
Contesting Alinesitoué Diatta: The polyphony of prophetic discourses in Boubacar Boris Diop's *Les tambours de la mémoire*

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ABSTRACT

Alinesitoué Diatta is a prophetess within the Awasena religion, an indigenous religion from Casamance, Senegal. However, nowadays, her prophetic identity is less known than her image as a national hero, specifically as a Senegalese freedom fighter. This article examines the representation of Alinesitoué Diatta through the character Johanna Simentho in Boubacar Boris Diop's novel *Les Tambours de la Mémoire* (1987). It aims to explore whether the novel revives the prophetic narrative of Alinesitoué Diatta or merely continues her political image constructed by the Senegalese government. Moreover, this article analyzes the relation between the character's representation and the narrative contestation about her that occurred in Senegal during 1980s. This research uses Mikhaïl Bakhtin's polyphony theory, Stephen Greenblatt's new historicism, and Max Weber's prophetic theory to examine these topics. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, we collected primary data consisting of novel quotations about the character Johanna Simentho and compared them with Alinesitoué Diatta's historical narrative. This research found that the use of polyphonic narratives in the novel represents the narrative contestation over Alinesitoué Diatta by the Senegalese government, FCS, and Kabrousse villagers. Furthermore, the article also found that the novel has revived Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic narrative even though this prophetic representation intertwines with a masculine narrative depicting her as “*Yo jigeen ci mun goor*” or “a woman who is stronger than men”.

Keywords: Alinesitoué Diatta, polyphony, nationalism, prophetic narrative, masculinity

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INTRODUCTION

Alinesitoué Diatta is widely acknowledged as a prominent national heroine in Senegal today. Born in the 1920s, she is generally known as the woman who mobilized the indigenous of Casamance, a region in Southern Senegal, against the French colonial regime during the 1940s (Tolliver-Diallo, 2005). These days, it is not difficult to find Alinesitoué Diatta's “presence” since her legacy still resonates throughout modern-day Senegal, where she is commemorated through monuments, statues, street names, and cityscapes, much like other national heroes worldwide. As an homage, the Senegalese government even assigned her name to a ferry that crosses the Atlantic Ocean from Ziguinchor to Dakar to conduct embarkation and debarkation operations (Aline Sitoé Datta succède au Joola, 2012).

However, her image as a national hero has not been long established. This image was only constructed by the Senegalese government in the Abdou Diouf era during the 1980s. This phenomenon began with the revival of a political group called *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance* (MFDC) in 1982, whose aim was to detach the Casamance region from Senegal. Her name was revived by the president of the MFDC, Abbot Augustin Diamacoune Senghor, as a symbol of the unity and resistance of the Casamance people. In his speeches, he called this figure the Jeanne d'Arc of Casamance who vehemently led the armed resistance against the French colonial government (Amnesty International Report 1997 - Senegal, | Refworld, n.d). In brief, he constructed Alinesitoué Diatta as the symbol of Diola's revival and the warrior of Casamance's independence (Tolliver-Diallo, 2005: 341).

As an impact of this discourse, Alinesitoué Diatta's name regained public attention and attracted many Casamance people to show their support for MFDC. However, it frustrated President Abdou

Diouf's regime as they regarded MFDC as a separatist movement. As a response, the regime attempted a counter-maneuver by constructing its own narrative about Alinesitoué Diatta that directly opposed the MFDC's version. This attempt started with Diouf's political pledge to make Alinesitoué Diatta a Senegalese heroine, which prompted him to dispatch a team of researchers to Mali in 1983 to investigate the motives behind her banishment to Timbuktu by colonial authority. The team returned from the investigation by bringing her death certificate stating that she died of scabies in prison on May 22, 1944. Although its validity has been widely doubted, this investigation has led the President to officially recognize her as a national hero. In his inaugural speech, he commended Alinesitoué Diatta as an anti-colonial warrior who gave her life to protect the honor, freedom, and dignity of Senegal. In short, the government has transformed the discourse on Alinesitoué Diatta from a symbol of Casamance independence to a figure of Senegalese independence (Tolliver-Diallo, 2005)

The conflict between the government and the MFDC over Alinesitoué Diatta's narrative was intense until the MFDC weakened in the 1990s. This happened as the government mobilized what Althusser called the "Repressive State Apparatus" (RSA) to suppress the MFDC. Facing repression, the MFDC rifted in 1991 into two parties, the Southern Front and the Northern Front. The Northern Front, led by Sidy Baji, opted for a ceasefire with the government, while the Southern Front continued its resistance (Foucher, 2019). Since then, Alinesitoué Diatta's narrative as a symbol of the Casamance rebellion has also gradually faded. This narrative further disappeared due to the Abdou Diouf regime, which deployed its Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to construct the nationalist narrative on Alinesitoué Diatta—especially through the communication and the cultural ISA (Althusser, 2001). For instance, in 1988, they created a documentary movie about her that was broadcast on all national television stations. The documentary depicted her as a woman who led the physical resistance against the French colonial troops and advocated for Senegalese unity (Tolliver-Diallo, 2005). They also sponsored multiple artists to produce works related to her. In 1993, Marouba Fall, a Senegalese novelist and playwright from Dakar, wrote a theater script entitled *La dame de Kabrousse*, portraying this figure as a woman who spoke out for the independence of Senegal (Fall, 2005; Tolliver-Diallo, 2005). Additionally, they sponsored Alioune Kasse, a singer from Dakar, to compose a song entitled *Alinesitoué Diatta*. The song contains the lyric "*djigen bu men gor*," or "*a woman who is stronger than a man*," which has become Alinesitoué Diatta's most famous nickname to this day (Stars, 1992; Tolliver-Diallo, 2005: 340). Nowadays, she is recognized as one of the most influential figures in the Senegalese feminist movement (Kane and Kane, 2018). However, her image as a strong woman is still deeply attached to her name, evident when Sousou and Maher Cissoko, a musician couple from Sweden and Senegal, released their single "*Aline Sitoé Diatta*" in 2016 which included once again the lyric "*djigen bu men gor*" (Cissoko, 2016).

Several intellectuals have criticized the state's narrative version of Alinesitoué Diatta. Tolliver Diallo, a researcher from the University of Washington in St. Louis, criticized the nickname "*djigen bu men gor*" for being overly masculine. She contended that this narrative has aligned Alinesitoué Diatta with Senegalese patriarchal standards that revere physical strength as an essential value. In fact, according to her, Alinesitoué Diatta had never physically resisted the French colonial regime. She was just a woman who was believed to have magical powers to bring down rain by the Casamance people (Tolliver-Diallo, 2005).

Furthermore, Robert M. Baum, a researcher at Dartmouth College, argued that this narrative was not only masculine but also obscured her status as the prophetess of the Awasena religion, an indigenous religion of the Diola tribe. According to Baum, Alinesitoué Diatta was regarded by the Diola tribe, especially those living in Kabrousse village, her birthplace, as the prophetess of their religion. Her prophetic identity began during the early 1940s when she received a revelation from Emitai, the Almighty of the Awasena faith, to help the Casamance people suffering under French colonization. As a note, the Awasena religion has had a rich prophetic tradition as they already had 15 prophets during the pre-colonial era (Baum, 2016). This long prophetic tradition also allowed her prophetic status to be recognized by many communities. In addition, her prophethood is also related to the matrilineal Diola tradition, which places women as important agents in economic, political, and religious spheres (Stiftung, 2013).

During her prophetic journey, Alinesitoué Diatta declared that she was sent by Emitai to propagate certain prophetic teachings. One of her teachings was to oblige her adherents to consume only Casamance's native rice, *Oryza glaberima*. This prophetic teaching clashed with the colonial policy,

which promoted the planting of *Oryza sativa*, an imported rice variety from Southeast Asia. As a result, they considered her to have provoked the indigenous to oppose the colonial program. However, she actually never advocated physical resistance or direct war against France. Nevertheless, the colonial regime arrested her in 1943 and exiled her to Mali, where she died of scabies in prison a year later. After that, the French colonial regime censored her name and punished any people who mentioned it. As a result, her name was buried for decades in Senegalese history until it suddenly resurfaced after the conflict between the Senegalese government and the MFDC as explained above (Baum, 2016; Tolliver-Diallo, 2005).

Amidst the narrative contestation over her portrayal, a Senegalese writer named Boubacar Boris Diop published a novel titled *Les tambours de la mémoire* (1987) that featured a character named Johanna Simentho, who shared many similarities with Alinesitoué Diatta (Diop, 1987). Boris Diop is a writer, essayist, and journalist born in Dakar on October 26, 1946. He is renowned for his writing style, which expertly combines fictional and historical elements. He also always uses multiple narrators to tell his stories. This writing aesthetic is related to his skepticism towards the construction of collective memory, which he believes is often controlled by one dominant narrative, especially those constructed by power. Therefore, Boris Diop asserts that literature should continually interrogate the validity of history (Nissim, 2009; Sarr, 2010; Seck, 2018). In *Les Tambours de la Mémoire*, Boris Diop chronicles a post-independence African country during the 1980s suffering from poverty and state violence under the military dictatorship regime of Major Adelezo. Amid the dire situation, Fadel, a young man from Dakar, was obsessed with tracing an enigmatic female character called Johanna Simentho.

At the beginning of the novel, Johanna Simentho is described as a woman who lived during the colonial era and fought against French domination in the 1940s. Later, the character was identified as having the real name “Aline Sitooye Jaata” (Diop, 1987). This name similarity indicates that the fictional character has an extratextual reference to the real historical figure, Alinesitoué Diatta. Moreover, a quotation in the novel describing Johanna Simentho also refers and copies almost entire excerpts from the book *Genèse du pouvoir charismatique en basse Casamance* (1969) by Jean Girard—one of the early researchers of Alinesitoué Diatta—as seen in the following quote:

C’était une femme de constitution assez faible et boiteuse depuis un accident de jeunesse qui avait provoqué une luxation du genou droit. Elle était cependant fort jolie femme, âgée de vingt-cinq ans environ, avait le teint clair, le geste élégant et la parole facile (Girard, 1969: 59; Sarr, 2010: 251; Diop, 1987:59-60).

She was a woman with a rather frail body and was paralyzed due to an accident in her youth that led to the dislocation of her right knee. Nevertheless, she was a beautiful woman, about twenty-five years old, with fair skin, graceful gestures, and a calm manner of speaking.

On the other hand, the narration about Johanna Simentho in the novel is particularly complex. This complexity stems from the use of the polyphonic narrative technique, a literary storytelling style that employs the voices of multiple narrators to describe a certain phenomenon. As Bakhtin wrote in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984), a polyphonic novel allows many characters to express their own perspectives on certain phenomenon, which leads to a fragmented narrative structure. This type of novel does not use the omniscient single narrator commonly found in classical literature. Instead, it employs more secondary narrators who might dialog, complement, or contradict each other. Furthermore, a polyphonic novel can generate dialogic opposition that often ends with no solution or clarity. In Bakhtin’s perspective, polyphonic novel produces “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.” (Bakhtine, 1970:6)

In *Les Tambours de la Mémoire*, Boris Diop employs this polyphonic style to portray Johanna Simentho’s character. This technique allows numerous characters to present their own version of Johanna Simentho. The use of this polyphony technique makes it difficult for the reader to understand who is the true Johanna Simentho. However, this article argues that this complexity of the narrative is an allegory for the discourse contestation about Alinesitoué Diatta that occurred in Senegal during 1980s.

As written above, during the 1980s in Senegal, various groups attempted to construct a discourse on Alinesitoué Diatta to suit their respective interests. The Senegalese government sought to establish her as a nationalist hero, while the MFDC wanted to make her a symbol of the Casamance rebellion. There was also a leftist activist movement known as the *Front Culturel Sénégalais* (FCS) that published a pamphlet and introduced her as a revolutionary anti-colonialist figure with Marxist views. In addition, there was also a narrative version from the Kabrousse villagers, Alinesitoué Diatta's birthplace, perceiving her as a prophet of the Awasena religion. However, this prophetic narrative was the most marginalized compared to other more political narratives.

Based on this problem, this article investigates the relation between Johanna Simentho's representation in the novel and the phenomenon of narrative contestation about Alinesitoué Diatta in Senegal history. The questions to be addressed include which discourse is dominant in the representation of Johanna Simentho? Does Johanna Simentho represent the prophetic narrative of Alinesitoué Diatta or simply reiterate the state political narrative that has developed dominantly in society today?

This article used several theories to examine the problem, including the polyphony narrative theory, new historicism, and Max Weber's prophetic theory. The main theory is Mikhaïl Bakhtin's polyphony theory, as elaborated above. Additionally, this article drew on Stephen Greenblatt's new historicism theory, which provides a methodology for literary research involving parallel readings of literary and non-literary texts. This theory is derived from Greenblatt's idea that the interaction between literature and history is reciprocal. In other words, if literature can influence history, history can also influence literature (Greenblatt, 1980).

This argument also echoes the thoughts of several literary experts such as George Lukàcs and Oana Panaïte who have discussed the significance of literature to history (Lukàcs, 1962; Panaïte, 2019). Greenblatt himself argued that texts are interconnected networks. Hence, new historicism allows for interdisciplinary research to bridge the gaps between literature, history, art, anthropology, economics, and other fields. By analyzing the connection among multiple texts, new historicism provides a framework to investigate the interrelation between literature, culture, and power while tracing the traces of those censored throughout history (Greenblatt, 1980). Greenblatt compiled the new historicism research method by linking three things: the internal text, the author's biography, and the sociocultural context when the work was written, as seen in the following quote:

"... (literature) functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of these concrete behaviors of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes..." (Greenblatt, 1980: 4)

Furthermore, this article also employs Max Weber's prophetic theory to identify Johanna Simentho and Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic status. According to Max Weber, a prophet is a person who serves as a bridge between God and the society in which he or she lives (Weber, 2013). There are at least three main dimensions that make a person to be called and recognized as a prophet. The first, and most common characteristic, is having supernatural powers. This character also echoes André Neher's perspective in *Prophets and Prophecy: The Essence of Prophecy* (1955), where he defines prophets as human beings who experience "*tout le vaste champ d'expériences humaines qui s'étend de la magie à la mystique* (every kind of human experience, from magic to mysticism)" (Neher, 2004). However, according to Weber, this dimension is the most tertiary since the magical powers were nothing special in ancient times. No need to be a prophet, shamans and witches also had superhuman powers. Furthermore, Weber even emphasizes that a prophet can be trusted by thousands or even millions of people primarily not because of their mystical powers, but rather their second and third dimensions, namely charismatic and revolutionary characters (Weber, 2013; Panuntun, 2024).

A prophet must be a charismatic figure. In this context, charisma refers to virtuous morals and certain individual qualities, such as physical traits or authority, that enable them to give commandments to others. As for the last dimension, and the most important one, it is the revolutionary dimension. A prophet can only gain a large follower if they descend in a chaotic period and offer certain prophetic teachings that give hope for the downfall of the evil forces in power. It is also this revolutionary dimension that makes a prophet usually claim to have a revelation from God to deliver a certain message of enlightenment that leads people to the "right" path (Weber, 2013).

Those characteristics can be found in the main prophetic figures in the Abrahamic religions, such as Moses in Judaism, Jesus Christ in Catholicism, and Muhammad in Islam. In the context of Islam, Muslims even believe that a charismatic figure like Muhammad is the last prophet. He is *un absolu théologique* (a theological absolute) who has ended the prophetic phenomenon in the world. However, the prophetic phenomenon has never ended since it exists in various cultures, not only Abrahamic religions. One place where the prophetic phenomenon has flourished is Africa. The prophetic phenomenon in Africa only gained attention in the academic sphere after George Balandier, a French sociologist and anthropologist, studied this phenomenon (Petarca, 2011). His article *Messianismes et nationalismes en Afrique noire* (1953) explored the phenomenon of the emergence of many prophets in Africa during the colonial era. For instance, it discusses the rise of André Matsoua, a Congolese man who professed to have received a revelation from Jesus to combat racial oppression endured by black people under white domination. His resistance subsequently triggered a surge of anti-colonial protests in Congo, which was later institutionalized as a black church known as the Matsouanism Movement (Balandier, 1953). André Matsoua's story has also inspired the writing of *Le feu des origines*, a novel by Emmanuel Boundzéli Dongala, which tells the story of Congo's struggle against French colonialism (Dongala, 2018). Balandier's analysis is significant since it has challenged the unfavorable perception of the African prophetic phenomenon, which was closely associated with negative connotations such as witches or lunatics during the colonial period. Their appropriation of Christian teachings was also usually deemed heretical. However, since Balandier's work, African prophets have been associated with decolonization.

Nevertheless, Balandier's study has drawn some criticism. N.A. Sokro in, *Remarques sur Le Prophétisme et Le Messianisme Africains* (1979), argues that the concept of prophethood existed in Africa long before European colonialism. He mentions numerous folklore characters from Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon with similar positions to prophets in Abrahamic religions, namely a powerful figure who communicates with God and aims to save his people from evil forces (Sokro, 1979). In addition, Robert M. Baum offers a similar view to Sokro after examining the prophetic concept in the Awasena religion. Baum states that the Awasena religion had a prophetic system long before European colonialism. Its adherents still believe in the rise of new prophets to this day (Baum and Robinson, 1992).

This research fills the gap of several previous academic studies on either *Les tambours de la mémoire* or Alinesitoué Diatta. In the field of literature, Fodé Sarr's dissertation, *Histoire, fiction et mémoire dans l'œuvre de Boubacar Boris Diop* (2010), has discussed the correlation between the novel and the history of Alinesitoué Diatta. This dissertation revealed the intertextuality between this novel and Jean Girard's history book about Alinesitoué Diatta. Christiane Ndiaye in *De l'authenticité et des mensonges chez Boubacar Boris Diop* (2001) also discusses the technique of blending fictional and historical narratives in Boris Diop's work, which she describes as a *nouveau baroque* aesthetic writing style. In her other article, *Monstres, Princesses et Justicières: du Féminin pluriel chez Boubacar Boris Diop*, Ndiaye examines the characteristics of female heroines in Boris Diop's novels (Ndiaye, 2019: 57-72). In the article, she concludes that the female characters in his universe such as Johanna Simentho are enigmatic figures characterized by their position at the center but also the periphery of the story. The three academic articles have analyzed the sociological and aesthetic aspects of the novel. Nevertheless, none of them have conducted a critical analysis regarding the depiction of Johanna Simentho's prophetic dimension and its relationship to Alinesitoué Diatta.

Next, several gender studies-themed articles have discussed Alinesitoué Diatta's relevance to the development of the feminist movement in Senegal. In *Women Senegal's Politics and Society and Women's Agency and Collective Action: Peace Politics in the Casamance*, Stiftung mentions her as one of the central figures in the Senegalese feminist movement. The article places Alinesitoué Diatta alongside Queen Ndieumbeur Mbodj and Queen Ndate Yalla from the colonial era, and Madior Boye, Senegal's former prime minister in the early 2000s (Stiftung, 2013:27). Additionally, Kane, in *The Origins of the Feminist Movement in Senegal: A Social History of the Pioneering Yewwu-Yewwi*, acknowledges Alinesitoué Diatta as a figure who inspired the Yewwu-Yewwi, a Senegalese radical feminist movement that emerged in the mid-1980s (Kane and Kane, 2018).

Moreover, this article is primarily inspired by the writings of Wilmetta J, Tolliver-Diallo and Robert M. Baum that has been mentioned before. Tolliver-Diallo's writing has opened the debate on Alinesitoué Diatta's heroic narrative. Meanwhile, Baum's writings have provided a more detailed and

in-depth investigation of Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic journey. Their writings serve as the main references for comparing the representation of Alinesitoué Diatta in *Les tambours de la mémoire* with her historical biography. Additionally, this article aims to fill the gap in their writings that have not rigorously examined the representation of Alinesitoué Diatta in Boubacar Boris Diop's novel, *Les tambours de la mémoire*.

METHOD

The material object of this research is the novel *Les tambours de la mémoire* by Boubacar Boris Diop. This research employed a qualitative descriptive method, a research procedure based on descriptive data in the forms of writings or statements related to research question. This method is also combined with the new historicism method that links literary text with historical text to examine how literature offers a certain discourse in viewing history. The initial step involved a heuristic and hermeneutic reading of the novel. The subsequent step was to create data cards containing the novel's structural elements (characters, characterizations, place and time settings, and vocalization) to aid the research process. We then collected all the citations concerning Johanna Simentho and organized them based on the characters who narrated them. Those citations were then analyzed and compared with historical writings about Alinesitoué Diatta, especially those related to the narrative contestation over her during the Casamance conflict. In the last step, we look for common threads that connect those various perspectives to reveal how the novel actually constructs the narrative of Alinesitoué Diatta.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Through a new-historicism reading that intertwines the novel's polyphonic narrative with the history of Senegal, this article found that the novel's polyphonic narrative technique serves to illustrate the narrative contestation about Alinesitoué Diatta that took place in Senegal during the 1980s. This means that the complex narrative form in the novel is a strategy to describe the same complex historical phenomena of that time. If contextualized with the period of its writing, the novel was an attempt to formulate the narrative of Alinesitoué Diatta, who remained obscure for society in that era. Furthermore, in relation to its author, this multivocal storytelling style reflects Boubacar Boris Diop's authorship pledge that requires a fiction to trigger people's awareness about the necessity of questioning historical truths.

This polyphonic narrative operates firstly through the division of narrators between two characters, Ismaïla and Ndella, who alternate as first-person narrators throughout chapters 1-6 of the novel. Their statements that indicate their ignorance of Johanna Simentho's identity serve to illustrate the collective amnesia of Senegalese society towards any form of memory related to Alinesitoué Diatta which is a result of the colonial authority's repression.

Subsequently, the polyphonic narrative becomes more complex after the two narrators agree in chapter six to jointly compose a novel that recounts the trajectory of Fadel Sarr in finding the truth about Johanna Simentho. Their writing then becomes a metanovel with the same title, *Les tambours de la mémoire*, which is presented in chapters 7-29 and narrated by an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator. It is this narrator who then distributes the narration to many secondary characters who further represent Johanna Simentho based on their own version. Not only through some characters, the narrator also relies occasionally the narration to some documents, letters, or theater scripts, which are embedded to depict Johanna Simentho from more diverse perspectives.

Based on the analysis of these second-level polyphonic narrative, this article found that Madicke Sarr's voice represents the Senegalese government at that time, which still saw Alinesitoué Diatta as a threat rather than a hero. This paranoid perspective was a sporadic reaction after the emergence of the MFDC as Casamance's pro-independence group, which used Alinesitoué Diatta as a symbol of their rebellion. Furthermore, a pamphlet embedded by the narrator in chapter eight represents the viewpoint of a leftist movement called FCS that perceived Alinesitoué Diatta as a marxist figure. In addition, the voice of Jacques Joseph Niakoly and a theater script embedded in chapter 27 represent the perspective of the indigenous of Kabrousse village, Alinesitoué Diatta's birthplace, who believed that Alinesitoué Diatta was the prophetess and rice goddess of their local religion, Awasena. With this prophetic perspective dominating throughout the novel, this article concluded that the novel was an attempt to revive Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic narrative, which was less recognized than other more political

narratives. However, this prophetic narrative is still intertwined with an overly masculine portrayal of Alinesitoué Diatta, which ironically echoes the state-driven narrative.

Discussion

Comparing the Narrative Contestation of Johanna Simentho and Alinesitoué Diatta

A polyphonic narrative on Johanna Simentho is apparent from the beginning of the novel. In the first six chapters, there are two characters, Ndella and Ismaïla, who take turns as the main narrator. Ndella called Johanna Simentho "*une reine au fond si incertaine* (a queen of uncertain origin)" (Diop, 1987), while Ismaïla labeled her as "*une reine presque imaginaire* (an almost imaginary queen)" (Diop, 1987). Ismaïla even considered Johanna Simentho as a figment of Fadel's imagination as an escape from his personal issues:

Pour moi, il ne faisait aucun doute que Fadel avait imaginé toute cette histoire compliquée pour justifier ses somptueux états d'âme de fils de milliardaire oisif et pas trop bête (Diop, 1987:9).

For me, there was no doubt that Fadel had imagined all this complicated story to justify his mood as the son of an idle and not too stupid billionaire.

If linked to the reality of Senegal's history, the two characters' skepticism on the existence of Johanna Simentho represents actually the collective amnesia of Senegalese society in the 1980s towards Alinesitoué Diatta. As mentioned in the introduction, this collective amnesia was caused by the burial of her memory by the colonial regime, which extended to the regime of Léopold Sedar Senghor. Ndella and Ismaïla represent most Senegalese at the time who have never heard of Alinesitoué Diatta. It can be seen from their backgrounds, which are depicted as Dakar middle-class who only care about their own business. Ndella is a high school math teacher, while Ismaïla is a general director in a Dakar local company. The novel portrays them as a couple who never got involved and interested in politics. Their ignorance on Johanna Simentho illustrates the impact of the erasure of the collective memory about Alinesitoué Diatta by the authorities. Although it was only forty years after her death, young people in the heart of the capital no longer know who she is.

The polyphonic narrative in the novel then branches out into more complex after Ndella and Ismaïla found a mysterious package from Fadel Sarr in chapter 6. From this package containing voluminous documents, they then decided to write together a novel that chronicles Fadel Sarr's journey and investigation of Johanna Simentho. This metanovel, which runs from chapters 7 to 29, moves then through the voice of an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator who distributes the narration to a myriad of characters who narrates their respective versions of Johanna Simentho (Genette, G, 1972).

This omniscient narrator, for instance, gives voice to several characters who narrate Johanna Simentho as a symbol of hostility towards the state. This perspective is conveyed by Madické Sarr, the right-hand man of Major Adélézo - the dictator and novel's main antagonist. Sarr described Johanna Simentho in the following words:

Johanna n'est que le dernier prétexte que les ennemis du major Adelezo, Bienfaiteur de la Patrie, ont trouvé pour troubler l'ordre républicain (Diop, 1987: 115).

Johanna was just a pretext invented by the enemies of Major Adelezo, the Benefactor of the Fatherland, to destabilize the order of the republic.

According to Madické Sarr, Johanna Simentho was a fictional character concocted by Major Adelezo's opposition to overthrow him. This belief reflects those of the Senegalese political elite in the early 1980s about Alinesitoué Diatta. At that time, they did not yet regard her as a national hero but rather a symbol of the rebellion against the state (Baum, 2016).

The polyphonic style also serves to give voice to a communist youth group based in Dakar that represented Johanna Simentho with a very different point of view to that of the authority. In the novel, this group's perspective is conveyed through a pamphlet embedded by the omniscient narrator in chapter 8. One paragraph of the pamphlet reads as follows:

A l'intrépide qui s'offrit en captivité pour le seul bien de son peuple, nous disons : le flambeau est tombé entre de bonnes mains, nos mains puissantes et sûres, les mains des briseurs de toutes chaînes. Car aujourd'hui que le prolétariat s'est dressé, debout, tel ce mât inébranlable qui ose défier la mer houleuse, aujourd'hui qu'il s'arme de son idéologie scientifique – le marxisme-léninisme et la Pensée-Mao-Zedong – notre résistance à coup sûr vaincra (Diop, 1987: 60).

To the brave woman who sacrificed herself in captivity for the sole good of her people, we say: the torch has fallen into the right hands, our powerful and sure hands, the hands of the breakers of all chains. Now that the proletariat has stood upright, like that unshakeable mast that dares to defy the stormy sea, now that the proletariat is armed with its scientific ideology - Marxism-Leninism and Mao-Zedong Thought - our resistance will surely win.

As shown in the quote above, Johanna Simentho was portrayed as a defender of the poor peasants against the French colonialists. She was a brave woman who was aware of class struggles in the context of Marxism—the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. She was even linked with the ideologies of Mao Zedong, the Chinese Marxist revolutionary. Concerning extratextual references, the pamphlet bears similarities to one written by the FCS (*Front Culturel Sénégalais*), a leftist artists' movement based in Dakar in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1976, the FCS published a piece on “Aliin Sitooye Diatta” which they described as a Marxist-minded anticolonial woman for armed resistance to colonial authority (Baum, 2016)

The polyphonic style in the novel unfortunately does not give a voice to a character that represents the MFDC perspective. The novel only implicitly narrates in chapter 3 an underground movement from Wissombo that has many similarities with the MFDC. In the novel, this movement was described as follows:

La malveillance politique s'en était mêlée et des opposants minoritaires et bruyants, lâchement tapis dans l'ombre, avaient vite fait d'appeler les populations à la révolte. Résultat : presque chaque année des troubles très graves au sud-est du pays, dans le District no 8 correspondant pour l'essentiel à l'ancien royaume de Wissombo (Diop, 1987: 28).

The political resentment of the noisy minor opposition, cowards hiding in the shadows, quickly mobilized the population to rebel. As a result, there were serious disturbances almost every year in the southeast region of the country, in District Number 8, which is essentially the former kingdom of Wissombo.

The above quote describes a rebel movement from Wissombo that often “*se servir du nom de Johanna pour semer le désordre* (used Johanna's name to cause chaos)” (Diop, 1987). The above passage drew many similarities to the actions of the MFDC. Firstly, both groups conducted guerrilla warfare and armed resistance against the government (Stam, 2009). Secondly, they use the name of a charismatic female figure as their symbol of regional unity, if the Wissombo movement ordained Johanna Simentho, the MFDC named Alinesitoué Diatta. In addition, both used regional identity as the basis of their struggle, as the clandestine group in the novel comprised people from Wissombo, and the MFDC consisted of people from Casamance.

Up to this point, this article has found that the polyphonic narrative in *Les Tambours de la Mémoire* has actually illustrated the complexity of the discourse on Alinesitoué Diatta in Senegal during 1980s. The novel presents various perspectives, ranging from civilians, those of the ruling party, and the leftist movement FCS. The novel also illustrates, albeit slightly, the MFDC's view over Alinesitoué Diatta as a rebellious figure from Casamance.

Prophetic Discours and Masculinity

The polyphonic narrative in this novel also serves to revive Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic narrative. This is evident in the voices of all the characters originating from Wissombo, Johanna Simentho's birth village, who perceived her as a prophetic figure. Their perspective represents that of the Kabrousse people who still regard Alinesitoué Diatta as their prophetess to this day.

In the novel, there are four characters from Wissombo namely Jacques Joseph Niakoly, Boureïma the Blind, Sinkélo, and Doumbouya. All these characters basically recognize Johanna Simentho's prophetic status, including Jacques Joseph Niakoly, one of the main antagonists.

In the novel, Jacques Joseph Niakoly was a police commissioner who supported the French colonial regime and Major Adelezo's dictatorship. It was also him who arrested, imprisoned, and tortured Fadel Sarr. In chapter 18, the omniscience narrator gives him a voice to chronicle Johanna Simentho's history for seven pages-or almost the entire chapter. In his story, he made the following description of Johanna Simentho:

Johanna se roulait par terre et prophétisait Abondance et Liberté, Justice et Fraternité, exigeait la suppression des impôts, interdisait la culture de l'arachide et du riz importé, prônait l'égalité absolue entre l'homme et la femme, instituait une nouvelle semaine de six jours ! (Diop, 1987: 140)

Johanna rolled on the floor and prophesied Abundance and Liberty, Justice and Fraternity, demanded the abolition of taxes, forbade the cultivation of groundnuts and imported rice, advocated absolute equality between men and women, instituted a new six-day working week!

The quote above, describing Johanna Simentho's first experience as a prophetess, is actually very similar to Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic process. According to historical records, Alinesitoué Diatta became a prophet in 1939 when she received a revelation from Emitai, The Almighty God. In the middle of a market, she rolled on the ground and suddenly declared herself a messenger of Emitai. She would become the goddess of rain and lead the people to overcome their social problems. She then prescribed several prophetic teachings, including forbidding the cultivation of Asian peanuts and rice, calling for an equitable division of field labor between men and women, and introducing the concept of *huyaye*, a type of sabbath that obliges everyone to take off work once a week for worship or family time (Baum, 2015).

This prophetic narrative can also be found through the voices of three other Wissombo characters, Sinkélo, Boureïma the Blind, and Doumbouya. Nevertheless, the polyphonic style for these characters operates with a unique strategy. In chapter 27, the omniscient narrator chose to recount a theater performance based on a script co-written by the three characters. The script tells the saga of Johanna Simentho from the perspective of Wissombo people. In the novel, the script was performed at the Wissombo annual folk festival and inserted by the omniscient narrator. The story began with the arrival of French colonialism in Wissombo. After this introduction, the meta-character of Johanna Simentho, performed by Sinkelo, entered the stage. She was primarily portrayed by the script as *la reine, Mâtresse du Monde* (the queen, the leader of the world)" (Diop, 1987: 158) who had a stunning beauty and the ability to orate confidently. The script then let this meta-character to give a speech as shown in the following quote:

Quand je quittai Wissombo, il était verdoyant et heureux. Maintenant le malheur s'est abattu sur le village, sa main de fer vous a frappés et toi, [...] Je suis revenue pour que la pluie ne passe plus au-dessus de vos champs sans s'arrêter. Je vous dis : ce sont les dieux qui m'envoient vous apporter le bonheur et la prospérité d'antan (Diop, 1987: 190)

When I left Wissombo, it was green and happy. Now misfortune has befallen the village, its iron hand has struck you and you, [...] I have returned because it never rains in your fields anymore. I tell you: the Gods have sent me to bring you happiness and prosperity.

The description of Johanna Simentho's posture and her declamation in the quote above represents at least three prophetic characters according to Max Weber. First, her beauty and oratory prowess represent the charismatic dimension. Second, her presence in the midst of French colonialism and her declaration of resistance represents the revolutionary dimension. More specifically, it also embodies Balandier's idea of the anti-colonial African prophetic dimension. Thirdly, her recognition as a direct messenger of God who will bring happiness and prosperity implies the mystical dimension. Moreover,

the script also describes her as a rain goddess who promised to return fertility after years of drought in Wissombo.

The representation above is closely related to Alinesitoué Diatta's history. In the historical record, Alinesitoué Diatta was a revolutionary and charismatic prophetess who emerged in the French colonialism era (Baum, 2016). Furthermore, she was also acknowledged as the rain goddesses of Kabrousse who had a privilege to communicate directly with Emitai (God) and *ukine* (the lesser gods). All these elements are clearly evoked by *Les tambours de la mémoire*. This conjunction of fiction and history is even more apparent considering the hymn sung by the meta-character Johanna Simentho at the end of the play:

*Ô Dieu! Ô Baliba nous vous faisons confiance
Car c'est grâce à vous que nous vivons sur cette terre
Je vous remercie devant mon fétiche
A qui vous accordez le pouvoir de nous aider
En lui permettant de vous transmettre nos prières
Voilà nos pauvres cultivateurs très contents
De recevoir cette eau très abondante
Qui a rendu la terre très humide, très facile à cultiver
Nous espérons de bonnes pépinières et de bonnes récoltes
Après les travaux chacun est si heureux
De rentrer sa petite récolte dans son grenier (Diop, 1987: 199)*

Oh God, Oh Baliba we trust in you
Thanks to You, we can live in this land
I thank You in front of the offerings
To whom You give strength to help us
You answered our prayers
The farmers are very happy
For receiving an overflow of water
Which makes the land very fertile and easy to plant
We hope for good seeds and crops
After work, everyone is happy
To bring their small harvest into their barns.

The name “Baliba” in the quotation above refers to the name a prophet in the Awasena religion. In addition, the song also describes the Awasena prophetic concept concerning the eternal connection between God and prophets in the religion.

Based on the analysis above, this article concludes that *Les Tambours de la Mémoire* has essentially revived the prophetic dimension of Alinesitoué Diatta through the figure of Johanna Simento. From the perspective of new historicism, the revival of this prophetic narrative is essential, considering that this prophetic narrative was almost unknown at the time when the novel was written. The revalorization of her prophetic status also shows the author's partiality towards marginalized history, since this prophetic narrative is not a grand narrative promoted by the state, but a narrative preserved by the indigenous of Casamance. The novel also once again reinforces Boubacar Boris Diop's position of always mixing fictional and historical elements in his novels in order to bring back historical figures who have been forgotten or misunderstood. As highlighted in his interview on xalimans.com, he emphasized that “*Quant aux figures historiques, elles ont toujours été au center de mes récits (As for historical figures, they have always been at the heart of my stories)*” (Xalime). This fusion is also not only an aesthetic strategy but a part of his authorship pledge as someone who believes that fiction can also serve to comprehend historical truths. His interview with Amanda Morris can affirm this claim, as shown in the following quote:

I didn't want them to see my novel as something fake. I wanted readers to confront reality. The story wasn't just from my imagination. I wanted people to read the book and know that everything I had to work with in the novel was true (Morris, 2011).

However, the depiction of this prophetic dimension is not profound enough. This can be seen from how Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic teachings are represented in an all-too general manner. For instance, the novel only mentions Johanna Simento's rejection towards the peanut and rice planting program, without elaborating on the context behind her rejection. An explanation of such context is crucial to illustrate the logical reasoning behind this teaching. According to Baum, Alinesitoué Diatta's rejection of the plantation colonial program was based on very empirical and reasonable reasons. She rejected the expansion of peanut farming since she knew it had the potential to appropriate lands previously used for rice cultivation. Moreover, the French colonial government had deforested Casamance for this program. The loss of green forests in Casamance meant the loss of their basic needs, such as herbal medicines, palm oil, game, timber, and thatch. Her rejection of the imported Asian rice was also because of its vulnerability to Casamance's local pests and low rainfall. For her, the forced replacement of staple varieties could potentially trigger various ecological disasters, such as the spread of new diseases and the dependency of the Casamance people on colonial markets (Baum, 2016). In essence, Alinesitoué Diatta's prophetic teachings aimed at maintaining ecological balance and food security in Diola society. It was thanks to these logical teachings, that Alinesitoué Diatta gained a large follower in Casamance and is still highly respected to this day. However, *Les tambours de la mémoire* does not delve into this aspect.

In addition, this article also found that the representation of this prophetic dimension is still mixed with a masculine narrative, evidenced by how Johanna Simento was portrayed as a warlord, which was narrated by almost all the novel's characters. In other words, although the novel uses a polyphonic narrative with diverse characters, almost all of them share the same voice in portraying her as a female war leader. Jacques-Joseph Niakoly, for example, gave the following description for Johanna Simento:

Johanna avait aussi levé sa petite armée. Wissombo était devenu une forteresse d'où, à l'abri des grands arbres de la forêt, Johanna appelait ses adeptes à chasser les Français du pays et même de toute l'Afrique! ... (Diop, 1987: 141)

Johanna had also gathered her small army. Wissombo had become a fortress, in the shadow of the great trees of the forest, Johanna called on her followers to expel the French from the country, indeed from all of Africa! ...

Furthermore, Johanna Simento in the Wissombo theatrical version was always accompanied by four warriors. She was also portrayed as a figure who planned to mobilize her followers to physically resist the French colonizers. Not only that, according to Badou, a leftist character in the novel, Johanna Simento was “*une jeune fille qui, surgie de la nuit de leur oppression* (a young woman who emerged from the darkness of their oppression)” (Diop, 1987: 58) who once told her followers, “*Voilà, les Français qui arrivent. Attention, préparez-vous. Que chacun s'arme de ton fusil* (The French have come. Be prepared. Arm yourselves with rifles!” (Diop, 1987: 53).

This masculine portrayal is problematic and inaccurate. As Tolliver-Diallo and Robert M. Baum wrote, Alinesitoué Diatta had never called for a war, let alone led, physical resistance. It is this masculine portrayal that makes *Les tambours de la mémoire* often regarded as a novel about a political figure rather than about a prophetess. Robert M. Baum also conveyed this point in his book, *West Africa's Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition*, where he wrote:

In 1990, Boubacar Boris Diop, already well known for his historical novels, wrote Les Tambours de la mémoire, a novel about a queen named Johanna Simento of the kingdom of Wissombo. Loosely modeled on the life of Alinesitoué, he even incorporates her into the novel when Johanna is mistakenly referred to as Alinesitoué. While there is an atmosphere of “fetishist religion” in the novel, Diop sees her clearly as a political figure (Baum, 2016: 180-181).

Considering Johanna Simento's representation in the novel, Baum's opinion above is understandable. However, the novel does not solely depict “atmosphere of fetishist religion” as described above. On the one hand, Johanna Simento's character has revived some of the prophetic

concepts from the Awasena religion. However, the prophet represented is still a masculine prophethood, commonly referred to as “*Yo jigeen ci mun goor* (a woman who was more than a man)”.

CONCLUSION

The polyphonic narrative in *Les tambours de la mémoire* narrates the historical complexity of the narrative contestation of Alinesitoué Diatta. The novel precisely illustrates Senegal in the early 1980s when the name Alinesitoué Diatta was still unfamiliar to most people and when it began to rise in popularity after the emergence of the MFDC, which made her a symbol of the Casamance rebellion. This historical phenomenon is then represented through the story of Johanna Simentho, which is narrated differently by the novel's characters.

After analyzing each of these representations, the article found that the novel has depicted the different perspectives of the common civilians, the Senegal government, the leftists, and the Kabrousse people towards Alinesitoué Diatta. However, the novelty of this article rested primarily on the finding that the novel has revived the prophetic narrative of Alinesitoué Diatta. This narrative is conveyed through the depiction of Johanna Simentho as a prophethood and rain goddess from the Wissombo village. Nevertheless, this prophetic narrative is still intermingled with a masculine narrative termed “*Yo jigeen ci mun goor*,” or “a woman who was more than a man.” Thus, *Les tambours de la mémoire* is paradoxical. On the one hand, it has revived the prophetic narrative of Alinesitoué Diatta believed by the Kabrousse people. Meanwhile, it also perpetuates the masculine narrative constructed by authority, which is problematic since it is historically inaccurate.

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