

INTRODUCTION

Between Memory and Memorial

Jeanne Garane

My rightful place is among the ranks of the elder sons of the century.

—Amadou Hampâte Bâ

Autobiography is often defined as the narration of an individual life told in intimate detail, while memoir is characterized as the narration of a life lived in its historical context. *Amkoullel, the Fula Boy*, and its sequel, *Oui, Mon Commandant: mémoires II* are both autobiography and memoir, for they intertwine pre-colonial and colonial history with the narration of Amadou Hampâte Bâ's personal trajectory.¹ The events recounted in *Amkoullel, the Fula Boy* take place within a time frame that dates from about 1860, with the story of A. H. Bâ's ancestors, and 1922, when he leaves his family and is sent to Ouagadougou to begin serving in the French colonial administration. *Oui, Mon Commandant!* covers the years between 1922, when A. H. Bâ began his career as a colonial civil servant, and the late 1930s and early 1940s, at the outbreak of World War II, when A. H. Bâ was about forty years old and began working for the IFAN (Institut français d'Afrique noire, renamed the Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire following independence in 1960).² A third volume, which promised to cover A. H. Bâ's later years, has never been published.

Amkoullel, the Fula Boy tells the poignant story of a childhood and adolescence that began in the former capital of the Toucouleur Empire, in Bandiagara,

Mali, during a period of tremendous upheaval. By 1900, the year of A. H. Bâ's birth, the colony of French Sudan had been in existence for just twenty years. Founded following the defeat of the Toucouleurs in 1889 by soldiers under the command of Colonel Louis Archinard, French Sudan became part of a larger federation of colonies known as French West Africa, or *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) in 1895.³

The impact of these historic events came to weigh heavily on A. H. Bâ. It is partly for this reason that, rather than beginning his life story with the scene of his own birth, *Amkoullel* begins with Bâ's "prehistory," that is, with the story of his noble paternal and maternal lines, and their intimate connections to the Fula empire of Massina (1818–1862) and to the Toucouleur conquerors who destroyed it. Given that his mother and father were Fula and his stepfather was Toucouleur, Bâ begins his narrative with an overview of the history of these two related but warring groups. As he explains in chapter 1:

According to African tradition, an individual cannot be separate from his lineage, for he is merely an extension of those who continue to live on through him. . . . Therefore, it would be unthinkable for the old African that I am, born at the dawn of the twentieth century in the city of Bandiagara, Mali, to begin the story of my personal life without first evoking my two paternal and maternal lineages. . . . Both of them are Fula, and both were intimately involved, although they were in opposing camps, in the sometimes tragic historic events that marked my country throughout the nineteenth century. The entire history of my family is in fact tied to the history of Massina (a region in Mali located in the inner Niger River bend), and to the wars that tore it apart. These wars pitted the Fula of the Fula Empire of Massina against the Toucouleur army of El Hadj Omar, the great conqueror and religious leader who came from the West and whose empire, once it had vanquished and absorbed the Fula empire of Massina in 1862, extended from eastern Guinea all the way to Timbuktu.

Each of my two lineages is directly or indirectly related to one or the other of these two opposing parties. (pages 11–12)

For Amadou Hampâté Bâ, this "dual historical and emotional heritage" (page 12), along with the profound social upheavals wrought by the advent of French colonialism, were such that the fickleness of fate would become a particularly prominent theme in his work. He remarks, "Every time I had started down a nice, straight path in my life, fate seemed to enjoy flicking its finger, sending me reeling in a completely different direction than the one I should have taken, and causing me to alternate between periods of good luck and

misfortune” (page 194). A. H. Bà later enumerates these misfortunes and their reversals: the male members of his father Hampâté’s family were massacred by the Toucouleurs at the fall of the Fula empire of Massina, and his father was one of the sole survivors. He was immediately forced to go into hiding and began to work as a butcher’s assistant (an occupation considered beneath his station by the Fula nobility to which he belonged). After his father’s death, when A. H. Bà was three years old, he was adopted by Tidjani Thiam. This Toucouleur chief of the coveted province of Louta had married A. H. Bà’s mother, Kadidja, and A. H. Bà then became his heir apparent, in line for the chiefdom. But Tidjani Thiam was deposed by the French, imprisoned, and sent into exile. As A. H. Bà puts it in reference to the unpredictability of fate, “Flick! We are all sent into exile and I become the son of a convict” (page 194). The situation again changes and the family returns home to Bandiagara from exile. Just as things seemed to have returned to normal, writes A. H. Bà, “Flick! I am brutally snatched away from the traditional activities that would surely have led me to enter the time-honored career of *marabout* and teacher. Instead, I’m forced to attend ‘the White Man’s school,’ which the Muslim populace of the time regarded as the most direct route to hell” (page 195).

Indeed, in chapter 5, A. H. Bà recounts in vivid detail how he was “requisitioned” by the colonial administration and forced to attend French primary school. Later, A. H. Bà would complete his studies at the Bamako Professional School. In the final chapter of *Amkoullel*, A. H. Bà provides a brief history of the school, explaining:

It had originally been created in 1854 by Faidherbe in Kayes, Mali, which at the time was the headquarters of the Upper Senegal and Middle Niger colony. Very officially called the School for Hostages, its ranks were filled by forcefully requisitioning the sons of chiefs and other dignitaries from recently conquered regions, with the aim of ensuring their submission. However, when they could, some of these chiefs sent captives in place of their sons, a decision that they perhaps came to regret later on. In 1908, when Governor Clozel transferred the colony’s headquarters from Kayes to Bamako, the school was reopened in that city and given the more discreet but nevertheless explicit name, School for Sons of Chiefs. With the development of the administration and the increased need for native subaltern personnel, it then became the Bamako Professional School. Later, it was renamed Upper Primary School, then Terrasson de Fougères School, before becoming known today as the Lycée Askia Mohammed.⁴ (pages 311–12)

While the School for Hostages was intended to transform A. H. Bâ and his schoolmates into (more or less reluctant) products of the French *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission), in *Amkoullel* A. H. Bâ shows how he decided to use his French education to his advantage and “learn the language of the commandant in order to be able to speak to him directly, without having to go through an interpreter” (page 206).⁵ This is certainly one of the reasons why he later decided to write in French, although he also wrote poetry in his first language, Fulfulde, the language spoken by the Fula people.⁶

The French title of A. H. Bâ’s memoir is *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul: mémoires*. *Peul* is the French translation of the Wolof word, *pël*, which refers to the “Fula, Fulani, or Fulbe” people of the Sahel region of West Africa. As A. H. Bâ explains in chapter 4, “Amkoullel” was the nickname given to him by “the great storyteller, historian, and traditionalist Koulel, who had become so attached to me in my childhood that I had been given the nickname Amkoullel (meaning ‘Koulel’s little Amadou,’ or ‘son of Koulel’)” (page 63). The French title, *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul*, echoes the title of the 1953 autobiography by Guinean writer Camara Laye, *L’Enfant noir*, translated by James Kirkup in 1954 as *The Dark Child: The Autobiography of an African Boy*.⁷ But where Camara Laye’s title echoed European designators of Africans by skin color alone, A. H. Bâ’s title specifically refers to his culture and ethnic identity.

While often lighthearted and humorous in its reconstruction of A. H. Bâ’s boyhood escapades (for example, the tale of the time when Amkoullel and his friends went to see whether the excrement of the white colonizers really was black), the text also documents the cruelties and injustices meted out by French colonial administrators and those Africans who worked with them, for the impact of such acts on A. H. Bâ’s family was immediate.⁸ Thus, even as it works to preserve a written record of A. H. Bâ’s culture and traditions that were threatened by colonialism and postcolonial modernity, the work serves as a kind of historical memorial lest these injustices be forgotten or covered up. As Benaouda Lebdaï explains in *Autobiography as a Writing Strategy in Postcolonial Literature*, postcolonial autobiographies and memoirs provide readers with a unique lens through which to access the past while allowing us to understand how individuals negotiated their life trajectories under oppressive situations. Such writing offers both “a path of resistance and a liberating experience . . . while participating in the rehabilitation of autobiographical texts as literary.”⁹

It could be said that *Amkoullel, the Fula Boy* and its sequel, *Oui, Mon Commandant!*, embody the culmination of A. H. Bâ’s lifelong efforts to inscribe oral traditions (defined as a sociocultural-historical knowledge archive held in living memory) from the West African Sahel, for they are at once the literary

inscription of his personal memorial archive, a record of his training as a practicing specialist in the preservation and recitation of Sahelian oral traditions, and a first-hand account of life under the French colonial regime.

As we learn in reading *Amkoullel*, Amadou Hampâté Bâ was immersed in the oral tradition from an early age. As he explains in chapter 5, “Someone once asked me when I had begun to collect oral traditions. I replied that I had begun in my early youth and never stopped. I had had the luck to be born and to grow up in an environment that was a permanent academy of everything concerning African history and traditions” (page 127). In his foreword to *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul: mémoires* A. H. Bâ also remarks on the prodigious accuracy and fidelity of his memory, explaining that “from childhood, we were trained to observe, to watch, and to listen, so that every event was inscribed in our memory as if it were in virgin wax. . . . I do not need to *remember*; rather, I see it all on a sort of interior screen, and all I have to do is describe what I see. In order to describe a scene, I only have to relive it” (page 7).

However, although A. H. Bâ asserts that “people of my generation, and more generally, people who come from an oral tradition and did not rely on writing, possess memories of an almost inordinate fidelity and accuracy” (page 7), not everyone was in a position to collect and perpetuate oral traditions as was A. H. Bâ.

In *Amkoullel*, A. H. Bâ explains how his talent for storytelling came to be enlisted in the colonial production of knowledge about Africa. He was twelve years old when the interpreter Wangrin enlisted him in the collection and translation of traditional tales for

Mr. François-Victor Equilbecq, a senior civil servant from the Office of Native Affairs who was passing through Bandiagara and who was touring the entire country in order to collect the greatest possible number of tales from the French Sudan. When Mr. Equilbecq arrived in Bandiagara in June 1912, the district commandant summoned Chief Alfa Maki Tall and asked him to send the newcomer all of the men, women, and children who knew any tales. I was among the children who were chosen. (page 219)

Even as the French colonial mission civilisatrice sought to impose French culture and language upon its colonial subjects by means of its colonial schools and imported administrative structures, it was also dedicated to creating a kind of inventory of the cultures and peoples that it was colonizing that became known as “Africanism,” the production of European knowledge “about” Africa. In being asked to contribute tales to Mr. Equilbecq, A. H. Bâ had been drawn into the process.

In chapters 4 and 5, A. H. Bâ recounts how as a young boy he witnessed the overwhelming power of colonial authority on his stepfather Tidjani Thiam, whom the French had deposed from his position as chief of Louta province in punishment for his use of force in putting down a rebellion that resulted from a plot that had led Tidjani to believe he had been ordered to do so by the French administration.¹⁰ *Amkoullel* vividly recreates scenes in which Tidjani walks in shackles and carries out forced labor. He portrays Tidjani's imprisonment in solitary confinement in minute detail along with his mother's valiant efforts to get her husband released. In one scene, when the little Amkoullel sees Tidjani in chains, he grabs a hatchet and runs toward his father "in order to try to break the chains and irons," crying, "when I grow up I will avenge my father" (page 112).

A. H. Bâ's dedication to preserving Sahelian oral traditions thus goes hand in hand with this personal vow of vengeance to such an extent that many of the figures who inhabit *Amkoullel* are heroically portrayed, as though they themselves had stepped from the annals of an oral epic. For instance, A. H. Bâ describes his stepfather Tidjani Thiam as a fearless "Titan" who possesses superior strength, and as an excellent marksman and horseman who exhibits noble probity when faced with the dishonesty of his enemies and the cruelties of the colonial administrators. Tidjani is a fitting match for the narrator's mother, Kadidja, described as an exceptional "woman of iron" who is known as "Queen of the Milk" in her women's association, harbors a fierce warrior soul, and never backs down when faced with adversity. Indeed, she is vividly portrayed as a formidable fighter in chapter 4, when she defends herself and other women against the unwanted advances of a maniacal and corrupt boatman, and in chapter 5, when she mobilizes an army of women to help her find her husband and then later disguises herself in men's clothing in order to make secret visits to her husband's jail cell—all under the nose of the colonial commandant.

It was after these events that A. H. Bâ, alias Amkoullel, was "requisitioned" to attend the School for Hostages. Once he had received his Primary School Certificate, or Certificat d'études primaires, he was again coerced into becoming a reluctant participant in the colonial machine, for he was forcibly enlisted into the ranks of colonial auxiliaries and assigned to become a colonial clerk and occasional interpreter in the very system that had upended the lives of everyone around him.¹¹

Because he had followed his mother's wishes and did not complete his secondary studies at the Ecole normale de Gorée in Senegal, the colonial administration decided that he would be punished and sent to work in the new

colony of Haute-Volta (Upper Volta; now Burkina Faso). A. H. Bâ was assigned the title *écrivain temporaire à titre essentiellement précaire et révocable* (temporary secretary classified as essentially revocable and subject to repeal), “for there was truly nothing lower that could be found in ranks of the administrative hierarchy” (page 319). He was thus sent out on a journey of one thousand kilometers from Bamako, Mali, to Ouagadougou in Haute-Volta. He explains that “at a time when simply failing to salute the commandant or the flag was cause for administrative internment, it was out of the question for a ‘French subject’ to disobey an order emanating from even the lowliest bearer of a parcel of colonial authority, and here was an order from the Governor himself. If I had refused, I would have been automatically sent to prison for noncompliance, without any other justification or trial” (page 319).

In order to reach Ouagadougou, A. H. Bâ walked, traveled by train, by water, and on horseback, under surveillance by a district guard whom he eventually befriended. As he was waiting in Koulikoro for a pirogue that would carry him to Mopti, Bâ attended a storytelling session and

for the first time, I took down in writing everything that I had heard, either word for word when it was possible, or in a general overview. I had brought a stock of large ledger books along with me. One of them became my first “journal.” In Koulikoro, and for the entire rest of my trip, I would write about the principal events of each day, and especially anything that I saw or heard that was of interest and that had to do with our oral traditions. Once I had gotten into the habit of doing this, I never stopped, and I have continued to do this for the rest of my life. (page 325)

The irony of using the colonizer’s ledger books for the recording of oral traditions under threat from colonialism should not be lost on the reader.

Saving Libraries from Burning

A. H. Bâ began to gain international recognition for his work after he joined the IFAN in Dakar, Senegal, in 1942, upon the recommendation of its founder and director, Théodore Monod. Indeed, the friendship and patronage of Monod played an essential role in Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s career. For instance, it was Monod who first presented A. H. Bâ’s 1943 translation of the Fula initiation tale *Kaïdara* at the first international conference of West African specialists, the *Conférence internationale des africanistes de l’ouest*.¹² It was Monod who first drew attention to the teachings of Bâ’s spiritual mentor Tierno Bokar in a 1950 essay in the journal *Présence Africaine*. It was Monod who wrote the preface

to *L'Empire peul du Macina*. And in naming A. H. Bâ to the IFAN in Dakar, he had effectively removed Bâ from a difficult situation in Mali, where colonial officials viewed his adherence to Hamallist Muslim beliefs with suspicion.¹³ It was Théodore Monod who wrote the preface that precedes *Amkoullél*, included in this volume.¹⁴

By the early 1960s, A. H. Bâ had already presented his translations into French of a number of traditional Fula and Bambara tales, and these were later published in collaboration with well-known European researchers and ethnographers. *Kaïdara: récit initiatique peul* was published in collaboration with Lilyan Kesteloot, and *Koumen: texte initiatique des pasteurs peul* with Germaine Dieterlen. He had published his lengthy oral history of the Fula empire of Massina, *L'Empire peul du Macina*, in 1954, and the portrait and philosophy of his spiritual teacher, *Tierno Bokar: le sage de Bandiagara*, in 1957.¹⁵ In 1974, A. H. Bâ won the Grand prix littéraire d'Afrique noire for *L'Étrange destin de Wangrin: ou, Les roueries d'un interprète africain* and was awarded the prize a second time in 1991 for *Amkoullél, l'enfant peul: mémoires*.

Following his UNESCO address to the Africa Commission in 1960, where he was representing Mali, Amadou Hampâté Bâ became known to many as the man who proclaimed, “En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c’est une bibliothèque qui brûle” (In Africa, when an elder dies, a library burns), in reference to the fact that the transmission of oral traditions was increasingly under threat. As Abiola Irele puts it, A. H. Bâ’s “burning library” statement expresses a tragic “sense of calamity at the prospect of the disappearance of the values of [the oral] legacy in our present situation of intense social and cultural change.”¹⁶ Today, A. H. Bâ’s “burning library” aphorism has become so well-known as to have become a kind of cliché.¹⁷ However, it is important to place the statement in historical context and to read it as an impassioned trace of decolonial resistance. In the words of Nadia Yada Kisukidi, such resistance participates in the oppositional practices of subjects who are confronted with multiple forms of loss and erasure and “l’oblitération de leurs souffrances” (the obliteration of their suffering).¹⁸

In chapter 6 of *Amkoullél*, “In the Military Town of Kati,” A. H. Bâ attributes the onset of the “burning libraries” phenomenon to the massive enlistment of West African youths in World War I. As A. H. Bâ explains:

Although this is not a well-known fact, one major effect of the war of 1914 was that it precipitated the first great *rupture in the oral transmission of traditional knowledge*, not only within the initiation societies, but also in the trade brotherhoods and corporations of craftsmen, whose workshops had

once served as veritable centers of traditional instruction. The hemorrhage of young people sent to the front—from which many would never return—the intensive recruitment of forced laborers on behalf of the war effort, and the mass exodus of people to the Gold Coast deprived the old masters of their all-important successor groups. In a more or less distinct manner, depending on the region, this caused the first great eclipse in the oral transmission of a vast cultural heritage. Over the decades that followed, this process would gradually become more acute under the effects of new social factors. (page 294)

In this context, one can understand A. H. Bâ's work to document aspects of Sahelian forms of knowledge as a preservationist struggle in the advent of what Kisukidi names the "undecolonisable," that is, "ce qui a disparu sous les coups d'une violence coloniale totale et vers quoi il est impossible de faire retour" (that which has disappeared beneath the blows of total colonial violence and to which it is impossible to return).¹⁹

Nevertheless, as Kisukidi further demonstrates, the "undecolonisable" also constitutes "la limite de tout projet de décolonisation épistémique dès lors qu'il s'effectue sur le site institutionnel de l'université et demeure solidaire des norms de connaissance qui y sont mises en oeuvre" (the limit of any project of epistemological decolonization when it is undertaken at the institutional site of the university and colludes with the norms of knowledge that are in process there).²⁰ Kisukidi asserts that the recognition of such limits should not lead to despair but to the recognition and acknowledgment of constraints placed on forms of knowledge within institutional settings.

It would be an understatement to say that A. H. Bâ and his work have often been entangled within such institutional constraints, given that much of his work first appeared under the aegis of colonial authority. Moreover, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that the present translation of *Amkoullel* into English, complete with the present introduction, the original preface by Théodore Monod, and the new foreword by Ralph A. Austen, also potentially places this work within a new set of constraints. Indeed, as Richard Watts compellingly demonstrates in *Packaging Post/coloniality*, postcolonial works have long been framed by paratextual elements such as the present introduction, which are intended to "insert the text within a particular cultural context."²¹ Moreover, the act of translating, publishing, and promoting a work such as *Amkoullel* to new audiences similarly introduces the text to new interpretive readerships. As Lydie Moudileno aptly writes in "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur post-colonial?" "la traduction participe de l'expansion des savoirs sur l'Afrique qui

caractérise notre contemporain global” (translation participates in the expansion of knowledge about Africa which characterizes our contemporary global era).²² For this reason, as Moudileno and her coparticipants in the 2016 collection *Ecrire l’Afrique-monde* point out, it is important to interrogate “la manière dont nous . . . recevons en tant que critiques, professeurs, et commentateurs des productions culturelles de l’Afrique” (the manner in which we . . . as critics, professors and commentators receive African cultural products).²³ To this end, it is useful both to retrace the initial trajectory of *Amkoullel*’s publication history and to reflect upon the ways in which this translation enlarges A. H. Bâ’s readership.

Publication of A. H. Bâ’s Memoirs, Postcolonial Memory, and the Cosmopolitan Present

The time that elapsed between the events that unfold in A. H. Bâ’s memoirs and their date of publication is quite great. A. H. Bâ passed away in May 1991, at the age of ninety-one, and *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul: mémoires* was published in September of that year. *Oui Mon Commandant!* was published posthumously in 1994. Given the political climate in France in the 1990s and official attempts either to forget or to whitewash the colonial past, their publication was rather timely. As Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard write in their 2008 essay:

Colonial history has been the object of a process of repression that has also maintained the myth of the French civilizing mission. The function of this myth was to avoid opening “a painful page from our past” the contemporaneous consequences of which were judged as potentially dangerous particularly given the presence on French territory . . . of . . . “descendants” of immigrants from the former colonies. Until the beginning of the 1990s, the marginalization of colonial history was the response to the double injunction to forget a historic traumatism that upset the [self] representation of the country, and to forestall any upsurge in colonial confrontations.²⁴

The publication of A. H. Bâ’s memoirs has certainly played a role in helping to counteract the erasure of the colonial past while continuing to contribute to present discussions surrounding the construction of that past.²⁵ Given that A. H. Bâ’s work continues to circulate in an ever-widening readership, it is worth mentioning that his work is also integral to postcolonial circuits of literary authorship. Indeed, contemporary writers such as Ahmadou Kourouma, Alain Mabanckou, Tierno Monémbo, Yambo Ouologuem, and Abdourahman A. Waberi have engaged with A. H. Bâ’s work in various ways.²⁶

In his 2011 book *Postcolonial Francophone Autobiographies from Africa to the Antilles*, critic Edgard Sankara interrogates the reasons behind A. H. Bâ's popularity and even what he calls his "canonization" in France, as *Amkoullel* has now been incorporated into the French secondary school curriculum. Sankara suggests that A. H. Bâ's memoirs, along with his own religious ecumenism, have been received as an appealing counterdiscourse to contemporary perceptions in France of Islam as a form of political and religious extremism.²⁷ Another explanation for the initial appeal of *Amkoullel* in France, according to Sankara, is the "dialogicity" of the text and the ways in which it addresses non-African readers by explaining certain cultural practices both in the text and through the use of explanatory footnotes. Although Sankara sometimes reads this "dialogicity" as a sign that *Amkoullel* was primarily written for a French audience, I would instead argue that A. H. Bâ, who began working as a translator at the age of twelve and who continued to practice translation throughout his life, employs a translational, cosmopolitan aesthetic which strategically amplifies the potential for his writing to appeal to multiple and diverse readerships. As Paul Bandia demonstrates in *Translation as Reparation*, this translational aesthetic is employed by many African European-language writers as a transnational and transcultural mode of expression. Souleymane Bachir Diagne calls this African translational aesthetic "penser de langue à langue" (thinking from language to language) and recognizes the decentering power of translation as holding ethical value.²⁸

I would add that Bâ's translational aesthetic is also "trans-temporal," for although the events narrated in *Amkoullel* occur in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they continue to resonate with contemporary readers precisely because, as Sankara also points out, the narrator is also an excellent storyteller and constantly interpolates his audience. This interpolation allows readers to be placed in a trans-temporal and coeval imaginary dialogue with the narrator and his text. As Kwame Anthony Appiah sees it, this sort of cosmopolitan conversation crosses "boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else," and can be generated through imaginative engagement with literary and other works of art that speak "from some place other than your own."²⁹ Appiah writes, "Cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation" (57). But this conversation can also transcend "talking" to enable a metaphorical "engagement with the experience and ideas of others" (85). Indeed, this invitation to converse that *Amkoullel* extends to its readers constitutes a prime example of what Achille Mbembe calls "Afropolitanism," a cultural, historical, and aesthetic sensibility exhibited in a way of inhabiting the world that

recognizes the “imbrication” of different worlds and a “capacité de reconnaître sa face dans le visage de l'étranger et de valoriser les traces du lointain dans le proche, de domestiquer l'in-familier, de travailler avec ce qui a tout l'air de contraires” (an ability to recognize one's face in that of the stranger, and to value the traces of what is distant in what is nearby, to tame the unfamiliar, and to work with what at first seem to be complete opposites).³⁰ It is precisely because A. H. Bâ's memoirs carry these “Afropolitan” traces that they have been variously cast by a diverse audience of readers as colonial bildungsroman, oral epic, historical documentary, and ethnographic fiction.

Translating *Amkoullel* into English: Why Now?

I first became engaged in studying the work of Amadou Hampâté Bâ while reading *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin: ou, Les roueries d'un interprète africain*. I decided to further research the prominent role that indigenous African interpreters (and thus the act and fact of translation) played in the French conquest and administration of colonial French West Africa. I visited the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence in 2012 and then went to Senegal in 2013 to research the topic at the IFAN, where Amadou Hampâté Bâ himself had also worked. In both Aix-en-Provence and Dakar, I found that the author who had most consistently documented the role and importance of indigenous African interpreters was A. H. Bâ. I also discovered that his writing on this topic in *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*, *Amkoullel*, *l'enfant peul: mémoires*, and *Oui, Mon Commandant!* is often cited by scholars of West Africa who read French but seems to be unknown among members of the Anglophone community of researchers, particularly in the field of Translation Studies.³¹ I came to believe that this was because the memoirs have never before been translated into English.

Given the global impact and importance of Amadou Hampâté Bâ's work, it is indeed astonishing that there exist only three translations of his writings into English: *The Fortunes of Wangrin* and *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*, and an out-of-print translation by Daniel Whitman of the Fula initiation tale *Kaïdara*. It is therefore high time for an English-language translation of Amadou Hampâté Bâ's memoirs. Why have they only now been translated into English some thirty years after they were first published in French? Why me?

One response to the first question is supplied by Taylor Eggan in an August 13, 2017, online essay entitled, “The Strange Fate of Amadou Hampâté Bâ in the Anglophone World.” He writes that the dearth of English-language translations of A. H. Bâ's works may be due to the fact that they are “difficult

to categorize by genre.”³² It is true that, as was the case throughout his life, neither A. H. Bâ nor his works always fit into neat generic categories. As Christiane Ndiaye notes:

Among the volumes bearing his signature are historical narratives that read like traditional tales [*L’Empire peul du Macina*], hagiographies and narrative epics that read like novels [*Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar*], a biography that many readers took for an autobiographical novel [*L’Etrange destin de Wangrin*], and so on. All of these writings are delicately situated between orality and writing, between lived reality (history) and fiction, between the individual and the collective, and between languages. That this prolific production should end with an autobiography, the most ambiguous genre of them all, should not surprise us.³³

A second response to the question surrounding the belated translation into English of A. H. Bâ’s memoirs could be that potential publishers may simply have found the sheer length of the work daunting. In its current French 2012 edition, the *Memoirs* total 865 pages on onion skin paper. But I was so scandalized to discover that one of the largest and most powerful language communities on the planet, speakers and readers of English, did not have access to A. H. Bâ’s memoirs unless they were able to read them in French or in one of the other languages into which they have already been translated that I felt called to undertake this translation without first obtaining any guarantee that they would later find a publisher. This required taking a leap of faith that also involved a fair amount of sheer determination. It is for this reason that this translation and the research that led to it were entirely supported by a series of grants from the University of South Carolina and from the Camargo Foundation, for which I am extremely grateful.³⁴

Some readers may find it strange to conceive of writing a translation as a “calling.” And yet this idea is present in Walter Benjamin’s landmark essay on translation, “The Task of the Translator,” first published in 1923. Benjamin asserts that a great work chooses its translator, rather than the inverse. Indeed Benjamin asserts:

A translation issues from its original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be considered with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity.³⁵

Thus, a translation extends the life of a text by granting it a new life in another language. This is exactly what Amadou Hampâté Bâ himself was doing as he collected and translated the traditional “oral” knowledge of his region, translated it, wrote it down in French, and eventually published it.

To extend the “life” of *Amkoullel* by translating it into English is my project here. An English-language translation published in 2021 amplifies the power of A. H. Bâ’s memoirs to both bear witness to the past and to reinsert his work into an ongoing dialogue with contemporary readers, writers, and scholars who share an Afropolitan aesthetic.

Amadou Hampâté Bâ knew very well that he would continue to live through his work, and that his work would live after he had passed away. He once declared, “Combien de fois des jeunes gens m’ont dit: ‘Monsieur Hampâté Bâ, vous êtes dépassé.’ Je leur ai répondu: ‘Mais c’est vous qui n’êtes pas arrivés.’” (How many times have young people said to me: ‘Mister Hampâté Bâ, your time has passed.’ I reply, ‘You are the ones who haven’t arrived yet.’)³⁶

For a man who was so invested in preserving knowledge of the past, Amadou Hampâté Bâ was very preoccupied with the future, and in 1984, he wrote an open letter addressed to those same youth of Africa and the world “who hadn’t arrived yet.” Even here, A. H. Bâ emphasizes the role of “fate” in the current configuration of global culture. “Young people of Africa and the world,” he wrote,

fate has determined that at this end of the twentieth century, at the dawn of a new era, you shall be as a bridge that connects two worlds; the world of the past, where old civilizations aspire only to bequeath to you their treasures before they disappear, and the world of the future, full of uncertainties and difficulties, it is true, but also rich with new adventures and fascinating experiences. It is up to you to take up the challenge and to ensure that a mutilating rupture does not occur, but instead the serene continuity and fertilization of one age by the other.³⁷

A. H. Bâ further encourages the youth to open themselves to the outside in order to “give and to receive,” and insists on the importance both of enriching and preserving their mother tongues and of perfecting their knowledge of French (“that language inherited from colonization”) in order to maintain and foster intercultural communication. In a film entitled *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, le sage du fleuve Niger* (Amadou Hampâté Bâ, sage of the Niger River) he asserts, “Nobody is at home anymore. We are all citizens of the world. . . . We have a birth place, we must all be citizens of everywhere. . . . That is why it would rather be a good idea for us to be in understanding, listening to one another in order to try to discover what we have in common so that we can build our future happiness.”³⁸

He believed that in order for cross-cultural dialog to take place, it was necessary to be able to listen to one another. But he also insisted that non-Africans would need to set aside preconceived notions about Africa “in order to become pupils who know absolutely nothing.”³⁹ For A. H. Bâ, it was the collected (and as yet little known) traditional knowledge of Africa that could help teach the future citizens of the world. To emphasize this point, he was fond of repeating the following admonition transmitted from the wise initiates of the African “bush” to those who would seek to discover their knowledge:

If you want me to teach you, you must stop being you, to be me. Forget yourself in order to be me. Otherwise, if you keep being you, although we are face to face, we will be . . . as distant from one another as the sky is from earth. This means that you must not take what I am going to tell you and compare it to what you already know . . . you must empty yourself of what you know in order to learn. That is when you are told that you must know that you do not know. *Anda a Anda*. The Fula expression says, “*Sa andi a anda a andat*.” If you know that you do not know, you will know. “*Sa anda a anda a andata*.” If you do not know that you do not know, you will not know.⁴⁰

In undertaking to translate *Amkoullel*, I tried to adhere to these injunctions. “Stop being you, to be me. Forget yourself in order to be me.” As the translator Sika Fakambi put it in an extension of A. H. Bâ’s widely recited tale, “A l’école du caméléon,” to translate is to engage in “le parler caméléon,” or “chameleon speech”—to use a kind of spoken or written word where the speaker or translator adapts her language to the situation in which she finds herself.⁴¹

In order to render the flavor of A. H. Bâ’s French-language writing into English, I chose to recreate the somewhat formal and even heroic language register that A. H. Bâ uses in both narration and dialogue. One example of this is visible in the section devoted to A. H. Bâ’s maternal grandfather, in the scene where he informs El Hadj Omar that he has renounced everything in order to join him:

Neither have I come to join you with the intent of acquiring knowledge because in this world you can teach me nothing that I do not already know. I am a *Silatigui*, a Fula initiate. I know the visible and the invisible. I have what we call “an ear for the bush.” I understand the language of the birds, I can read the prints of small animals on the ground, as well as the patches of light that the sun projects through the leaves; I know how to interpret the murmurs of the four great winds and the four lesser winds as well as

the movement of clouds through space, because for me, everything leaves a sign and speaks a language. (page 16)

However, in places where A. H. Bâ relates dialogue spoken in the jargon known as *le français des tirailleurs*, locally known as *forofifon naspa* (a kind of lingua franca mixing French and West African languages developed by the French military and indigenous infantrymen during the French colonial period, I use the implantation of certain recognizable French, or approximated French (and English), words in the translated text. In the example below from chapter 5, where Amkoullé's stepfather, Tidjani Thiam, is working in a forced labor camp under the supervision of a cruel guard, the narrator contrasts dialogue that was spoken "correctly," if forcefully, in the Bambara language, with that of the "incorrect" jargon found at the end of the passage:

This surly guard, who had nicknamed himself *gonfin yirijougou feere* (black chimpanzee flower of a venomous tree) never stood up unless he got the urge to whip the first prisoner within arm's reach when he felt like it and without any particular reason. . . . "You had better pray to your ancestors that my 'little brother' (his whip) that you see tucked under my arm here does not become dislodged, otherwise he'll come and plow into your criminal backs like a *daba* cuts through the weeds in the fields. The Commandant is up there on top of the hill, where he is perched like the great eagle of the skies, but down here in the valley, I am like the hippopotamus that rips up the rice fields. Here, I am the one in command, and not the Commandant." Then he would add in his "infantryman's French" (called French *forofifon naspa*): "Get to work! *Travadjé, travadjé!* (Work, work!). Otherwise, you pigs, I'll pigwhip you good!" (page 124)

Scenes such as these occur repeatedly in *Amkoullé*. In recording past injustices, even as it vividly recreates A. H. Bâ's childhood and adolescence, the text also provides readers with a lens through which to view events that some would rather forget.

The Legacy of A. H. Bâ

Although Amadou Hampâté Bâ passed away in 1991 (in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, where he had served as Mali's ambassador), he lives on in the hearts and minds of many. He is present on the internet and on social media. The Fondation Amadou Hampâté Bâ, located in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and directed by his daughter, Roukiatou Hampâté Bâ, is on Facebook, and many of the interviews

and addresses that he gave over the years are posted on YouTube.⁴² His writings are read aloud in French and in translation.⁴³ The African Studies Centre at Leiden University in the Netherlands has posted an extensive web dossier on A. H. Bâ.⁴⁴ Following the English-language translation of his *Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar: Le sage de Bandiagara* (translated by Fatima Jane Casewit as *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*), this portrait of A. H. Bâ's influential Sufi Muslim spiritual teacher who favored interfaith cooperation and understanding was adapted to the stage and directed by Peter Brook in a performance at Columbia University in 2005.⁴⁵ He is present in the theatrical French-language sketches of Fula actor and comedian Saïdou Abatcha (also available on YouTube), and his life was the subject of a recent play by Bernard Magnier, the editor at Actes Sud responsible for republishing A. H. Bâ's *Memoirs* in 2012. The play was performed in France in March 2018 with Le Tarmac Theater, and it was quite appropriately entitled *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amadou Hampâté Bâ* (The fabulous destiny of Amadou Hampâté Bâ). A. H. Bâ's well-known novel, *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin: ou, Les roueries d'un interprète africain*, has been translated into English, Italian, German, and Japanese and is the subject of numerous essays and books. Even before they were republished in 2012 by Actes Sud, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul: mémoires* and *Oui, Mon Commandant: mémoires II* had already been translated into Dutch, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and Portuguese.

All told, A. H. Bâ published fifteen books and a great number of articles, poems, and stories in French and Fulfulde, and many more works still remain unpublished. His contributions are global in scope. The *MLA International Bibliography* lists fifty articles and books dedicated to various aspects of his work. A World Cat search under the heading "Amadou Hampâté Bâ" lists 234 works in 820 publications in 11 languages and 5,347 library holdings.⁴⁶ A. H. Bâ's work has been studied by ethnologists, historians, literary scholars, religious studies experts, and translators. Somewhat like the chameleon in "A l'école du caméléon," in which A. H. Bâ exhorted listeners to learn from "that very great professor, the chameleon" for its ability to change itself and adapt to the place in which it happened to be, A. H. Bâ was and is many things to many people: a teller of traditional tales, an African sage, an orator, an initiate, a spiritual leader, a philosopher, a historian, an ethnographer, an autobiographer, a biographer, a poet, a translator, an interpreter, a novelist, a colonial clerk, an ambassador, a father, a husband, a son. As Austen and Soares remark, "given Hampâté Bâ's many facets . . . it has not been easy to characterize him or pin him down."⁴⁷ According to A. H. Bâ, such a transformative and chameleon-like ability "n'est pas de l'hypocrisie; c'est d'abord de la tolérance, et puis le savoir-vivre" (is not

hypocrisy; rather, first it is tolerance and then *savoir-vivre*). While his ability to adapt to diverse situations was necessary for surviving the numerous reversals of fortune that marked Amadou Hampâté Bâ's life, this "penser-caméléon" is directly related to what Achille Mbembe identifies in "L'Afrique qui vient" (Africa in view) as the transformative power of "une sorte d'intelligence rusée" (a wily intelligence) where "ce que l'on est et ce que l'on devient est le résultat de notre capacité à exploiter les potentiels de situation" (what one is and what one becomes is the result of our capacity to exploit situational potentials).⁴⁸