

Book Review

A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar, by Amadou Hampaté Bâ. Introduction by Louis Brenner. Edited by Roger Gaetani. Translated from French by Fatima Jane Casewit. Bloomington, IN, World Wisdom, 2008, 236 pp.

The rainbow owes its beauty to the variety of its shades and colors. In the same way, we consider the voices of various believers that rise up from all parts of the earth as a symphony of praises addressing God.¹

(Tierno Bokar)

With the unremitting bombardment of news and media coverage depicting contemporary Africa in a state of total disarray – ridden with famine, disease, genocide, war – we are blessed for this profound testimonial of Amadou Hampaté Bâ's extraordinary Sufi master of Africa, Tierno Bokar. It is through the universal message of this African mystic that the world's spiritual traditions, not only Islam, can honor what has been regarded as the "religion of the heart", or "the transcendent unity of religions"² – fearlessly affirmed in *The Tarjumān al-ashwāq*³ of Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (The Greatest Master). Considerable interest has come about regarding this great spiritual teacher of Mali via the acclaimed play *Tierno Bokar* by renowned director Peter Brook, which was adapted for the stage from Bâ's book by Marie-Hélène Estienne. It is with the hopes of the editors and publisher that this volume will accompany other key contemporary works, such as that of Martin Lings' book on Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi.⁴

During his youth, Amadou Hampaté Bâ (1900–1991) became a disciple of Tierno Bokar while attending a Qur'anic school under Bokar's direction in Bandiagara, Mali. Bâ was to become

1. Page 126.

2. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London, Faber and Faber, 1953).

3. *The Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, or "The Interpreter of Desires", trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London, Theosophical Publishing House, 1978).

4. *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

a well-known Malian diplomat, writer and influential voice of Africa – providing information and insight into its history, religion, literature, culture and life. He is the author of the following celebrated quote: “In Africa, when an old person dies, it is as if a library has burned down” (p. xvii). Without Hampaté Bâ’s efforts to put this testimony into writing the modern world would perhaps know nothing of this great master, Tierno Bokar, since this work contains most of the only recorded words of this man of remarkable spiritual insight.

This new translation, *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*, is divided into a tripartite discourse – Part 1: *His Life*; Part 2: *His Words*; and Part 3: *His Teachings*. There are also two important appendices – Appendix I: *The Pearl of Perfection*⁵ and Appendix II: *Sufism and Brotherhoods (Turuq) in Islam*, offering a broad overview of the different Sufi orders, including relevant photographs depicting the ambiance of where Tierno Bokar lived, his disciples, the mosque of Bandiagara, his tomb, as well as illustrations of present-day Malian life. The book also contains significant biographical notes on the authors and those who helped prepare the book. Louis Brenner, who provides the Introduction, is arguably the most knowledgeable scholar in the English speaking world on the writings of both Hampaté Bâ and the life and thought of Tierno Bokar.

Part One, *His Life*: Tierno Bokar Salif Taal (1875–1939) was known as “the sage of Bandiagara” in Mali, West Africa. From an early age his life was infused with the spirit. His maternal grandfather was Seydou Hann, a great Sufi mystic of the Qadiri order, and later the Tijaniyya. In addition, Tierno benefited from the innate wisdom of his other family members which provided a pivotal support to his traditional education. And yet his education took place in juxtaposition to a social milieu that was characterized by an atmosphere of turmoil: with the seething combination of compulsory modernizations and foreign occupation, tribal and sectarian differences were escalating. From an early age he learned to find peace within himself and to converse regularly

5. *Jawharat al-kamāl*, revealed by the Prophet Muhammad in a vision to Si Ahmad al-Tijani in 1781.

with God. Bokar provides us with some advice offered by his mother to guide him in “the greater *jihād*”:

Write the Divine Name *Allāh* on a wall, next to your bed so that when you awaken the Name will be the first image that your eyes fix upon. When you get up, pronounce it with fervor from the depths of your soul, so that it is the first word to come out of your mouth and to enter your ears. At night when you go to bed, fix your eyes on the Name so that it is the last image contemplated before being taken off into the temporary death of sleep. If you persist, the light contained in the four letters will spread over you and a spark of the divine Essence will enflame your soul and illuminate it. (p. 14)

By the age of fifteen, Bokar had virtually memorized the Qur’an, the rituals and laws of Islam, and the lives of the saints such as al-Ghazali, Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi and Muhammad ad-Dabbar, and yet his knowledge was in no way restricted to only this. Readers will be interested to note that “the *Meccan Revelations* [*al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya*] of the great Andalusian spiritual master Ibn ‘Arabi was his [Tierno Bokar’s] favorite book” (p. 21).

Tierno Bokar was tremendously unassuming and did not wish to be addressed with any titles, even that of spiritual master or teacher – “We are all teachers and we are all students” – referring to his students as “brother” (p. xv). Tierno Bokar received initiation (*al-bay‘a*) into the secrets of the Tijani Sufi order by Amadou Tafsir Bâ. At the age of twenty-six, Bokar’s *shaykh* informed him, “I have nothing more to teach you” (p. 23). By the age of thirty-three, Tierno Bokar was the director of the Bandiagara *zāwiya*, which was called “the refuge of love and charity”.

A central and unforgettable element of Tierno Bokar’s life has to do with the disagreement that emerged in the Tijani order over certain ways of reciting a particular Tijani prayer, known as *The Pearl of Perfection*. There were those who practised the “eleven beads” and those who practised the recitation of “twelve beads”. The disagreement came about when the founder of the order, Ahmad al-Tijani, arrived late on one occasion:

One day he was delayed, and the students started the *wazīfa* [a Tijani litany] without him. They had already finished the eleventh

recitation of *The Pearl of Perfection* when the Shaykh was at last able to join them. Spontaneously, and so that the Shaykh could give them his benediction as was the custom, they repeated the prayer a twelfth time, after which the Shaykh blessed them. (p. 44)

Without any observation, positive or negative, from the Shaykh, some of his disciples began to practise the “twelve beads”, a practice that was later adopted by the Umarian branch of the Tijaniyya found in Mali and Niger.

Later in his life, having received a crucial letter from Alfa Hashimi Taal (brother of the king of Bandiagara), Bokar traveled to meet with Shaykh Sharif Hamallah, a clan rival, in order to better comprehend this dispute between the two practices. During his stay Bokar had a *metanoia*, or “change of mind”, and asked to receive *tajdīd* (renewal of his *wird*) into the “eleven beads”. On Bokar’s return to Bandiagara, the news had spread quickly of the renewal of his *wird* into the “eleven beads” with Sharif Hamallah. It was from this point on that Tierno Bokar experienced extreme hardships: he was essentially ostracized by his clan and family and forbidden to teach or pray publicly. Tierno Bokar’s school was destroyed and he and his two wives and children were placed under house arrest. He spent the remaining years of his life in sheer solitude and yet he never lost confidence in God’s benediction nor did he cease to be a spiritual light to all those who dared to visit him under such adverse conditions.

Part Two, *His Words*: Tierno Bokar taught in the traditional method that was known and used throughout Africa which was oral rather than written. Contrary to the modern bias against oral traditions, the “word” was perceived as being potentially sacred, originating from what was transcendent and divine, and was referred to as the “life-giving word”. The author points out that, “In Islam, as in many other religious traditions, esoteric knowledge is taught by word of mouth” (p. 111).

In this section of the book, “the sage of Bandiagara”, Tierno Bokar, expresses a universal truth regarding the ineffable nature of the Absolute or the Divine Reality which is beyond all conceptualization:⁶

God is the bewilderment of human intelligence because on one hand, if you affirm His existence, you cannot, in any case, prove it materially or mathematically. On the other hand, if you deny His very existence, you deny your own existence, which is merely the effects of His existence. Of course, you do exist. And even if one cannot prove God materially, it is nonetheless necessary to remember that the non-visibility or non-tangibility of a thing is not absolute proof of its nonexistence.

Finally, God is the bewilderment of intelligence because everything that you conceive in your thought and give form to in your speech as being God ceases by this very fact to be God. It becomes no more than *your own way* of conceiving Him. He escapes all definition. (p. 135)

Throughout this book readers will notice that Tierno Bokar continuously acknowledges and affirms the underlying significance of the world's religions:

With all my heart, I desire the coming of the era of reconciliation amongst all religions of the earth, the era in which these united religions will support each other to form a spiritual and moral canopy, the era in which they will be at peace in God by resting upon three supports: Love, Charity, Brotherhood.

There is only one God, and there can be only one Way that leads towards Him, one Religion of which its various worldly manifestations are like branches spreading out from a single tree. This Religion can only be called Truth, and its dogmas can only be three: Love, Charity, Brotherhood. (p. 159)

Part Three, *His Teachings*: one of the principal methods of Tierno Bokar's instruction was to meet the seeker at his or her own level of receptivity which was in accordance with the

6. Given Tierno Bokar's unanimous recognition of the inherent truth pervading the world's religious traditions, it is appropriate to point out that the terrestrial inability to conceptualize the Absolute is reminiscent of the sacred formula of the (first) *shahādah*: *Lā ilāha illa 'Llāh* (There is no divinity but God), the "Tao that can be named is not the Tao" of the Tao Te Ching, *neti-neti* (not this, not that) of the Upanishads or *negatio negationis* (negation of a negation) which is central to Meister Eckhart's teachings.

Prophet's instruction: "Speak to people according to the level of their understanding" (p. 110). Tierno Bokar often made use of the potent symbol of the river that was widely used by the different Sufi *turuq* when describing stages of the spiritual path:

There are three ways to know a river: First of all, there is the man who has heard the river spoken about and becomes capable by imitation and repetition to describe it without having seen it himself. This is the first degree of knowledge.

Then there is the man who has undertaken the journey and who has arrived at the banks of the river. Seated on the banks of the river, he contemplates it with his own eyes and is a witness to its majesty. This is the second degree of knowledge.

Finally, there is the man who throws himself into the river and becomes one with it. This is the supreme degree of Knowledge. (p. 199)

This book stands out as a traditional testimony to the universal spiritual heritage of all people *qua* the life of a twentieth-century African saint, Tierno Bokar. In addressing the diverse readership we hope that this testimony may be instrumental in leading more people, especially the younger generations, to reconnect to their own spiritual traditions. "The sage of Bandiagara" provides this astute aphorism for the modern world: "Do not go seeking fortune by begging in far-off places, you who are seated upon a sack of gold. Make use of this fortune, make it grow by trading in it with others" (p. 155). Readers will find that Tierno Bokar, like his fellow Sufi companion Ibn 'Arabi, affirms the religion of the heart.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos