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Amadou Hampâté Bâ. *Amkoullel, the Fula Boy*. Trans. Jeanne Garane. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 393. ISBN: 978-14-780214-9-0 (E-Book).

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In *Amkoullel, the Fula Boy*, Amadou Hampâté Bâ executes the master stroke of presenting a region and its peoples, cultures, histories, and philosophies (religious and secular) through his account of one boy (Bâ's) growth and maturation into adulthood, all while following a path of narration that is an homage to the oral tradition of which he was so passionate an advocate. Through the pages of this work, Bâ recounts his childhood and adolescence in the areas of Bandiagara, Bougouni, Jenne, Kati, and Bamako in what was then French Sudan, and what is currently the Republic of Mali. In the process, Bâ simultaneously provides insight into the French colonization of West Africa as it was experienced by the indigenous populations, the impositions and privations visited upon them as "French *subjects*" (as opposed to French *citizens*), and the ways in which they adapted to, negotiated with, and to the extent possible, resisted the French imperial project. However, regardless of the individual actors, event, or location, Bâ is intentional in grounding the narrative in the perspective of one steeped in the cultural and historical milieu of the region.

Bâ begins his narration with a brief discussion on the ways in which memory is engaged in the African contexts; he is careful to point out that there is no single "African" approach, but rather myriad approaches influenced by several factors (ethnicity, religion, etc.) that have numerous points of convergence. This discussion establishes the cultural perspective through which the individuals and events presented in subsequent pages will be viewed and interpreted. The cultural, religious, and social practices of the peoples of the region, in particular, those of the Fula and Toucouleur, are the normative basis against which all others will be assessed. What follows, the stories of his father, Hampâté Bâ¸ and his mother Kadidja Diallo (prefaced in both instances with their genealogies) reifies the privileging of this cultural perspective; Bâ presents his life story not as result of his individual striving, but rather as a product of his parents' (and to an extent, his extended families') life stories.

Amkoullel is also a reflection of Bâ's families' position in the socio-political hierarchy within the sub-region. As a descendant of two powerful family lines, Bâ's memories of his youth are replete with implicit and explicit expressions of the

privileged position he occupied as a member of the local nobility. He recalls without comment the presence of "captives" within his family and the society at large, and the ways in which they are perceived by the larger public. While he assures readers that his family's captives were respected and treated as members of the family, he nevertheless acknowledges the reality of the physical abuse of captives. Moreover, as a member of the captive-holding elite, Bâ's insistence that his family's captives were respected and loved is unconvincing, particularly in light of his accounts of instances of conflict between "captives" and "free" individuals, and the ways in which captives' status is leveraged against them.

This is perhaps the one area in which more could be asked of the work. The failure of a privileged child to interrogate the nature of the social hierarchy into which s/he is born is unremarkable. However, having witnessed the momentous changes of the intervening decades between the final scene of *Amkoullel* (January 1922) and the composition of the work – the second World War; the independence movements across the developing world and the collapse of the Colonial Order; and the reevaluation of hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity, and class – it is somewhat surprising that Bâ is so uncritical in his reflections upon the social organization of the Mali of his youth. One can only wonder what picture an individual from a lower position in the social hierarchy might have painted of the French Sudan of the early 20th century. The text provides some indication of the potential of divergent class perspectives on the region's social organization in the persons of some of the most inveterate native proponents of the French colonial project, many of whom are identified as having "humble" origins. Their willingness to participate in the French project, and in the discomfiture of the indigenous ruling classes, speaks to their dissatisfaction with the preexisting social order and the limited options they perceived within it.

Where *Amkoullel* falls short in its analysis of the prevailing hierarchical order, it succeeds beyond measure in its descriptions and explanations of the ways in which individuals and institutions reified and perpetuated cultural and social norms, particularly as it pertained to inter-generational transfers of knowledge in these areas. Bâ's discussion of the form and function of the Qur'anic schools and his experience within them, as well as the entirety of the ceremony of male circumcision (including the roles of the initiates' families and the wider adult community) are excellent examples of his assiduity in recounting and then elucidating local phenomena for a wider audience. However, there may be no greater example of his ability to render a local practice legible to an international audience than in his detailed accounts of his experiences with the *waaldé/ton*, or youth association (in Fulfulde and Bambara, respectively) in Bandiagara and Kati. Within his accounts of his participation in the formation, management, expansion, and defense of his

waaldé, Bâ leads readers into an exploration of the traditional social world of adolescents of the region, the ways in which the interacted with others in their cohort (within and across gender lines) and youth in general, the functioning of these associations in preparing members for entrance into and participation in the adult world, and the role of adults in guiding and supporting these institutions. Finally, in recounting the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the youth associations (the massive recruitment of youth in French West Africa), Bâ offers the reader a true sense of the value of the *waaldé* in the preservation and perpetuation of local culture, and the real implications of its absence for the region.

However, the brilliance of *Amkoullel* is most evident in its presentation of individuals of note. And while there is no shortage of memorable individuals - Hampâté Bâ, Bâ's biological father; Tidjani Thiam, his adopted father; Tierno Bokar, his Qur'anic teacher and mentor – none shines brighter than his mother, Kadidja Diallo. Through his account, Bâ sketches a portrait of intelligence, resilience, resourcefulness, strength, and wisdom; the imposing, impressive daughter of another equally remarkable individual, Anta N'Diobdi. Kadidja Diallo is the most potent human force in the narrative; her drive and resourcefulness provide the material comforts Bâ enjoys (notwithstanding the contributions of her husband Tidjani Thiam, whose work ethic is also impressive), and her resilience and will enable her to recover from every obstacle and setback she (or those closest to her) encounters. It is Kadidja Diallo who finds the wrongfully imprisoned Tidjani Thiam; she then arranges for his transfer to more comfortable accommodations in prison, and thereafter accompanies him for the duration of his exile in Bougouni. Moreover, while in exile, her resourcefulness manifests itself in an entrepreneurial spirit that enables them to return to Bandiagara wealthy; her business acumen manifests itself throughout the narrative. She is also an exemplar of Fula social and cultural norms in her private and public interactions with family, friends, neighbors, and strangers, consistently demonstrating the type of restraint Bâ contends is the clearest representation of this ethos.

Her last interaction with Bâ, who at this point is en route to a colonial appointment in the "Upper Volta" (Burkina Faso), epitomizes her role in the text and in Bâ's life. Having accompanied her son from Bamako to Koulikoro, she takes his hands in hers, looks intently into his eyes, and then imparts advice that clearly and concisely presents her perspective on a life well-lived, and then walks away without looking back (according to Bâ, so that he won't see her crying, as it would be unseemly). In our encounter with Kadidja Diallo, we meet an individual who, like her mother, possesses an unparalleled strength of character and integrity that is acknowledged by all. Amadou Hampâté Bâ is the subject of *Amkoullel*; Kadidja Diallo is the star.

In the pages of *Amkoullel* readers are presented with the stories of an individual and collective life. The individual life is that of young Amadou Hampâté Bâ; the collective life is that of the peoples of what is now the Republic of Mali. Both stories involve the attempt to come into a sense of oneself in a rapidly changing environment in which older, established norms and practices are threatened by new, foreign norms imposed through the process of colonization, and the struggle to maintain these former while navigating a terrain in which the latter are increasingly dominant.

In the end, both protagonists embrace aspects of the culture and values of their conquerors, while demanding, and eventually obtaining, their independence and the right to reaffirm those ways of knowing had been (and remained, although unacknowledged) so central to their identities. Both stories are compelling and deserving of our attention. The enduring genius of Amadou Hampâté Bâ is his ability to render the story of the collective life of the peoples of Mali legible through the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of one Fula boy and the process by which he comes of age.

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