

# Roots

## My Dual Heritage

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. This is why, when one wishes to honor someone, that person is greeted by calling out his clan name, for instance, “Bâ! Bâ!,” or “Diallo! Diallo!,” or “Cissé, Cissé!,” rather than his personal name (in Europe this is known as one’s first or given name), for it is not just one isolated individual who is being greeted but, through him, his entire ancestral line.

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, if only to place them in context. Both of them are Fula, and both were intimately involved, although they were in opposing camps, in the sometimes tragic historical 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. I thus received at birth a dual historical and emotional heritage, and many of the events in my life have been touched by this fact.

“Not so fast!” will undoubtedly be the reaction from non-African readers with little exposure to the great names of our history. “Before you go any further, just who are the Fulas and the Toucouleurs?”

I will begin with my Fula ancestors. If the question is easily asked, it is not easily answered, because these nomadic people who have driven their herds across the entire African savanna south of the Sahara, from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to those of the Indian Ocean, as it has done for millennia (the rock art depicting cattle in the Tassili n’Ajjjer caves discovered by Henri Lhote bear witness to this), constitute a veritable enigma of history.<sup>1</sup> No one has yet been able to pierce the mystery of their origins. Fula legends and oral traditions almost all refer to an ancient Eastern origin. But according to different versions, this origin is sometimes described as Arab, Yemeni, or Palestinian, is sometimes Jewish, and is sometimes thought to be even more distant, with its roots located in India. Our traditions speak of several great migratory currents out of the East during very ancient times. Some of these, which traversed Africa from east to west, are said to have arrived in the Fouta Tooro region of Senegal, a region from which they would much later set off once again toward the East, in new migratory waves, during a time period closer to ours.

Intrigued perhaps by the physical appearance of the Fulas, by their relatively light skin color (which can be darker depending on the degree of intermixing), by their long, straight noses, and their often rather thin lips, European scientists and researchers have tried, each according to his or her discipline (history, linguistics, anthropology, ethnology), to find a solution to the mystery of Fula origins. Each has followed his or her own hypothesis, sometimes investing as much energy in defending it as in refuting those of others, but nobody has provided a clear response. They most often agree to assign the Fula a more or less “oriental” origin, with a rather varied degree of intermixing between a non-Negro Semitic, or Hamitic element, and the Blacks of Sudan without providing further details. For modern African historians, the Fula are of purely African descent.

Whatever the case may be, and this is the profound originality of the Fula, over time and space, and throughout their migrations, their intermixing, the contributions from outside elements, and the inevitable adaptations they have made

to their surrounding environments, they have been able to retain their identity and preserve their language. They have retained their cultural heritage and, even with their conversion to Islam, have maintained their own initiatory and religious traditions, each of which is connected to their deep conviction regarding their identity and their nobility. While they may not know where they came from, they know who they are. “The Fula knows himself,” as the Bambara say.

With poetic wit, my old friend Sado Diarra, chief of the village of Yérémadio, near Bamako, used to express Bambara thinking vis-à-vis the Fula in the following way: “The Fula are a surprising mixture. A white river in lands where black waters flow, a black river in lands where white waters flow, they are an enigmatic people that capricious whirlwinds have carried from the rising sun and scattered almost everywhere from east to west.”

Buffeted by thousands of historical events that are more or less known, the Fula were effectively scattered like will-o'-the-wisps over all the grassy regions of the African savanna south of the Sahara. “Everywhere present, but nowhere at home,” constantly seeking new watering holes and rich pasture, by day they would drive their great humped cattle with horns shaped like lyres or crescent moons, and by night they would give themselves over to improvised poetic jousting matches. Sometimes oppressed, dispersed in diasporas or settled by force in restricted areas, sometimes turned conquerors and organized into kingdoms, following their conversion to Islam, they would go on to found great empires: among them, the Sokoto Empire (in the region of Nigeria), founded in the seventeenth century by Ousmane Dan Fodio, and the Fula Empire of Massina (in the region of Mali), founded at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Cheikou Amadou, in the heart of the fertile inner bend of the Niger River.

Attracted by its vast, grassy prairies, successive waves of Fula herdsmen, originating especially from the Senegalese Fouta Tooro and Ferlo regions, had settled in Massina centuries before the founding of this last empire. My distant paternal ancestors arrived there around the fifteenth century. They settled on the right bank of the Bani River (an affluent of the Niger) between Djenné and Mopti, in a land that was called Fakala, meaning, “for all,” because the Fula cohabitated there with the various ethnic groups of the region: Bamabaras, Markas, Bozos, Somonos, Dogons, and so on.

In 1818, when Cheikou Amadou founded the *dina* (or Islamic state) in the country which historians have called the “Theocratic Fula Empire of Massina” (whose history I have recounted elsewhere), the population of the entire Niger Bend was already in majority Fula.<sup>2</sup> My paternal ancestors, the Bâs and the Hamsalahs, who occupied the role of chiefs in the Fakala region, pledged a vow

of allegiance to Cheikou Amadou. They also continued on as pastoralists, since no Fula worth his salt, even if he is no longer nomadic, could conceive of living without having a herd to care for, not so much for economic reasons but out of an ancestral and almost sacred love for the animals, his brothers, since they have been his constant companions since the dawn of time. According to an old adage, “a Fula without a herd is like a prince without a crown.”

The community of the *dîna*, modeled after the very first Muslim community of Medina, prospered for twenty-eight years under the enlightened guidance of Cheikou Amadou. Cheikou Amadou had succeeded in freeing the Fula from the domination of local sovereigns by organizing and more or less sedentarizing them within the reaches of a powerful, independent state and, what was no small feat, by regulating the dates and trajectories of the seasonal migration of the herds in concert with local farming communities. After his death in 1845, and the death of his son Amadou Cheikou in 1853, the situation of the community deteriorated under the reign of his grandson Amadou Amadou, who died in 1862 during the events that accompanied the taking of the capital Hamdallaye by the Toucouleur armies of El Hadj Omar. The Fula Empire of Massina, where my paternal lineage had flourished, had seen its day.<sup>3</sup>

Now they step onto history’s stage: those “Toucouleurs” whose name, by its very sound, never fails to surprise the uninitiated reader. A brief explanation is in order. This name, which has nothing to do with any notion whatsoever of color, is derived from the Arabic or Berber word *Tekroul*, which at one time referred to the entire Fouta Tooro region of Senegal. The Arabic-speaking Moors called the inhabitants of this land *Tekarir* (the singular form is *Tekrouri*). According to Maurice Delafosse, this name, deformed through its pronunciation in Wolof as *Tokoror* or *Tokolor* became, in its final French deformation, *Toucouleur*.

Over the course of a distant and obscure historical process, the inhabitants of this land, although of different ethnic backgrounds (probably primarily Fula once this group had arrived en masse in the Fouta Tooro region, although there were also Serer, Wolof, Soninké, etc.), all became speakers of Pulaar, which then became for them a factor of linguistic and even of cultural unity.<sup>4</sup> The Toucouleur people are therefore not an ethnic group in the true sense of the word, but rather an assemblage of ethnic groups bound by the use of the same language, who, over time, became more or less mixed through intermarriage. The Toucouleurs themselves have their own designation: *Halpulaar*, those who speak *Pulaar*; they are also called *Foutanké*, those who are from Fouta.

Regarding pure Fula traditions, notably the religious and initiatory traditions, these have been carried on solely by the Fula pastoralists who live deep in the bush, that is, far removed from any cities or villages.

The two peoples who, in the year of 1862 fought each other in Massina on the outskirts of Hamdallaye, thus had a good many things in common: their religion, their language, sometimes their ethnicity, and even their original homeland, since the ancestors of the Fulas of Massina had also come from the Fouta Tooro centuries before. The “Fulas of Massina” and the “Toucouleurs” of El Hadj Omar nevertheless comprised two distinct political entities. Because they will be present throughout this entire narrative, I will retain these two designators in order to maintain clarity for the reader. They themselves would later use the designators “old Futa” (*Foutakindi*) to name the Fulas of Massina who had been in the country for centuries, and “new Futa” (*Foutakeiri*) to name the Toucouleurs who had arrived in the country with El Hadj Omar.

### Pâté Pouлло, My Maternal Grandfather

Among the victorious Toucouleur army that penetrated Hamdallaye, there was a Fula from Fouta Tooro who had once given up everything in order to follow El Hadj Omar. His name was Pâté Pouлло of the Diallo clan, and he was my future maternal grandfather. I would later hear his oft-recounted tale.

Pâté Pouлло was a Fula herdsman from deep in the bush of Dienguel in Senegal and a *silatigui*, or grand master of pastoral initiation and a kind of priest of this religion, and therefore a spiritual leader of the entire tribe.<sup>5</sup> Like all *silatigui*, he was gifted with uncommon abilities: he was a seer, soothsayer, and healer; he was a talented judge of character and could interpret the mute sign language of the bush. Although young, he enjoyed an eminent position in society. But one day, while on a journey, he chanced to see and hear El Hadj Omar, the grand master of the Islamic Tidjaniya brotherhood, who was on a tour of the Fouta Tooro.<sup>6</sup>

As soon as he arrived home, Pâté Pouлло summoned his brothers, close relations, and tribal representatives and announced his intention to renounce everything in order to follow El Hadj Omar. “But first,” he told them, “I wish to ask your permission. If you consent, I will compensate you for my departure by leaving my entire herd to you. I will leave empty handed, with nothing but the hair on my head and the clothes on my back. As for my *silatigui*’s staff, before my departure, I will ritually bequeath it to the one most qualified to inherit it.”

His relatives were greatly surprised, but in the end they all gave him this blessing: “Follow your path and go in peace and only in peace!” And this is how

my grandfather renounced his wealth, herds, and power, and, armed only with his herdsman's staff, set out to join El Hadj Omar.

Upon finding him again in a city whose name I have forgotten, he introduced himself: "Cheikh Omar, I have heeded your call and I have come to join you. My name is Pâté Poullo Diallo and I am a 'Red Fula,' a Fula herdsman from deep in the bush. In order to free myself from my obligations, I have left my entire herd to my brothers. I was as rich as a Fula can be rich. It is therefore not with the goal of acquiring wealth that I have come to join you, but solely to answer God's call, because a Fula would not leave his herd to search for any other thing.

"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. This knowledge that is inside of me, I cannot renounce it, but perhaps it could be of use to you? As you travel with your companions, I could be 'responsible' for the bush and guide you through its perils.

"This is to tell you that I have not come to join you for worldly things. I beg you to receive me into Islam, and I will follow you wherever you go, but on one condition: on the day that God allows your cause to triumph, and when you have power and great riches at your disposal, I request that you never name me to any commanding posts, neither as a military chief, nor as a provincial chief, nor as a village chief, nor even as a district chief. Because a Fula who has abandoned his herds can never be given anything to equal their worth.

"If I have chosen to follow you, it is solely so that you may guide me toward knowledge of the One God."

Greatly moved, El Hadj Omar accepted my grandfather's conditions and called for the conversion ceremony to proceed. And in fact, for the rest of his life, my grandfather accepted neither honors nor duties of command. A purely spiritual alliance was formed between the two men and soon developed into a deep friendship. As an expression of trust, El Hadj Omar placed Pâté Poullo in charge of watching over and caring for the small herd that he had personally inherited from his Fula mother, a herd that followed him everywhere and from which he would draw, along with the fruit of the Koranic lessons that he never stopped giving, food and sustenance for his own family.

From that day forward, enlisted under the banner of El Hadj Omar, Pâté Pouлло followed him throughout his campaign toward the East. And that is how, one day in 1862, as conquerors, they penetrated Hamdallaye, the capital of the Fula Empire of Massina founded forty-four years earlier by Cheikou Amadou. El Hadj Omar would remain there for two years. During his final nine months there, all his enemies (Fulas, Kountas from Timbuktu, and others) formed a coalition to lay him siege. Their armies, encamped along the sturdy perimeter wall that he had had built for the protection of the city, let nothing through. The blockade was unrelenting, the famine atrocious. The Toucouleurs were at times reduced to the utmost dire straits.

It was during these dramatic times that, thanks to a few of drops of milk, Pâté Pouлло formed a bond of friendship with a nephew of El Hadj Omar named Tidjani Tall (son of Amadou Seydou Tall, the older brother of El Hadj Omar). No one yet suspected that he would later become the new sovereign of the Toucouleur kingdom of Massina, that he would found the city of Bandiagara, where I was born, and that he would play an extremely important role in the history of my family, both on the paternal and maternal sides, thereby indirectly influencing my own destiny.

One day during the siege, a milk cow that had escaped the notice of the enemy soldiers had managed to approach one of the gates in the perimeter wall. Immediately, she was allowed into the city where, quite naturally, she was entrusted to the good care of Pâté Pouлло. Every night, he left the city undetected in search of forage for the cow. Every morning, after he had milked the good cow, he would carry a great calabash brimming with milk to El Hadj Omar, who would share the precious liquid among his family members, himself, and Pâté Pouлло. But on each of these occasions, my grandfather carried an extra portion of milk, which he had hidden in a small goatskin, to Tidjani, in thanks for his strange abilities; he had read Tidjani's destiny in the features of his face. "Here is the rest of your father El Hadj Omar's milk," he would tell him.<sup>7</sup> "Drink it for you will be his heir." And Tidjani would drink. This is how a solid bond was formed between them, founded on affection and gratitude, and which ever after never flagged.

In 1864, when the situation became unbearable, El Hadj Omar decided to send his nephew Tidjani outside the walls to gather reinforcements. He advised Tidjani to go to Doukombo in Dogon country and to seek out his friend, the distinguished Ellé Kossodio, in order to ask for his help in recruiting an army to rescue them. He handed him a great amount of gold in order to facilitate the task, and he appointed three Toucouleur soldiers to accompany him. Then

he called my grandfather: “Pâté Pouлло, go with Tidjani. You will be of more use to him than I. You once promised to ‘take responsibility’ for the bush on my behalf. Today, my wish is that you ‘take responsibility’ for Tidjani. Go with him and be his guide, his light. Make sure that the way is clear of danger, and then return and tell him what he must do.”

El Hadj Omar then took Tidjani’s hands, placed them in Pâté Pouлло’s hands and told him: “Consider Pâté Pouлло as your father, just as you do me. He will be your companion and your eyes and ears in the bush. Everything that he tells you to do, you must accept. If he tells you to camp, you must camp. If he tells you to break camp, you will break camp. As long as you are in the bush, follow his advice strictly. But as soon as you reach the city, the initiative will again be yours, as the city is not his domain. I entrust you each to the other, and both of you to Allah, who never betrays.”

Favored by a deep, black night and guided by Pâté Pouлло, the small group was able to slip out of Hamdallaye and cross enemy lines without being detected. They soon arrived without mishap in Doukombo, at the residence of Ellé Kossodio. Ellé Kossodio began by taking Tidjani to see the great Dogon hunter Dommo, who lived seven kilometers away in the heart of a great basin-shaped plain in a place called Bannya’ara, “the great basin,” for elephants would go there to drink. It is in this place that Tidjani would later found the capital of his realm, which the Toucouleurs would come to call Bannyagara and which was one day transcribed into an official register by a French official as Bandiagara, and the name remained.

It was on this occasion, I believe, that an incident took place in which my grandfather was involved and which played an important role in Tidjani’s future choice of this place.

As was his habit, Pâté Pouлло went out to explore the surrounding bush. When he returned, he found Tidjani resting in the shade of a great balanza tree thick with foliage, while nearby there was a small balanza tree whose thin leaves allowed most of the sunlight to pass through. Compelled by inspiration, Pâté Pouлло exclaimed, “What, Tidjani! Your father El Hadj Omar is in the shade (a prisoner, unable to act) and you too are sitting in the shade? Who is going to step into the sunlight for you two? Rise and go sit on the rock lying at the foot of the small balanza tree that you see there. This is not the time for you to sit in the shade, but in the sun.” (In Fulfulde, “to sit in the shade” means that one has finished working and may rest; to “be in the sun” means to be at work.)

Tidjani, who always followed Pâté Pouлло’s advice to the letter whenever the mysteries of the bush were involved, rose and gathered up his saddle and bridle. The Toucouleurs who were accompanying them took offense: “Really



Tidjani? Pâté Poullo treats you like his child! Get up, sit here, sit there!” Without saying a word, Tidjani went and sat down on the rock. Pâté Poullo, who had watched the entire scene declared, “Tidjani, son of Amadou Seydou Tall! You who have accepted to go sit on this rock, I have something to tell you. I give you my word as a Fula from Dienguel, that one day, right here on this spot, you will found a capital city that will be the talk of the entire Niger Bend and from which nothing save your natural death will dislodge you. On that day, I will ask you to give me the land on which this rock sits so that I may be able to build my compound and raise my lodgings.”

Four years later, Tidjani would establish and develop on that very spot the capital of his kingdom, where he alone would reign for twenty years until his death. The rock on which he had sat, famous in Bandiagara, is still in the courtyard of the compound that I inherited from my mother, who herself had inherited it from her father, Pâté Poullo.

My grandfather later explained that if Tidjani had remained in the shade of the great balanza tree on that day, and if he had still been there when it came time to perform the Asr prayer (that moment in the afternoon when the sun begins its decline), he never would have become a ruler, nor would he have founded a kingdom in that place. Of course, this is not very logical in the Cartesian sense of the word, but for us elders, particularly for “men of knowledge” (silatigui for the Fulas, *doma* for the Bambaras), logic rested on another vision of the world in which humanity was connected in a subtle and vibrant way to all the surrounding environment. For them, the configuration of things at certain key moments of existence took on a precise meaning that they were able to interpret. *Listen*, it was said in Old Africa, *everything speaks, everything has a voice, everything seeks to communicate its knowledge to us*.

Aided by Ellé Kossodio and his companions, Tidjani succeeded in raising an army of 100,000 men in the region. In the meantime, he learned that Hamdallye had been completely destroyed by fire and that at the urging of his men, El Hadj Omar had ventured out and had cleared a route for himself all the way to Déguembéré, in Dogon country. With his sons and last remaining companions, he had taken refuge in a cave on a mountainside and had been surrounded by Fula and Kounta armies from Timbuktu.

Tidjani pressed onward as quickly as possible in order to extricate his uncle, but when he arrived at Déguembéré, it was too late. Just a few hours earlier, El Hadj Omar had met his demise. For reasons that remain obscure, a powder keg had exploded inside the cave, and he had perished with his companions in the explosion.

Mad with grief and rage, Tidjani led his men in an attack on the Fula and Kounta armies and pushed them back a considerable distance. As he pursued the fugitives, he waged a ferocious crackdown on the land. Following the great battle known as Sebara, where the Fulas of Fakala were vanquished, he gave the order to execute males of all ages who belonged to the important families of the Fula Empire, essentially the families related to Cheikou Amadou, the founder of the empire, and the Bâ and Hamsalah families. At Sofara, in my paternal family alone, forty people were executed on the same day. All of them were my grandfathers, my great-uncles, or my paternal uncles. Only two young boys escaped: Hampâté Bâ, who would become my father, and who happened to be far from the country at the time, and a young cousin whose fate I do not know.

After settling in different cities in the region, Tidjani finally decided to place the capital of his realm in Bandiagara, since the site was well protected. From there, he was able to carry out a series of victorious maneuvers against his enemies. He became the master of the land, although he still had to make war against the pockets of Fula resistance that were scattered throughout the country, and that were supported by the Kountas of Timbuktu. Pâté Poulo, who was in charge of the royal flock, was still at his side. Let us leave him for a moment in order to join the young boy who had miraculously escaped the massacre and who was to become my father.

### **The Story of My Father Hampâté, the Lamb in the Lion's Den**

I have no memory of my father, because unfortunately I lost him at a moment when I had spent only three years in this turbulent world where, like a shard from a broken calabash carried away on the river, I would later float at the whim of the political and religious events that were unleashed by the colonial presence.

One day, when I was about four or five years old, I was playing near Niélé Dembélé, that wonderful woman who had been my “servant-mother” since my birth and who had spent her entire life in the company of my father, when suddenly I turned and asked her, “Niélé, what was my father like?”<sup>8</sup>

Taken aback, she was speechless for a moment. Then she cried, “Your father! A good master!” And to my utter amazement, she broke into tears, drew me to her and pressed me tightly to her breast.

“Have I said something bad?” I asked. “Must we not talk about my father?”

“No, no, you haven’t said anything bad,” replied Niélé. “It’s just that you have moved me by reviving in my mind the memory of the man who saved my

life when I was a child by snatching me away from the grip of a cruel and capricious mistress who beat me constantly and barely fed me. Hampâté was not just your father, for by his bounty and his affection, he was also mine.

“You wish to know what he was like? Well, he was of medium build, and well proportioned, and not a sack of meat with puffed out cheeks. He was as quiet as a cavern in the wild bush, and almost never spoke except to say what had to be said. His fine Fula lips lightly revealed his white teeth in a half smile that constantly illuminated his face. But beware! If he fixed his gaze on someone, his male lion’s eyes could make that person piss in terror!

“Because you have questioned me today about your father, it is because the time has come for you to know his story.”

I sat down next to her, and it was then that for the first time, and from beginning to end, she told the incredible story of Hampâté. His is a story that was told and retold in our family as well as in a good number of households in Bandiagara, for it was as if it had come from a novel. I had already heard bits and pieces of it, but this time, the story was told to me alone, as if to an adult. Of course, I did not retain all of it on that day, but I was to hear it again a good many times over. This is how I am able to insert a number of details, notably historical ones, into Niélé’s narrative, details that were likely not present at first.

Niéle began by recounting the circumstances by which, in a single morning in Sofara, I had lost “forty grandfathers,” and how Hampâté, who was then only a young boy about twelve years old, had miraculously escaped. He was already an orphan, for he had lost both his father and his mother. On that sad day he also lost all those who would naturally have supported him: the uncles who had replaced his parents, and all his cousins.

Following the executions, the leading Fulas of Fakala were given permission to bury their dead. As they proceeded to identify them, they noticed that the body of young Hampâté was not among the Sofara victims. After making a number of discreet inquiries throughout the country, they learned that the boy was in Kounari, where he was in imminent danger of being discovered, since Tidjani’s armies and governors were everywhere.

As soon as their torments began to recede a bit, they held a council. It was of the utmost imperative to save young Hampâté, the lone male survivor of a decimated family, and to find a way to protect him from the fate that threatened him. The Hamsalah family tree could in no way be allowed to die. Had not the venerated founder of the Fula Empire of Massina, Cheikou Amadou, himself once said, “The Hamsalah of Fakala are ‘human gold.’ If such a

thing were possible, I would sow them like plants in order to always have them among us.”

On the advice of two Fulas who had rallied behind King Tidjani in Bandiagara, the notables decided to hide Hampâté in the very capital where the king himself resided. He would be sought everywhere, they thought, save in the shadow of the monarch who had condemned his entire family. Who would dream that a lamb would come to take refuge in a lion’s den? Hassane Bocoum, a Diawando from Fakala, was given the task of traveling to Kounari to collect Hampâté and take him in secret to Bandiagara to live with a trusted landowner.<sup>9</sup> It so happened that during his sojourn in Kounari, Hampâté had formed a fast friendship with a young Fula boy his own age, Balewel Diko, a descendant of the famous Gueladio, the former *peredio* king of Kounari.<sup>10</sup> This young boy had become so attached to Hampâté that he categorically refused to be separated from him, come what may. He asked his father for permission to join the expedition that was to take Hampâté away. Since our two families were connected, his father accepted.

In Bandiagara at that time there lived an old butcher whose name was Allamodio. He belonged to the *rimaibe* (sing. *dimadjo*) class, that is, the class of “house captives,” servants tied to a particular family from generation to generation.<sup>11</sup> Given his status as a former *dimadjo* of the Hamsalahs, he was entirely devoted to the family. Well, this old butcher, who had taken refuge in Bandiagara, had entered into the good graces of King Tidjani to such an extent that Tidjani had liberated him and had charged him with supplying meat to all the Toucouleurs. My grandfather, Pâté Poullou, who had become the manager of Tidjani’s herds, had been instructed to each day place at Allamodio’s disposition as many animals as were necessary to serve the needs of the inhabitants. In fact, during the entire length of Tidjani’s reign, no single Toucouleur, no single Fula who had rallied to Tidjani’s side, nor any member of the royal entourage had to pay anything whatsoever for subsistence. The state supplied their meat and food, and copious meals were offered daily to the poor at no charge.

The organ meats of the animals became the property of Allamodio, who made a good profit from selling them, but he used the money only to help the underprivileged. His generosity was so proverbial that he had earned the nickname of “Allamodio,” a word that, in Fulfulde, literally means “God Is Good.” Never before had a man so deserved his moniker! His home had become the refuge of those in need, whether they were war orphans or victims of fate who, upon arriving in Bandiagara, knew not where to go nor how to get by. Well

nigh thirty young boys and twenty or so indigent adults were living in this way in his vast compound.

King Tidjani, who held him in high esteem, had declared his residence to be sacrosanct. One day, some jealous courtesans had come to tell him, “Tidjani, your head butcher is hosting anyone who asks him for shelter and is doing so without any oversight.” Tidjani had replied, “If a man who is my enemy enters Allamodio’s residence, even if he does not become my friend, he ceases to be my enemy.” Nobody was thus better suited than Allamodio to take in and to hide in his own home the descendant of the Hamsalahs of Fakala, a family to which he had remained viscerally attached. Hassane Boucoum had entrusted Hampâté to him “in the name of all Fakala,” strongly advising him never to reveal the child’s true identity, for to do so would have been the surest way to send him to the cemetery. Hampâté and his little comrade, Balewel Diko, were given the same instructions for discretion and prudence.

The two friends thus settled in with Allamodio, who taught them the trade of butcher’s assistant. For the sons of important families, this trade was somewhat scorned and not considered very suitable, but Hampâté and Balewel were able to overcome their prejudice. Out of gratitude for their benefactor, who had personally taken a great risk in lodging them without revealing their presence, they ardently set to work, fueled by the sole desire of assisting to the best of their abilities their new “father” who was no longer a young man.

Hampâté—unlike me!—could spend an entire day without speaking. “Hello,” “Goodbye,” “Yes,” “No,” “Don’t do that,” “Pardon,” “Thank you,” constituted the essential content of his speech. His serious conduct and his discretion, along with the courage and fidelity of Balewel, touched the old butcher. Soon Allamodio gave them his complete trust and grew to depend on them. He affectionately called them “my hands and my feet.”

One fine day, he made Hampâté his treasurer. He gave him the keys to his storehouse and cowries and charged him with making payments and deposits for him in town.<sup>12</sup>

Years went by. Hampâté and Balewel were living peacefully in the most complete anonymity, apparently forgotten by the royal power. Nothing seemed to indicate at that time that one day things could ever be any different.

During this time, Bandiagara had not stopped growing. It had become the renowned and flourishing capital of the Toucouleur kingdom of Massina, masterfully led by Tidjani (son of) Amadou Seydou Tall (whom we will henceforth call Tidjani Tall, to simplify things), while the western part of the old Toucouleur

Empire of El Hadj Omar remained under the authority of El Hadj Omar's eldest son, Amadou Cheikou, sultan of Segou and commander of the faithful.

Over the years, Tidjani Tall's anger and resentment toward those who were responsible for the death of his uncle El Hadj Omar had subsided. Moreover, a good number of Fakala Fulas had rallied behind him. A Fula named Tierno Haymoutou Bâ, who was El Hadj Omar's personal friend and head of his army, now held the position of supreme general of the armies and leader of the council of elders. In particular, he was in charge of the Fulas who had rallied to the cause and who were serving under his command in Tidjani's troops. A great protector of the Fula refugees from Massina and Fakala, Tierno Haymoutou Bâ was able to intervene with the king, and his presence in Bandiagara no doubt persuaded a number of people to join Tidjani's side.

Thanks perhaps to this fortunate influence, and thanks also to the advice of a number of other *marabouts* in his entourage, Tidjani Tall understood that terror does not seat authority on a solid foundation, and that the best means of ensuring peace in the country lay instead in forgiveness and respect for the lives of others, their possessions, and their customs.<sup>13</sup>

Being a highly intelligent man and an astute head of state, he decided to implement a policy of reparation and reconciliation between the Fulas of Massina and the Toucouleurs living in his state. In order to avoid descending into perpetual conflict, he set out to create a veritable fusion between the two communities throughout the kingdom by way of marriage. He enacted a law whereby every Fula woman who had lost her husband in the war would have to marry a Toucouleur, while every Toucouleur woman who had lost her husband in the war would have to marry a Fula from Massina—except, of course, in such cases where, according to the Koran, kinship ties would have forbidden it. He also decreed that no prisoner of war of noble birth, that is, who was free, would be placed in captivity.<sup>14</sup> These laws had such a positive effect on the people, and in Africa the population is always quick to assign nicknames, that they christened Tidjani *Hela hemmba*, “breaker-bonesetter,” in other words, “He who breaks something and then repairs it.”

A few months after the enactment of this law, during one of his expeditions against remaining pockets of Fula resistance, Tidjani's army took the city of Tenengou and returned with prisoners. Among them was a very distinguished Fula lady from Massina, Anta N'Diobdi Sow, great-granddaughter of the Hamsalabs and a member of the Sammodi family, founder of the city of Diafarabé. She was Hampâté's maternal aunt. Because her husband had been killed during the fighting, in accordance with the new law, she was promised her freedom on the condition that she would agree to marry a Toucouleur.

Anta N'Diobdi was not only of noble lineage; she was also extremely beautiful and possessed a strong personality. Marriage proposals flooded in. She had a number of suitors from among the military leaders, provincial leaders, important marabouts and other influential personages in Tidjani's entourage. Each time, Anta N'Diobdi disdainfully replied, "I will never marry a man whose hands have been blackened and fouled by gunpowder, and who, moreover, is a coward. Only a coward would agree to fight using a gun. To hide behind a tree and to kill from a distance is not really to do battle! Real bravery means eye to eye combat with a spear or a sword, chest to chest! I will only ever accept as my husband a man who has never used a gun. In fact, in Fula women's initiation rites, I am 'Queen of the Milk' and gunpowder and milk do not go well together. The powder would sully my milk."

The rejected candidates considered themselves duly insulted and complained bitterly to Tidjani. This sparked Tidjani's curiosity along with a desire to see this intractable woman with his own eyes and to hear with his own ears the words that had been attributed to her. He sent for her.

"From what I understand," he told her, "you do not wish to marry any of my brave companions because they have supposedly been sullied by gunpowder? Don't you know that, while anyone can take in powdered millet and use it for food, only the brave can take black gunpowder into their nostrils in order to be covered in glory?"

Anta N'Diobdi smiled and lowered her head demurely.

"We are slowly coming to an agreement, are we not, my sister?"

"Venerable King, never have we been so opposed as on this particular point. It goes without saying that you can impose your point of view and even your will on me, but you will never convince me that a man who fights with a gun is as brave as one who attacks his enemy with sword and spear."

This was very bold on her part, since the Toucouleurs who belonged to Tidjani's entourage all fought with guns. Although he had understood this Fula woman's disdainful allusion perfectly, Tidjani did not become angry. He found an excuse for her in the suffering that the loss of her husband and the humiliation of her family members must have caused her.

"Because you abhor those who snort black gunpowder," he told her, smiling, "I also have 'Red Ear' Fulas like you, bred and raised on milk and butter, who would never fight alongside me unless it was with a knife.<sup>15</sup> Among them is someone that I particularly cherish: he is a great silatigui from Dienguel in Senegal who once gave up his herds, his power, and all his wealth in order to follow El Hadj Omar on the one condition that he would help him achieve union with God. He is like a father to me. He is from the Diallo clan and is

named Pâté Poullou. My sister, agree to meet him and he will pay you a visit. If you could find him attractive, I would be delighted.”

As Fula modestly demanded, Anta N’Diobdi kept her eyes lowered and returned home without responding. A few days later, she received a visit from Pâté Poullou. He was a light-skinned man, tall, solid and well built, who had never fought using any other weapons than spear and saber. She found him to be suitable. “At least,” she said to herself, “there is no chance that this one will sully my milk with gunpowder!” It went without saying that the Milk Queen would esteem the Fula silatigui. Their wedding ceremony was performed. From their union six children would be born, and among them was my mother, Kadidja.

During this period, thanks to the protection afforded by Tierno Haymoutou Bâ, a good many Fulas from Fakala had ended up in Bandiagara. Most of them were regular visitors to Anta N’Diobdi’s house. Anta N’Diobdi, who had formerly resided in Tenengou, knew nothing of the rescue of Hampâté and thought that he had been killed along with all his family members. One day a griote from Fakala who had taken refuge in Bandiagara came to pay a visit.<sup>16</sup> In the course of their conversation, the griote declared, “Your nephew Hampâté is in Bandiagara.”

“Hampâté? That is not possible. He is dead.”

“No, he is alive. If you do not believe me, talk to Mamadou Tané, the confidant of all the refugees from Fakala.”

Anta N’Diobdi sent for Mamdou Tané. “Is what they are telling me true?” she asked him.

“Yes. Hampâté is very much alive.” And he told her of the circumstances by which the child had escaped the massacre and how he had been taken to Bandiagara. “We had been ordered,” he added, “to hide him with Allamodio and to ensure that he was living in the most complete anonymity. And until now, this is what we have done.”

Overwhelmed at hearing this news, Anta N’Diobdi immediately sent someone to look for her nephew. When she saw him cross her threshold, she cried for joy. She wanted to know everything about how he had been living. Hampâté told her his story.

Anta N’Diobdi gave thanks to God for having allowed at least one male member of her family to survive, and then quite naturally asked her nephew to come and live with her. To her astonishment, the young man refused. “Mother,” he said, “I am sorry, but I must stay with Allamodio. This old butcher has become my father and my place is with him. I cannot abandon him.” Although it was against her wishes, Anta N’Diobdi could do nothing but allow him to leave.



The immense joy that she had felt was suddenly marred by something that she could not bear and that gradually began to eat away at her, for her nephew, the only surviving descendant of the Hamsalahs, was living at the lower rank of a poor butcher's assistant and doing so in complete anonymity. That night, she did not say a word to her husband about the encounter, but from that day forward, the sadness that overcame her was so strong that she could no longer eat or drink. She stopped laughing and spent her nights moaning and crying, softly singing sad songs about her family's misfortunes.

Pâté Pouлло soon noticed this change and began to worry. At first he thought that it would pass, but after weeks went by, he decided to break his silence. "Anta," he said, "you have changed. You are no longer the same. You seem to regret our union. And yet, I belong to a lineage that is as pure as yours. The king honors me with his trust and friendship. I am not an insignificant person in Bandiagara. As for my material wealth, I am well-off. You have one thousand head of cattle at your disposal, and I manage twenty thousand head of the royal herd. Indeed, my entire fortune is in your hands. Do what you want with it. Be happy, make me happy, and spare me from hearing my rivals crow disparagingly, 'We knew all along that Anta N'Diobdi would never be happy with Pâté Pouлло!' And if by misfortune my tenderness and my wealth are incapable of making you happy and that at whatever cost you must withdraw the hand that you have so generously given me, then say so. I may be able to survive that shame and misfortune. Even if my heart is desperate, it will be with a smiling mouth that I will say, 'Ask me for a divorce if you wish,' and if you do ask me, I will allow you to leave. But never, never, ever, will my mouth open itself on its own accord to say 'I divorce you.'<sup>17</sup> And yet, know that if you must leave one day, that day will mark my entrance into a darkness beyond death and the beginning of an endless night."

Receiving no response, Pâté Pouлло arose, seized his spear, and left the house as though in a dream. Anta N'Diobdi remained slumped and motionless. When Pâté Pouлло returned very late that evening, he found that his wife was still lying where he had left her upon leaving. He approached and took her head gently into his hands and pressed it to his chest. Her face was swollen and she had been crying. Overwhelmed, Pâté Pouлло said, "Anta, even if I were not your husband, in my capacity as *bi dîmo*, a noble and well-born Fula, I have the right to your trust and I must help you and support you in your pain. I beg you, speak to me!"

Anta N'Diobdi, who had let down her long Fula hair, finally raised her head. She pushed back the tendrils that were hiding half of her face, and in a weak voice unburdened her heart.

“Yes, it is true,” she said, “that I am carrying a painful weight, but it is not because of you! Under no circumstances should you think that I am unhappy with you, quite the contrary! Our meeting was a fortunate one. But what has been gnawing at me for a month, what makes my nights sleepless, my days unbearable, my food bland, and my drink insipid, is an affair that concerns my family’s honor, an affair as delicate as it is grave.”

“What can this affair be, Anta?”

“You know that my family from the Fakala belongs to one of the Massina families whose male descendants, young and old, were condemned to death by King Tidjani Tall, and that forty members of my family were executed on one single day in Sofara.”

“Yes, alas, I know!” cried Pâté Pouлло. “Unfortunately, the laws of war are more akin to the reflexes of ferocious beasts than to the actions of normal human beings.”

“It so happened that two boys were noticed to be missing from among the bodies of the men of my family. Well, I have just discovered, in this very neighborhood, right here in Bandiagara, one of the surviving boys. He is my very own nephew Hampâté, the son of my deceased sister. He is in hiding with Allamodio, the king’s chief butcher, and lives in complete anonymity. Nobody knows who he is. What sends me into despair is to see a descendant of the Hamsalahs, the hope of my country and my family, living without a name in the degrading proximity of a butcher’s shop. For almost a month now, I have been struggling to become accustomed to the idea, but to no avail. I have hesitated to speak to you about this, because I did not want a misunderstanding or a subject of disagreement to develop between you and King Tidjani. But because you insist on knowing about the cause of my sadness, I will tell you everything. In truth, I can no longer bear this situation. So here is what I have decided. Whatever happens, I am asking you to take my nephew Hampâté to King Tidjani and to reveal his true identity, so that everyone can know who he is. You will beg the king, on your behalf, or on my own, as you see fit, to safeguard the life of my nephew. If he refuses, you will ask him to have Hampâté executed immediately so that his soul may join without delay those of his fathers who have preceded him into the other world, where he will perhaps be no worse off than here.”

Pâté Pouлло stared at his wife. His face seemed to stiffen, and he began to sweat profusely. “Do you realize what you are exposing your nephew to?” he asked.

“Yes, I know. I have purposefully chosen death for him rather than anonymity, which is another way to die. I would rather see him dead and buried under his real name, than to see him live with no identity. And I would also

like you to tell Tidjani this: 'If he has my nephew executed, I would understand his act, and I would not even condemn it.' It is the law of war. If I myself, by a reversal of fortune, were to become his conqueror, I would not hesitate to cut his throat. But I ask him the favor of saving the body of my nephew from the 'drag of degradation' reserved for the condemned so that I may bury him honorably."<sup>18</sup>

Pâté Pouлло did everything in his power to curb his wife's resolve and to dissuade her from such a dangerous undertaking, but in vain. He summoned Hampâté to his house and informed him of the decision taken by his aunt and asked for his opinion of the situation.

Hampâté, who was only seventeen or eighteen years old at the time, responded, "My mother, Anta N'Diobdi, my only remaining parent, has every right over me, including the right to life or death, and it would be out of the question for me to refuse the fate that she has chosen for me. I owe her respect and obedience. Here in Bandiagara, it is she who attends to my family's honor. If she feels that I must die in order to save that honor, then let me die!"

"By Cheikh El Hadj Omar's prayer beads!" cried Pâté Pouлло, "If Tidjani knew the true mettle of his enemies, he would be a thousand times more on the alert than he is now!"

"We are not the personal enemies of Tidjani Tall," interrupted Anta N'Diobdi, "but we will defend our land and our honor. An enemy can be vanquished physically and sent into slavery, but no one will succeed in taming his soul and his mind to the point of impeding his capacity for thought."

Faced with such determination, Pâté Pouлло had no other choice but to take Hampâté to see the king and to implore his clemency. He chose a Friday on which to do so, as it was the Islamic holy day and the day on which Tidjani was accustomed to performing numerous good works and according pardons. The following Friday, after attending the great communal Friday prayer at the mosque, Pâté Pouлло and Hampâté, followed by Balewel, who had decided to share every aspect of Hampâté's fate, headed toward the palace. Pâté Pouлло was among the very restricted number of notables who could enter the royal palace at any hour of the day or night. He had only to pronounce the current password to the guards. Thanks to this open sesame, the three companions crossed unhindered through three well-guarded vestibules, and then went to wait at the foot of the stairway that led to the private apartments of the king on the floor above.

A bit later, Tidjani returned from the mosque where he had lingered. As soon as he saw Pâté Pouлло, his face broke into a large smile. "Ah, here is my father Pâté! May this Friday be a day of good fortune for us all!"

“May God hear you, O Tidjani, son of Amadou, son of Seydou Tall!” replied Pâté Poulo.

Tidjani glanced inquisitively at Hampâté and Balewel. “What brings you to me, father Pâté?” he inquired. “I will wager that you have come to present these handsome young men to me.” And he began to walk toward the stairway.

“Yes, I have come to present them and to plead for the cause of one of them, the one named Hampâté. His companion is called Balewel Diko, and he has decided to share Hampâté’s fate, come what may.”

Tidjani began to climb the stairs, drawing Pâté Poulo, whose hand he was holding, along with him. “What fault has this young man committed?” he asked.

“I will tell you once we have reached the audience chamber,” replied Pâté Poulo. And he signaled to the young men to wait for him below.

When they reached the great hall, Tidjani went out for a moment in order to remove some of his clothing. He returned shortly, wearing a simple *tourti* (ample under boubou) and wide pants, and then comfortably settled in. To receive a visitor in this guise was to demonstrate his trust and the extent of his familiarity with Pâté Poulo.

“Well,” he said, “what crime has your protégé committed?”

“It is a crime that is not his fault. His crime is to have been born into the Bâ family of the Hamsalabs of Fakala. Because of this he falls under the death sentence that was decreed against all the male members of his family. Now he has become my nephew by marriage, because I married his aunt Anta N’Diobdi.

“Ah! He is the nephew of that Fula woman whose beauty and courage I so admired!”

“Yes, and it is she who has forced me to come here and present him to you, regardless of the consequences.”

Pâté Poulo then faithfully recounted to the king everything that his wife had said. “I have thus come here, *Fama* [King], to ask you to spare the life of Hampâté who, from now on, is my child to the same extent as my firstborn son.”

Tidjani remained silent for a good long while and then said, “Father Pâté! This is the second time that I have run up against Anta N’Diobdi, this male soul lodged in a woman’s body. You will tell her that I myself am going to adopt her as my aunt, first because she is your wife, and also because she is one of those who have a sense of honor and a religious respect for it. As for Hampâté, I will think of him as a temptation that God has placed on my path to see how far my vengeance could carry me. If the hundreds of enemies executed in Sofara, Fatoma, and Konna have not avenged the death of my father El Hadj Omar, the additional death of this young man will certainly not avenge

it! My dear Pâté, rest assured. I accept your request, and I am publicly sparing Hampâté's life. However," he added, smiling, "let me tell you something. Ten days after his arrival in Bandiagara, I had already been informed of his presence. I would be a very sorry excuse for a leader if I did not know what was happening in my kingdom or, what's more, in my own city. I did not want to bother Hampâté since I had considered that God himself had placed him in my care. It did indeed seem unconscionable to hide the condemned within the very confines of he who had pronounced the sentence.

"Now that Hampâté, who was my uninvited guest, has become my cousin—since he is your nephew—I am going to make a donation: I give him the amount necessary to pay a dowry and marry a woman, a spacious compound, a horse and bridle, a gun, seven spears, a halberd, a sword, a piece of blue guinea cloth sixty cubits in length, a piece of white cretonne cloth, a starched Hausa turban, a pair of embroidered boots, two pairs of Djenné slippers, and ten milk cows. Finally, I would like him to join my army in the ranks of the Fula troops commanded by Tierno Haymoutou Bâ. Then he will no longer be an anonymous butcher's assistant."

Pâté Pouлло was as happy as a Fula whose cow has just given birth to a female calf! Unable to throw his arms around the king's neck, he bowed deeply before him in thanks.

The king pulled him up. "Please, Pâté, there will be no such gestures between us!"

Hampâté and Balewel, who had remained at the bottom of the stairs, were invited to ascend. Pâté Pouлло informed Hampâté of the pardon that had been accorded by the king and the rich gifts that had been bestowed upon him. Then he informed him of the king's wish that he join his army under the command of Tierno Haymoutou Bâ. With downcast eyes, Hampâté remained silent for a moment, and then he said, "I thank God and King Tidjani Amadou Seydou Tall for having accorded me my life. I am very honored by the king's generous gesture, and I thank him from the bottom of my heart. But concerning my enlistment, may I be permitted to tell him that there are three things that I will never allow myself to do. First, to take up arms against the people of my country, that is, against the Fulas of Massina; second, to take up arms against King Tidjani himself, who, rather than cutting my throat, has opened his arms magnanimously and has showered me with gifts; third, to abandon the old butcher Allamodio, who has been a real father to me. I have vowed to stay by his side in order to serve him until my death or until he dies."

Following these words, there was an oppressive silence that seemed endless. Pâté Pouлло feared the worst. But far from being angry, King Tidjani exclaimed,

“Wallahi! By God! Noble blood speaks! Loyal young man, you deserve the respect and admiration of everyone, including the king.” And extending his hand to Hampâté and Balewel, he told them, “Go out and live in Bandiagara as free Muslims, with all the rights due to the Toucouleur citizens of our city!”

The king did not leave Balewel empty handed. He gave him a horse, a gun, a halberd, seven spears, and three costly garments.

In the company of the two young men, Pâté Poullo returned home. Radiant and proud as a conqueror returning from battle, he gave his wife the good news. Anta N’Diobdi’s joy was immense. But when her husband informed her of the three things that Hampâté had told the king that he would never do, she almost stopped breathing! The idea that her nephew would continue to work as a butcher’s assistant with Allamodio was stifling. She took a moment to regain her composure, but finally she gave it some thought and said, “And yet, it is more shameful to be ungrateful than to be a butcher’s assistant.”

She turned to Hampâté. “Go,” she said, “return to Allamodio, and serve him, I accept. My soul will cry about it every day out of chagrin, but my reason will dry the tears that family pride will make me shed. When it is honor that makes a sacrifice acceptable, then the sacrifice becomes sublime. You have chosen to live in opaque obscurity although a grand and radiant sun is offering to shed its rays upon you. May the Lord take note of your conduct and give you sons who will glorify your name!”

(Here ends Niélé’s narrative. What follows has been reconstructed from stories handed down in the family by the main actors or witnesses to this story, in particular Balewel Diko.)

Still seconded by his faithful companion, Hampâté thus continued to live with the old butcher Allamodio. Shortly after his reinstatement, he founded the first association (*waaldé* in Fulfulde) of young Fula men from Massina in Bandiagara. Subsequently, thanks to the encouragement of the king, who had looked favorably upon this initiative, his *waaldé* was expanded to include boys of diverse backgrounds. Indeed, much later, this association would play an important role in Fula and Toucouleur politics in Bandiagara, since it favored the good relations envisioned by the king between the Toucouleurs and Fulas of Massina.

Years passed. Allamodio, who had become quite old, depended more and more on the two young men in order to carry on his business. Hampâté was no longer just in charge of the finances. He was also a buyer throughout the countryside, for Allamodio and for himself, of animals whose meat was resold for their common benefit.

As soon as the Fulas of Fakala, who were mostly herders, learned that the heir to the Hamsalah was out of danger, in order to help him, they began to send him their animals to be slaughtered. Over the years, Hampâté became a trusted intermediary between the herders of a particular region in the Niger Bend, on the one hand, and the livestock merchants in Bandiagara, on the other. From his various activities, he drew a comfortable revenue, generally using it to purchase unfortunate captives, especially children, in view of freeing them or improving their lot. He acted both out of natural generosity and out of religious duty, in accordance with the command and the example of the Prophet Mohammed himself.

Over the course of his life, Hampâté purchased fifteen captives. He freed six of them, while the remaining nine refused to leave him. He treated them rather more like his adopted children than as his servants. Among them, there were two he had saved from cruel masters and whom he particularly cherished: Beydari and Niélé Dembélé. Niélé Dembélé, a Mianka from the San region in Mali, would later become, for my older brother, Hammadoun, and myself, the most attentive and tender of “servant-mothers,” while Beydari, my father’s trusted confidant, would be named by my father as he lay on his deathbed, as his only heir and leader of the entire family!

Beydari had been captured at the age of about eleven or twelve at the taking of Bousse (locality in the district of Tougan in today’s Burkina Faso). Since slavery had not yet been abolished in the French colonies, the child had been given as a gift to an indigenous noncommissioned officer in the French army, who took him to Bandiagara and sold him to a griot of the Talls named Amfarba. Amfarba had assigned him to work at his wives’ household chores.

To say the least, the poor boy had not ended up in a charitable environment. From the first call to prayer at dawn until late at night, sometimes even until midnight, he worked without pause, carrying out tasks that were beyond his physical capacity. He fed himself on leftovers and from what he could scrape from the bottoms of cooking pots. After two years of this life of famine and fatigue, walking about half naked and sleeping on the ground (and during the dry season, the nights are very cold in this region), the poor fellow had nothing but skin on his bones. After walking through stagnant water, he had caught the “Guinea worm,” a parasite whose larvae accumulate in the lower parts of the legs where they wait further contact with water in order to escape. His feet and ankles were swollen beyond measure. In spite of his condition, one of Amfarba’s wives sent him one morning to the market one kilometer away, under a leaden sun. His legs were so swollen and painful that the boy could not take twenty steps without searching for some rare patch of shade where

he could cool his bare feet, burned by the overheated earth. Seeing that he had not returned on time, Amfarba's wife went to complain to her husband. She accused the boy of being nothing but a lazy, disobedient child who was no doubt entertaining himself along the way. Anger overtook Amfarba. Seizing his whip of hippopotamus hide, he rushed out to find the boy, whom he soon met. With a full basket on his head, Beydari was walking slowly, dripping with sweat and crying out at every step.

"You are a sluggard, lazy, and disobedient!" shouted Amfarba. "This will help you stretch your legs!" And he began to whip the poor boy with all his might. As he tried to run, the swellings in the boy's legs burst open before the larvae were ready to come out. In spite of the blood that began to trickle from the child's feet, Amfarba continued to beat him.

It was then that Hampâté, who was returning from the mosque, providentially appeared from around a bend in the road. The boy ran to him, crying, "Oh Papa, save me, save me! He is going to kill me! He is going to kill me!"

And he threw himself into Hampâté's arms, just at the moment when Amfarba was going to strike a blow that would certainly have knocked him unconscious.

Hampâté caught Amfarba's hand in midair. "You brute!" he exclaimed indignantly. "Have a heart! Would you treat your own son or relative in this manner? This child suffers as you suffer. He is a human being and has a mother and father somewhere in this world."

Enraged, Amfarba replied, "In that case, if you care so much about him, buy him!"

Hampâté took him at his word. "Fine! Name your price!"

"One hundred thousand cowries," replied Amfarba.

Hampâté removed a carnelian ring from his finger and handed it to Amfarba. "Take this ring to Ousmane Djennonké and tell him that I said to give you one hundred thousand cowries. He will ensure that the ring is returned to me."

Then he picked up the basket containing the provisions that the child had bought and handed it to Amfarba. "Carry this to your wife," he said. "This boy is no longer your captive!"

Hampâté took the boy home. As soon as they arrived, he baptized him "Beydari," a name that means "increase" or "benefit" as in "benediction." Then he cured him. When the child was healed, he gave him suitable clothes to wear. Beydari was expecting to be ordered to carry out certain tasks, but to his great surprise, my father simply told him, "Go out and play with other boys your age."



In truth, Beydari did not always heed this recommendation because he liked to stay by my father's side. He followed him everywhere and never went to play with his friends until my father's work was done. It was during that time that he made friends with a boy of the royal family, young prince Koreïchi Tall, and that he joined his young people's association. Here is one example of the gestures that illustrate my father's approach. Before buying new clothes for Beydari, as was the custom on the eve of important Muslim feasts, he would first inquire what the young prince would be wearing. Once informed, he would buy the same for Beydari.

Seeing that Hampâté treated Beydari like a son, old Allamodio decided to consider him as his grandson. And this is how Beydari learned the butcher's trade, which he practiced his entire life.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, King Tidjani had passed away. His power, which had come into being in 1864, had been maintained in all of Massina until his death in 1888. As we know, he had carried out massive executions at the beginning of his reign. He had uprooted entire villages and groups of people and had installed an entire local administration, but he had continued to be at war with pockets of resistance. Yet in the long run, things had become relatively calm, and finally, this man who had been baptized "breaker-bonesetter" became perhaps one of the most effective leaders to have reigned in the Niger Bend. Just as he had been implacable in his conquest, thanks to his keen understanding of local politics, he showed that he could be an enlightened leader in his kingdom. There is a saying that is still current in Massina that goes, "When Tidjani arrived, the people cried, 'Wororoy en boni Tidjani wari!' (Oh! We're in for it now, Tidjani is here!) But at his funeral, the same people shed tears as they proclaimed, 'Wororoy en boni Tidjani mayi!' (We're in for it now, Tidjani is dead!)"

Hampâté was no longer a young man when he married his first wife, one of his cousins, named Baya. Their union remained sterile. This was an unfortunate situation, since all Fakala and Pemaye were counting on Hampâté's children to regenerate the Hamsalah tree. Prominent Fakala Fulas who had taken refuge in Bandiagara took it upon themselves to consult marabouts, soothsayers, and fortune tellers of every ilk in order to know whether their hopes would be fulfilled. The oracles were unanimous. Baya would never carry Hampâté's fruit, as their respective procreative "spirits" were deemed incompatible. These unhappy predictions had an influence on Baya's mood. She became bitter and almost unbearable. She could no longer tolerate having anyone in her presence. She could barely tolerate her own shadow. Finally, she went too far.

One evening when Hampâté was away, Balewel Diko, his longtime friend, arrived at Baya's house accompanied by a few friends belonging to their association. He asked to dine. Baya could not refuse since it was the custom of the association members to dine each night at the home of one of its members. The wives of the members were accustomed to this, and in any case, in large African families there was always enough food prepared so as to accommodate last-minute guests or visiting strangers. Baya had the dinner brought out but kept muttering, "Ah! How unfortunate I am to be the wife of a vagabond who forgets to return home at dinnertime! I am neither a slave nor a lowborn woman to be treated this way by an inconsiderate husband. Really, I have had enough of this Hampâté!" And either intentionally or by an involuntary reflex, she uttered an oath targeting Hampâté's deceased mother. At a time when an insult to a person's mother constituted the most serious of offenses and was settled at spear- or knifepoint, this was indeed singularly inappropriate, and all the more shocking because it had been uttered in the presence of her husband's friends. In truth the affront was unpardonable.

Balewel, for whom Hampâté and himself were one and the same, and who considered Hampâté to be his alter ego, exclaimed indignantly, "What Baya! Do you dare to insult Hampâté's mother in my presence? I would rather have heard your mouth insult my own mother rather than Hampâté's. Don't even think about doing it again!"

"And what if I did," retorted Baya, "would the heavens fall from the sky to the earth? Would the mountains vomit the contents of their fiery bellies?"

"It will be none of those things," replied Balewel, "except for the death of your marriage to us."

"With whom, 'us'?" said Baya incredulously.

"With us, Hampâté and Balewel."

Baya withdrew the insult with a snicker. Outraged, Balewel shouted, "Leave this house! I divorce you!" With these words, all Hampâté's friends rose as if they were a single man. They left the house without finishing their meal, an extremely serious gesture in Africa, where to not consume a woman's food is a sign of rejection and rupture. This clearly meant, "All Hampâté's friends have divorced you."

Baya entered into an indescribable fury. She rushed into her room and rapidly gathered all her clothes and household utensils into large bundles, which she then had taken to the vestibule that sheltered the entrance to the house. She spread out a mat and sat down, waiting for the return of her husband. Upon returning home, Hampâté, who knew nothing about the incident, found his wife sitting erect under the vestibule next to her baggage, apparently waiting

for no one knew what. As we have seen, Hampâté was neither demonstrative nor loquacious. Without straying from his usual composure (his friends said that he was as calm and quiet as peanut oil), he began by greeting his wife, and then asked, “What are all these packages? What is going on?”

“What is going on is that your little friend and god Balewel Diko has divorced me in your name and on your account. Therefore, I have packed my things and I am waiting to hear whether you confirm that decision.”

“If my little friend and god Balewel Diko has divorced you,” Hampâté calmly replied, “then consider yourself divorced.” And without one more word, he stepped into the house.

In dismay, Baya broke into tears. She requested that her baggage be transported to her parents’ house, which was done that very night by Hampâté’s servants. The next day, when the news spread throughout the city, nobody faulted Balewel or Hampâté. Modern minds will probably find this difficult to understand. How could it be acceptable for a man to make the decision to “divorce” his friend’s wife and have the friend accept it as a *fait accompli* without further discussion? The answer lies in the fact that in the old days, a true friend was not someone “else,” he was oneself, and his word was our word. True friendship counted more than kinship, except in matters of succession. This is why tradition recommended that one have many friends, but not too many “real” friends. Moreover, relatives had the same privileges. A brother, father, or mother could “divorce” a man in his absence, and in general the man in question would oblige. It cannot be said that this was a custom, since this did not happen frequently. If it did occur, it was accepted, since such a decision was not taken lightly. If the reverse were true, the community, family, or village could oppose the decision.