is also criticized for non-respect of other Islamic codes of decency in social relationships such as the respect of the privacy of the home. Local architecture was usually mindful of separating private areas from spaces of public reception (in the anteroom or *zaure* in Hausa). Besides, many wealthy males practiced (and still practice) *purdah*, secluded their wives in an apartment reserved for them. Considered as the inner sanctum of the master of the house, few males, excepting bondsmen or servants, were allowed to enter this area. Dan Alalo notes in "Baudot", not only the latter's utter lack on respect of codes of common decency but also the ignoble strategies he deploys in the violation of the privacy of the home:

The animist does not enter through the gate,  
He enters from behind the house.  
Gingiro [the Tyrant], whip in hand, on his black horse, the Nazarene,  
Takes you by surprise;  
He does not come in his car, but on his black horse.  
Gargami [the inflexible] mounted on his big horse, the Nazarene,  
Does not come through the front gate,  
But enters from the back of the house, the man with the whip.  
And blows rain down on you as if you were a dog.  
("Baudot", lines 72-80).<sup>13</sup>

Moral and physical violence are thus shown as being the order of the day under colonial rule. It takes the shape of violation of privacy and loss of dignity (as men are beaten in the presence of their wives and children) perverse and puerile strategies of the dominator in his relations to the dominated (Baudot sneaks around to catch the people of Zinder off guard). Baudot, mounted on his big black horse, whip in hand, oppressive and tyrannical, becomes the devil incarnate. Hence, portrayed as the "absolute Other" or pagan, Baudot is also a French incarnation of the "Dodo" or ogre, who haunts the childhood imaginary in Niger, and figures in countless folktales.<sup>14</sup>

### **Ambiguities**

Although Islamic values are magnified in Dan Alalo's *wakoki*, the griot nonetheless praises other values common to various religions and moral persuasions such as hard work and the love of a job well done. Those who are faulty in this come in for particular criticism regardless of the fact that they may demonstrate other worthwhile traits, be they Islamic. Hence, Dan Alalo stigmatises the behaviour of *marabouts* and *Cherifs*.

These, real or supposed descendants of the prophet Mohamed, enjoy pride of place in Zinder's social hierarchy and consider agricultural labour beneath their dignity, an attitude that has no basis in Islam, which condemns sloth and begging. Notwithstanding, *marabouts*, *Cherifs* and some impotent persons use religion as a pretext for exploiting hard-working peasants. Thus, Dan Alalo seems to take a certain pleasure in the severity of the colonial practice of forced labour when it comes to bear on *marabouts*, *Cherifs* or other parasites of this kind:

I said, "Plough, marabout, plough!"

The marabout stood there, silent.

I insisted: "Plough, marabout!"

The pagan does not know Allah; plough marabout!

But, you can't plough dressed in robes," I warned them,

"Take off your caftan and your turban, the pagan is coming!"

Take off your caftan and your turban, the pagan is coming!

The marabout, without another word, took off his turban

The marabout, without another word, took off his caftan

The marabout, without another word, took off his caftan

Then I went to see the Cherifs and the Arabs:

Surprise! The Arab and the Cherif have never ploughed a field.

They were standing there too, and one of them was weeping.

I said, "God approves of you,

The pagan is coming,

Baudot the worker";

I said, "Plough, Sidi!"

Sidi held his peace.

But I insisted, "Plough, Sidi!"

Sidi ploughed.

He said to me: "El Hadji Dan Alalo,

I have never ploughed in my life, you know."

I heard him say:

"I have never ploughed in my entire life

Since God created me as Sidi,

I have never ploughed, never.

This is the first time I've ever heard the word "plough".

Since God created me as Sidi,

I have never ... look at my poor swollen hands!"

("Baudot", lines 145-198).<sup>15</sup>

We note in both these extracts from “Baudot” that the *mawaki* cuts out a central role for himself. He is at the same time performer and social actor in the moral economy of his *waka*. In the context of colonial domination of the forties depicted here, he is a lucid commentator of the new power pyramid, hence his role as seer, warner and critic, both of the colonizer and of certain subjects of colonization. The shift in power allows the *griot* to ridicule the formerly influential religious powers and to rejoice in their fall from glory. This is especially true in the case of the *Cherifs*, despite their Islamic knowledge and supposed genealogical relation to the Prophet. This brings us to the question of Arabic lexical borrowings and the poetic use Dan Alalo makes of these.

### **Arab-Islamic expressions and dramatization**

Instances of Arabo-Islamic borrowings in Dan Alalo’s *wakoki* are too numerous for us to make a complete inventory of them in this paper, which will look at a few interesting illustrations instead.

In his search for dramatic effect, Dan Alalo sometimes uses Arabo-Islamic expressions in the characterization of the dramatic personae of his songs. In the case of censured characters like *Cherifs*, *marabouts* and lepers, the use of Arabic expressions or Koranic verses serve to ridicule rather than magnify them. Irony is therefore a common procedure. As is generally the case, the audience’s connivance is indispensable for this procedure to function (see Peyrouthel, 1994: 76). It invariably does, as people from Zinder enjoy mockery in all its forms and registers, from friendly and familiar banter and word play to caustic criticism. Elliptical expressions, allusive quotations, vocal imitations are all common ploys than the performer exploits with the complicity of the audience. Thus, when Dan Alalo, in his performance, ridicules religious leaders like *marabouts* engaged in “degrading” fieldwork, he mimes their ploughing while imitating the tones in which they chant verses of the Koran like: “Soubahanallahi, walhamdou lilalli wa la ilaha illahahou, Allah Akbar” (Baudot, lines 159-160). The audience is amused by the recitation of this formula called “Baqiatou Salihatou”, outside of its proper context. In fact, this verse is meant to be repeated 3, 33 or 99 times at the end of each of the five daily canonic prayers. Here, the comic effect derives from the situation; the unusual context, the atypical occupation of these specialists of prayer; the fact everyone knows that that no amount of praying will spare those who had formerly looked down on physical labour, especially toiling in the fields, from the common lot of forced labour. Similarly, during his ironic portrayal

of the Arabs and *Cherifs* of Zinder, the *griot* imitates their accent to the great pleasure of the audience. The humoristic effects derive both from the imitation and from the voluntary deformation of the formulae cited.

Lepers also come in for their share of ridicule. To demonstrate Baudot's complete lack of compassion, Dan Alalo insists on the fact that even lepers are forced to work and to participate in the war effort. Yet this pathetic situation is exploited for comic effect, as the *mawaki* imitates the leper sowing and chanting, in nasal tones, the verses usually employed to ask for alms:

Sha kallahu  
Shari kallahu labbaika, (thank you)  
Sha kallahu  
Sha kallahu  
Shari kalahu labbaika, (thank you)  
Sha kallahu  
Shari kallahu labbaika, (thank you)  
(Who but Baudot would force lepers to sow among thorns?)  
("Baudot", lines 408-417).

Dramatization and comic effect hinge on the use of Arab-Islamic formulae, accompanied by mime, vocal imitation and repetition. The latter, which might appear monotonous in print, has quite the opposition effect in live performance as, depending on the resources of the performer, tonal changes and theatrical tricks enliven the repetition. At any rate, repetition is a part of the aesthetic canon, and the public also appreciates it in itself, as evidenced in numerous African epics, folktales and in the structure of countless African languages.

### **The role of the *san kira***

Another technique that Maazou Dan Alalo uses to heighten the dramatic intensity of his performance is the accompaniment of a *san kira* (answerer or Bard's bard) or personal panegyrist. This technique is not specific to Hausa oral performance. In fact, Jean Dérive, in his analysis of African epic creations, remarks on the existence of panegyrists like the *san kira*. One characteristic of this actor is the role of answerer he plays. As Dérive (2004: 103) underlines: "he is also a 'rhythmic agent' who punctuates either the end of each verse or the end of each stanza, depending on the degree of intensity of the narrative, with a phatic intervention, usually "naamu" – "yes" in Arabic – a word used in Islamic societies in Africa."<sup>16</sup>

However, in the case of Dan Alalo's performances, the *san kira*, usually a former pupil of the Koranic school, has a role that is not limited to punctuating or approving the griot's enunciations with a rhythmic "yes". He contributes, in fact, actively to the dramatic intensity and complexity of the performance as in the case of the *waka* celebrating Sultan Oumarou's voyage to Niamey. Throughout the rendition, the *san kira*'s recurrently quotes Arab-Islamic expressions. In the written form, they sometimes give the reader of the transcribed and translated text the impression of dealing with two parallel entities: the main narrative and a second narrative, underlining the anchorage of Arab-Islamic culture in local society in Zinder.

A skilled *san kira* possesses the qualities Zahan attributes to the *ndalé-dala* or actor-storyteller: "intelligence, memory, imagination, a sharp tongue, and above all the gift of eloquence and the ability to present serious matters in comic vein" (quoted in Belinga, 1965: 53).<sup>17</sup> In his farcical role as a comic, the *san kira* sometimes resorts to the use nonsensical "Arabic" expressions. When the audience is aware of this ploy, humour is provoked by a certain sense of complicity. But the audience, sometimes ignorant of the "Arabic" inventions of the *san kira*, is unduly impressed. Given a certain pedantic bent, the *san kira* does, however, make use of bona fide Arabic expressions, in order to exhibit his knowledge and to mystify and force the esteem of the public. A case in point is a quotation like: "Barahinatou, laa tankida wa ibatouhou" ("Sultan Oumarou's voyage", lines 26-27), taken from a famous collection of poems dedicated to the Prophet Mohamed, called the *Aqaasaid al ishe riyya*. The words, referring to the Prophet's perfection means, "His proofs, his arguments, his gifts are infinite". Quotations like this whip the admiration of the audience and usually elicit a shower of gifts.

The use of Arab-Islamic expressions therefore lends itself to a wide variety of uses, all of them dramatic, invariably underlining the extent of Arab-Islam influence on local culture in Zinder, sometimes to the end of praise. The opposite objective is also noted. Moreover, comic effects also repose on borrowings from a culture and language covering the entire spectrum of expression from the sublime to the ridiculous or the comical.

### Conclusion

In the light of the preceding remarks, we might conclude that Maazou Dan Alalo draws on Arabo-Islamic expressions to glorify the sultans of Zinder, by attributing to them, in songs of praise, cardinal Islamic val-

ues, and piety in particular, seen as corner stones of the Islamic city. Islam being a factor of collective identification, the non-Muslim is shown up as an unrighteous “Other”. Thus the colonial administrator Baudot, who forces admiration because of his love of hard work, is condemned for his indiscriminate severity and lack of compassion. The *mawaki* uses the values of Islam to the end of collective self-valorisation and preservation. It becomes the final bastion of glory, of claim to fame, if we prefer, of the chief under “occupation”. However, this collective self-definition also reposes on various types of positions, including, on the occasion, distance from neighbouring local norms and modes of behaviour: the animist, faithful to his ancestral religion, to whom Baudot is associated, is also seen as the “Other”; while the Nazerene (or Christian) is perceived as a hard-hearted unbeliever, represented by the colonial overlord. Even within the community itself, no-one is above criticism. Hence, persons placed in high esteem for religious reasons are also mocked by Dan Alalo, who rejoices in their fall from glory in ironic and humouristic terms. Arabo-Islamic expressions are not merely exploited in religious terms, nor merely to introduce a sublime atmosphere or to praise traits of nobility, as comic techniques also exploit such expressions. Finally, Dan Alalo’s *wakoki* allow a close-up view of colonial history as lived experience, complete with a range of privileged insights on evolving social dynamics, including changes in the power pyramid, strategies of adaptation and preservation of the elite, of the community, and of people’s dignity in particular. In this enterprise, the *griot* plays – and is aware of playing – an invaluable role: social commentary, censure and distraction. His multiple functions include providing a sense of continuity as well as protecting the dignity of local rulers, and of the community as a whole, through the catharsis of humour, in particular.

Translated by Antoinette Tidjani Alou.

Le texte original en français est disponible sur [www.letterkunde.up.ac.za](http://www.letterkunde.up.ac.za)

## Notes

1. “L’Islam a profondément transformé et renforcé la culture orale” (Dieng, 2003: 117). All translations in this article are mine, unless stated otherwise.
2. “Dès lors, l’art du griot s’islamise sur le plan formel et thématique: sujets religieux, citation de versets du Coran et des hadiths, recours au lexique arabo-islamique” (Dieng, 1991: 68).
3. See Sériba’s article in this volume on traditional wrestling and his discussion of other instances of praise and self-praise, (*kirare* and *taken*), within the sporting arena [eds.].
4. The French delimited the territory that is now called Niger in 1910 [eds.].
5. In French-speaking African Islamic societies, the *marabout* is a Muslim holy man, the equivalent of an imam [eds.].

6. The trip actually took a week, by car and was very strenuous. The *griot* goes to great pains to magnify this voyage, however, and the accompanying drumming gives the impression that the sultan actually went to Niamey on horseback.
7. In the local noble nomenclature of Zinder, *Cherif* or *Sidi* is the title given male members of the small Nigérien Arabic population. They are the real or supposed descendants of the prophet Mohamed and supposedly possess certain powers including mastery of the secrets of fire, to which they are reputedly invulnerable. Hence, in Zinder, they are called to put out fires and rescue victims in fire-related disasters.
8. "La région de Zinder est, en effet, à la frange et au point de rencontre de deux mouvements d'islamisation, celui, plus ancien, plus orthodoxe et dont l'axe de s'orientait d'est en ouest, et celui davantage imprégné d'influence berbère et dont l'ultime manifestation fut le djihad fulbé. En s'attaquant au souverain de Bornou, le second se heurtait à une tradition musulmane plus orthodoxe que celle de ses partisans. Le Bornou, ou ce qu'il en restait au début du siècle dernier, au terme de multiples vicissitudes historiques, résista victorieusement à ces assauts. La cité de Zinder, fondée par un lettré béribéri, devint la citadelle avancée de cet empire contre une conquête peule qui n'avait pas le privilège de la pureté islamique" (Nicolas, 1975: 503).
9. "An masa sarki mai imani/ Ba ya kyashi ba zalumci,/ Sai kowa ya rike kayanai."
10. I have formerly translated *mai Turawa* as "Master of the white man" out of a sense of political correctness. The term in fact implies a certain complicity, whose undertones are quite distasteful, in retrospect, which can only be properly interpreted in the political context of the colonial era.
11. "Ci-gari Umaru mai Turawa,/ Da lallashi sa arne salla./ Sa arna su yi koyon tsarki."
12. "An nasara bai bar ba koda matan aure/ Domin shi kafiri ne/ Ko yan mata yan talla/ Ko mahauta, ko yan koli/ Da gurdugai, da makahi, da kutare/ Bodo ba zai bari ba/ Ko mai saida gyada bai bari ba/ Nasaran aiki Bodo/ Ko mai gyada bai bari ba."
13. "Arnen ba ya bi ta kofar gida,/ Sai ta bayan gida./ Gingiro, mai kwagiri da bakin doki, nasara./ In ya tashi tsiyarsa./ Ba aya hawam mota, sai bakin doki./ Garkami mai dogon doki, nasara,/ Bai ya bi ta kofar gida,/ Sai ta bayan gida, mai kwagiri./ Sai ka ji duka sai ka ce kare."
14. See in this volume Chaïbou's article for a discussion of the Dodo folktales and Marie Baraou's story, "The five orphans". "Dodo" also has another meaning. It refers to the awe bordering on fear that chiefs supposedly inspire, reminding us of the original sacred function that was theirs. The term is therefore used, as a compliment, in praise songs even today [eds.].
15. "Na ce, 'A noma malam/ Kafiri bai san Allah ba, a noma malam./ Sai malam yace mana, 'Ina nomawa, Dan Alalo./ Amma na yi gardadin malumai./ 'Ba a noma da riga./ Tube rigarka, hwarere rawani, arnen ya na tafe./ Tube rigarka, hwarere rawani, arnen ya na tafe./ Malam bai gardama ba, kan a jima ya tube rawani./ Malam bai gardama ba, kan a jima ya tube rawani./ Malam bai gardama ba, kan a jima ya tube riga./ Malam bai gardama ba, kan a jima, ya tube riga./ (...) Hallau na koma wajen sharifan Allah tare da larabawa./ Hallau na koma wajen sharifan Allah tare da larabawa./ Ashe, balarabe da sharifi bas u taba noma ba./ Sun yi tsaye su ma, wani ya na kuka./ Na ce, 'Allah ya ji dadin ku./ Kafiri ya tashi./ Arne mai gongon ga wuya./ Bodo mai aiki./ Na ce, 'A noma, Sidi./ Sidi ya yi shuru./ Sai ni ce: 'Ku noma, Sidi./ Sidi ya noma./ Ya ce mana, 'Alhadji Dan Alalo./ Banna noma da dai ni./ Sai na ji yana fadin./ 'Allazi da yafiya./ Allazai da yafiya./ Aiwa kallas Sidi./ Wallahi tallahi, Sidi./ Ban taba yin noma ba ni da dai./ Tun da Allah ya yi ni Sidi./ Ban taba yin noma ba ni da dai./ Sai yau na ji sunan noma./ Radda Allah ya yi ni Sidi./ Ban taba ... har hannu yana ruwa.'"
16. "[il est] aussi 'agent rythmique'. Celui-ci ponctue chaque fin de vers ou parfois seulement de groupe de vers, selon le degré d'intensité du récit, d'une intervention phatique, très souvent 'naamu' – oui en arabe – en usage dans les sociétés islamiques d'Afrique de l'ouest" (Derive, 2004: 103).
17. "intelligence, mémoire, imagination, esprit de réparties et surtout le don de la parole, avec la facilité de présenter les choses les plus graves et les plus sérieuses d'une manière amusante" (Zahan in Belinga, 1965: 53).

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32th Annual meeting & conference

May 2006

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Generations in Creative Dialogue

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Contacts: k-anyi@ug.edu.gh  
manthia.diawara@nyu.edu  
awam.amkpa@nyu.edu

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• Pre/Post-conference Tours to Cape Coast, Elmina, Kumasi will be arranged for those who can come early and/or stay longer.

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