Alioune Sow (University of Florida), “Memoirs, religion and morality in Mali’s national memory”
This paper explores a practice of writing in Mali associated with the idea of national reconciliation, by examining how some authors draw upon an Islamic ethic to testify about the past. The paper’s point of departure is the emergence, several years after the democratization, of a new culture of memoirs, which has brought back to the public sphere the memory of the military regime that ruled the country since 1968, and revealed the ambivalence of the political transition. The proliferation of these narratives, often apologetic or corrective in their rendition of Malian political history, strongly demonstrates the country’s entry into what historian Henri Rousso calls a period of “anamnesis”. The distinctive narrative configurations of these texts point to a preference for the testimonial mode and a recourse to a hybrid religious framework that prompts confessions, repentance, victimization and victimhood. To demonstrate this modality, I will examine one narrative in particular, written by Assimi Dembele, a former military officer who served the regime since the military coup in 1968. His memoir, titled Transferts definitifs (2003), signals a radical change in testimonial writings and differential modes of self-writing in the Malian literary repertoire. I will show that Dembele’s narrative induces an interrogation of the past through a unique morphology that owes to a combination of Mande hermeneutics with Muslim ethical values and principles about justice, responsibility, ruling and reconciliation. The paper concludes with a reflection on the nature of the theological meditation, which these memoirs promote and how they relate to processes of political transition to democracy.