

Spiritual Inspirations of Africa's Urban Spaces: Between Paul Klee's Architectonics and the Contemporary Art of "Sub-Saharan" Sufi Mourides

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The study of creation deals with the ways that lead to form. It is the study of form, but emphasises the paths to form rather than the form itself. The word *Gestaltung* suggests as much. 'Theory of form' (Formlehre), as it is usually called, does not stress the principles and paths. Gestalt is in a manner of speaking a form with an undercurrent of living functions. A function made of functions. The functions are purely spiritual. A need for expression underlies them. Every expression of function must be cogently grounded. Then there will be a close bond between beginning, middle, end. The power of creativity cannot be named. It remains mysterious to the end. We cannot state its essence, but we can in certain measures, move towards its course.

Paul Klee, The Thinking Eye¹

The path to form rather than the form itself, shall be my starting point to approach the continuity between the art of Paul Klee and that of the Sufi Mourides. If the path of Klee's artistic creation is spiritual path that starts from the form and moves towards the essence of creativity, the Sufis use the term *tariqa* to denote the idea of spiritual progress "way" or a "path" that guides humans from the manifest Law to the divine Reality and to God.² According to Cynthia Becker, the Sufi artist Yelimane Fall's progression through the three schools or stages of learning reflects

¹ Paul Klee, and Jürg Spiller. 1961. Paul Klee: the thinking eye; the notebooks of Paul Klee. New York: G. Wittenborn. p 17

² Cynthia Becker, and Alex Zito. "Yelimane Fall: Senegalese Calligraphy in Action." African Arts 47, no. 2 (2014): 28-39. p 34

the Sufi concept of *tariqa*, or “path,”³ but this concept also underlies the work of other Sufi artists. I shall argue that the need for expression that underlies these purely spiritual functions of the Sufis artistic forms, is the motive that transformed the contemporary art of Sufi Mourides from its initial representational forms into more abstract forms. I shall also illustrate how approaching the folding and unfolding between the material form and its essence in the art of Sufi Mourides through the spiritual functions of what Klee suggest as a path or theory of form (*Gestaltung*), would qualify their art as expressionist art in the Deleuzian sense of the word.

Mouridism is a Sufi Muslim movement practiced by more than four million people in Senegal and thousands more in the diaspora. The movement is founded on the life and writings of its spiritual leader Amadou Bamba, who lived between 1853 and 1927, and adopted the principles of hard work, pacifism, and piety as a way of life and resistance to French colonialism as well. Mourides’ devotional art is largely founded on anthropomorphic imagery depicting Sheikh Bamba and based on a single photograph taken of him in 1913 while he was under house arrest by the French colonial administration in Djourbel, Senegal.⁴ In that sense, Mourides’ devotional art could be seen as representative par excellence. These representational images are depicted on repair-shop walls, public transportation, recycled glass, and clothing, to bring blessings, or (Baraka) in Sufis’ words. Thus, Mourides’ devotional art is interwoven into Senegalese urban spaces.

However, this paper focuses on the work of three artists who transformed Mourides representational art into Expressionist one. The contemporary images these artists create are “certainly created as high art or art with a capital “A,”” and “with a different set of issues than the

³ Ibid

⁴ Peri M. Klemm. “A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal”, *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Number 19, Summer 2004, pp. 70-73 (Article) Published by Duke University Press. p70

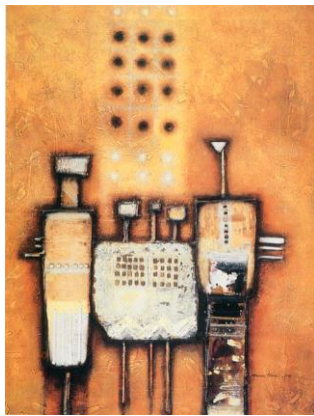
popular arts,”⁵ if I can borrow Peri M. Klemm words from her essay “A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal.” This is not to suggest a dichotomy between popular and high art of Sufi Mourides, but to show how the Sufi image is reconstructed to express a fusion of Bamba’s teachings, the attributes believed to be laden with baraka, and Sufi beliefs. In this sense, the more direct interpretations of the popular artists can be put in dialogue with the hidden meanings of the more spiritual and conceptual images of these artists. But most importantly for my purpose, these hidden meanings offer new grounds to expand the exploration of the continuity between the compositions of Paul Klee and the contemporary art of Sufi Mourides beyond its formal aspects, to reach its spiritual and intellectual common sources.

We may agree that the inward gaze of Klee’s mask-like faces anticipates that of Moussa Tine’s *A chacun son masque*; his cryptic symbols evoke a mysterious state common to Yelimane Fall’s calligraphy; and the interplay of verticality and horizontality that characterizes Klee’s work also underlies many of Viyé Diba’s compositions such as *Musical Materiality* in which Diba uses fabric swatches in a manner recalling the colorful patchwork of Mourides’ clothing. This continuity can be attributed to Klee’s exposure to the African landscape and Islamic culture during a trip to Tunisia early in his career. But the question remains: what are the spiritual and conceptual grounds that allowed those Sufis who mostly started from representational art, to reach such an expressionist state in common with Paul Klee?

I will start with Moussa Tine, who started his career painting Bamba’s eyes on minibuses to deflect the evil eye, then shifted towards abstraction after joining the national school of fine arts. Apart from the similarity between his mask-like faces and these of Klee, I would like to focus on

⁵ Ibid, p72

his expression of abstract concepts like Baraka (Blessings) in images like that of a family receiving blessings in his painting *La Famille*,⁶ but also to focus on his use of architectonics and colour schemes common to the African landscape that also recur in Klee's compositions, in transforming human bodies into abstract images.



Left, Moussa Tine, *La famille* (from the series *Les elevations*), 1998. Canvas, paint, wood, metal. Private collection. Photo: Don Cole. Right, Mosquée de Kani Kombolé. Mali



Left, Paul Klee, *Cold City*, 1921, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Berggruen Klee Collection, 1987. Right, *Untitled, fantasy architecture with three-gated propylons*, brought back from Tunisia by Paul Klee in 1914. <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/861/common-threads>

In painting human bodies in terracotta and white-washed squares pierced with arrays of window-like squares in black and white common to the mud brick mosques of sub-Saharan Africa, Tine transforms the human body into a holy place ready to receive blessings. While *baraka*, this

⁶ Klemm. "A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal"

very abstract idea, is expressed in white and black circles descending towards the bodies in a clear indication to the Islamic believe that Baraka descends on the mosques.

However, interpreting the work from a Sufi point of view, we can see this folding and unfolding between the spiritual Baraka and the material human bodies in the very earthy expressions that Tine created. It is very common to think of Sufism as the esoteric side of Islam, but Sufism in reality reflects a wholistic understanding of the cosmos that rejects the distinction between matter and essence. In other words, Sufism reflects a monist belief that sees in every material manifestation an unfolding of Being (with a capital B), or the One (with a capital O). In that sense we can associate Sufism with Expressionism.

By Expressionism I do not only mean German Expressionism as an artistic movement of which Klee is a dominant icon, but to a larger extent, Expressionism in a Deleuzian sense. Expressionism is a philosophical concept that Giles Deleuze attributes to Spinoza and Leibniz, and “applies to Being determined as God, insofar as God expresses himself in the world,”⁷ as Deleuze puts it. Expressionism is an intellectual and spiritual concept that envisions the cosmos as endless explications and implications, folding and unfolding between God, Being, or the One and his infinite manifestations in the material world. Hence, the fold of the Baroque, to which Deleuze assigns the work of Paul Klee, and this paper in its turn attempt to assign the contemporary art of Sufi Mourides.

Seeing the continuity of architectonics and the colours of Klee’s painting entitled *Cold City* for example, and Tine’s *La Famille*, through a Deleuzian lens shall allow us to take such a

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. New York; Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 1990. p321

continuity beyond its formal aspects. The interplay of vertical and horizontal elements conveys the feeling of the spiritual movement in both Tine and Klee's works. Through this interplay of verticality and horizontality Klee reached "the perfect accord of severing, or the resolution of tension" between the high and the low that Gilles Deleuze assigns to the Baroque fold. He created an infinite fold that moves between "the pleats of matter" and "the folds of the soul,"⁸ thus, Deleuze considers him one of "the great modern Baroque painters." For Deleuze, Baroque is "abstract art par excellence," however, "abstraction is not a negation of form: it posits form as folded, existing only as a "mental landscape" in the soul or in the mind."⁹ This wholistic perspective can be extended to colors to unfold their symbolic codes. Klee painted *Cold City* in 1921, seven years after his visit to Tunisia, where he wrote "Colour possesses me... It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: colour and I are one. I am a painter."¹⁰ Thus, we can see the influence of the African landscape on Klee's colours, especially when we go back to the paintings he created in Tunisia with their shadows of terracotta. But these colours have their spiritual connotations that we can sense in Tine's work as well as in that of Klee.

According to Yelimane Fall, "black represents that which is unseen, implying mystical meanings and knowledge, while white evokes purity,"¹¹ which explains Tine's choice of black and white to express the descending of Baraka. Fall also notes that "blue evokes the infinite expanse of the ocean and the sky, which, according to Fall, is the closest we get on this earth to eternity, so it helps us understand God."¹² Reading the late work of Klee with such codes in mind, would offer

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. p35

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ https://medium.com/@chrisjones_32882/paul-klees-tunisia-trip-bdadabf902e5

¹¹ Fall P30

¹² Fall P30

new meanings. Under an untitled painting in the Städel museum that Klee created in 1938, the following is written:

A hovering, silent, magical apparition in the crowd" is how Klee was described by a friend during the last years of the artist's life. Klee confronts the viewer with black lines on reduced patches of colour as if they were secret graphic characters from a vanished culture. There is nothing to help us interpret them - no picture title to make it easier to decipher what we see.¹³

Reading the symbolic connotations of black, white and blue according to Sufi Mourides in Klee's late works may offer some understanding to what is seen as a mystery. Especially when we highlight the similarity between what seems like "secret graphic characters from a vanished culture" and the letters of the Arabic alphabet.



Left, Paul Klee, Untitled, ca. 1938. <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/untitled-8>
Right, Paul Klee, 'Insula dulcamara', 1938

¹³ <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/untitled-8>



Yelimane Fall, *Fall and Fall Again* (2008) Installation view, Boston University Sherman Gallery Collection of the artist *Photo: Cynthia Becker*

For Sufis, every letter in the alphabet also has its spiritual and primordial creativity. The “Alif,” which occupies Klee’s untitled composition in the Staedel Museum, also represents the letter “A,” the first letter of the Arabic alphabet and, at the same time, representing the number one and the oneness of God according to the Sufi cosmology.¹⁴

Chris Pike, in his essay “Signing Off: Paul Klee’s ‘Insula dulcamara’” draws more connections between Klee’s cryptic paintings and Arabic calligraphy and even the Quran. But most importantly, Pike points to the way in which Klee explores “how the generative dynamic, or ‘law’, inherent in an emerging composition unfolds moment-by-moment through the interdependent activity of formal organization, subjective association, and the artist’s ‘active I’,”¹⁵ Thus, he renders his works “self-reflexive engagement in the process by which they come into being.”¹⁶ In other words, reading a painting by Klee “is to imaginatively reconstruct, or rediscover, the process

¹⁴ Fall 30

¹⁵ Chris Pike, Signing Off: Paul Klee’s ‘Insula dulcamara’ 2014 in *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, 30(2), 117-130, DOI: 10.1080 / 02666286.2013.871907

¹⁶ Ibid

by which it came into being.”¹⁷ For Klee “the way to form, dictated by some inner or outer necessity ... determines the conclusive or concluded character of the work.”¹⁸ In that sense, Pike’s essay offers different insights to compare the processes in which Klee’s mysterious graphical work and the calligraphic work of Yelimane Fall come into being.

Yelimane Fall, in his three-paintings installation entitled *Fall and Fall Again*, cut out the paper around the letters as if he symbolically peeling off the layers of meaning and revealing the inner essence of the words. This outer shape of the first painting provides the base of the second, which in its turn contains the inner essence of the first one. He repeats the process of peeling off layers in the third painting to reveal what he calls “the essence of the essence.” If Fall’s artistic process reflects the Sufi concept of *tariqa*, which denotes the idea of spiritual progress from the manifest Law to the divine Reality and to God, then, we can compare Fall’s spiritual approach to abstraction as a process with Klee’s ongoing artistic production that he identified as a process of becoming.¹⁹

According to Fall, it is through this process of abstraction that the final painting expresses “the archetypal Sufi message that there are always secrets and inner meanings (batin) to be learned as one crosses the veils of ignorance to approach divinity.”²⁰ No wonder, the allegory of the shape-shifting veils that traces an infinite series of folding and unfolding is inseparable from the Sufis’ ecstatic states that reach hallucination, as expressed in their poetry. As Omar Ibn El Farid, the Egyptian Sufi poet said, “In veils she came forth, hidden by external guise, each showing

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Pike, *Signing Off: Paul Klee’s ‘Insula dulcamara’*

¹⁹ Klee *Pictorial writing*. p 18

²⁰ Ibid 38-39

shaded with shape shifting,”²¹; thus, every appearance is but a veil in which God is disguised, but also expressed.

The metaphor of the veil is also central to Deleuze’s concept of the fold. In *The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque*, Deleuze referred to the French psychiatrist G. G. de Clérambault’s photographs of Moorish veiled women that show a “taste for folds of Islamic origin.”²² Deleuze believes that “[if] Clérambault manifests a delirium, it is because he discovers the tiny hallucinatory perceptions of ether addicts in the folds of clothing.”²³ Deleuze also speaks of Helga Heinzen’s compositions of striped and folded fabrics as a fold that “follow [this] line now coming from Islam.”²⁴ The Sufi spirit and the interplay of verticality and horizontality common to Klee’s work that underlie many of Viyé Diba’s compositions such as *Musical Materiality*, qualify his work to be seen as contemporary folds from Islamic origins.



G. G. de Clérambault’s photographs of Moorish veiled women that show a “taste for folds of Islamic origin,” according to Giles Deleuze

²¹ Ibn al-Fārid, ‘Umar ibn ‘Alī, and Emil Homerin, *Ibn Al-Farid: Sufi Verse, Sainly Life*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001. p 14

²² Deleuze, *Fold* p 38

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid 37



Left, Viyé Diba, *Musical Materiality*, 1998. Source:

<http://newsroom.ucla.edu/file?fid=52e7224ef6091d782f0003db>

Right Elga Elga Heinzen, from *Le langage des plis*, 2016. Source <https://www.24b.paris/Elga-Heinzen-Le-langage-des-plis>

In *Musical Materiality*, Diba folds and layers fabric swatches that recalls the colorful patchwork of Sufi Mourides' clothing around vertical axes, creating horizontal strata of colours and textures. The endless folding and unfolding between matter and soul, in Diba as well as in Klee, is what qualifies their work as continuous expressions of the Baroque fold, Baroque in the Deleuzian sense as an abstract art. But abstraction, according to Deleuze,

is not a negation of form: it posits form as folded, existing only as a "mental landscape" in the soul or in the mind, in upper altitudes: hence it also includes immaterial folds. Material matter makes up the bottom, but folded forms are styles or manners. We go from matter to manner; from earth and ground to habitats and salons, from the Texturologie to the Logologie. These are the two orders. Is it a texture, or a fold of the soul, of thought? Matter that reveals its texture becomes raw material, just as form that reveals its folds becomes

force. In the Baroque the coupling of material and force is what replaces matter and form (the primal forces being those of the soul).²⁵

Diba's works are "rich in colours, textures, and symbolism"²⁶ as Elizabeth Harney states, yet, they also "exhibit a keen understanding of the relationship between space, movement, built form, and the ever-changing properties of artistic materials,"²⁷ as she adds. Diba developed his style after several months of conversation and interrogation of sculptures and masks from around Africa, in Dakar's IFAN museum. Aware, as he is, of the parallels between such conversations with Africa's traditional art, and the inspirations modern artists like Picasso experienced, he chose a different path. He "has placed great importance on the reflective process and on the manner in which his solutions differ greatly from the mimetic presentations of the Ecole de Dakar painters in the 1960s and 1970s."²⁸ Diba's works employ only subtle references to the traditional forms, "his appropriation is conceptual rather than material." Works like *Plantlike*, *Evocation*, *composition #2*, and *Hanging #2* "present a strong sense of verticality" that Diba compares to the verticality of the traditional African sculptures. Thus, we can speak of a creative process or a spiritual path that underlies Diba's works and moves "from matter to manner"; from "the Texturologie to the Logologie," in a Deleuzian sense.

To conclude, if we found common grounds to compare Sufi Mourides art and that of Klee in the Baroque fold, that is because both Klee and those Sufis adopt a wholistic view of the cosmos. This wholistic view finds its roots in Plotinus's Doctrine of Oneness of Being, which Deleuze considers as the start point of a line of thought that reached its zenith in the concept of

²⁵ Deleuze, Fold. p35

²⁶ Harney, Viyé Diba: Profound Beauty. p80

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

Expressionism that Spinoza and Leibniz developed during the Baroque. The ideas of Plotinus of Alexandria contributed largely to the Theosophical Society through which it reached Klee. The Plotinian doctrine of the Oneness of Being also inspired the Sufi realm of thought through many ways, among which is the work of the Egyptian Sufi Dhu Al Noun Al Misri. However, Plotinus's philosophy in its turn draws from the Egyptian hermetic cosmology. In that sense, we can talk of an intellectual and spiritual line that extends from ancient Egyptian thought through Plotinus to these Expressionists; to the Senegalese Sufi Mourides through the diverse schools of Sufism that span Africa from Egypt to Morocco; and to the German expressionists such as Klee and Kandinsky through the Theosophical Society. Looking at African art from a Deleuzian perspective, we can see that the continuity between African and modern art goes far beyond their formal aspects, beyond the so called "primitive" styles and jarring colours, to reach the intellectual and spiritual inspirations that underlie them. Moreover, such a Deleuzian perspective would contest the geographical demarcation imposed on the map of African art, by showing the inseparable connections between north African, and what is called "Sub-Saharan" art.

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