

PREFACE TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION

Théodore Monod

I was of course very moved to learn that Amkoullél had requested that the preface to this volume be written by his old friend, whom he called his “Quiet River.”¹ In fact, it was around 1941 or 1942 that we met, and it was then that our deep friendship—which united us in several ways—was born. First, we had in common our joint participation in researching the West African past. Perhaps even more importantly, we shared the conviction that our religious beliefs obviously converged, rather than dividing us. Following apparently different paths, both of us were climbing the same mountain to that summit above the clouds where the supernatural light that must enlighten every man awaits. The teachings of Tierno Bokar contributed greatly to opening Amkoullél’s heart and mind to all aspects of true spiritual life. Thus he always welcomed spirituality with joy and gratitude whenever it appeared.

One day, we had made a pilgrimage to Bandiagara, to the house and grave of Tierno Bokar. We had wished (he and I) to introduce his friends to one of the most beautiful texts of religious literature, known as the “Hymn to Love,” inserted by the Apostle Paul into one of his letters.

We went together to the Bandiagara mosque where my companion translated the following well-known passage, which concludes as follows, into Fulfulde: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Those who were listening found the text very beautiful and questioned me about its origin. Without going into too much detail, I took the liberty of accepting the response that Amkoullél gave them: “The author is a Sufi from the Banou Israel people.”

This tale demonstrates the open-mindedness of my friend.

I must also add, by the way, that in his daily life, rather than isolating himself on the lofty summits of thought or religion, Amkoullél was also in many ways a man like any other man. He knew how to laugh, had a ready sense of humor that could lead to gentle mockery, and possessed a particular talent for telling stories, and—by extension—for telling traditional tales. A number of his

writings are in fact stories, whether they are symbolic texts or, more simply, light-hearted tales, as, for example, the tale with the somewhat surprising title, “The Calamitous Coccyx.”

The form known as “Youthful Memories” is part of a well-known but perilous literary genre, because it is the place of encounter between the greatest successes and most powerful thoughts and the most meager banalities. The good intentions of the memoirist will never replace genius, and not everyone will have the luxury of being able to evoke, as did Chateaubriand, his childhood at Combourg.

In telling us the story of his youth and, in fact, of his first twenty years, Amadou Hampâté Bâ introduces us into a world that will be particularly informative for today’s reader. It is the world of the West African savanna, with its peaceful immensities, its bush scorched by the sun or battered by the tempests of the rainy season, with its sandstone plateaus and the immense Niger River that remains the central artery of the entire region.

Nevertheless, although the narrative is centered in the small city of Bandiagara, other places are mentioned in succession, such as Mopti, Sansanding, Segou, Bougouni, Koulikoro, Kati, and so on. While at the beginning of the twentieth century, Bandiagara would witness the implantation and occupation by the French military as a conquered land, the country remained passionately attached to the grand memories of its history and, of course, to the two principal episodes in that history: the rise of the Fula Empire of Cheikou Amadou in Massina, and the conquest of that country by the Toucouleurs under El Hadj Omar. Passions were still running high when, in his childhood, the author would find himself submerged in the eddies of a past about which he himself would later become the historian.

The kingdom of Bandiagara (1864–1893) was, of course, Muslim. This fairly strict Islam governed matters of faith as well as social matters. For example, boys were obligated to learn the Koran by heart, although some of them would never understand its full meaning because they did not know Arabic.

The clarity of detail in a narrative that reproduces even the oldest of past conversations is astounding. It is clear that the author is relying on his own personal memories as well as on information gathered from outside sources. The present work contains an extremely rich spoken history archive that bears witness to a veritable civilization based in oral tradition, one capable of conserving often ancient narratives told in surprising detail.

Fula children grow up adhering to a double allegiance: that of a veritable honor code, and of complete respect for the mother’s wishes. A Fula child who has been raised on stories of the lofty acts of his ancestors must regulate his

conduct according to a strict moral code. Therefore, there are some things that a well-born Fula will refuse to do.

After honor, here is the second part of the diptych: the mother. A Fula can disobey his father, but never his mother. The rule is absolute. Amadou Hampâté Bâ would undergo this experience when Kadidja forbade him to leave for Gorée Island, the training ground of the best African employees in the colonial administration. Bâ's mother was, in fact, of exceptional caliber, and this noble, gracious, and strong Kadidja reappears in one hundred pages of the narrative.

As he was leaving his mother in Koulikoro to occupy his first position in the colonial administration, Amkoullél watched Kadidja as she left the river-bank without looking back. "The wind was billowing through the hems of her *boubou* and lifting her delicate head veil. She looked like a damselfly preparing for flight."

After the honor and respect due to the mother, a third element of Fula society lies in the practice of generosity. Amkoullél's stories contain a great number of instances where a giver (who has the means to do so) returns a favor by way of a gift (whether large or small) of livestock, clothing, various objects, and, at times, cash. This ubiquitous practice of gift-giving is part of Fula custom.

Twenty years in the life of a young Fula amounts to a host of stories, anecdotes, and descriptions of the greatest variety. One discovers with interest, for example, the function of youth groups that can include up to fifty young boys who belong, by the way, to all social classes, whether nobles or *rimaibé* captives.

Amadou Hampâté Bâ's sense of humor is always discernable and the picturesque is never lacking. Take, for example, the most unusual tale of the boys' expedition whose goal it was to discover whether, as rumor had it, the excrement of the White-Whites was, in fact, black.

Scenes of horror are equally represented in this volume, for instance, as on the occasion of a severe famine, a tragedy that was scored into the author's memory.

As a devout Muslim, he would always seek to discover justification in his faith for the caprices of Fate. In 1947, he wished to see his friend Ben Daoud once again. This was a person whom he had known as rich and honored, the son of King Mademba of Sansanding. He found him living in poverty, stripped of all his possessions, destitute, and on the brink of starvation. Nevertheless, in the face of the cruelty of Fate, his friend had retained a perfect serenity and moral courage, which evoked the author's utmost admiration. He wrote, "Ben Daoud Mademba Sy, whom I first met in 1919 during my summer vacation and then met again in 1947, remains for me one of the men who has most deeply touched my life."

It would be unjust not to mention the author's style here. It is of a remarkable quality throughout and is frequently enriched by the most picturesque of images and comparisons. We clearly sense here the qualities of an author who has expert knowledge of the rules and requirements of telling stories and tales. Amadou Hampâté Bâ remains a marvelous storyteller. There is no doubt that this work will serve, in the happiest of ways, the memory of our friend who has passed on.

May the many who will come to know him through this message sent from beyond the grave feel morally enriched and fortified as they become acquainted with he who was at once a sage, a learned man, and a spiritual being, and who will remain for many the best witness of this line from scripture: "For the spirit of God blows where it wills . . ." (John 3:8).

A Note from the French Publisher, Actes Sud

Amadou Hampâté Bâ's original manuscript contained a number of commentaries on certain aspects of African culture and sociology. Because of the length of the work, it was decided, with the author's permission, to showcase the narrative and to delete a good many of these commentaries. The reader will find these in the author's more specialized works.