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**A MAGYAR TUDOMÁNY KÜLFÖLDI BARÁTAI  
AZ AFRIKA-KUTATÁS TERÜLETÉN  
FRIENDS IN ABROAD OF HUNGARIAN SCHOLARSHIP  
ON THE FIELD OF AFRICAN RESEARCH**

STRATEGIES COMPARED  
THE CULTURAL TRANSLATIONS  
OF ALEXIS KAGAME  
AND AMADOU HAMPATE BA

Paper presented at the African Literature Association  
Austin, TX — March 1998

BELCHER, Stephan

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African literature includes not only the many works in international languages, but also — and arguably, originally — the verbal art of African languages. Some of this is what one terms ‘traditional’, i.e. the common property of the culture; some of it is not, and I would like to explore — and I use the word to signify a tentative, rather than imperialist, intention — some examples which seem to me to pose particular problems. I often find it helpful, in my approach to African literature, to work with pairs or even sets of texts. The multiple interactions of the texts often suggest dimensions and perspectives in the works which would not stand out when approached alone; the transference of questions from one work to another may be a simple tool of inquiry, but it often casts a revealing light. The selection or pairing, however, should not be random; some parallels of content or context seem necessary to justify the association. The broad field of African literature abounds in such possible parallels, of course, thanks to the common experiences of different colonialisms fragmented into multiple linguistic and national communities, and today I would like

to consider briefly some specific works by two somewhat older and perhaps less visible writers: Alexis Kagame, of Rwanda, and Amadou Hampâté Bâ of Mali.

The biographical and literary features which link the two are fairly obvious, and in his recent *Littératures d'Afrique noire* Alain Ricard in fact unites them, with other writers, under the rubric of '*passseurs*,' i.e. writers whose works bring aspects of their oral tradition into writing and who thus bridge the cultural dichotomy implicit in the relations of vernacular and international languages in Africa. Both men provide a corpus of scholarly treatments of the oral traditions of their native culture, and both men launched into enterprises of their own, in a creative appropriation and reconfiguration of that oral tradition. The differences between the two I find quite instructive and illustrative of the complexity of modern Africa.

The works I intend to juxtapose are Kagame's religious poems, as represented in his French translations (1952, 1955), and Hampâté Ba's initiatory narratives, particularly *Kaidara*, which exists in multiple versions and which has been the object of some provocative analysis.

#### Kagame's Christian Poetry

Father Alexis Kagame, 1912-1981, was a Catholic priest in Rwanda, and his literary legacy is considerable, in French and in Kinyarwanda, although it does not appear well-known outside Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> His scholarly work is considerable, and still serves as a primary source for histories and analysis of the pre-colonial kingdom of Rwanda: he wrote on law and on military institutions, on philosophy, and particularly on poetry: the poetic traditions associated with the royal court in Rwanda were very rich, and he endeavoured to capture this linguistic heritage as he saw it vanishing.

And also, very early, he began writing poetry of his own in Kinyarwanda; a recent article in *Research in African Literatures* by Anthère Nzabatsinda notes some of his poems are school-room classics, memorized by all primary students. And also well-known in Rwanda is his attempt to translate Christian doctrine into Kinyarwanda. In 1950 and 1953, he published, with the sanction of

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1. Historians of Rwanda constitute an obvious exception to this remark, and Valentin Mudimbe works with Kagame's philosophical legacy (*Invention* page refs.). Biographical information on Kagame is taken from his own work, from Ricard, and from the Dictionary...

the Church, the first two ‘Nights’ of a projected eighteen night sequence which would tell the story of creation according to Christianity — the equivalent in English terms of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. The two nights together take us to the end of the seventh day of creation, through eight cantos per night. Kagame’s French translation of these texts appeared in 1952 and 1955, and it is these that I have used, lacking a knowledge of Kinyarwanda.

Kagame’s intention for these texts was explicitly for proselytization: while admitting that his poetry would find no place in the liturgy, he expresses the hope that it might serve to convey doctrines and to sensitize the people towards Christianity (1952: 17-18). He adopted, from a number of possible poetic modes, a traditional aristocratic verse-form, which he calls ‘Pastoral’ and which for specificity we might term ‘cattle-praises’. He had at his disposal a considerable corpus of many forms of dynastic praise; he had become in a sense the royally-sanctioned collector of the poems and spent some time at this task in the late 1930s.<sup>2</sup> He chose the pastoral, or cattle-praise, because it seemed the more popular and accessible:

Le *genre pastoral* semble cependant mieux se prêter à l’ampleur d’une épopée ... Et voilà comment la présente adaptation est du *genre pastoral* choisi pour sa langue qui veut se faire aussi douce que le lait et pour la clarté du style qui le caractérise. Le *genre dynastique* au figures énigmatiques, le *genre guerrier* essentiellement fait d’ardeur belliqueuse et prônant les scènes de carnage ne pouvaient offrir, à un essai aussi délicat, autant de facilité que le *pastoral*

[The *pastoral genre* seems best to lend itself to the scope of an epic ... And that is how the present adaptation is in the *pastoral genre* chosen for its language which tries to be as sweet as milk and for the clarity of the style which defines it. The *dynastic genre* of the enigmatic tropes, the *warrior’s genre* made up of martial spirit and advancing scenes of carnage, could not supply to such a delicate project the facilities offered by the *pastoral*]

(Kagame 1952/1973, pp. 18-19).

He does, however, acknowledge a debt to warriors’ songs and to

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2. See Vidal for a discussion of Kagame’s access to the royal court and the questions raised by his role as privileged informant and intermediary.

the general tradition of praise-singing (*ibid.*) as well, and they would certainly suit the rhetorical intentions and needs of his work. The nuances, however, appear relatively fine. The published examples of the pastoral, cattle-praise, poetry share much with the warlike tone of other poetic genres, as we see in this sample of a pastoral poem published by Kagame:

Parmi eux, la Favorisée de succès fit son choix,  
 en brandissant la Bâillonneuse-des-batailles,  
 zagaie à la reluisante lame de fer,  
 emmanchée d'un bois solide ...  
 Le trait le perfora de toute la largeur des crochets,  
 et la lame refusa qu'il le transperçât de part en part:  
 elle campa à l'intérieur, dans son sein...

[Among them, the Blessed-by-success made her choice /  
 Brandishing the Stifler-of-Battles / An assegai with shining  
 iron blade, / Its shaft made of strong wood. / The blow pierced  
 him to the width of the barbs, / And the blade refused to pass  
 entirely through: / It settled inside him, in his breast...<sup>3</sup>]

Nevertheless, the contrast drawn by Kagame between the tightly enigmatic poetic style of dynastic poetry (comparable to the Northern European tradition of the kenning) and the distinctive style of individual praises does seem useful; the pastoral offers more space for narrative, and (a point he does not make) it avoids association with any human authorities: to have chosen the dynastic style, for instance, might have been construed as an implicit challenge to the king.

While much of Kagame's inspiration was certainly derived from the missionary zeal of a convert, it would also appear that simple poetic delight was a factor as well — the sort of delight that W. H. Auden invoked when he said that for him, a poet was someone who liked “hang around words and overhear them talking to one another.”<sup>4</sup> A canto in the first Night, which Kagame identifies in his notes as among the oldest, appears to be a thesaurus of invective addressed to Lucifer, and thus a poetic exercise in the vein of his earlier praise of

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3. Kagame 1969, p. 94. The same tone is to be found in the examples published by other scholars such as Coupez and Kamanzi 1970. The premise of pastoral poetry seems to be the attribution to the cows themselves of the valor and exploits attendant upon a tradition of cattle-raiding.

4. In John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1959), p. 667.

pork, the “*relève-gout des pommes de terre.*”

Il a les joues boursoufflées,  
Et la marche de grenouille.  
Les lieux couverts sont ses voies;  
A cause du fait qu'on le maudit dès qu'on le voit.  
(ll. 41-44, p. 72)

Il a la queue comme d'un rat  
La denture proéminente comme d'une hyène;  
Il est phacochère aux mamelles comme d'une chienne  
Pour la taille il ne ressemble qu'au chacal  
(ll. 57-60, p. 73)

[His cheeks are puffed out / He walks like a frog. / Covered places are his paths, / Because people curse him on sight. (ll. 41-44).

He has the tail of a rat / And the jutting jaws of a hyena. / He is a warthog with a bitch's dugs, / And his stature is that of the jackal. (ll. 57-60)]

He was also clearly playing with the adaptation of the standard poetic vocabulary from the praise tradition, although this dimension is naturally harder to discern without reference to the original. Drums, a standard attribute of royalty, provide an ongoing reminder of the African context. In his notes, Kagame explicitly spatializes the scene of Lucifer's rebellion in terms of the layout of a royal palace and the adjoining compounds of the nobles (1952, p. 68, n.19).

Other elements seem less playful. The first canto of the first night is devoted to an explication of the nature of the Triune God, alone in infinity, and the technicalities remind us that Kagame is rephrasing an alien doctrine for easy assimilation — sugarcoating the pill, or putting a wolf in sheep's clothing, depending on one's choice of metaphor:

Tous les Trois n'ont aucune disproportion d'aucune sorte:  
Leur stature est identique,  
Leur mesure est chose unique,  
Leur gloire à tous égale.  
Ils n'eurent jamais un commencement d'existence,  
Pour la durée Ils sont jumeaux;  
Le point de départ de leur vie fut impossible,  
Et nul terme qui s'imaginerait pour l'avenir!

[The Three have no disproportion of any sort: / Their stature is identical, / Their measure is a single thing, / Their glory the

same for each. / Never was their a start to their being, /  
Throughout all time they are twins;<sup>5</sup> / The starting point of  
their life was impossible, / And no limit imaginable for the  
future. 1952, p. 35, ll. 125-132]

For the modern sensibility, and in political terms, elements of the enterprise do seem questionable. Most of Kagame's work was done under Belgian colonial rule in Rwanda, and Kagame was clearly an active collaborator, furthering the mission of the Church. Granted, his work (especially his scholarly endeavors) contributed to the elucidation and affirmation of the value of his own tradition, but it was certainly not carried out in a spirit of enlightened rebelliousness. And even within the Rwandan context, he remained closely associated with the status quo which involved the subordination of Hutu to Tutsi, through his alliance with the Tutsi king, and the deplorable consequences of that state of affairs are all too well known.

Nevertheless, it seems obvious that such a work — influential on its home turf and clearly comparable in intention and scope to the works of Dante and Milton — should register on our mental maps of African literature, despite any limitations of access caused by language skills. The work challenges any vision of vernacular languages as passive (and dwindling) repositories of an inherited tradition; it marks instead the almost natural adaptation of available resources for innovation and re-creation in the cultural tradition. It raises the question whether our definition of the canons of African literature should depend upon what appeals to us, outside the continent, or should also reflect the actual reading practices of African publics. It remains relatively unknown, hidden by language difficulties and the deplorable events of recent years in Rwanda.<sup>6</sup>

For the second case, we turn to the territory of the colonial *Afrique occidentale française* and the Malian Amadou Hampâté Bâ, 1901-1991. After a combined Islamic and French education, he served in the colonial administration for twenty years, until Theodore Monod had him assigned to the IFAN; he then served as a researcher for close

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5. Kagame here offers a note on the use of the word *jumeaux* (twins), in Rwanda *impanga*, saying it could not offend a Rwandan and citing, for French, the *Littré* dictionary for its application to numbers of items greater than two.

6. The fact that Rwanda was a Belgian colony, and thus something of a step-child for the Francophone world may also have contributed.

to twenty years until the years of independence drew him into international administration, particularly in UNESCO.<sup>7</sup> Like Kagame, his work consists of a diverse array of pieces: essays co-authored with French scholars on hunting techniques, on traditional culture, on rock-paintings and on historical topics; extensive texts collected from the oral tradition; and finally a body of fiction and autobiographical narratives such as *L'étrange destin de Wangrin* and *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*.

His collection from oral tradition includes among many pieces four initiatory narratives, as he calls them, which the notes attribute loosely to the esoteric traditions of the pastoral Fula particularly of eastern Senegal. The first, published in 1961, was *Koumen* is a schematic narrative, in which the initiand Sile Sadio is led by Koumen, god of herdsmen, through a series of twelve clearings until he reaches Koumen's home, and there Koumen's spouse Foroforondou leads him through further explication of the symbols he has encountered. The second and third texts, *Kaïdara* and *L'éclat de la grande étoile*, were published in the *Classiques africains* series, which involves original language and facing French translation, and offer somewhat more developed plots and a certain continuity between their stories. The last narrative, *Njeddo Dewal*, was published as a French prose text in Abidjan; a prose version of *Kaïdara* was also published in this series.

*Kaïdara* is certainly the best known and most widely studied of these pieces. It tells of three young men, Hammadi and two others, who set out seeking initiation in the mysterious and wonderful land of Kaïdara. They encounter a series of eleven symbols such as a chameleon, a bat, a scorpion, and finally reach the land of Kaïdara. There, they are tested: each is given gold and asked what they will seek to accomplish, and Hammadi's two companions choose material ends: power and wealth. Hammadi, who is, incidentally, a noble, chooses knowledge. His two companions come to grief, while he passes the tests, and he ends up with their gold as well as his own, and returns home and becomes king. Many years later, a disgusting and lousy beggar appears at his gate and asks for a meal with the king; Hammadi grants the request. The old man is Kaidara, who has come to explicate the symbols which Hammadi had encountered on his

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7. See Ricard, 160-162, and Daniel Whitman's introductory remarks in his translation of *Kaïdara* (pp. 10-12) for biographical sketches.

travels years before, and this he does quite mathematically, linking the numbers of the symbols to various knots used by herdsman.

*Kaïdara* has acquired a certain stature as an example of traditional lore and wisdom within the context of the initiatory models of knowledge which are particularly associated with the French school of Marcel Griaule and his successors. It has been the object of a short monograph by Werewere Liking, who approached it using the Tarot and pentangles and various other keys to understanding, and who concludes her analysis with three chapters on Amadou Hampâté Bâ's social philosophy, as expressed through his notes and commentary, which she finds finds regressive, being classist (Hammadi, who succeeds in his quest, is noble; the others are of lower status), agist--or at least perpetuating a gerontocratic system — and sexist. In his introduction to *.Njeddo Dewal*, Bâ explicitly rejected Liking's vision of his work (1985, p. 9, n. 6).

Our approach to *Kaïdara* turns on somewhat different issues: its relationship to the oral tradition from which it purportedly arises, and thus questions of its genre, its sources, and finally, perhaps, its definable literary intention. These questions present themselves largely because Hampâté Bâ appears to be the only composer of such narratives on record.

In the various introductions to *Koumen*, *Kaïdara*, and the other narratives, the works are assigned to the category of the *jantol*, a Fula word derived from the same root as *jangude*, to read or study. Lilyan Kesteloot offers the basic initial definition:

Tout d'abord, le *jantol* est un récit très long dont les personnages sont humains ou divins; son sujet peut être une aventure mythique, une histoire exemplaire didactique ou édifiante, une allégorie initiatique comme c'est le cas ici... Le *jantol*, contrairement au *taalol* [the tale], peut se composer en vers ou en prose et peut également s'écrire... Le *jantol* est donc le fait des *lettrés peuls* car il nécessite une culture, une science, et une adresse que ne possède habituellement pas le conteur ordinaire...

[First of all, the *jantol* is a very long story involving human or divine characters; its subject may be a mythical adventure, a didactic or edifying exemplary story, or an initiatory allegory, as is the case here. ... The *jantol*, unlike the *taalol*, may be composed in prose or in verse, and may also be written. ... The

*jantol* is thus the product of *Fula men of letters*, for it requires culture and knowledge and skill beyond what an ordinary story-teller may possess. (1968, pp. 7-8)]

Within Kesteloot's definition, however, we can perceive the seeds of uncertainty: although the genre is said to come from the pastoral tradition, it is in fact the product of 'men of letters' — which for the Fula of western Africa of necessity implies some connection with Islam — and implicitly involves more than the 'tradition' (the folklore?) of the nomadic groups. Christiane Seydou, who participated in editing the texts, also expresses some reserves:

Quant à l'expression littéraire elle-même, le style remarquable de leur "transmetteur" — qui est un grand lettré et un écrivain au talent poétique confirmé — ne nous permet pas de l'évoquer dans la perspective d'une littérature véritablement orale...

[As for the literary expression itself, the remarkable style of their "transmitter" — who is a notable man of letters and a writer of proven poetic talent — does not allow us to approach [this work] from the perspective of a truly oral literature] (Seydou 1973, p. 179).

The reservations which I perceive in these definitions arise from a simple fact: Amadou Hampâté Bâ is the only known composer of the *jantol* as he describes it, and while he enjoys a certain credibility as a supremely well-informed source on west African culture some external confirmation of this literary practice would be, at the least, desirable. Otherwise we are left with the not unappealing notion that this is a genre he invented himself.

By its association with *Koumen*, *Kaidara* makes a claim to represent pastoral lore — the traditions of cattle-herding Fula. But if we go outside the pool of texts to which Bâ himself contributed, we have very little evidence to support this assertion. Bâ himself states in his notes that this tradition of the *jantol* is centered in eastern Senegal. For that region, Alain Le Pichon and Souleymane Balde offer an excellent study of a Fula *silatigi* or *ardo*, the lead herdsman which alternates between their ethnographic expedition and a narrative dealing with a troublesome hero named Samba told by their informant (*Le troupeau des songes*). We also have materials from Niger, by Dioulde Laya and Marguerite Dupire, which document local practices but show no support for teaching centered on narrative exposition.

Moving outside the Fula linguistic and ethnic group, we could look at Bamana hunters' associations which are reasonably well-documented, or the *Bagre* narratives of the LoDagaa collected by Jack Goody which are still part of the same cultural complex.

*Kaïdara* seems to have little in common with these materials. The earlier *Koumen* and the later *Njeddo Dewal* are perhaps a closer fit in very different ways. *Koumen*, for instance, involves initiation by a deity, Koumen himself, and his spouse, Foroforondou. The name *koumen* is at least cited by Djibril Ly (in 1938) as that of a bush-spirit (the equivalent of the wide-spread jinns):

Les kouwènes sont les habitants des mers et des fleuves, ils possèdent des troupeaux de boeufs qu'ils mènent paître dans les endroits désertiques. Les sciences naturelles n'ont pas de secrets pour eux, néanmoins ils craignent beaucoup les humains; les kouwènes ont la forme humaine, de petite taille, le visage au teint clair; ils possèdent de longues chevelures leur tombant jusqu'au jarrets.

[The kouwens live in seas and rivers, they own herds of cattle which they take to graze in desert areas. The natural world has no secrets from them, still they fear humans greatly. Koumens have human form, and are of small size, their face of a light hue; they have long hair falling to their calves.

(Ly 1938, pp. 318-319, n. 1)

This description of the kouwens matches that given for bush-spirits throughout the Western Sudan, and Ly's testimony can easily be connected with many other reports. The name Koumen, however, does not appear in other accounts, to my knowledge, such as those of M. L'Estrange, who described the folklore and the spirits of Fulakunda (1950, 1951).

In *Koumen*, the pairing of male and female seems a familiar cultural pattern for the region; it recalls, for instance, the Mande hunting divinities Sanen and Kontron, who are male and female in various relationships: siblings, spouses, or mother and son, and who also serve as initiatory figures for Mande hunters (we must remember here that the Mande world overlaps with that of the western Fula in Senegal, the Gambia, and Guinea).<sup>8</sup> The female element, absent in

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8. The literature on Mande hunters is growing; see first, perhaps, Y. T Cisse's *Les confréries de chasseurs malinke* (Paris: Karthala, 1994) and

*Kaidara*, returns in *Njeddo Dewal*, although as a negative force that must be overcome, and Bâ's notes here link her explicitly with the Mande deity Muso Koronin Kunje, the little white-haired old woman who is one of a triad of creators in some versions of the Mande creation myth. But *Kaidara* eschews the feminine, as Werewere Liking observes; it offers a purely masculine world.

The problem here is that of independent confirmation of the traditional lore which is allegedly presented in Hampâté Bâ's works. Such confirmation may not be strictly necessary, so long as we view the works as the product of an author; it does seem required if we are to view the works as representative of a wider and more popular tradition. And at the moment, it seems impossible to find.<sup>9</sup> There is a fairly well-known Fula account of the origin of cattle, the story of Tyamaba the great serpent (Lilyan Kesteloot has edited an excellent study of this legend); there are other Islamized legends. But the names of the gods and spirits, the significance of the various symbols identified in the various narratives, and even the plots themselves cannot, in our present state of documentation, be connected with independent testimony. Given the strong and wide agreement one encounters elsewhere between written sources and documents from the oral tradition for the western Sudan, this discrepancy seems significant.

What does emerge as relevant from the available materials is the question of the plot and the type of narrative. What most strikes the reader upon encountering *Koumen*, *Kaidara*, or *Njeddo Dewal* is the detailed symbolism, the allegorical tone of the narratives. But in fact, that is exactly what we have difficulty correlating with the oral tradition (and that seems to be the feature which Seydou and Kesteloot, as noted above, associate with the written tradition). But the skeleton underneath the symbolism is essentially that of a folktale, and if we look at these narrative bones we begin to find ourselves upon more familiar ground. *Kaidara* tells us of three men who

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Gerald Cashion's *Hunters of the Mande: A Behavioral Code and Worldview derived from the Study of their Folklore*. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1984. 2 vols.

9. I make this statement fully aware that it depends upon the limitations of my own knowledge, and I consider it an invitation to those who, having more awareness of the traditions which Hampâté Bâ is claiming to represent, might fill in the gaps which now seem so glaring.

received gifts after a quest, and of the differing uses, with their consequences, made of the gifts. *Njeddo Dewal* combines two recognizable story types: a quest followed by a magical flight and a ‘Thumbling’ pattern in which the youngest of many siblings saves them from the plots of a witch.<sup>10</sup> What seems traditional, then, is the story-line which Hampâté Bâ has appropriated for a somewhat deeper use, and which he invests with a weight of significance. And the question then becomes — whence the significance?

At a conference in 1945, Theodore Monod first described *Kaïdara*, of which Hampâté Bâ had apparently just finished the first version. He tells the story in some detail, and comments that it has nothing Islamic about it.<sup>11</sup> But later readers and students would disagree. Gabriel and Denise Asfar, in their respective articles, outline the patterns of Islamic symbolism and Sufi initiation processes which inform the narrative. The English translations of *Kaïdara* incorporates mystic drawings annotated in Arabic to illustrate the modes of symbolism. An association with Islam easily explains the heavy numerical

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10. A narrative which in some ways offers a parallel initiatory theme was collected by Equilbecq and anthologized by Blaise Cendrars in his *Anthologie Nègre*: “Hammat et Mandiaye”, in which first Hammat and then Mandiaye goes on a quest (the story type is essentially that of the Aarne-Thompson classification 480, the kind and unkind girls, although the details vary considerably). Hammat, who goes first, encounters unusual people such as the man who knocked over a baobab with his *bangala*, or another who travelled which his *bangala* draped over 100 donkeys, and women with organs to match. When the people ask him how he will describe them, Hammat answers, “I shall say I met a person who [knocked over a baobab/had a single load carried by 100 donkeys, etc. ] and then gave me something to eat.” The people are pleased and reward him, and Hammat on the return voyage matches up the men and women. Mandiaye, of course, gives the wrong answers: “I shall say I saw a man with a *bangala*...” and is ultimately punished.

Despite its scatological tone, the story clearly plays with the themes of perception and interpretation, and so lends itself to comparison with *Kaïdara*; we might also recall that Cendrars’ work is certainly something Hampâté Bâ would have encountered during his years with the IFAN in Dakar.

11. Monod 1951. His description continues, however, with an account of Hampâté Bâ’s Islamic education in Bandiagara, and so it seems clear that even then this narrative was associated, for Hampâté Bâ, with the patterns of his early education.

organization of the symbols, the somewhat passive mode of presentation of the knowledge (the symbols are eventually explicated by the master, and their meaning absorbed by the student) and even the name itself. Lilyan Kesteloot made the convincing suggestion that the name *Kaïdara* is to be linked with that of *el-Khidr*, the rather mysterious Islamic figure associated with Sufi initiations.

Here we return to Hampâté Bâ's roots and his spiritual model, the subject of his first co-authored book: *Tierno Bokar, le sage de Bandiagara*. Tierno Bokar was a Tijjani Sufi leader of the Tall family — the family of al-Hajj Umar — who lived in Bandiagara as a teacher until he was caught up in colonial religious politics through his association with the Hamallist movement. Besides Hampâté Bâ's hagiography, reissued under his own name in 1981, we also have a study of Tierno Bokar by Louis Brenner, and Brenner, I think, captures the appeal of this teacher:

Cerno Bokar spoke often about the "Truth," although he never seems to have given a specific definition to the word... Cerno Bokar employed [various Muslim] meanings in his teachings, but he also spoke of Truth as a kind of essential, universal religion and as a kind of mystical intuition. This vagueness of definition reflects an inherent characteristic of the man, because the emphasis in Cerno Bokar's life was much less in proclaiming any particular "Truth" than in constantly searching for it."

(Brenner, *West African Sufi*, p. 1)

Tierno Bokar's catechism, the *ma ed-din?* (What is the faith) consists of an essentially numerologic exposition of the principles of Islam and religion in general; Louis Brenner reproduces the diagram which was used, and the English translation of *Kaïdara* offers two other clearly Islamic and Arabized diagrams as illustrations of Hampate Ba's thought.

It is difficult, then, to think of *Kaïdara* as a genuine reflection of the oral tradition, although it does at least come with an original-language version in the *Classiques Africains* edition. But is such authenticity really a requirement? *Kaïdara* has evoked a greater popular response than the other works — multiple editions, translations, commentary — and it clearly satisfies a need of some kind. The initiatory function implies a form of guidance or revelation, and to some extent answers to questions and doubts. The fact that those answers rely for their source on an Islamic foundation does not,

however, make them necessarily foreign. The Tijani Sufi order is a particularly African branch of Islam, founded in North Africa and associated most closely with the name of al-Hajj Umar Tall, who dominates the mid-19th century history of the Western Sudan. So Bâ is drawing on a home-grown vein of questions and answers, although he passes it off as something slightly different.

We end up with a contrast — Kagame rewriting a foreign doctrine in his native language, Hampate Bâ creating an illusory grounding in the oral tradition for something that is essentially his own composition. Each endeavour finds an audience and a certain popularity and influence, although I think the endeavours work in different ways and in a sense for opposite audiences. And so — since I said this was a tentative exploration — we end with questions for ourselves about how to approach and present such texts, and how to define our perceptions of African literature to include them.

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