

## AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

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### On African Memory

A number of friends who have read this manuscript were surprised that the memory of a man over eighty years of age could reproduce so many things in such minute detail.<sup>1</sup> This is explained by the fact that people of my generation and, more generally, people who come from an oral tradition and who did not rely on writing possess memories of a rather inordinate fidelity and accuracy. 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. Everything was there: the setting, the characters, the words, even the most minute details in clothing. For example, when I describe the uniform worn by the first circle commandant that I had ever seen in close proximity during my childhood, 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. And if a tale was told to me by someone else, it is not only the content of the narrative that my memory has recorded, but the entire scene: the bearing of the narrator, his clothing, his gestures, his mimicry, and the ambient noises, such as the sounds of the kora that Djeli Maadi was playing while Wangrin was telling me the story of his life and that I can still hear to this day.

When an event is reconstructed, the entire film recording runs from beginning to end. That is why it is very difficult for an African of my generation to “summarize.” We tell the entire tale, or we do not tell it at all. We never tire of hearing the same story again and again. For us, repetition is not a flaw.

### On Chronology

Because chronological order was not the first concern of African narrators, whether they were traditional storytellers or family members, I have not always been able to provide the exact date (within a year or two) of the events that are recounted, except when known outside events allowed me to place them. In African stories, where the past is relived as a present experience, outside of time, as it were, there is at times a kind of disorder that upsets Western

minds but in which we feel perfectly at home. We reside there, at ease, like fish in a sea, where water molecules mingle and form a living whole.

### Zone of Reference

In speaking of “African Tradition,” one should never generalize. There is no *single* African tradition, there is no *single* Africa, there is no *single* African, there is no *single* African tradition that is the same in every region and for every ethnic group. Of course, there are a good number of shared elements: the recognition of the presence of the sacred in all things, of the relationship between the visible and the invisible worlds, of the relationship between the living and the dead, in the shared sense of community, in the religious respect for the mother, and so on. But there are also a number of differences: in deities, in sacred symbols, in religious interdicts. The social customs that stem from these practices vary between regions, ethnic groups, and, sometimes, between villages.

The traditions that I discuss in this narrative are generally those of the African savanna, which stretches from east to west, south of the Sahara, and, in particular, those of the Fula, Toucouleur, and Bambara communities of the region that was once known as Bafour, in Mali, where I grew up.

### Dreams and Predictions

Another thing that sometimes bothers Westerners when they read African stories is the frequent intervention of premonitory dreams, predictions, and other phenomena of this kind. But these sorts of events, which for us are part of daily life, are intricately woven into African life and do not surprise us in the least. In times past, it was not rare to see a man arrive on foot from a distant village with the sole purpose of making an announcement or of giving instructions that he had received in his dreams. Once he had done this, he would quite naturally take his leave, like a postman who had simply come bearing a letter to its addressee. Not to mention these types of phenomena in the course of telling a story would have been dishonest of me, because they were, and undoubtedly still are, part of our lived realities.

### On the Transcription of African Words

In order to facilitate the reading of African words, rather than applying rules set by linguists, we have preferred to favor phonetic transcriptions. For example, *ou* replaces *u*, or *è* replaces *e*. We have equally favored a French nam-

ing system for ethnic groups. In the case of certain proper names, differences in spelling regarding the names of certain persons are to be explained by the fact that in everyday usage, these names, which are derived from Arabic, have undergone a number of phonetic transformations. For example, the honorary title of Cheikh (where the *kh* corresponds to the Spanish pronunciation of the letter “j”) is transcribed as Cheik, Cheikou, Chékou, and even Sékou, when used as a proper name. The same rule applies to the name of the Prophet Mohammed, which can become Mohammed, or even Mamadou, and for Ahmed, which becomes Ahmadou, as the case may be.