

Amkoullel, the Fula Boy

Amadou
Hampâté Bâ

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BUY

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Amadou Hampâté Bâ

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY JEANNE GARANE

With a foreword by Ralph A. Austen

DUKE

Duke University Press Durham and London 2021

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Translation, Foreword to the Translation, and Introduction
© 2021 Duke University Press
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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Production editor: Lisa Lawley
Designed by Drew Sisk
Typeset in Portrait Text and Agnes by Westchester
Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Bâ, Amadou Hampaté, author. | Garane, Jeanne,
[date] translator. | Austen, Ralph A., writer of new foreword.
Title: Amkoullel, the Fula boy / Amadou Hampâté Bâ ;
translated and with an introduction by Jeanne Garane ;
with a foreword by Ralph Austen.
Other titles: Amkoullel, l'enfant Peul. English
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020057981 (print)
LCCN 2020057982 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478013273 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478014188 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478021490 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Bâ, Amadou Hampaté—Childhood and
youth. | Fula (African people)—Biography. | Fula (African
people)—Social life and customs. | Oral tradition—Mali. |
Ethnologists—Mali—Biography. | Authors, Malian—20th
century—Biography.
Classification: LCC DT551.45.F85 B2813 2021 (print) |
LCC DT551.45.F85 (ebook) | DCC 966.23/01092 [B]—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020057981>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020057982>

Cover art: Handwritten passage by Amadou Hampâté
Bâ from *Sur les traces d'Amkoullel, l'enfant peul* (In search of
Amkoullel, the Fula boy), 1998: "I am an autodidact of the
French language, and an autodidact of the Malian bush.
I am a member of the constellation of the elders of the
twentieth century, which was a time when, in my country,
learning to read and write in French were rather more a
curse than a blessing."

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FOREWORD TO THE TRANSLATION

Ralph A. Austen

It is a great honor and pleasure to be invited to write a foreword for the English translation of Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *Amkoullel, the Fula Boy*. Not only have I admired, studied, and enjoyed this work for more than twenty years, but I also spent a good part of that time in a frustrated effort to manage such a translation. Jeanne Garane has finally achieved this goal in splendid fashion through her own skills and initiatives as a translator, a scholar of Africa and its literature, and a fund raiser.

The honor of my role is enhanced by its juxtaposition with the preface to A. H. Bâ's *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul: mémoires* by Théodore Monod, a major scholar of Africa in his own time and a founder of IFAN (Institut français [now fondamental] d'Afrique noire). Unlike myself, who came to the study of A. H. Bâ after this great African intellectual had already passed away, Monod not only knew A. H. Bâ personally but also played a critical role in his professional and spiritual life.¹ His preface, unlike my foreword, thus constitutes a key element of this book.

In her own introduction to the translation, Jeanne Garane provides an excellent background account of A. H. Bâ's life and its historical context. I feel no need to repeat that task here. Instead I want to reflect upon the relationship between the "literary" products of A. H. Bâ's late years (the two volumes of his memoir and the "novel" *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin: ou, Les roueries d'un interprète africain*) and his earlier career as a researcher, cultural statesman, and advocate of an ecumenical version of Sufi Islam. I put the terms "literary" and "novel" in quotes because A. H. Bâ himself insisted that "mes seules oeuvres de 'création'" (my only creative works) were the religious poetry he composed in his own Fulfulde language.²

Of course, in his capacities as ethnographer, folklorist, and religious teacher, A. H. Bâ had dealt quite intensively with literary texts, especially narrative ones, but his role had always been to record, translate, and analyze them rather than to claim authorship. He never fully acknowledged the distinction between such efforts and the books others would consider to be literary

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The role within Sudanic culture that A. H. Bà most revered, and which he sought to continue in the modern colonial/postcolonial era, was that of “traditionalist,” or “traditionist,” a term he seems to have coined himself to define individuals with deep knowledge of their people’s history and culture and the ability to transmit it to future generations, often via musical and narrative performance skills.⁴ In *Amkoulel*, two men are cited as exemplary traditionists: the first, Koulel, a figure in the court of A. H. Bà’s stepfather and from whom the author earned his nickname (meaning “Koulel’s little Amadou,” or “son of Koulel”) (page 63); and the second, who receives more attention than Koulel, Danfo Siné, a *doma* (man of knowledge) in the southern Mali community of Bougouni, where A. H. Bà and his family were exiled during much of his early childhood (pages 124–27).

It is the engaging quality of these tales that accounts for the much wider readership gained by the two volumes of his memoirs and *Wangrin* than by any of A. H. Bâ's more scholarly writings. But readers need not consider themselves to be indulging in a guilty pleasure by exercising such a choice. First, these three books hold a unique place in the repertoire of African literature since they deal in knowledgeable detail with the colonial era in its classical

(pre–World War II) form. This is a subject largely neglected by African memoirists and novelists, primarily because most were born too late to have experienced it as fully as did A. H. Bâ—to say nothing of his “older brother,” Wangrin. A. H. Bâ not only portrays many of the abuses of the French colonial regime, as noted by Garane, but also reveals the degree of agency Africans retained within it, both to counter and sometimes to profit from such oppression.

Around the time A. H. Bâ wrote *Amkoullel*, the concept of “tradition,” upon which he had based his entire career, was coming under fire from postcolonial theorists, who claimed it existed only in an “invented” dialogue with modernity, often deployed for the political purposes by both colonial regimes and their African antagonists or successors.⁵ There is no evidence that A. H. Bâ used his concept of tradition for political purposes, but his many claims about the fixity and esoteric meanings of the texts and rituals he studied provide an easy target for such “deconstruction.”

Yet *Amkoullel*, in its various accounts of everyday life in the urban settings of colonial Mali, provides its own, not always self-conscious, insight into the transformation of historical African culture into “tradition.” The setting in which A. H. Bâ learns from both Koullel and Danfo Siné is the *cour* (courtyard, but also court) of his stepfather, Tidjani Thiam, a private urban space to which he has been relegated after having been deposed from his chiefdom. The performances that inspire the young Amadou are now cut off from any real politics and constitute a *mélange* of local cultures (A. H. Bâ’s own Fula, the majority Mande of Mali—the identity of both Koullel and Danfo Siné—and Islam). While these ethnicities and/or belief systems were never entirely separate in the precolonial past, they are now brought together in ways that allow A. H. Bâ to represent them collectively as “tradition” and bring his vision out into the world via the colonial language of French.

In his analysis of oral literature in the Sudanic region, A. H. Bâ, influenced by his collaboration with the Griaule School of French anthropology, put special emphasis upon the theme of initiation, labeling several of the texts he collected and published *contes* or *récits initiatiques*. *Amkoullel* also includes discussion of initiation, although less in terms of symbolic representation than by descriptions of the circumcision rituals that formally induct boys of the Sudanic region into manhood. However, the subject of the specific ceremony described here at some length (pages 177–85) is not Amadou himself, but rather his older brother, Hammadoun, and his age mates. In order to respect the hierarchy of age within the family, Amadou was supposed to be circumcised two years later. But by that time he had been forcibly enrolled in a European-style school, whose schedule would not allow him the time to go out into the local

brousse (uncultivated countryside), where most of this ritual takes place. A further two years afterward, Amadou, embarrassed by the prospect of being treated as a subservient child by his own age peers, arranges “a hasty [*à la sauvette*] circumcision” for himself in a French medical clinic (pages 278–80).⁶

This effort to preserve and yet transform historical practices may also explain the relationship—or lack of one—between initiation and the youth associations A. H. Bâ organizes in his hometown, Bandiagara, and his second site of exile, the southern Mali town of Kati. In his description of orthodox circumcisions, A. H. Bâ notes that the boys who go through such a ritual together form a lifelong bond of egalitarian comradeship (thus the refusal of family elders to let Amadou be circumcised together with his older brother, Hammadou). Having ultimately been circumcised on his own, A. H. Bâ never became a member of such a fraternity. However, shortly after his family returned to Bandiagara, Amadou, at about the age of eight, formed his first *waaldé*, or youth association. A. H. Bâ’s accounts of such groups, pursued at far greater length than initiation (pages 153–56, 168–73, 185–93, and 274–76) provide some of the most engaging passages in his entire memoir. These accounts are also the best indicators of how both remembered local culture and new colonial-era practices can be blended into “tradition.”⁷

As reported by A. H. Bâ, the *waaldé* functions something like a combination of a street gang and a training institution. Most of the time its members are concerned with games, pranks, and a good deal of low-level theft from the vegetable and fruit gardens of the city. They do, however, have a formal organization with offices that echo a precolonial Sudanic polity, including chiefs, Islamic judges, griots (here less bards than diplomatic intermediaries) and a *moutassibi* (public prosecutor or snoop).⁸ The proto-adolescent inclinations and the precocious formality of the *waaldé* come together in their stylized relations with other Bandiagara youth associations: intense but chaste courtships of parallel female associations, and violent but never fatal battles with rival male groups. The *waaldé* are multiethnic and cross lines of caste and slavery but, like Bandiagara itself, seem to be dominated by Fula and Toucouleur of noble descent. The age divisions of these associations seem to parallel those of circumcision fraternities (Amadou’s older brother headed his own *waaldé*), but there appears to have been very little connection between the *waaldé* and any initiation rituals.

The still preadolescent Amadou left Bandiagara for a French colonial school in 1912, but after graduating three years later, moved to the southern Mali town of Kati, where his mother and stepfather had settled after quarreling with their Bandiagara household. In Kati, the dominant Bambara (that is,

non-Muslim Mande) population initiated their children into a series of power societies of the very type that A. H. Bâ would later study together with his French anthropological colleagues. During his previous stay (from about age two to eight) at Bougouni, in this same region, Amadou had himself been initiated by Danfo Siné into the lowest level of local ritual associations; but he had been forbidden by the piously Muslim Tidjani Thiam from participating in their ceremonies.⁹

Early in his second southern sojourn, A. H. Bâ was violently attacked for entering the sacred space of a more senior Bambara power society. He decided to counter this force with the same kind of “secular” youth association he had so happily led in Bandiagara. Given the great ethnic heterogeneity of Kati, a military post now in the midst of training African recruits for World War I, he had no difficulty in organizing such a group and even avenging himself upon the Bambara youths—not with a *waaldé* but with a *ton*, a Mande term that primarily references initiation fraternities. It was also in this context that the now fully adolescent Amadou had himself circumcised.

For those interested in the genesis of A. H. Bâ’s career as a researcher, his engagement with tradition can be seen as emerging from these early encounters with not only the lessons of “traditionists” but also the tensions of being properly initiated into what was now a colonized and multicultural African world. But *Amkoullel* should be rewarding—as well as entertaining—for anyone seeking to encounter that world on its own terms, which is to say through the vividly remembered early life of someone who personally experienced its many travails and treasures.

INTRODUCTION

Between Memory and Memorial

Jeanne Garane

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

—Amadou Hampâté Bâ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Saving Libraries from Burning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Translating *Amkoullel* into English: Why Now?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Legacy of A. H. Bâ

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

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

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

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

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INTRODUCTION

NOTES

Foreword to the Translation

- 1 See Monod's preface to this volume and also Triaud, "D'un maître à l'autre."
- 2 Amadou Hampâté Bâ, "Pourquoi j'écris," interview with Isaïe Biton Koulibaly, Abidjan, ca. 1975. Fonds Amadou Hampâté Bâ, L'Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine, l'abbaye d'Ardenne (hereafter IMEC), 4FHB 6GE8-4/359 (this archive is now held by the Fondation Amadou Hampâté Bâ, in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire).
- 3 For more on this point, see chapter 5, note 5, in this volume.
- 4 For Hampâté Bâ's fullest statement on this role, see his "The Living Tradition," in Ki-Zerbo, *UNESCO General History of Africa*, 166–203.
- 5 Hobsbawm, and Ranger, *Invention of Tradition*.
- 6 This theme of local initiation disrupted by European education also plays a major role in perhaps the most widely read of all francophone West African coming-of-age memoirs/novels, *L'Enfant noir*, by Camara Laye.
- 7 I am still pursuing some inquiries into the ethnography of Fula youth associations but have thus far found very little material, suggesting that they became more prominent in the twentieth-century urban situations experienced by Hampâté Bâ.
- 8 The term comes from the Arabic *muhtasib* (market inspector).
- 9 In the file titled *Carrière: Notes* by Hélène Heckmann, IMEC 6GE9-2/416; see also note 12, pages 332–33, in this volume.

Introduction. Between Memory and Memorial

- 1 My translation of volume 2 is in progress under the proposed title *At Your Service, Commandant!*
- 2 See Izzo, *Experiments with Empire*, for a reading of *Oui Mon Commandant!* as ethnographic fiction.
- 3 The colony of French West Africa (1895–1958) was a federation that joined Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan (now Mali), French Guinea (now Guinea), Côte d'Ivoire, Upper Volta (Haute Volta—now Burkina Faso), Dahomey (now Benin), and Niger. The administrative capital was located in Dakar, Senegal. French Sudan is not to be confused with the Republic of Sudan, whose capital is

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Khartoum. A. H. Bâ explains Fula and Toucouleur (also spelled Tukulor) ethnic identities in chapter 1.

- 4 A. H. Bâ provides a similar explanation in *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* (*The Fortunes of Wangrin*), which tells the story of an African interpreter who undermines colonial authorities in the French Sudan. He writes that the sons of chiefs “were given the kind of education that enabled them to become servants, houseboys, cooks, or low-ranking civil servants [such] as copy clerks, telegraphists, or male nurses.” Bâ, *Fortunes of Wangrin*, 262n9; Bâ, *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*, 367n10.
- 5 The colonial administrator known as the “commandant” is ubiquitous in both volumes of A. H. Bâ’s memoirs. As historian Ralph Austen explains in a personal communication, “The title [of commandant] derives from the French marine infantry, which played an important role in the French conquest of West Africa. But unlike its American equivalent, the marine infantry was considered a low prestige branch of the national military order” (Austen to Garane, October 2019).
- 6 As Mamadou Diouf points out in “L’Universalisme (européen?) à l’épreuve des histoires indigènes,” the contradiction between the “universalisme de la mission civilisatrice et les pratiques coloniales a été mise en évidence et largement exploitée par le sujet colonial” (universalism of the civilizing mission has been underscored and largely developed by colonial subjects). Although Diouf cites the work of Bernard Dadié as an example of an ironic gaze cast on colonial practices that had the effect of keeping the colonized “hors du territoire de l’universel, malgré les proclamations civilisatrices” (outside the territory of the universal despite its civilizing proclamations), attentive readers of *Amkoullel* will discover a similar ironic gaze, particularly where the descriptions of various colonial authorities and their “acolytes,” as Bâ calls them, are concerned. Diouf, “L’Universalisme (européen?),” 35.
- 7 Literally, *The Black Boy* or *The Black Child*, which Kirkup chose to translate as *The Dark Child: The Autobiography of an African Boy*.
- 8 See chapter 4, “Return to Bandiagara,” under the heading “The White Man’s Excrement and the Town Made of Trash.”
- 9 Lebdaï, *Autobiography as a Writing Strategy*, 1–2.
- 10 A. H. Bâ explains the intricacies of this plot in chapter 2, “Khadidja, My Mother.”
- 11 While the “native” Primary Studies Certificate, or Certificat d’études primaires (CEP), was modeled on that of France, it was not legally equivalent before World War II. See also chapter 5, note 6.
- 12 See Hélène Heckmann, “Petite histoire éditoriale du conte Kaïdara,” in Bâ, *Contes initiatiques peuls*, 343–45. Hélène Heckmann was also an important figure in Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s professional and private life. According to Bintou Sanankoua, who grew up in A. H. Bâ’s household, it was after A. H. Bâ met and married Hélène Heckmann in 1966 that he began to sign his works with his signature alone. Sanankoua writes, “C’est elle qui l’encourage à publier ses livres sans co-auteur alors que, jusqu’ici, il avait signé tous ses ouvrages avec quelqu’un d’autre” (It was she who encouraged him to publish his books without a co-author, for until then, he had always signed all of his other works with someone else)” (409–10). Sankankoua

explains that it was also Heckmann who urged A. H. Bâ to write *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* and then the *Memoirs*. He later appointed her his literary executor. See also Austen and Soares, “Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s Life and Work” (141–42), for more information on Heckmann and A. H. Bâ’s archived works.

- 13 For further information on this subject, see Brenner, *West African Sufi*.
- 14 On the sometimes paternalistic role of paratextual materials such as forewords and introductions, see Watts, *Packaging Post/coloniality*.
- 15 Kusum Aggarwal notes that Bâ named the ichthyologist Jacques Daget as coauthor of *L'Empire peul du Macina* in recognition of the logistical support that Bâ had obtained from this director of the Hydrobiology Lab in Diafarabé, Mali, who had helped him to reach his numerous oral sources and to organize his notes (201). By contrast, the 1957 edition of *Tierno Bokar, sage de Bandiagara*, named as “coauthor” Marcel Cardaire, a colonial official who held the title of “Officer of Muslim Affairs,” who had been assigned to investigate Bâ’s Tidjani Muslim beliefs, for the French colonial officials considered them at the time as potentially subversive. In *Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar*, Bâ explains that Cardaire had been sent by the French government to “manage Muslim affairs and to carry out an investigation on me” (31). A. H. Bâ later revised this work and published it under his own name in 1980 with the title *Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar: Le sage de Bandiagara*. For more information on the relationship between Cardaire and Bâ, see Louis Brenner, “Becoming Muslim in Soudan Français.”
- 16 Irele, *African Imagination*, 83.
- 17 When one enters the statement in its French version on an internet search engine, it is still attributed to A. H. Bâ, while in its English versions, the statement is vaguely known as an “old African proverb.” Although there has been some confusion surrounding the exact time and place in which A. H. Bâ made his so-called burning library statement, he did in fact address the Africa Commission at the 1960 UNESCO General Conference in Paris where he was representing Mali, newly independent from France. In that speech he declared, “Je considère la mort de chacun de ces traditionnalistes comme l’incendie d’un fonds culturel non exploité” (I consider the death of each of these traditionalists to be like the incineration of an untapped archive). He was arguing for the urgent need to collect and record Africa’s endangered oral traditions from a dying generation of elder “traditionalists,” the guardians of memory as transmitted through the spoken word.

According to Yacouba Konaté, in “Le Syndrome Amadou Hampâté Bâ,” the now famous aphorism about “the burning library” was in fact pronounced in an interview between A. H. Bâ and Baba Kaké, in which Bâ was explaining a traditional West African view of the difference between writing and knowledge:

L’écriture est une chose et le savoir en est une autre. L’écriture est la photographie du savoir, mais elle n’est pas le savoir lui-même. Le savoir est une lumière qui est en l’homme; héritage de ce qui lui a été transmis. La parole EST l’homme. Le verbe est créateur. Il maintient l’homme dans sa nature propre. Apprenez que dans mon pays, quand un vieillard meurt, c’est une bibliothèque qui brûle.

[Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photograph of knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light that is in man; the heritage of what has been transmitted to him. The word is man. The verb is creative. It maintains humanity in his own nature. Know that in my country, when an elder dies, it is a library that burns]. (58)

In chapter 4 of *Amkoullel*, A. H. Bâ attributes a similar citation to Tierno Bokar. He writes:

The fact of never having had writing has thus never deprived Africa of having a past, a history, and a culture. As my master Tierno Bokar would say much later, “Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photograph of knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is the light in man. It is the heritage of everything that the ancestors were able to know about and whose seeds they have transmitted, just as the Baobab tree is potentially contained in its own seed.” (page 160)

18 Kisukidi, “*Laetitia Africana*,” 60.

19 Kisukidi, “*Laetitia Africana*,” 61.

20 Kisukidi, “*Laetitia Africana*,” 61.

21 Watts, *Packaging Post/coloniality*, 17.

22 Moudileno, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur postcolonial?” 161.

23 Mbembe and Sarr, *Ecrire l’Afrique-monde*, 162.

24 Bancel and Blanchard, “La colonisation,” 137 (my translation). “L’histoire coloniale a fait l’objet d’un processus de refoulement qui a maintenu en parallèle le mythe de ‘la mission civilisatrice de la France.’ Ce mythe a eu pour fonction d’éviter d’ouvrir une ‘page douloureuse de notre passé’ dont les conséquences sur notre contemporanéité ont été jugées potentiellement dangereuses, du fait notamment de la présence sur le territoire français . . . de ‘descendants’ d’immigrés issus des anciennes colonies. Jusqu’au début des années 1990, la marginalisation de l’histoire coloniale répondait à la double exigence d’oublier un traumatisme historique heurtant la représentation de la nation et de prévenir tout ressac des affrontements coloniaux.”

25 As if to confirm this, both volumes were reissued by their original publisher, Actes Sud, in 2012 in its prestigious Thesaurus collection under the title *Mémoires*. The volume also includes a book of photographs by Philippe Dupuich and aphorisms and excerpts from works by Bâ entitled *Sur les traces d’Amkoullel l’enfant peul*. This led critic Tirthankar Chanda to conclude, “In Africa as elsewhere, every time an elder dies, it is not a library that burns!” See Chanda, “Les ‘Mémoires’ réédités.” See also Mbembe’s *Sortir de la grande nuit* for a detailed study of the ways in which this past is being remembered. See in particular his chapter 3, for an in-depth study of why, although France “decolonized” its empire, it never “decolonized itself” (12).

26 See Garane, “What Is New about Amadou Hampâté Bâ?” for a contextual analysis of Mabankou and Waberi’s satirical citations of A. H. Bâ’s so-called burning library aphorism. On the relationship between Yambo Ouloguem and A. H. Bâ, see Christopher Wise’s introduction to his collection of essays entitled *Yambo*

Ouloguem. This collection also contains an interview with El Hadji Sékou Tall, the direct descendant of the Toucouleur conqueror El Hadji Omar, who appears in chapter 1 of *Amkoullel*. In the interview Tall recalls that his father was responsible for sending A. H. Bâ to the French School for Hostages (“Interview with Al-Hajj Sékou Tall,” in Wise, *Yambo Ouloguem*, 238). This event is vividly recounted in chapter 5 of *Amkoullel*. In a different interview, Jean Ouédraogo and Ivoirian writer Ahmadou Kourouma mention A. H. Bâ’s *Wangrin* and the possible connections between that work and Kourouma’s 1990 novel *Monnè, outrages, et défis*. To cite another example, A. H. Bâ is one of three authors to whom Tierno Monénembo dedicates his 2008 novel, *Peuls*.

- 27 See chapter 3 of Mbembe’s *Sortir de la grande nuit* for an analysis of the ways in which French republican “laïcité” is invoked to “police” (110) French Muslims.
- 28 Diagne, “Penser de langue à langue,” 80.
- 29 Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 85. (The following two quotes are also from this work.)
- 30 Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit*, 229.
- 31 Scholars such as historian Ralph Austen, whose contributions to the study of A. H. Bâ have long been a mainstay for researchers.
- 32 Egan, “Strange Fate of Amadou Hampâté Bâ.”
- 33 Ndiaye, “Les mémoires,” 13 (my translation). “Parmi les volumes qui portent sa signature, figurent des récits historiques qui se lisent comme des contes [*L’Empire peul du Macina*], des hagiographies et récits épiques qui se lisent comme des romans [*Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar*], une biographie que bien des lecteurs ont pris pour un roman autobiographique [*L’Etrange destin de Wangrin*], etc. Tous ces écrits se situent délicatement entre l’oral et l’écrit, entre réalité vécue (ou histoire) et fiction, entre l’individuel et le collectif, et entre les langues. Que cette production prolifique se termine par une autobiographie, genre ambiguë entre tous, ne devrait alors pas tant nous étonner.”
- 34 Camargo Foundation Fellowship, Spring 2019; Provost’s Humanities Grant, Fall, 2019; African Studies Research Grant, 2012; Provost’s Humanities Grant, 2012.
- 35 Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 76.
- 36 Cited in Bâ, *Sur les traces d’Amkoullel, l’enfant peul*, 839.
- 37 Bâ, “Lettre d’Amadou Hampâté Bâ à la jeunesse africaine” (my translation). “Jeunes gens d’Afrique et du monde, le destin a voulu qu’en cette fin du vingtième siècle, à l’aube d’une ère nouvelle, vous soyez comme un pont jeté entre deux mondes: celui du passé, où de vieilles civilisations n’aspirent qu’à vous léguer leurs trésors avant de disparaître, et celui de l’avenir, plein d’incertitudes et de difficultés, certes, mais riche aussi d’aventures nouvelles et d’expériences passionnantes. Il vous appartient de relever le défi et de faire en sorte qu’il y ait, non-rupture mutilante, mais continuation sereine et fécondation d’une époque par l’autre.” This letter is now widely available on the internet. Christian Ndiaye provides the original citation as “Préface,” *Notre Librairie* 75–76 (1984): 10–11. See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHDbYMwbjQ>.
- 38 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDP7U8rx5sI>. “Personne n’est plus chez lui. Nous sommes tous citoyens du monde. . . . Nous avons un lieu de naissance,

nous devons être citoyens de partout. C'est pourquoi il serait plutôt bon que nous soyons à l'entendement, à l'écoute les uns des autres pour essayer de trouver ce que nous avons de commun pour bâtir le bonheur de demain."

- 39 "Au moment où l'Européen écoute l'Africain, il faut qu'il cesse d'être européen pour être un élève ne connaissant absolument rien." "Bà Amadou Hampâté-Savoir qu'on ne sait pas," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAsjD5Co73Q>, ina.fr.
- 40 "Si tu veux que je t'enseigne il faut cesser d'être toi, pour être moi. Oublie-toi, pour être moi. Sinon, si tu restes à être toi, nous serons, tout en étant face à face . . . aussi éloignés que le ciel et la terre. Ça veut dire qu'il ne faudrait pas que tu ramènes ce que je vais te dire en le comparant à ce que tu sais . . . il faut te vider de ce que tu sais pour apprendre. Alors c'est là qu'on vous dit qu'il faut savoir qu'on ne sait pas. *Anda a anda*. L'expression peut dit: '*Sa andi a anda a andat*.' Si tu sais que tu ne sais pas, tu sauras. '*Sa anda a anda a andata*.' Si tu ne sais pas que tu ne sais pas, tu ne sauras pas." See "Bà Amadou Hampâté-Savoir qu'on ne sait pas." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAsjD5Co73Q>, ina.fr. Readers may recall that Socrates also said, "I know that I know nothing."
- 41 This tale is reprinted in Bà, *Sur les traces d'Amkoullel* (126–29) and is also widely available on the internet. See, for example, <http://www.trilogies.org/blog-notes/hampate-ba-lecole-cameleon> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aedTErSmqME>. See also Sika Fakambi, "Parler caméléon," France Culture, June 20, 2016, <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/au-singulier/sika-fakambi>.
- 42 For an interview with Roukiatou Hampâté Bà recorded on RTI (Radio Télévision Ivoirienne), May 16, 2018, about the current role that the works of A. H. Bà play in the preservation of African cultures, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlEsy36jru4>. See also the Fondation Amadou Hampâté Bà Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Fondation-Amadou-Hampâté-BA-273258896173922>.
- 43 These readings can be found at "Dîners lectures de paroles Indigo," in Arles, France, May 10, June 18, and June 24, 2019. See Festival Paroles Indigo, at <https://www.facebook.com/FestivalParolesIndigo>. I have also read some of his work at the 2016 and 2017 meetings of the American Literary Translator's Association.
- 44 "Amadou Hampâté Bà," African Studies Centre Leiden, September 15, 2007, <https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/amadou-hampate-ba>.
- 45 For more detail on this performance, see Tierno Bokar, 2005, <http://www.tiernobokar.columbia.edu>.
- 46 "Bà, Amadou Hampâté," WorldCat Identities, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n84149759/>.
- 47 Austen and Soares, "Amadou Hampâté Bà's Life," 135.
- 48 Mbembe, "L'Afrique qui vient," 26.

Preface to the Original Edition

- 1 [Trans. note: On the relationship between Bà and Monod, see Austen and Soares, "Amadou Hampâté Bà's Life," 133–42, and Triaud and Robinson, *La Tijànyiya*.]