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Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1901-1991) and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948): Two Apostles of Tolerance

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Résumé de l'article

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AMADOU HAMPÂTÉ BÂ (1901-1991) AND MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI (1869-1948) : TWO APOSTLES OF TOLERANCE

Résumé

Hampâté Bâ et Gandhi, deux penseurs emblématiques issus de deux lieux très distincts sur les plans géographique, historique, culturel et religieux, manifestent des convergences qui incitent à la réflexion. Ils font montre tous les deux d'un penchant pour les principes de la tolérance et de la dignité humaine envers tous les peuples, au-delà des barrières de caste, de couleur et de convictions. Tous deux étaient, on le sait, reconnus internationalement comme des hommes de sagesse, des esprits libres, résolus même face aux vicissitudes définissant leur situation. Incontestablement, la voie que ces deux hommes choisirent révèle d'importantes dissemblances : Gandhi, plus que Hampâté Bâ, représentait un défi pour l'administration coloniale. Cependant, ils partagent l'expérience de la colonisation territoriale, qu'ils ont documentée dans leurs autobiographies, mais aussi une réflexion sur la tolérance en conjonction avec des courants de pensée occidentaux. Les lisant ensemble, l'un avec l'autre et l'un contre l'autre, cet essai cherche à dévoiler les imbrications qui relient leur trajectoire et leur mode de penser.

Mots clés : Hampâté Bâ – Gandhi – tolérance – sujet colonial – penser au-delà des marges – correspondances.

Abstract

Hampâté Bâ and Gandhi, two thinkers emblematic of two distinct geographical, historical, cultural and religious locations exhibit commonalities that are thought provoking. Both demonstrate a common penchant for principles of tolerance and human dignity for all people, across barriers of caste, color and creed. Understandably, both came to be seen internationally as men of wisdom, as free spirits, resolute even in the face of their unsettling times. Indisputably, the path the two men chose reveals glaring dissimilarities : Gandhi, more than Hampâté Bâ, represented a challenge for the colonial administration. Yet what unites them, however, is their shared experience of territorial colonization, closely documented in their autobiographies, but also the ways in which both constructed their ideas of tolerance in conjunction with strands of Western thought. Alternately reading them together and against each other, this essay seeks to uncover the imbrications that connect their trajectory and their thinking.

Keywords : Hampâté Bâ – Gandhi – tolerance – colonial subject – thinking across the margins – correspondences.

Basically, there are two ways to think across cultural and ethnic frontiers, which I call *common humanity* and the *anthropological turn*. Notions of common humanity bracket cultural differences by appealing to universal values and human commonalities. A discourse of common humanity transforms a stranger into a fellow human being. While common humanity seeks to transcend cultural difference by abstracting from it, the anthropological turn concentrates on difference. Whereas common humanity turns a foreigner into a fellow human being, the anthropological turn deconstructs humanity by focusing on the semantics of « we » versus « them »¹.

The hardening of racial, cultural and religious differences, indisputably a signature of our times, demands that we place greater emphasis on our « common humanity », rather than on epistemologies of otherness and difference bolstered by the scientific legitimacy enjoyed by anthropology, a discipline with imperial entanglements, since the end of the 19th century². It is with intent that this essay seeks to uncover the subterranean imbrications linking two writers, Amadou Hampâté Bâ and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, emissaries presumably of two radically distinct civilizations, African and Indian ; and yet, conjoined in their shared aversion to violence and racial prejudice that informed colonial domination. Both men were born and lived under colonial rule and experienced first-hand the indignities of a discriminatory political system. Notwithstanding, each in his distinctive manner was conspicuous by his commitment to tolerance, a notion whose elucidation led them to delve into their ancient religious and philosophical traditions to unearth from « within », from native thought and religion, philosophies of tolerance deemed a befitting response to Western ideologies of racial and cultural difference. While both

¹ STUURMAN (Siep), « Common Humanity and Cultural Difference on the Sedentary-Nomadic Frontier », in : MOYN (Samuel), SARTORI (Andrew), eds., *Global Intellectual History*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2013, 352 p. ; p. 33.

² For Michel Foucault's critique of anthropology and its colonial imbrications, see : FOUCAULT (Michel), *The Order of things : An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York : Vintage Books, 1973, XXIV-387 p. ; p. 377. His observations spawned much discussion on the legitimacy of anthropological knowledge – cf. MUDIMBE (Valentin-Yves), *The Invention of Africa : Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington-Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1988, 241 p. ; HOUNTONDJI (Paulin), *Sur la « philosophie africaine » : critique de l'ethnophilosophie*. Paris : F. Maspero, coll. Textes à l'appui, 1977, 257 p. (English edition : ID., *African Philosophy : Myth and Reality*. Translated by Henri Evans with the collaboration of Jonathan Réé. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1983, XXVIII-221 p.) ; CLIFFORD (James), *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge (MA) : Harvard University Press, 1988, XII-381 p.

men self-created in the literary posture³ of indigenists evidenced in their vestimentary preferences that clearly set them apart from the modernist colonial elite, with Hampâté Bâ attired in a *djellaba* and Gandhi in a white loin cloth ; as affiliates of the educated elite, both were *ipso facto* compelled to direct their search « outward », negotiate disparities, engage with contemporary Western thought, and mostly to establish a basis for communication across cultural and religious frontiers.

Hence, what I wish to track here is a configuration of postcolonial thought and knowledge foregrounded on the impulse to negotiate across cultural and religious polarities. While allured by the virtues of autochthonous religions and morals, the two writers cannot be faulted for dogmatism. Their writings clearly reveal their humanist, or rather cosmopolitan leaning, founded on the axiom that « there is much to learn from [...] differences »⁴. In reading their personal trajectory and thinking, the essay aims to unearth shared histories that bind the so-called South, kindred in its quest *to know*, or rather *to harmonize and even marry* beliefs and ideas that at the start seem radically different.

Two men : two trajectories

The two thinkers, an Indian and a Malian, each shaped by his unique history, sociocultural environment and belief systems, did not enjoy a comparable stature, nationally or internationally. Gandhi is an exemplary figure : the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore bestowed on him title of *Mahatma*, or Great Soul, the French essayist Romain Rolland placed him in league with Indian saints, and the Indian philosopher R.N. Iyer saw him as an avatar of Buddha, Christ, Krishna, Rama and St Francis of Assisi⁵. His ideas on politics captured the imagination of civil rights activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, and others point to his global relevance in the contemporary world⁶. Amadou Hampâté Bâ was comparatively an obscure figure who emerged as an international voice after his nomination to the Executive Council of UNESCO in 1962, in his capacity as cultural activist and defender of Africa's oral traditions, bolstered by the new-found authority of this prestigious institution. His appeal possibly found favor internationally : it resonated with the French anthropologist,

³ MEIZOZ (Jérôme), « Ethos, champ et facture des œuvres : recherches sur la "posture" », *Pratiques*, n°117-118, 2003, p. 241-250.

⁴ APPIAH (Kwame Anthony), *Cosmopolitanism : Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London ; New York : Penguin Books, 2007, XIX-196 p. ; p. XIII.

⁵ ROLLAND (Romain), *Mahatma Gandhi*. Paris : Stock, 1946, 204 p. IYER (Raghavan N.), *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1973, XIII-449 p. ; p. 4.

⁶ HARDIMAN (David), *Gandhi in his time and ours*. New Delhi : Permanent Black, 2003, XII-338 p. ; p. 198-216.

Claude-Lévi Strauss' theories on cultural relativism envisioned in his essay, *Race and History* (1952). Significantly, the Malian anthropologist is today often remembered for the aphorism he coined, urging cultural institutions to expedite the preservation of Africa's dying repository of oral literatures : « With the death of each elder, an entire library is wiped out ». The virtues he attributed to Africa's cultural legacy are, in some sense, responsible for his elevation to the pantheon of sages, clearly as a « man of traditions », of « science and wisdom »⁷.

Gandhi's presence looms large over us even today. It is often argued that his accomplishments were unparalleled. He launched the most powerful political movement in human history and with his steadfast moral conviction inspired three hundred million Indians to rise against British Imperialism and carve out a nation⁸. He died a martyr at the hands of sectarian forces, assassinated for his unwavering commitment to religious tolerance. His origins though were modest. He was born to a Hindu family, of Bania caste, essentially petty merchants and farmers, in the coastal town of Porbandar (Gujarat) where his father served as prime minister to the ruling prince. An ordinary student of no singular brilliance, after matriculation, defying caste rules prohibiting overseas travel, he set sail for England in 1888 with the purpose of studying law, leaving behind his wife and his infant son under the care of his brother. Soon after his return in 1891, he was commissioned by a Gujarati firm based in the British colony of Natal in South Africa to work with them for a year. In the end, this excursion lasted for seventeen years and proved life-transforming. Africa shaped him politically and intellectually. It is here in culturally and socially diverse cities like Durban and Johannesburg where he lived and worked that he gradually outgrew the conservatism of his Gujarati upbringing. South Africa provided the perfect location to forge enduring friendships with individuals of ethnic and religious backgrounds very different from his own.

His sojourn was critical also from the point of view of his political education : it is here that he became conscious of the repercussions of colonialism as he witnessed firsthand the treatment meted out to Indian nationals, mostly indentured laborers ; coolies, victims of a regime given to economic exploitation and racial discrimination. A London-educated barrister, Gandhi was recognizably better positioned socially. It is understandable therefore that he was revolted when he was forcibly ejected from the first-class coach at the Pietermaritzburg Railway Station, on a cold wintery

⁷ DEVEY (Muriel), *Hampâté Bâ : l'homme de la tradition*. [s.l.] : LivreSud, coll. Grandes figures africaines, 1993, 191 p. ; TOURÉ (Amadou), MARIKO (Ntji Idris), dir., *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, homme de science et de sagesse : mélanges pour le centième anniversaire de la naissance d'Hampâté Bâ*. Bamako : Nouvelles éditions maliennes ; Paris : Karthala, coll. Tradition orale, 2005, 350 p. The titles of books about him often position as a mystic and a sage.

⁸ ROLLAND (R.), *Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit.*, p. 11.

morning, while travelling from Durban to Pretoria. The episode represented a turning-point in his life. It fortified his resolve to eradicate the « deep disease of color prejudice » and seemingly firmed his commitment toward social reform. Hereafter, he campaigned untiringly in favor of civil rights for indentured Indians, the repeal of unjust laws and burdensome taxes, and the freedom of movement of people and of goods. He established the newspaper *The Indian Opinion* (1903-1915) which served as a tribune for the dissemination of his social and political ideas, in particular of his experiments with *Satyagraha* or truth-force, at the core of his practice of non-violence. Soon after the outbreak of the First World War, Gandhi returned to India, flush with insights culled from his experience of three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa, and a renewed awareness of the manifold expressions of human civilization, prompting the historian Ramachandra Guha to sagaciously conclude that he clearly owed his inclusiveness to his encounter with Judeo-Christian religions in the course of his stay in South Africa⁹. His years in England and in Africa were formative. They groomed him for the struggle that awaited him in India, a colonial territory of the British Crown with a polity riven in terms of language, religion and caste.

Conversely, Hampâté Bâ's life was shaped within the narrow confines of his native region. He was born in 1900 in Bandiagara, the ancient capital of the Toucouleur Empire, located in present-day Mali (previously a part of French Sudan), to a noble Fulani pastoralist family. Since, his father died at a young age, he was adopted by his mother's second husband, Amadou Ali Thiam, a Toucouleur chieftain. He received his early education at the Koranic school founded by Tierno Bokar, teacher and dignitary of the Tidjani Sufi order¹⁰, until he was peremptorily conscripted to the French School (or the School for Hostages) at the instigation of an erstwhile family retainer, supposedly in connivance with the French administration. It must be recalled here that Hampâté Bâ's life was distinctly marked by the vicissitudes of history and politics in the Masina region from the start of the 19th century. Initially home to the theocratic Fulani Empire, the region succumbed in 1862 to the armies of El Hadj Umar, Toucouleur jihadist of the Tidjani Sufi brotherhood¹¹. Hampâté Bâ's father had no option but to live under cover. He died shortly thereafter. Later, his mother's second husband, a Toucouleur chief, met a similar fate : the colonial administration confiscated his estates and exiled him. As a young boy, Hampâté Bâ was convinced that history had robbed him twice of the chieftdom that was rightfully his. He believed that his is what

⁹ GUHA (Ramachandra), *Gandhi before India*. London : Penguin Books, 2013, x-672 p. ; p. 530-550.

¹⁰ TRIAUD (Jean-Louis), « La Tidjaniya, une confrérie musulmane transnationale », *Politique étrangère*, vol. 75, n°4, 2010, p. 831-842.

¹¹ BRENNER (Louis), *West African Sufi : The Religious Heritage and Spiritual Search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal*. London : C. Hurst & Company, 1984, VIII-215 p.

prompted him to covet the system of education established by the French administration. Schooling would possibly allow him to reclaim his place both in the material and spiritual world. Immersion into the Sufi doctrine and practice was what he aspired to most in the interest of perpetuating the transmission of indigenous knowledge, threatened due to disruptions triggered in the course of the colonial encounter.

In 1918, he obtained his primary school certificate, but overcome at the prospect of moving to distant Senegal, he declined the offer to pursue his education at William Ponty School, a premier institution designed to impart training to the incipient native elite. Hastily appointed as mere « probationary writer », he was summarily « banished » to Ouagadougou in the newly formed colony of Upper Volta. Of a Fulani pastoralist lineage, the move stimulated his appetite for travel : he covered a thousand kilometers by train, boat and on foot (the last 500 kilometers on foot), acquainting himself during his peregrinations with the region's rich ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of the land. Travel held the promise of cultural and spiritual initiation ¹²; of observing and documenting indigenous cultures ; of what Gandhi would have seen as an exercise in « training the spirit » ¹³ : he owed much of his pan-African sensibility to the travels he later undertook during his tenure in the colonial administration. Subsequently, the cultural landscape of Africa appeared to him as a mosaic, as one of imbricated ethnic groups, animated by what the revisionist French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle calls « mestizo logics », in contravention of dominant readings of pre-colonial African societies construed as isolated monadic entities rather than as a « chain of societies » ¹⁴.

Gandhi's return to India in 1915 was historic : in Nehru's words « like a beam of light that pierced the darkness... ». Political freedom took a new shape then acquired a new content » ¹⁵. Henceforth, the Indian National Congress emerged as a mass organization and plunged into the vortex of Indian politics. Moving from campaign to campaign, he championed the cause of the peasantry in Champaran district in Bihar and Kheda in the State of Gujarat, and of the underpaid workers of the textile mills in

¹² Cf. DUCOURNAU (Claire), « De l'intermédiaire colonial au mémorialiste postcolonial. Les fonctions du déplacement géographique dans les mémoires d'Amadou Hampâté Bâ », *Études littéraires africaines*, n°36 (*Littératures et migrations transafricaines*), 2013, p. 33-45 ; URL : <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ela/2013-n36-ela01496/1026333ar/> (c. on 13-06-2021).

¹³ GANDHI (Mohandas Karamchand), *An Autobiography or The story of my experiments with truth*. Ahmedabad : Navajivan Publishing House, 1959, XVI-392 p. ; p. 249-250 (hereafter AA).

¹⁴ AMSELLE (Jean-Loup), *Logiques métisses : anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*. Paris : Éditions Payot, coll. Bibliothèque scientifique, 1990, 257 p. ; p. 15-39.

¹⁵ NEHRU (Jawaharlal), *The Discovery of India* [1946]. Delhi ; New York : Oxford University Press, coll. Oxford India Paperbacks, 1995, 582 p. ; p. 358.

Ahmedabad. The practice of peaceful resistance and non-cooperation redefined the terms of the struggle against colonial exploitation and dehumanization, infusing a renewed sense of hope among people.

Hampâté Bâ, in contrast, had no truck with politics. He led a measured life as colonial functionary until his house arrest in 1937 in connection with the dispute in Bandiagara provoked by a rift within the Tidjanya over the practice of « eleven beads ». While a large section opposed it, his teacher and spiritual guide Tierno Bokar remained a firm proponent of the practice. The French administration, under the sway of his opponents, accused both him and his disciple of anti-French activities. In 1942, the naturalist and explorer Theodore Monod, director of the Institut français d'Afrique noire (IFAN), a research centre based in Dakar (Senegal), came to his rescue and secured him a job as research assistant assigned with the task of collecting, compiling and documenting oral literatures of the African people. During the inter-war years, in collaboration with French Africanist scholars, he published a series of oral *récits initiatiques* or coming-of-age tales, in a bilingual edition with the Fulani transcription in the roman script alongside the French translation, expressly with the intention of dismantling dominant perceptions about the African continent mostly seen as a *terra nullius*, bereft of the human potential for reflection¹⁶. In other words, rather than treating oral narratives as obsolete cultural artifacts of museographical value, he sought to revitalize them, and make them available to a wider readership. In his capacity as « passeur de langues », he had clearly gauged the significance of the transmission of indigenous thought and belief systems in an increasingly globalizing cultural economy¹⁷.

Thinking beyond the margins

Tolerance presupposes an attitude of openness toward human diversity, religious, cultural and social ; a willingness to negotiate with and accommodate difference, often based on moral precepts like love, humanity and truth, with the ultimate objective of contributing toward peaceful co-existence among all people in a world free of discrimination and vio-

¹⁶ BÂ (Amadou Hampâté), KESTELOOT (Lilyan), eds., *Kaïdara : récit initiatique peul*. Paris : Julliard, coll. Les Classiques africains, n°7, 1969, 183 p. ; BÂ (A.H.), DIETERLEN (Germaine), *Koumen : texte initiatique des pasteurs peul*. Paris ; La Haye : Mouton & Cie, coll. Cahiers de l'homme : ethnologie, géographie, linguistique : nouvelle série, 1961, 95 p.-[1 f. de pl.] ; BÂ (A.H.), KESTELOOT (Lilyan), SEYDOU (Christiane), SOW (Alfa Ibrahim), eds., *L'Éclat de la grande étoile* [suivi du] *Bain rituel : récits initiatiques peuls...* [recueillis par Amadou-Hampâté Bâ], [Paris] : Armand Colin, coll. Les Classiques africains, n°15, 1974, 149 p.

¹⁷ RICARD (Alain), *Littératures d'Afrique noire : des langues aux livres*. Paris : CNRS éd. : Karthala, 1995, 304 p.-[12] p. de pl. ; p. 151-152.

lence. On this account, we observe that the two thinkers, while demonstrating deep attachment toward humanist values embedded in their respective native religious and philosophical traditions, are forcefully drawn toward strands of the *new* knowledge revealed to them in the course of their contact with the West. Their gaze outward is neither naïve nor reductive ; but rather a manifestation of the impulse to negotiate the rift that impedes the flow of thought across cultures and societies ; it is anchored in a desire to partake of otherness, to engage with disparate strands of philosophical and religious thought.

Hampâté Bâ's appeal lay primarily in his power of mediation : a « Great Conciliator », he propounded a philosophy of universality : « When we are tuned in to the universal, we shall have earned the right to call ourselves human beings and be worthy of our place in the concert of nations »¹⁸. Likewise, in the highly charged climate of the inter-war years, Gandhi sounded a clarion call in favor of humanist values : « Our object is friendship with the whole world. Non-violence has come to men, and it will remain »¹⁹. In a politically and socially asymmetrical world dominated by ideologies of race and color, the two thinkers challenged existing power equations by positioning themselves at the margins, as insiders and outsiders at once.

Hampâté Bâ : translation as mediation

In a region where the elders are living libraries, it not fortuitous the Malian writer should have developed ideas of tolerance in the shadow of his life-long spiritual guide, Tierno Bokar (1875-1939) who initiated him into the arcane teachings of Sufi doctrines²⁰. Despite the social and political upheaval spawned by French conquest and occupation, Bokar had relentlessly propagated Islamic thinking on tolerance. Clearly, he was responsible for the spiritual and intellectual ferment experienced by his disciple, and equally for his awakening to Africa's rich religious and cultural heritage, its innate vitality and plurality. Bâ's essays on pre-Islamic religions of the Fulani, Bambara, Dogon, Baoulé, and Mossi stress two important points : primitive religions were both rational and moral ; and endorsed the principle of the fundamental unity of all things, thus anticipating

¹⁸ DIALLO (Diélika), « Hampâté Bâ : the great conciliator », *The UNESCO Courier*, n°45 (1), January 1992, p. 13.

¹⁹ ROLLAND (R.), *Mahatma Gandhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

²⁰ As an expression for his gratitude, Hampâté Bâ published his mentor's biography and teachings successively in two editions (1957, 1980), making his remarkable story of tolerance known to the world. Peter Brook explored his life and teachings in a theatrical rendition in 2004.

the advent of Islam and a Unitarian conception of God²¹. The non-sectarian inclusiveness of African religions is thus seen as the basis for Tierno Bokar's exemplary tolerance, based not on « some vague sentimentality, but on profound understanding of spiritual realities and on vast love and charity towards others »²².

*Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar : le sage de Bandiagara*²³ : as the title suggests is at once about the man and his teachings which, we are given to understand, were collected personally by the author « from [his] mouth » over the years since his childhood, as he grew up in the shadow of his benevolent presence. An embodiment of wisdom and piety, the teacher inspired profound respect for his devotion to God and his unparalleled service to humanity. He led a solitary life devoted to study and contemplation. His teachings foregrounded a unified vision of mankind based on his in-born desire to embrace moral principles :

Love and charity are the two inseparable sides of Faith. The love of God cannot be understood without the love of man. Faith is like a piece of hot iron [...]. In cooling, it reduces in volume and becomes difficult to shape. It is therefore necessary to heat it in the hottest furnace of Love and Charity (*TB*, p. 10).

He regarded as axiomatic that religious dogmas are a fertile ground for the proliferation of forms of conformism. The persecution he endured at the behest of the dominant Tidjani brotherhood after his conversion to Hamallism or the practice of the « eleven beads » further strengthened his calling. His faith, he nurtured over the years with exemplary erudition of Islamic theology, sciences and mysticism. Yet in all humility, he maintained that all men were born wise, and naturally endowed with a wellspring of intelligence : « In the depths of each soul resides a knowledge – which is often dormant [...]. It is this profound Intelligence, this spiritual instinct that spurs the soul to distinguish truth from error; and subsequently, to embark upon and progress on the path of Return » (*TB*, p. 193). If all are equal, all have the right to receive Koranic teachings. With this certitude, he devised mnemonic techniques to convey the prophet's message to the Dogon Antiaba, who had no knowledge of Arabic, the language of Islamic rituals. His non-partisan outlook provoked displeasure among coreligionists, in particular among Wahhabist scholars, returnees from Islamic Universities in Medina and Cairo, who firmly upheld the primacy of Arabic in all doctrinal transactions. His proficiency in Arabic notwithstanding, Tierno Bokar was convinced that in the interest of Islamic propagation in

²¹ BÂ (A.H.), *Aspects de la civilisation africaine : personne, culture, religion*. Paris : Présence africaine, 1972, 139 p ; p. 135-136.

²² BÂ (A.H.), *A Spirit of Tolerance : The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*. Edited by Roger Gaetani. Bloomington: World Wisdom, (Introduction by Brenner L.), coll. Spiritual Masters : East and West, 2007, xxxiii-236 p. ; p. viii. Original in French.

²³ BÂ (A.H.), *Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar : le sage de Bandiagara*. Paris : Seuil, coll. Points. Sagesse, n°23, 1980, 254 p. (hereafter *TB*).

Africa, the tenets of faith must be made accessible to people in a native language, in line with the Prophet's injunction : « Speak to people according to their level of understanding » (*TB*, p. 197).

Often compared with St Francis of Assisi, the Islamic teacher advocated universal love and urged his followers to rise above sectarianism, a sign of spiritual immaturity in his view, asserting that « [t]o love that which resembles us is to love oneself ; this is not how to love » (*TB*, p. 142) ; and fostering among them an awareness of different religions which

[b]elieve me, each one of these forms, however strange it may seem to you, contain that which can strengthen your own faith. [...] To believe that one's race or one's religion is the only possessor of the truth is an error. [...] Faith is like air. Like air it is indispensable to human life (*TB*, p. 149).

Understandably, as his foremost disciple, Hampâté Bâ sought to propagate his mentor's teachings ; and also to reveal to a Western audience, in an understandable idiom, namely the French language, the existence in Africa of a cogent doctrine founded on humanist principles.

Interestingly, across the colonial divide, two men, Theodore Monod, a keen Africanist scholar who came from an illustrious family of Protestant republicans and a Malian writer, a traditionalist, made common cause : as passionate exponents of Africa's cultural heritage, both aspired to initiate conversations across cultures and religions ²⁴, with the Sufi mystic's life and catechism as a point of departure. Monod's involvement with the advancement of Hampâté Bâ's scholarly pursuits led him to publish two articles on Tierno Bokar and his teachings as if to announce the publication of Malian scholars monograph ²⁵. This gesture most certainly consolidated his position as an emerging colonial writer and cultural mediator, and contributed favorably toward his standing among French Africanist scholars. But more importantly, as the French historian J. L.Triaud reminds us, Monod also introduced his *protégé* to the prominent Orientalist and specialist of Islamic studies, Louis Massignon, who in all evidence was influential in directing Hampâté Bâ's reading of Tierno Bokar's philosophy. It is believed that on receiving the Malian scholar's manuscript, the French thinker, a proponent of inter-religious dialogue, was befuddled by its explicit theosophical tenor ²⁶. Further probing revealed

²⁴ BÂ (A.H.), *Amkoullel, l'enfant Peul : mémoires*. Arles : Actes Sud ; Paris : Agence de coopération culturelle et technique, 1991, 409 p. In his preface, Monod recalls his special relationship with Hampâté Bâ who fondly called him « My Silent River » (p. 7).

²⁵ MONOD (Théodore), « Dans l'Islam noir : un mystique soudanais », *Almanach des Missions*, (Montpellier), 1943, p. 19-25 ; ID., « Un homme de Dieu : Tierno Bokar », *Présence Africaine*, n°8-9, 1950, p. 149-157.

²⁶ TRIAUD (Jean-Louis), « D'un maître à l'autre : l'histoire d'un transfert. Amadou Hampâté Bâ entre Tierno Bokar et Theodore Monod (1938-1954) », *Sociétés politiques comparées*, n°20, décembre 2009, 30 p. ; p. 9 ; URL : http://www.fasopo.org/sites/default/files/article_n20.pdf (c. on 21-06-2021).

that the Malian scholar, while translating in the French language, his mentor's teachings had adapted it in accordance with his readings of the esoteric journal *Eudia*, a monthly published by the Durville brothers with obvious theosophical affiliations. Communicating Tidjani Sufi doctrines and mysticism was proving to be a complicated matter. Under Monod's guidance, Hampâté Bâ plunged into the study of the mysterious world of Christian theology, the Bible and in particular mystical treatises on Catholicism and the liberal Protestant press. In return, he tutored his French counterpart on Islamic thought and mysticism. Later, his eagerness to reveal to the Western world his personal discovery of an authentically native humanism with evangelical and pacifist leanings, the colonial scholar was instrumental in facilitating the publication of the Sufi sage's biography.

« Traduttore, traditore », it is said. Tierno Bokar's situation was no different from that of the Greek philosopher Socrates, for we will never know how much of their wisdom survived the test of time ; or to what extent philosophers like them became victims of subterfuge, inventions conceived purely for the conquest of intellectual or spiritual power. As the « Second Sage of Bandiagara »²⁷, Hampâté Bâ who had absorbed his mentor's ecumenical vision, conducted interfaith dialogues between Islam and Christianity, convinced that the need of the hour was unity among believers, critical the face of the dark clouds of Western modernity and atheism²⁸.

Gandhi : tolerance as a moral principle

Gandhi's autobiography clearly demonstrates the virtues of morality, as much for the individual, as in public life. He believed that morality and chiefly truth, concepts at the heart of his philosophical and moral investigations, must be understood in their filiations with religion, conceivably in light of the religious formulation of the idea of an absolute. Thus « there is no other God than Truth », and consequently « one must be able to love the meanest of creatures as oneself. [...] That is why my own devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics [...] » (AA, p. 270). Iyer claims that his adherence to the Indian doctrine of monism or *Advaita* led him to posit an « essential unity of God and man and for that matter of all lives »²⁹, leaving no possibility for the admission of polarities. Neverthe-

²⁷ MORABITO (Vittorio), « Hélène Heckmann au service d'un sage », in : TOURÉ (A.), MARIKO (N.I.), dir., *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, homme de science et de sagesse...*, op. cit., p. 286.

²⁸ BÂ (A. H.), *Jésus vu par un Musulman* [1976]. Abidjan : Nouvelles éditions ivoiriennes, 1993, 63 p. ; p. 11.

²⁹ IYER (Raghavan), *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1973, XIII-449 p. ; p. 91.

less, to grasp his relationship with God and his creation, man must be committed to the spiritual : « Identification with everything is impossible without self-purification ; [...] God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart ». Accordingly, only an inner transformation in man can awaken him to the God that lies dormant within him :

To attain perfect purity, one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action; to rise above opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion. [...] As long as man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him (AA, p. 371).

Man's ultimate goal is service to humanity, but he can only accomplish this once he is definitively conscious of the truth that, like him, all men are endowed with humanity or Godliness. Gandhi's conception of man is optimistic. He subscribed to the principle of human perfectibility, and believed in the natural capacity of human beings to transform « brute force » into « soul-force », and thus to manifest in thought and action, moral virtues like tolerance and compassion. Thus, « when I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force »³⁰. He claimed that this is precisely what has kept human civilization alive.

We must recall that the sanctification of truth was envisioned as a necessary panacea for the darkness and despondency that pervade human existence in the belief that since truth is Supreme, it can possibly serve as an object of worship and reliance : « If there is God, Truth must be God »³¹. Moreover, the concept of truth was of political and social significance : it liberated the individual of religious and social determinisms that could otherwise stymie his capacity for moral authority and independent action³².

Gandhi, even though his thinking was firmly embedded in his Indian philosophy, essentially in its Universalist articulations, remained an inveterate trespasser, inexorably transcending cultural boundaries in order to seek outside, in Western thought, ideas that resonated with his. His autobiography reminds us that his childhood years were formative with this regard. It was in the non-sectarian environment of his home where his fathers' friends of divergent faiths – Jains, Muslims and Parsees – freely spoke about their religion that he first became conscious of the underlying implications of religious pluralism (AA, p. 24). During his student years in London, he was drawn toward the esoteric movement founded by the Russian philosopher Helena Petrovna Blavatsky : Theosophy. The British socialist activist Annie Besant was an eminent member of the movement.

³⁰ GANDHI (M. K.), *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad : Navajivan Pub. House, 1933, 96 p. ; p. 74-75.

³¹ DESAI (Mahadev), *The Diary of Mahadev Desai*. Ahmedabad : Navjivan Pub. House, 1953, VIII-336 p. ; p. 155. He was Gandhi's secretary from 1917 to 1942.

³² DESAI (M.), *The Diary of Mahadev Desai*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

She was also a member of the Indian National Congress and passionately campaigned in favor of Home Rule. Gandhi gravitated towards the Theosophists primarily because of their interest in Indian thought. And curiously, during his student days in England, they were instrumental in fostering his discovery of Indian philosophy, mediated necessarily from the vantage point of their orientalizing gaze. He was introduced selectively to works endorsed by them : the *Bhagavad Gita* which in his belief was « a book *par excellence* for the knowledge of Truth » (AA, p. 48) and Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, a poem on the life and times of Gautama Buddha that he claimed was even more profound. He was called upon to read the *Bible* and was struck by the similarity between *The Sermon on the Mount* and the *Gita*.

During his time in South Africa, Gandhi went through a period of religious ferment, engaging in wide-ranging religious discussions with his Christian and Theosophist friends and reading eclectically among the religious texts that came his way. He read the German-born philologist and Orientalist Max Muller's works on India and translations of the *Upanishads* published by the Theosophical Society. His comprehension of Islam was derived from two obscure biographies by Washington Irving and Thomas Carlyle *Mahomet and his successors* and *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*. He read the Koran several times on grounds that the Prophet too was a seeker of truth. He read his friend, the occultist theosophist Edward Maitland's *The Perfect Way : Or, The Finding of Christ* written in collaboration with Anna Kingsford, as well as his *The New Interpretation of the Bible*.

Nevertheless, two Western thinkers truly exercised a decisive influence over Gandhi : the Russian novelist and social thinker Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and English painter and social activist John Ruskin (1819-1900). The first he discovered by reading his seminal essay *Kingdom of God is within us* in English translation in 1894. It left « an abiding impression » on him and was seen as noteworthy for its « independent thinking, profound morality, and truthfulness » (AA, p. 99).

Much has been said about the intellectual affinities between Tolstoy and Gandhi, two writers preoccupied with questions of violence and its peaceful resolution. Some have said that theirs was a « correspondence of minds »³³ on grounds that « There is no parallel in modern Indian intellectual history to what Gandhi says he owed to Leo Tolstoy »³⁴. Gandhi,

³³ BARTOLF (Christian), « Tolstoy and Gandhi », in : COPLEY (Antony), PAXTON (Georges), eds., *Gandhi and the Contemporary World*. Chennai : Indo-British Historical Society, 1997, 421 p. ; p. 196-204 ; URL : <https://gandhifoundation.org/1997/01/06/tolstoy-and-gandhi-by-christian-bartolf/> (c. on 15-03-2020).

³⁴ PAREL (Anthony), « Gandhi and Tolstoy », in : MATHAI (Mundackal Paulose), JOHN (M.S.), JOSEPH (Siby K.), eds., *Meditations on Gandhi : A Ravindra Varma Festschrift*. New Delhi : Concept Publishing Company, 2002, xx-228 p. ; p. 96.

in his foreword to Tolstoy's « A Letter to Hindu : The Subjection of India – Its Cause and Cure »³⁵, published in the weekly journal *Indian Opinion*, praised him stating that he was « a great teacher whom I have long looked upon as one of my guides ». In fact, he personally translated the « Letter » into Gujarati and hoped it would persuade others' to translate it into other Indian languages. Ruskin's *Unto his Last Lastly*, he read in 1904. He called it « A magic spell of a book » that provoked in him a spiritual renewal and led him « to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book » (AA, p. 220). The book appeared in his Gujarati translation with the title *Sarvodaya* or universal well-being. Ruskin's critique of modern capital and utilitarianism was the inspiration behind the foundation of the Phoenix Settlement (1904) in Durban and the Tolstoy Farm (1910) where Gandhi sought to experiment with communal living and translate into action his utopian aspirations for an egalitarian society.

In thinking beyond the margins of cultural and religious precepts, and in intermingling with thinkers across the board – Theosophists, pacifists, social thinkers – Gandhi once again fortified his pluralist ideals on grounds that truth was no cultural or civilizational artifact. Often, he expressed his gratitude toward his Christian friends for « the religious quest they awakened in me. I shall always cherish the memory of their contact » (AA, p. 100). In distant South Africa, among alien Christians, he amassed ideas and insights that progressively led to the crystallization of his faith into a doctrine that guided his struggle for the political and social justice. As Romain Rolland rightfully stated, his was an « evangelical heart beating under his Hindu creed »³⁶.

Correspondences and homologies

The two men, subjects of European imperial powers, one a barrister educated in England, the other a functionary in the colonial administration, both lived under comparable circumstances, within a unique historical setting that the French sociologist George Balandier defined as a « colonial situation », a « complex totality » requiring hereafter the absolute subjugation of all areas of colonial life, social, political, economic and cultural to the interests of the ruling minority³⁷. Both we were quick to measure the essentially exclusionary nature of the colonial system con-

³⁵ Tolstoy's « Letter to a Hindoo » was written in response to two letters he received from Taraknath Das who represented an extremist strand within the Indian national movement. Gandhi on discovering Tolstoy's « Letter » struck up a year-long correspondence with the Russian writer. The two men exchanged seven letters in all.

³⁶ ROLLAND (R.), *Mahatma Gandhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁷ BALANDIER (Georges), « La situation coloniale : approche théorique », *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. 11, 1951, p. 44-79.

ceived essentially for the purpose of coercion and suppression of the natives. It was evident to them that it held no promise of a future. Gandhi responded to the situation by taking to politics and political activism, and Hampâté Bâ devoted his energies to the preservation and the transmission of the cultural ethos of his people. In their commitment towards the struggle for independence from colonial rule, both resolutely adhered to principles of non-violence and mutual respect. Their incursions into the realm of indigenous religion and spirituality had shaped their ideas on this account and given them the conceptual apparatus to articulate their vision of peaceful coexistence among men of all nations : Gandhi advocated *Satyagraha* and Hampâté Bâ unswervingly defended the precepts of Sufi thought and practice.

Subaltern historiography has however strongly critiqued similar attempts aimed at resurrecting culturally exclusivist constructions, claiming that anticolonial nationalism

[...] creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the outside [...], a domain where the West had proved its superiority [...]. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an « inner » domain bearing the « essential » marks of cultural identity³⁸.

In framing within the domain of the spiritual, the political imagination of anticolonial struggles, the two thinkers were contributed willy-nilly toward fashioning a « modern » national culture that is not entirely European in conception ; that is hitherto exposed to the risk of misappropriation by anti-modernists and right-wing nationalists.

Conversely, both Gandhi and Hampâté Bâ were well aware that their ideas were not exactly expressions of preexisting native thought, but essentially the resultant of their personal cogitations on tolerance developed in concurrence with relevant strands of Western thought. In all evidence, the Theosophists interested them primarily because of their interest in ancient religions, in esotericism and mysticism, but also because they gave them a vocabulary which facilitated the communication of their musings. Visibly, Hampâté Bâ was more forthcoming in acknowledging that his elucidation of African philosophy was none the less a stratagem, designed with the express intention of marking presence in the world of thought seen as a predominantly Western preserve. This is best articulated in his novel, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, about the trials and tribulations of a colonial interpreter³⁹, in some sense the author's alter ego and a prag-

³⁸ CHATTERJEE (Partha), *The Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton (NJ) : Princeton University Press, coll. Princeton Studies in Culture, Power, History, 1993, XIII-282 p. ; p. 6-7.

³⁹ BÂ (A.H.), *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. Translated by A.P. Taylor. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1999 (French edition : 1973), 296 p.

matist who systemically responds to the unethical political authority of the colonial order, indiscriminate in its usage of power, with a carefully crafted strategy founded on deception as if to remind us of the imaginative capacity of the subaltern to self-construct even if within hidden interstitial social spaces.

Concomitantly, both men were deeply conscious of the fact that what they had each witnessed was an extraordinarily momentous period of human history ; and that their lives, choices, thoughts and actions emanated from the events that progressively led to the dismantling of the European empire and the creation of nation-states. These considerations possibly led them to record their observations and experiences : Gandhi authored *An Autobiography* and Hampâté Bâ *L'Enfant Peul* and *Oui, mon commandant !*⁴⁰. These autobiographies are unique to the extent that they problematize normative conceptions of subjectivity and identity anchored fallaciously in impressionist and a-historical readings of the colonial experience. The intellectual trajectory of the two men is revealing of the conflicting impulses that circumscribed the rise of the colonial elite as suggested by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's observations on this account :

In many ways, colonization was a co-invention. It was the result of Western violence as well as the work of a swarm of African auxiliaries seeking profit. [...] it must be recognized that colonialism exercised a strong seductive power over Africans on a mental and moral no less than material level. Manifold possibilities of upward mobility were promised by the colonial system. Whether such promises were actually fulfilled is beside the point. As a refracted and endlessly reconstituted fabric of fictions, colonialism generated mutual utopias –hallucinations shared by the colonizers and the colonize⁴¹.

In sum, what we see here is that the correspondences and homologies that connect Gandhi and Hampâté Bâ were clearly contingent on their status as *subjects* of colonial powers writing within the constricted space of colonial knowledge production. It is highly likely that their position as *outsiders* with relation to an essentially Western tradition of literature and thought compelled them to explore autochthonous conceptions of religion and morality, and particularly to cogitate on philosophies of tolerance. Yet, whatever the limitations of their project⁴², their intellectual trajectory, their writerly affiliations point to their participation in a distinct philosophical « moment » shaped by the constraints inherent in the conditions of

⁴⁰ BÂ (A.H.), *Amkoullel, l'enfant Peul : mémoires, op. cit.* ; ID., *Oui, mon commandant !* Arles : Actes Sud, 1994, 396 p.

⁴¹ MBEMBE (Achille), « African Modes of Self-Writing », *Public Culture*, (Duke University Press), vol. 14, n°1, p. 239-273 ; p. 262-263.

⁴² ROY (Arundhati), *The Doctor and the Saint : Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste*. Chicago (IL) : Haymarket Books, 2017, VIII-167 p.

possibility that shaped their thinking⁴³. What is remarkable about both men is their openness, their unwavering tolerance of otherness, of European thought, even within the prevailing climate of suspicion and political and social violence. Clearly, the two men, though intensely critical of the colonial project, and acutely aware its repercussions on their respective ways of life, remained steadfast in their persistence to seek out European thinkers, and establish connections with them, in order to recast their own age-old philosophies into an idiom that make them available across nations and cultures. In doing so they most certainly contributed towards modernizing autochthonous thought and religions and rendering them relevant both to their newly formed nations and to the world at large.

Kusum AGGARWAL⁴⁴

⁴³ WORMS (Frédéric), *La Philosophie en France au xx^e siècle : moments*. [Paris] : Gallimard, coll. Folio. Essais, n°518, 2009, 643 p. ; p. 10-13. Also see : DIAGNE (Souleymane Bachir), *Bergson postcolonial : l'élan vital dans la pensée de Léopold Sédar Senghor et de Mohamed Iqbal*. Paris : CNRS Éditions, coll. Conférences au Collège de France de la Chaire d'histoire contemporaine du monde arabe, 2011, 126 p.

⁴⁴ University of Delhi.