

# Appropriation of Islam in a Gambian Village: Life and Times of Shaykh Mass Kah, 1827–1936

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the role played by an Islamic cleric, Shaykh Mass Kah, in the dissemination of Islamic teaching and its practice in the Senegambia. It analyzes the role religious leaders played in the Senegambia after the demise of Islamic kingdoms that militant Islamic leaders attempted to build during the second half of the nineteenth century. Examining the life history of Mass Kah within this time period shows how religious leaders like him remained central in the everyday lives of local communities, their followers, and those who sought their blessings. Given the pivotal role of Islam in the Senegambia during the militant revolutions between Muslims and non-Muslims or nominal Muslims (those who practice the religion in name only) of the nineteenth century, the clerics emerged as new leaders in positions of social and political authority. Islam offered the people a social, cultural, and political opportunity to replace their autocratic overlords. By foregrounding the meaningfulness of the change that was brought by the peaceful transition to Islam during the colonial period, the paper examines how the “new” faith was widely internalized by the peasantry, who were impressed with the numerous demonstrations of miracles by Muslim clerics.

## Introduction

One day, a student of Shaykh Mass Kah who had goiter, came to the cleric to seek permission to go to Dakar for treatment.<sup>1</sup> The Shaykh looked closely at the swollen neck. He then murmured words under his breath, blew air onto his hands, and smeared the goiter with his hands. “Let us sleep till morning, and then you can go by God’s grace.” When the student woke up in the morning, the swollen neck was reduced to a tiny pimple, producing pus, which healed in a few days. The Shaykh’s followers regarded such as a “miracle,” which Qadi Omar Saho composed into a song:

*“Amoon na been taalibeem bu ko ñewaloon  
Di ko tawat si benna giir,  
Bu ko sonnal.  
Seringe bi moocal ko,*

*There was a student of his who came to him,  
to complain of goiter,  
That troubled him.  
The Shaykh smeared the swollen area with words of  
Allah,*

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*Mu weer sa saasa.  
Sering bi musta deñi,  
'Yukisi naasa.'"*

*The goiter healed immediately.  
The Shaykh never faltered.  
Yukisu naasa'*

This story is an example of how clerics like Mass Kah reached out and dealt with populations on daily issues that mattered to the people. The story helps us to understand how through such miraculous exhibits clerics drew followers.

This paper explores the role played by the Islamic cleric, Shaykh Mass Kah, in the dissemination of Islamic teaching and its practice in the Senegambia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By attending to the everyday worries and needs of small communities, Shaykh Mass Kah was able to draw an extensive following. Using the history of Shaykh Mass Kah as an example, this paper analyzes the role religious leaders played in the Senegambia after the demise of Islamic kingdoms that militant Islamic leaders attempted to build during the second half of the nineteenth century. Given the pivotal role of Islam in the Senegambia during the militant revolutions between Muslims and non-Muslims or nominal Muslims of the nineteenth century, the clerics emerged as new leaders in positions of social and political authority. Islam offered the people a social, cultural, and political opportunity to replace their autocratic overlords.<sup>2</sup> As Martin Klein states, the victory of clerics against the autocratic rulers was not only military, but moral and political as clerics established schools in the region, and inculcated Muslim values as a replacement for the mores of the old order.<sup>3</sup> For instance, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, militant Islam swept across the West African region through a series of revolutions (*jihads*) enforcing Muslim forms of worship and legal practices.<sup>4</sup> This forceful dissemination of Islam in the Senegambian historiography is known as the Soninke-Marabout Wars (non-Muslims and Muslims), which were waged from 1850-1901.

Scholars also argue that the process of Islamization gained momentum once colonialism was established, and some people have suggested that European conquest helped spread Islam in meaningful ways, particularly by ending the violence between Africans. For example, Frances Leary contends that it was European colonialism that helped to lay the foundations for the spread of Islam in the Cassamance region of Senegal. For Leary, colonialism created stable conditions which permitted peaceful proselytization and interaction to occur and in some cases even encouraged the Muslims with formal official policies.<sup>5</sup>

By foregrounding the meaningfulness of the change that was brought by the peaceful transition from militancy during the colonial period, this paper explores how the "new faith" was in some ways widely internalized by the peasantry, who were impressed with the numerous demonstrations of "miracles" of Muslim clerics. These "miracles" were associated with special supernatural powers that clerics were believed to possess in continuity and in abundance.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, there is a need to rethink the historiography of Islam in West Africa, which tends to focus on jihads emphasizing militant Islamic reform. For instance, there has been substantial works on the nineteenth century Muslim revolutions in West Africa focusing on individuals such as Uthman Dan Fodio, Maba Diakhou, and Al-Hajj Umar Tal.<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, the literature on *Sufi* shaykhs who opted for the peaceful paths to Islam is growing, especially in recent

years.<sup>8</sup> However, more work needs to be done on these individuals and generators of *baraka* (divine grace) who not only sought to adopt a peaceful path to practice Islam but also attempted to create a *Dar al-Islam* (abode of believers) within a *Dar al-Kufr* (abode of nonbelievers) they dealt with eminent social problems.<sup>9</sup>

The present-day popular view of Mass Kah as a saint is based on the belief that he would shower *baraka* on those who visited his grave at the village of Medina in Niimi.<sup>10</sup> Commonly, these views are expressed in Wolof poems, some of which are reproduced above and below. Artistic (poetry) depictions of these deeds, considered miracles by his followers, offer the historian the possibility of providing a better understanding of how some members of the communities he visited were attracted to Islam. The ability of the saint to manipulate divine forces makes him a charismatic figure who attracts followers as people seek help from him for personal or community problems. The source of devotion to a cleric is the pursuit of *baraka* and the supernatural power attached to these blessings is a guarantor of redemption. The devotion to a cleric is also the source of amulets and charms.

Scholars have already treated the subject of saint veneration. Lamin Sanneh writes that the burial ground of the cleric, Karamoko Ba, and his relatives at Touba in Guinea became a center of pilgrimage where people made their various petitions at the site of Ba's grave. He notes that a saint must be prominent in divinely attested works to be distinguished sharply from acts of revolt or rebellion (*ma'siyah*) in the secular realm.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Mass Kah was considered a saint who performed many miracles. In both Gambia and Senegal, every year hundreds if not thousands of people gather in Banjul or at his village in Medina for what is called *ziyara* (visit) to mark his death. The *ziyara* is also an occasion to remember the life and deeds of the Shaykh.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to state here that my interest in Mass Kah's story is not whether these "miracles" happened or not, or even whether he actually studied at great centers of Islamic learning his followers have attached him to. My aim is to show how these stories and miracles are memorialized and what they tell us about the past. Why do his followers take pleasure in recounting his miracles? For example, why do his followers say that the Shaykh studied at Pir in Senegal and why is that important?<sup>13</sup> Are the stories of his followers an attempt to legitimate the Shaykh's traditions or is this a case of "invented tradition?"<sup>14</sup> Why did the Shaykh remain a pacifist in a time of increasing militant Islamic revolutions? What does that tell us about his authority in the region? For instance, it is clear that though the stories about the Shaykh have not changed, the ways they are memorialized have changed over time. In recent years, memorialisation of the Shaykh's life has transformed from family and students gathering in the village to large scale *ziyaras* in urban areas. Perhaps, one reason for this is the increasing economic and social position of the Shaykh's grandchildren.<sup>15</sup> The question is whether this public performance can be considered as a conscious effort by Kah's grandchildren and followers to legitimize the *Shaykh's* tradition.

Nonetheless, it is a daunting task to reconstruct such a story with very few written sources or archival materials. I attempt to situate Mass Kah and his life in the general context of religious reforms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Senegambia by reviewing published materials. I base my narration on the complex insider stories, which are, stories of family members and the Shaykh's followers here woven together with the few available archival sources. The insider stories are contrasted with accounts by other carefully chosen

informants who are close to but not related to the Shaykh. This type of investigation is striking because it allows historians to see contending dynamics in life histories.

One should obviously utilize such insider stories carefully and critically. It is customary in Senegambia for followers, students, and siblings to speak well of their shaykh, teacher, and parent, as these figures are the source of *baraka*. Similarly, one should be wary of the struggle between siblings of a shaykh to control and monopolize the shaykh's "traditions" —each member of the family may claim authority of either the "authentic" knowledge of the shaykh or the correct version of his life story. For example, during my interviews, some family members rejected versions of the *Shaykh's* story told by other family members. Some even told me that if I want the story to be credible, I should not believe the versions of some particular family members. Likewise, others in the community not related to the Shaykh pointed to certain family members as credible sources. Examples such as these require a particular attention not only to the voices of informants but also how researchers interact with informants and what conclusions they draw from their stories.

The publication of Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History* (1985) led scholars to examine critically oral traditions as sources of history. Much work has explored how oral historians extract knowledge about the past from oral narratives, what evidential material they have at hand, and by what procedures they combine these into purported representations of the past. C. A. Hamilton observes how "carefully unpacked and deconstructed, oral traditions can provide some evidence of 'voices from below.' Often this evidence can be found, not in the consistency of oral traditions, but in their very contradictions and 'fault lines.'"<sup>16</sup> For example, there seem to be a number of pieces of missing information in the Shaykh's life, particularly regarding his wives.<sup>17</sup> Why are there such silences and what does that tell us about family feuds? If Mass Kah had given advice or prayers to *jihadists*, what type of advice and what kinds of prayers were they?

### Early Life, Education, and Teacher

In African mythology, heroism and cleverness have long been associated with children who learn to walk or speak late in their development.<sup>18</sup> The life story of Mass Kah given by his followers and disciples emphasizes his mysterious childhood, while accounts of his deeds later in his life attest to his sainthood status. At the age of three, Shaykh Mass Kah could barely walk and his parents used to wonder if he ever would be able to do so. In many ways, his life therefore reflects the customary ways in which saints' lives were presented and remembered by inhabitants of the Senegambia region.

*Seringe* Mass Kah was born into a Fulbe family at Ngui Mbayen in the Wolof state of Kajoor of what is now Senegal circa 1827 and died in The Gambia in 1936 at Medina Seringe Mass, a village located in Niuni District, North Bank Division.<sup>19</sup> His father was Ma Sohna Kah and his mother was Sohna Gaye Khan.<sup>20</sup> *Seringe* Mass established the village of Medina for learning the Quran, spreading the word of God, and agricultural work. A present-day visitor to the village of Medina Seringe Mass is quickly struck by the sight of a beautiful minaret, loud songs in praise of God from Quranic students, and the sight of large millet and groundnut fields.

As was customary at the time, Mass Kah went to Quranic School under the tutelage of his brothers, *Seringe* Samba and *Seringe* Morr Anta Sally, at a village called Pir. David Robinson

mentions that many key leaders of the Fulbe revolt movements studied in Islamic schools located at Pir.<sup>21</sup> Mass Kah was a quick learner and as a young man studied the Quran and Islamic sciences at Pir, where he had opportunity to meet other clerics. The shaykh was also said to have studied in Mauritania.<sup>22</sup> Though the exact time and location of this is not clear, Charles Stewart indicates that during the nineteenth century Mauritania was revered for its religious scholarship, and many in West Africa seeking Islamic knowledge would visit renowned scholars such as Sahikh Sidiyya (1775-1868) who had disciples from the Futa Jallon to Southern Morocco and from Futa Toro to Timbuctoo.<sup>23</sup> Mass Kah continued studying under different clerics. He read many books including: *Asma'wee* (fiqh-religion, ways of prayers), *Laxdari* (religion and prayers), and *Hasamadine* (way of life) as well as aspects of the religion such as *Lawal* (religious affairs), *Usul* (jurisprudence), *Tawhid* (unity of God), and *Naxu* (grammar), after which he returned to Senegal.<sup>24</sup>

By the time of his return to Senegal, the shaykh's peaceful approach to Islam began to attract a following. One can only speculate that his decision was influenced by the changing political and religious landscape in the Senegambia. O'Brien notes that the defeat of the last Wolof King, the Damel of Kayor, Lat Dior, at the battle of Dekkilé in 1886 at the hands of French conquerors, and the subsequent disintegration of the state of Kayor, served as a warning for all the clerics in the region that their culture was now under threat.<sup>25</sup>

Mass Kah's attitude towards colonial expansion was said to be one of avoidance. He relocated himself whenever the French got closer to his area of domicile.<sup>26</sup> Though it is not clear why he made such decisions, a purported incident between Mass Kah and a certain French colonial commissioner is perhaps relevant.<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Lamin Bah narrates that the marabout's brother, Sheikh Kah, was arrested by the French commissioner and detained without charge along with several others. Despite appeals and negotiations to persuade the commissioner, the detainees were not released. At that time, Mass Kah was living at the Senegalese border custom post Karang. The commissioner sent a message to Mass Kah to report to the commissioner's office, but Mass Kah was unwilling to go. Instead, he sent his son, Seringe Mustapha Kah. On Seringe Mustapha's arrival at the post, he heard names being called from a list and Mass Kah's name was called at exactly 11:45 in the morning. Seringe Mustapha raised his hand and answered on behalf of the shaykh.

"Where is Mass Kah?", the commandant enquired.

"He did not come," Seringe Mustapha answered.

"He is the one I need here, not you," the commandant demanded.

"I said the shaykh cannot come," Seringe Mustapha replied.

"Why do you say he is not coming?" the commandant asked.

"I am the one whom he sent and I said he is not coming," Seringe Mustapha emphasized.

"Are you sure Mass Kah will not be here even if I ordered him to come?" the commandant reiterated through an interpreter.

"Tell him, he is just a mere representative and nothing more and nothing else. He is a *jefeendukay*, (a tool), and there is nothing he can do," Seringe Mustapha replied to the interpreter.<sup>28</sup>

The commandant looked at his wristwatch. It was 12 noon. He ordered Seringe Mustapha to be thrown into a cell until 2 in the afternoon, at which time Seringe Mustapha would be seriously dealt with. Seringe Mustapha was put into custody. At about 1 pm, coincidentally, the telephone in the commandant's office rang. It was from Dakar. The office in Dakar had received an order from France for the immediate dismissal of the said commissioner. As soon as the telephone conversation ended, a vehicle arrived for the commissioner to leave his duty station. Everyone refused to help the commissioner load his luggage onto the vehicle. He had to carry the loads himself on his head. By 2 pm, when the hearing was to take place, the commissioner had no time for Seringe Mustapha, who with many others was released. On his return, Seringe Mustapha narrated everything that had happened to Mass Kah, who responded in a gentle manner: "Well the commissioner is the ruler, and when you cannot agree with the leader, you have to leave the land for him."<sup>29</sup>

The story also provides a good illustration of the uncommon characteristics recognized in the saintly figures of the past among clerics, followers and ordinary people seeking *baraka*. This claimed account of Seringe Mustapha's encounter with French officials implies that Mass Kah's prayers (*dua*) were responsible for the French commissioner's dismissal, which then led to the release of all the detainees. In assessing sainthood and the cult of saints, Sanneh reckons that "such examples of saintly *baraka* achieving moral victory helped to establish their author firmly in the esteem and devotion of ordinary people and a certain premium began to be placed on acquiring the marks of saintly distinction."<sup>30</sup> In this case, Mass Kah seemed to have influenced the dismissal of a powerful French administrator, thereby establishing his reputation as a saint.

The Shaykh finally established his village of Kërr Medina Seringe Mass in The Gambia in the early 1890s.<sup>31</sup> Here the scholar immediately established a *daara* (Quranic school) and continued to teach the tenets of Islam and the Quran as well as instilling work ethics into his students and followers. The school soon attracted students from within Gambia and Senegal. This school became so popular that it attracted the attention of the British colonial administrators. In the 1923-1932 report of North Bank Province concerning educational improvements, it is written that "There are a number of schools at which Arabic is being taught. The chief of these are: at Farafenni under Sherif Malainen a native of French Soudan; at Medina Seringe Mass: Under Mass Kah and his son, Momadu Kah, Jollofs (Wolof); at Sittannunku under Arafang Briama Dabo, a Mandingo; at Medina Cherno under Cherno Omar Jallo, a Toranko."<sup>32</sup> The writer of the report was impressed with the level of Arabic education and continued, "Some of these teachers are highly educated men. I know one, a Mandingo now dead, who evolved a calendar whereby he could convert the days of the moon into days of the month, and even overcome the difficulty of the leap year."<sup>33</sup> In his study of Islamic schools in West Africa Muhammed Joof also notes the place of the school run by Shaykh Mass Kah as a center of learning and with many students.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Donald Wright reckons that by the 1930s, Niimi (in The Gambia) was dotted by villages that were magnets for young men who wanted to learn to read Arabic and advance their knowledge of the Quran under the tutelage of noteworthy clerics.<sup>35</sup>

The life of Mass Kah needs to be examined against the general background of the religious reforms of the nineteenth century, which should be seen through the acts of key reformers, most of whom, it is claimed, at one time or another had come into contact with Mass Kah. For

example, Mass Kah was said to have met with Amadou Bamba of Touba (1852-1927), founder of the Murid Brotherhood.<sup>36</sup> Informants narrated that Bamba visited Mass Kah in Banjul at Hagan Street, where the present “Murid Headquarter” in The Gambia is located. It was also reported that the Shaykh met Al-Hajj Umar Tall (1794-1864), one of the most travelled and influential clerics in West Africa.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, it is said that he had met Maba Diakhou Bah (1809-1867) and his son, Saer Matti, by blessing their jihads through prayers.<sup>38</sup> Although there are no written records to substantiate these claims, they seem to suggest that these encounters strengthen his credentials as a reputable religious figure. These religious figures have remained important icons in Senegambians’s popular memory. Relating Mass Kah to these individuals therefore appears to be a conscious effort to illuminate his piety.

In some ways, Mass Kah’s life can be compared to that of Bamba who evaded colonial encroachment through what Robinson calls “accommodation.” By making the same evolution as Bamba, Mass Kah’s preoccupation was to avoid conflict with the French and the British. In so doing, Mass Kah can be seen as someone reaching back to other distinguished Muslim tradition of Sufism and the peaceful spread of Islam. Also, Mass Kah’s actions can be seen in light of making the faith more prominent at a time of the evident failure of the militant approach, and in this he is similar to his contemporary Bamba.

The peaceful spread of Islam in West Africa was first associated with the life of Al-Hajj Salim Suwareh, a religious teacher who probably lived in the fifteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Mass Kah’s life as it appears in the legends and poems I present in this paper is a later example of the peaceful efflorescence of Islam during the colonial period. His model of the peaceful practice of Islam was similar to the peaceful Suwarian tradition of Islamic clerics in West Africa. Although this peaceful model was negated during the nineteenth century by jihadist leaders within the Suwarian tradition who adopted militant models from elsewhere in the Islamic world, with the onset of colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century, the Suwarian tradition gained a new life and led to an upsurge of Islamic affiliation.

Seringe Mass Kah’s teachings took place during the turbulent years of Islamization in parts of the Senegambia during the nineteenth century when Islam was also spread by the sword. Mass Kah, however, never took up the sword. By establishing schools and public preaching, Islamic scholars obtained followers and gained trust in the communities they visited, enriching the lives of believers and winning over new converts.

Mass Kah ascended through Sufi Islam as an adherent of the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya, two popular Islamic orders which gained currency among in the Senegambia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as most local clerics embraced either one or the other.<sup>40</sup> This gave Mass Kah an opportunity to understand the Sunna, Quran and Islamic institutions.<sup>41</sup> Sufi Islam, with its mystical and ascetic movement, is associated with the veneration for saints (*waliu*), who are credited with miracles and are believed to have the mystical gift of *baraka* (redeeming power and grace).<sup>42</sup> The central core of the Sufi way is the *wird*, usually part of *dhikr*, the prayer ritual that is specific for the way and transmitted from teacher to student. The initiation is variously called *akhdh al-’ahd* (“the taking of the oath”), *akhdh al-wird* (“the taking of the litany”), and *akhdh al-tariq or al-tariqa*.<sup>43</sup> The Shaykh took to Sufi practices by combining fasting, seclusion, and travel as a way of spreading the word of God. Valerie Hoffman in her work on Sufism, notes, “The Sufi’s major preoccupation is with crushing his passions, fighting,

as the sufi say, against his own soul. A time-honoured method of taming the soul is to resist its desires through fasting and other forms of asceticism.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Miracles, Social Work, and Healing**

Today, there are numerous stories, tales, and poems about Mass Kah’s supernatural performances, recounted by Qadi Aliou Saho and many of the Shaykh’s followers. Qadi Aliou Saho’s father was a student of Mass Kah, and Saho was a student of Mass Kah’s son.<sup>45</sup> Such accounts from students and other followers form the core of praises that are performed at every religious gathering in honor of the Shaykh. In Islamic tradition, Sufi poets find inspiration in the poems of earlier periods. Julian Baldick mentions the influence of poetry on Sufism and how earlier mystics of Islam had made extensive use of Arabic poetry.<sup>46</sup> The poems and songs about Mass Kah are composed in Wolof, interspersed with words and sentences in Arabic. The inclusion of Arabic in the poems requires that the performers be literate in Arabic and belong to the Shaykh’s *daira*.<sup>47</sup> The performers who usually are all men interject their songs into the sermon. Though women belong to *dairas*, their role is to echo and chant the songs repeatedly. The use of Arabic also tells us something about the performers. James Searing, writing of Mouride poetry, points out that “popular preachers” who are from bard families perform most of the songs. “The bard performed an important social function, but had a low status in society ... and as masters of public speech, bards speak for other groups ... One result is that rhetorical, artful speech is a sign of low status. In public settings, aristocrats whispered to their bards and the bards spoke for them.”<sup>48</sup> Much can also be said of the relation between the highly educated clerics and some of their followers. At religious sermons, one finds that the highly regarded scholar speaks in a low tone, and his words are transmitted and amplified by someone else.<sup>49</sup>

The purpose of this section is to show the significance and meaning of some of the miracles which are attributed to Mass Kah and why his followers attach much importance to these miracles.<sup>50</sup> This is not difficult to understand if we follow what Ali Karrar has said, that “The heart of every *tariqa* was its shaykh (senior cleric or head of a *tariqa*) who was believed to be divinely authorized to teach and guide people in their worldly life and in the hereafter.” Karrar further explained how “all the *tariqas* were agreed that an aspirant who desired a safe arrival at his goal (i.e. perfect knowledge of God) should put himself under the guidance of a shaykh.”<sup>51</sup> Belief in the power of a senior cleric has far-reaching implications in strengthening the bond between the shaykh and his follower as the shaykh is believed to be divinely guided and incapable of sin.

These popular views of Mass Kah are echoed in beautifully composed poems sung by adherents during annual *ziyaras* in the cleric’s honor. Most of the stories are believed to be miracles, which confirm the cleric’s position as a *waliu* (saint).<sup>52</sup> Many stories abound about the miraculous achievements of Muslim clerics. For instance, John Ralph Willis notes the return journey from Mecca of Al-Hajj Umar (1794 – 1864) by a ship bound for Cairo. “A storm confronts the ship and the agitation of the waves brings sleep to the new khalifa of Tijania order, but the sudden shouts of his eldest daughter rouse him from his slumber: ‘Rejoice, I have seen al-Tijani in the company of Muhammad al-Ghali: ‘make known to shaykh ‘Umar’, they commanded me, ‘nothing untoward shall befall him.’ The winds calm, the waves subside, the Divine Manifestation is made known.”<sup>53</sup> Similar stories radiate around the life of the Murid

founder and leader, the charismatic Muslim cleric Amadou Bamba. In 1895, the colonial French government sent him into exile in Gabon. Bamba's cult grew amid tales of his sea voyage, his prayer at sea, his fasting for a year, and his emergence from incarceration with lions.<sup>54</sup> Though these stories may remain subjects of debate, nonetheless, such miraculous exhibits are common anecdotes for the agitated minds of a shaykh's followers.

To a large extent, the life and deeds of Mass Kah recounted in these poems and songs are constantly reminding his followers of his sainthood. The Qadi narrates that while Mass Kah was at Medina he continued teaching the Quran and preaching Allah's words, and it was there that he exhibited many of his miracles. For example, Qadi Saho reports that there was a day when a fellow by the name of Sunkary Njie was arrested and put into custody by colonial authorities in Bathurst (now Banjul). The detainee's parents went to see Mass Kah for help. The cleric prayed for Sunkary and asked no payment for it. This is how humble and generous the cleric was, the narrator emphasized.

Qadi Saho continued: While Sunkary was asleep, he saw Shaykh Mass Kah in a vision telling him to leave the place and go. "*Bul naago, Sunkary, joggal nga dem*—don't sleep, get up and go" the marabout told him. Sunkary woke up and looked outside. He saw that all the guards were sleeping and the doors of the cells were open. He stood there and was afraid to leave the place, but the voice kept telling him to go. Sunkary gathered courage and left. He headed towards the Senegalese border. The voice followed him up to Kerr Salleh, near Ndunku Kebbeh on the North Bank highway, from Barra to Kerewan. "*Jen bi nga amee, saani ko falee, nga dem*" (throw away the load and go), the voice commanded. That was how Sunkary escaped. This story has been composed as a poem:

<i>Sunkari Njie, beñu ko tejee ci Ngurga</i>	<i>When Sunkary Njie was detained by the government,</i>
<i>Yengmuna, yenguna, karama korga;</i>	<i>he did all that he could,</i>
<i>Ngurga sika koy jaapa,</i>	<i>The authorities put him into custody,</i>
<i>Tej ko, dal koy ceene;</i>	<i>and chained him.</i>
<i>Sasko xalaal, tej ko,</i>	<i>He was jailed.</i>
<i>"Kula ñi... ko anee;</i>	
<i>Booko ye, jappa fas a nee ko".</i>	
<i>Ag beñu jotee sosee yi,</i>	<i>When he quarrelled with the Mandinka people.</i>
<i>Beñu teyee ko", Senge bee ne leen</i>	<i>When he was jailed,</i>
<i>Yewekuleen...te xam ne</i>	<i>the marabout told them,</i>
<i>'Insa a rabi, ne na jakk xam ne'</i>	<i>"Be aware and know that Allah is the greatest."</i>
<i>Sunkari dey neleew, Senge bi naan ko,</i>	<i>Sunkary was sleeping, the marabout told</i>
	<i>him,</i>
<i>Sunkari yewul, dem sa yoon</i>	<i>"Sunkary, don't fall asleep, get up and go.</i>
<i>Bul naagu.</i>	<i>Don't fall asleep."</i>
<i>Sunkari yewu, fekka garde yiy neleew,</i>	<i>Sunkary woke up and found all the guards asleep.</i>

<p><i>Jengba tas, neegba ubee ku...Waja raw,</i></p> <p><i>Kaadu Seringe bi ko gungee be Kerr Saleh,</i> <i>Mu naan ko, "jen bi nga yorr, deff ko falee".</i></p> <p><i>Kerog la Seringe Mass Kah neleewloowoona</i> <i>peeyi-ba,</i> <i>yepp xeral</i></p>	<p><i>Sunkary woke up and found all the guards</i> <i>asleep,</i></p> <p><i>The doors were open, and Sunkary escaped.</i> <i>The words of the marabout accompanied</i> <i>him up to Kerr Salleh, saying, "Throw away the chain."</i></p> <p><i>That day Mass Kah made the company of</i> <i>guards fall sleep, And they snored,</i> <i>until they were late for work</i></p>
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This story attaches mystical power to the Shaykh in making the guards fall asleep and opening the doors to the room where Sunkary was located. Ordinarily, this would have been an impossible task and as such only the Shaykh's *baraka* could accomplish such an assignment.

In a similar story, Qadi Saho recounts that a trader by the name of Sulay Njie lived in Banjul, doing business for a certain man called Peterson. Unfortunately for Sulay, the business did not go well, and after a period of time the enterprise collapsed. The businessman, however, accused Sulay of mismanagement and began court proceedings against him. Sulay was persistently harassed by the authorities as he was arraigned before the magistrate, time and time again. In his desperation, Sulay went to see his friend Tamsir Demba Mbye, who was a student of Mass Kah. Sulay asked for Tamsir's help, and Tamsir said to him, "The only place we can go is to our usual place, to Medina, to see Mass Kah."

The two men crossed the sea to Barra, where they boarded a passenger vehicle to Buniadu and walked from there to Medina. They arrived late in the night while the whole village was asleep except Mass Kah:

"You have come so late, I hope it is peace?" Mass Kah asked.

"No, it is not," replied Tamsir.

"What is it that brought you so late and could not wait for the day"? Mass Kah asked them.

"Well, when a child is in trouble, he goes behind an elder. And you are our elder. That is why we are here, to seek protection," Tamsir replied.

"And you think I can do something about it?" asked Mass Kah.

Tamsir did not answer but instead explained reasons why they had come to see him. In their presence Mass Kah repeated the name of the businessman four times, as follows: "*Maa ngiy weeral ne Peterson; Nel Peterson,*" (I am making it clear that it is Peterson; say Peterson) the marabout said. The marabout then woke up his son, Momodou Mariam, to provide a room for Tamsir and Sulay for the rest of the night. Early in the morning, after the marabout had finished his morning prayer and *wird*, he called the two men and prayed for them, after which he allowed them to return to Banjul. But as soon as they left the village, Sulay anxiously asked Tamsir:

"Is this the way Seringe Mass Kah has left us? To go back to Banjul empty-handed? I may be in trouble if I reach Banjul. I cannot go. Seringe Mass has not given us any charm or holy water. Peterson will imprison me if I go." Sulay was perspiring.

"Let us go; as long as you believe in God, let us go. Just have faith." Tamsir encouraged him. When the two men reached Banjul, they received word that Peterson was

looking for Sulay Njie. Peterson said to Sulay: “Where have you been, Sulay? I am sorry if I scared or offended you. I just wanted to make sure that the business progresses well for both of us.

*“Ak waaji ku ñemeetul dem Banjul,  
 ŋa farr deelo ko Banjul;  
 Daaxa seetane,  
 Moy waaji ku daan teeretal ku tudee,  
 Ku tudee Petterson;  
 Soy nobu dajee  
 Moom la wa Banjul di waxtaane”.*

*“And the person who was afraid to go to Banjul,  
 but you made him to return;  
 You chased away evil spirits.  
 That was the person who used to work for the  
 person called...,  
 He was Peterson;  
 nowhere to hide.  
 That is what the whole of Banjul is talking  
 about.”*

This story informs not only about the Shaykh’s ability to alter circumstances in Sulay’s favor but as importantly it shows that the Shaykh does not associate anything with God such as making of amulets and charms, which other *marabouts* traditionally do in the Senegambia. In strict Islamic tradition, making of amulets and charms are considered *bida* – innovation or *shirk* – associating other powers with God.

In another story, the Qadi narrates that one day, the people of Medina were clearing land for cultivation towards the direction of Bakindiki village. The villagers cleared a wide path till they came to a big tree. They tried to fell the tree but they found the tree had grown again to its former size the following morning. They reported the matter to Seringe Mass Kah. The following morning, when the villagers returned to work, the tree had disappeared. The villagers were stunned and chanted about the incident:

*Amoon na garab bu ñu  
 Toxaloon ci yooni Bakindiki la woon,  
 Waa réew mi yepp la lootaloon,  
 Seringe Kah jël ko mu sori.*

*There was a tree that was removed  
 from the way to Bakidinki.  
 It disturbed the whole village,  
 Seringe Mass Kah removed it to a farther  
 place.*

This is another story that illustrates the Shaykh’s ability to see and deal with what “ordinary eyes” cannot see. Presumably, the Shaykh was able to defeat the jinns of the tree and made the tree disappear. In this part of the world, it is commonly believed that most trees have owners—a jinn.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Hoffman notes that “the ability of sufi shaykhs and saints to see things that ordinary people cannot see might be considered just a part of their ability to transcend spatial limitations.”<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, the Qadi recounts that a man by the name of Seringe Fafa recited *wird* given to him by someone else, but it unfortunately made him mad. He went around to people’s houses molesting and embarrassing them. His madness made him talk about people’s private parts, whether they were men or women. As soon as he met people, he would shout at them and name their private parts. His parents were so discomforted that they tried every possible means to cure him but to no avail. Seringe Fafa and his elder brother, Seringe Baboucar, who

was *alkali* (head of a village) of Njawara, finally decided to go and see Mass Kah. They took along a reasonable amount of silver and jewellery as payment for Seringe Mass. But the cleric refused to accept any payment. On their arrival at the marabout's waiting room, they found many people waiting to see the marabout. But to the surprise of the madman's brother, he was calm and quiet. The cleric told the madman's parents that it was God's Name he had wrongly touched and that "*rawan*" (spirits) got into him. The madman remained with the cleric so that he could be cured. One evening the cleric went with him to farm. Seringe Mass gathered wood and asked the man to lift it and carry it home. As he bent to lift the bundle, he sensed lightness in his body, as if something was leaving it. He bent over again and sensed easiness within himself. "I am feeling light," he told the cleric. "Run home quick, run to the mosque and pray." The cleric commanded him. That was how the man was cured from the evil spirits. The incident is recounted into a song:

*Amon na benna talibeem ci Njawara,  
bo ko xamul,  
Moo tudd Babou Njawara.  
Defaay siikar, rawane dal ko songa;  
Yaramam defaay tayal, keram donga.  
Mu ñew tawati si lo lu.  
Baay Mustapha Kah Moy seen seringé,  
di seen seringé ...  
Di sekuna Mass Kah.  
Seringe bi ooko,  
Xellu ko kanje,  
Be mu ko beeci la mbiiram leer nanña.  
Nee na be mu beeci,  
Ma takk Seringe ba,  
Pi sa la weer pelleñi, degg sañi sañi ba;  
Kon ... matam ga xamal ma tamga,  
Da nal nu xamal ... maaam ga.*

*There was his student,  
If you don't know the student  
He was Babou Njawara.  
He used to do wurd and spirits attacked him,  
He used to get tired,  
and he became sick.  
Father Mass Kah, you are their marabout,  
Their marabout  
You are marabout Mass Kah.  
The marabout summoned him  
and diagnosed his illness.  
His condition became clear  
when the marabout hit him.  
The marabout hit him with words of God  
Then I highly praised the marabout,  
He instantly became well;  
and I make it known that, I am praising the  
Shaykh,  
I am praising the marabout.*

This demonstrates again the esoteric knowledge of the Shaykh, which the informant chose to emphasize. For example, at the end of narrating this story, the informant looked up to me and said, "The simplest way to understand the complexity of *wurd* (prayers) about God's names is to list ten names of all the persons one knows and attempt to call them by one name. Almighty Allah has ninety-nine names, and to pray or call these names is a special form of prayer. Some clerics are more knowledgeable than others when it comes to secrets relating to God's names. It is believed that calling on God's names wrongly can lead to madness."<sup>57</sup> The informant also highlights the point that the Shaykh was not in the habit of accepting payments for his work.

Aliou Saho further informed me about his father, Shaykh Omar Saho, who was a devout student and follower of Seringe Mass Kah. For example:

When Seringe Mass had grown old in Medina, Sheik Omar lived in a village called Njai Njai. The cleric asked him to relocate to Medina so he could lead the prayers. Shaykh Omar agreed to the request. When Shaykh Omar was about to return to Njai Njai to collect his belongings and bring his family, Seringe Mass Kah gave him some money and asked him to pay all the debts he owed in the village. To Shaykh Omar Saho's surprise, this amount of money exactly equalled the money he owed to various people in the village. The following year, Shaykh Omar tried to pay him back but the cleric refused to accept it saying that the sum was owed not to him but to God. "*Man sama telka baat la, lu si jenn, dutul deelo* (My hands are like my words, whatever comes out of it does not return to it).<sup>58</sup>

The closer one examines the trust disciples attach to their Shaykh, the more fascinating the stories that are told about the Shaykh's achievement. The Alkali of Jeshwang told me a story about his deceased mother, who was a student of Mass Kah.

My mother was a student of Mass Kah for a number of years. My mother was then living at Latrikunda. Her parents were the original settlers of that area and therefore owned much land in the vicinity. At the time of my grandparent's death, these lands were passed on to my mother. There came a time when a man living in the neighbourhood occupied her land and refused to give it up, saying that the land did not belong to my mother.

After a long and frustrating negotiation, the case ended up in court. This man's cousin was his witness. My mother decided to go and see Mass Kah, who gave her a *wird*.<sup>59</sup> The shaykh told my mother to leave everything in the hands of God, and justice would be delivered. The shaykh asked her to recite the *wird* always, especially when she entered the courthouse. On the first day of the hearing, the witness got sick and could not attend the court. The case was postponed. Two weeks later, my mother was in the court, but this time the man himself was sick and could not present himself in the courts. The case was adjourned. The third time that the case was to be heard, it was revealed that the witness had passed away. In addition, the judge who was an Englishman left the country. The case was adjourned again. After a long interval, the matter was finally heard by another judge and resolved in my mother's favor. The most interesting thing was that the man who wanted to take my mother's land passed away a few weeks after the court ruling. You know it is wrong to take what is not yours.<sup>60</sup>

Towards the end of his life, Mass Kah's knowledge and wisdom became more profound and visible. He lived and died for what he believed: teaching the Quran, spreading of God's word, and doing his work.

## Conclusion

In many ways Mass Kah's life is now being remembered through many of the songs and miracles related in the previous pages, including the belief of him as a saint who could shower

*baraka* in life or in death. However, one also needs to be cautious and treat “miracles” with suspicion, as Kenneth Woodward points out: “Because miracles always manifest power, and because that power can come from evil as well as divine sources, miracles alone are never to be trusted.”<sup>61</sup>

I have endeavored to relate the story of Mass Kah from the inside, based mainly on interviews with people related to him. Though such an approach may raise questions about subjectivity and objectivity, it provides insights into the dynamics of family history and an opportunity of getting insider views. It also provides a window of opportunity for historians to hear divergent views and enables them to comment on internal family dynamics.

Perhaps more interestingly, these types of family history can also produce what Marcia Hermansen describes as “role depiction, life-telling and the concept of person in religion” which tell of how the structure and details of a shaykh’s life serve to set an example to be embodied in the life-tellings and even life choices of subsequent followers of the shaykh or followers of that tradition which the leader founded.<sup>62</sup> As it is difficult to validate many of these sources, I have raised questions and interrogated the narration by showing how oral history, despite its weaknesses, can provide sources from which historians can reconstruct the past.

Significantly, Shaykh Mass Kah’s life reveals that he was a cleric who played a key role in disseminating Islamic practice in the Senegambia. He did this through his teachings, by creating the “holy” village of Medina, and by blessing his followers. He had performed several “miracles” in the process of healing the sick and relieving people in difficulty. Moreover, like Bamba, he opted for a peaceful Islam. But unlike the Murid cleric, he rarely came into direct contact with either the French or British colonial authorities at different times in his life. The life and times of Shaykh Mass Kah reveals that scholars of Islam have a lot to gain in studying individual Sufi clerics who were seemingly not so well-known to the “outsiders,” namely the Europeans. As a result, there is not so much written on them. The Shaykh in particular did not leave behind a rich collection of *risalas* (messages, memoirs, or documents). All that is available about him is stored in the popular memory of his disciples who wrote songs and stories and also organized annual *ziyaras* to memorialize him.

Mass Kah’s life history as narrated to me is in many ways an account of interactions of social relationships between the community and the individual cleric. The stories set out the services the individual cleric provides and reciprocal gestures of the community. The encounter between local people and Islam created dynamics within which clerics emerged as the new social and political leaders. Islam offered the people an alternative to their autocratic overlords. The majority of the population adopted Islam by peaceful means, and the major transmitters of Islam and the greater Islamic culture were the Muslim scholars and clerics whose main concern was to preach Islam to villagers. In doing so, the clerics more than offered services that made them welcome among the people.

## Notes

- 1 This article draws from the extensive research on the life and times of Mass Kah and the book I published on the Shaykh (Saho 2010) subsequent to its initial submission to the *African Studies Quarterly*. In this essay the word cleric has been used interchangeably with

*marabout* and *shaykh* (*Seringe* in Wolof; *Cerno* in Pulaar; *Moroo* in Mandinka). These words are used to mean a highly trained Islamic scholar with prestige, a community leader, one who leads prayers, who prays for people, and who enjoys the praise of the community. Mass Kah was then living in The Gambia.

- 2 By autocratic overlords I mean leaders who did not accept Islam, disrespected Islam, and or did not allow their subjects to profess Islam.
- 3 See Klein 1968.
- 4 For the rise of militant Islam, see Trimmingham 1962, pp. 160-161. See also Robinson 2000; Abun-Nasr 1965, p. 106.
- 5 Leary 1970, p. 108.
- 6 For the subject of super natural powers, see Dilley 2004.
- 7 See Robinson's work on Al-Umar Tal, 1968; Hiskett 1973.
- 8 See Babou 2007.
- 9 Dilley 2004, p.13. Dilley notes that "a person possessed of baraka or 'divine grace' is in a position to bring about wondrous acts that fill people with amazement."
- 10 One is inclined to add that the cleric's baraka extends to his descendants. Many of them are highly educated and they occupy leading roles as imams or qadis in The Gambia.
- 11 Sanneh 1997, pp. 37-38.
- 12 The *ziyara* takes place every February in Banjul. The grand scale of the gathering is a recent phenomenon though his family members and followers continuously marked his death at the village –Medina. The *ziyara* is usually organized by followers belonging to a *daira*. Examples of works on *daira* include those of O'Brien 1971; and Villalion 1995. Also, in the last few decades, some scholars show interest in how saintly figures and religious events are memorialized. For example, see Babou, 2007, pp.197-223; Green 1991, pp. 127-35.
- 13 Pir is known as one of the Islamic centers in the region. For example, see Ka 2002.
- 14 Invented tradition is a subject thoroughly discussed in which people continually reinterpreted the lessons of the past in the context of the present. For example, see Spear 2003, pp. 3-27; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Chanock 1985.
- 15 For example, sixteen of the Shaykh's grandchildren are either qadis (Islamic judges) or imams (those who lead prayers at mosques) in The Gambia.
- 16 Hamilton 1987, p. 67.
- 17 Part of the problem of such silences is that traditionally Islam allows only four wives (legally recognized). However, some clerics tend to co-habit with multiple women aside from the four legally recognized wives. For example, slave women taken as concubines or some form of arrange marriage known as *tako* in Wolof. *Tako* is a type of marriage in which the woman does not live with the man. For instance, clerics who travel around would marry women in places they go who are however different from their four legally recognized wives. Similarly, in Mandinka this type of arrange marriage is known as *kundendoo*.
- 18 For instance, it was said of Sundiata Keita, the legendary king of the Manding Empire, that his mother was disillusioned by the thought of Sundiata being gripped with paralysis. Oral

- historians recount how he mysteriously walked from strength to strength to become a great hunter and king. See Suso 1998.
- 19 These dates make Mass Kah very old when he died. During my interview with Muhammad Lamin Bah he showed me a note-book written in Arabic text which contains the tarikh of Mass Kah. According to him, the document is inherited from his late elder brother, Seringe Mustapha. I have not established when the text was written and whether it is an original copy. In addition, Dr. Omar Jah Snr. (graduate of McGill) informed me that Mass Kah died two years before his own birth in 1938. However, like many Senegambians born in the nineteenth-century, exact dates are difficult to remember. In addition, there is no way of cross-referencing these dates.
  - 20 Though the name Sokhna refers to the wife of a shaykh or Muslim cleric, it has now become a common name among Senegambians. The use of the name here could indicate that both his father's and mother's family were already specialized in Islamic scholarship.
  - 21 Robinson, in Levtzion and Pouwels 2000, p.135.
  - 22 Interview with Muhammad Lamin Bah and Masohna Kah, February 2003.
  - 23 Stewart with Stewart 1973, p. 11.
  - 24 Though Mass Kah was said to have studied a great number of books, I have not been able to learn his exact curriculum.
  - 25 See Obrien 1971.
  - 26 Interview with Muhammad Lamin Bah, Serrekunda, The Gambia, February 2003.
  - 27 The interviewee could not establish the name of the French Commissioner nor the dates for this incident. Nonetheless, the story (whether accurate or not) serves to legitimize the Shaykh's power as this was regarded as one of his first known miracles.
  - 28 Interview with Alhagi Muhammad Lamin Bah, Serrekunda, The Gambia, February, 2003. Alhagi is the Gambian usage for Al-Hajj, Al-Haji, etc.; the honorific term means that the individual has completed the pilgrimage to Mecca.
  - 29 Interview with Alhagi Muhammad Lamin Bah, serrekunda, The Gambia. Such narrations needs to be treated with skepticism as the story looks more like an "invented tradition" in which Mass Kah's supernatural power is being exalted. It could also be that the informant is aware of an actual incident relating to French colonial subjects. For example, the brutality of some French colonial representatives toward clerics was a concern even for the French colonial government. Robinson states, "In the 1880s, the ministry of colonies was critical of its representatives and had to recall one of its most forceful governors for excessive use of authority." See Robinson 1999, p. 201.
  - 30 Sanneh 1997, p. 78.
  - 31 Muhammad Lamin Bah and Masohna Kah noted that the Shaykh moved to Barthurst (Banjul-The Gambia) in the same year Sait Matti, a militant religious leader sought refuge in Bajul in 1887. The Shaykh spent a few years in Banjul and then went to establish Medina.
  - 32 This report shows yearly gaps and lack of precise information of who this Mandingo teacher was. However this information is necessary to show evidence that Mass Kah and many clerics had flourishing schools.

- 33 National Archives of The Gambia. National Records Service. File ARP32/33, p 37. Note the discrepancy in which the files are catalogued.
- 34 Joof 1996, pp. 113-14.
- 35 Wright 2004, p. 188.
- 36 Interview with Muhammad Lamin Bah., Serrekunda, the Gambia, February, 2003. In a separate interview with Dr. Jah Snr., in August 2009, he also informed me of this visit.
- 37 For more on Umar Tal's role in Islam see Robinson 1985. Also, for more on the claims that Mass Kah met all these individuals see my interviews with Muhammad Lamin Bah. Bah persistently claims that Mass Kah met Bamba, Maba, and Sait Matti at different times in his life. However, if his meeting with Umar had ever taken place, the Shaykh must have been very young and perhaps still a student, because by Robinson's reckoning, Al-Hajj Umar embarked on his Senegambian journey in 1846 when Mass Kah was twenty.
- 38 Interview with Alhagi Muhammed Lamin Bah, Serrekunda, The Gambia, February, 2003.
- 39 For the story of Al-Hajj Salim, see Sanneh 1976.
- 40 Mass Kah stood within the Tijaniyya tradition. However, his son, Seringe Alieu Kah died as a Nyassene. In fact, it is said that Alieu Kah's decision to become Nyassene (the Tijaniyya branch based in Kaolack founded by Abdoulai Niass, 1844-1922) led to the "breakaway" of the village of Medina. Alieu Kah's brother, Serigne Modou was noted to have been upset with Alieu Kah's decision and therefore decided to move out of Medina Seringe Mass to establish Medina Darou, few meters from Medina.
- 41 The Qadiriya came to prominence with the scholar Sidi al Mukhtar al-Kunti (1729-1811) and was brought to Senegal from Mauritania by Muhammad al-Fadil (d.1869) and Shaik Sidya al-Kabir (d.1868). The Wolof states of Kayor and Walo became adherents of the Qadiriya by the first half of the nineteenth century. The Tijaniya was founded by Ahmad Tijani (1737-1815) but became widespread in West Africa later in the nineteenth century. The spread of the Tijaniya has been associated with the warrior scholars of Tukolor origin such as Al-Hajj Umar Tall (1794-1864), Maba Diakhou (1809-1867), and the Wolof cleric Al Hajj Malick Sy (1855-1922) of Tivouane (O'Brien, 1971; Ryan 2000).
- 42 See Ryan 2000, p. 208. Ryan has detailed the mystical theology of Tijaniyya Sufism based on three elements that flow from one another like water channeled from a higher to a lower level. The first is the veneration of Muhammad, not so much as the finite "seal of the prophets" (Quran 33: 40), but as *al-haqiqat al-muhammadiyah* (the essence of Muhammad), as the fountainhead from whom all created things derive. The second element centers on this veneration of Muhammad as specified for the whole of the Tijaniyya by the saintly influence of Ahmad al-Tijani who claimed for himself the title of *qutb al-aqtab* (the supreme pole of sainthood) or *khatm al-awliya* (the seal of saints), the overflowing source of all human closeness both to God and to Muhammad, not only for his own generation but for all generations before and after. The third element often (but not always) involves attachment to and reverence for a mystical propagandist (*muqaddam*) in the Tijaniyya who channels the spiritual benefits to be derived from Ahmad al-Tijani, the Prophet Muhammad and God to the individual member.

- 43 O'Brien (1971) says that a Sufi *tariqa* is organized by the descendants of a holy man, where the followers hope to attain paradise through the special holiness and redeeming power of their religious guides.
- 44 Hoffman 1995, p. 196.
- 45 All the songs I have collected are composed by Qadi Aliou Saho. In fact, Qadi Saho is named after Aliou Kah, Mass Kah's first son who in turn was the Qadi's teacher. The circumstances of my research on Mass Kah came from my interest in collecting and documenting oral histories of non Mandinka communities and individuals in The Gambia when I was the Director of research at the Oral History Division. Most of the data in the oral history collection is centralized on the Mandinka, a situation that I wanted to address by expanding the collection on non Mandinkas. During my interviews, I asked my informants to tell me as much as possible of what they know about Mass Kah and then I made follow up questions. I selected the informants based on informal contacts.
- 46 Baldick 1989, p. 67.
- 47 *Daira* is a religious school formed around a shaykh. Sometimes the *daira* can be in honor of a shaykh and hence is named after him. Here followers study the Quran, prayer rituals, and the deeds of the shaykh.
- 48 Searing 2002, p. 95.
- 49 Usually it is the bard who does this performance. However, it is not uncommon for non-bards to perform, especially qualified *talibes*/students or trusted followers.
- 50 For detailed information on miracles, see Schimmel 1985.
- 51 Salih 1992, pp. 125-26.
- 52 In Islamic "tradition," only prophets performed miracles (*mujizat*). Miracles perform by saints (*karamat*/charisma) or *manaqab*/heroic deeds. See Schimmel Annemarie, 2004.
- 53 Willis 1989, p. 87. Muhammad al-Ghali was the shaykh of Al-Hajj Umar in Mecca, who introduced him to the Tijaniyya order.
- 54 See O'Brien 1971.
- 55 For more on the association of trees with jinns, see Wright 1980. Trees features frequently as sites of *Jalang* (shrines) during the process of state formation in Niimi (where Medina is located).
- 56 Hoffman 1995, p. 206.
- 57 Interview with Alhagi Muhammad Lamin Bah, February, 2003
- 58 Interview with Qadi Aliou Saho, March, 2003.
- 59 This is a formula that is recited a number of times and or repeatedly.
- 60 Interview with Alkalo of Jeshwang, Oct, 2005.
- 61 Woodward 2000, p. 24.
- 62 For a detailed description of this concept, see Hermansen 1988, pp. 18, 163-82.

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