

Coda: Brook in Barcelona, July 2004

I thought I had finished this book. After three years of close identification and critical reflection, I had built up a picture of many levels and voices, responding to Peter's challenge to match the monologue of his own memoir. Sometimes the writing had been heady, as I evoked the glow left by his productions; sometimes hard, as I struggled to grasp the sheer scale of his life and imagination. Exhilarated but also emptied out, I thought I had completed it. And then Peter came up with a new piece – which in fact he'd been nurturing for decades – and in summer 2004 I set off to Barcelona to catch it, even in its half-born state, wondering whether it would be yet another new beginning.

The drama of *Tierno Bokar*, which I saw in Barcelona's converted flower market on its way to its Paris opening, centres on a bitter dispute between rival religious factions. At stake is whether a prayer should be said eleven times instead of twelve. What begins as a doctrinal dispute is turned, with the malign intervention of the French colonial service, into a realpolitik exercise of divide-and-rule. A play on this subject written by a Voltaire or a Shaw would have been a rationalist's mockery of organised religion. In the hands of Brook, his dramatist Marie-Hélène Estienne and his multiracial cast, *Tierno Bokar* becomes an empathetic elegy for a way of living which is crushed as much by colonial domination as by its own fanaticism.

Brook found the story of Tierno Bokar in the writings of Amadou Hampaté Ba, an African writer and preserver of oral storytelling and traditions, whom he met in Paris when Hampaté Ba took up a post at UNESCO. Ba was himself the pupil of Tierno Bokar, the Koranic teacher and spiritual leader of the village of Bandiagara, in Mali. In Brook's *recherche théâtrale*, a title he prefers to 'production' or 'play', Tierno Bokar tries to reconcile the fierce antagonisms between two communities over the number of times the 'Pearl of Perfection' prayer is recited in the daily service. Tierno Bokar's community recited it twelve times, following a time-honoured tradition; in the distant village of Nioro a young holy man of the same Sufi sect obeyed a mission to restore the prayer to the true number of eleven times. Execrations, appeals to ancient authority, boycotts and curses sprang from this difference. But Tierno Bokar wants to meet the young *chérif* Hamallah

of Niuro, and make up his own mind based on the quality of the meeting.

The encounter and the nightly theological debates – a haunting scene of two men circling in near-darkness, whispering just out of our earshot – convinces Tierno that the 'Hamallists', as the French authorities have labelled them, are sincere and their beliefs well-founded. He also recognises that the younger man has an even greater spirituality than himself. But this is where Tierno's troubles begin.

His own family and village turn against him, ban him from the village mosque, forbid any contact with him. Shopkeepers are forbidden to sell to him; his remaining followers have to smuggle food to him. He sits in his clay hut, his prayer-beads in his hands, having struggled to avoid a religious conflict, having failed, and now, in Ba's words, 'accepting destiny absolutely, without looking back'.

Sotigui Kouyate, one of the core actors of Brook's group, seems to sculpt Tierno Bokar with the lightness of his fine fingers and his elongated body and the steadiness of his voice, like a stream. He brings to the part of Tierno Bokar a radiant good humour, a tenderness that is never sanctimonious and a gift for pungent, direct speech. 'I pray God,' Tierno Bokar said, 'that at the moment I die I have more enemies to whom I've done nothing than friends.' Sotigui, and the four other engaging African actors playing major parts (Habib Dembélé, Abdou Ouloguem, Dorcy Rugamba and Pitcho Womba Konga), together with Brook's long-standing actors with whom he has shaped his group's style, Bruce Myers and Yoshi Oida, communicate those qualities that have so captivated Brook in African actors since *The Mahabharata*, *Woza Albert!* and *Le Costume*. Exuberance. Gravity. Elegance. Irreverence for things of the earth. Reverence for the spirits that rule human life.

Brook designs a paradisaal world, a stage soaked in the colours of honey, gold and sand – a reminder that Mali edges on to the Sahara. Glowing in bright light, Brook sets out the simplest elements – straw matting, a low platform on which coloured rugs are rolled out, coiled raffia that can become a stool or a pillow. In this shimmering surround, ten actors and two musicians – threading and shaping the action with their plucked and bowed sounds – wear ample robes of a billowing beauty, tracked down by Marie-Hélène Estienne in the *soukhs* of Fès and Marrakech. By contrast, the military uniform of the French prefects and governors looks clumsy.

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When the Governor General sends the young Hamallah into distant exile because France sees him as a troublemaker and his followers as a threat to their order, the back wall of the set glides away upstage behind him, as if he is being thrust out of history, which he is; he will die, we are told, in a prison in Montluçon, in mainland France. At such moments, in a reverse-telescope effect, we glimpse 'our' European historical context: Tierno Bokar's timeless story is in fact taking place during the 1930s and 40s, and the new Governor General, we realise, is an official of Vichy France. As the Hamallists are persecuted, two pillars which have framed the life of the mosque lie fallen and askew. We also follow the high-minded oppression of French rule through the third main character, Amkoullé, Bokar's prize pupil, as he rises into the French colonial service and confronts its racism.

The *mission civilisatrice* exists to serve the interests of the conquerors, and is just as blinkered as the enraged partisans of the 'eleven-times' or the 'twelve-times' prayer paths. They recall Brook's own words, in his talk at the Grotowski centre in 2001; 'I am "glued". Glued to the part I am playing at this moment. I believe totally in the words that I am saying because I am glued to them.' French patriots singing chauvinistic anthems with their pupils in an African classroom are glued. Intemperate defenders of a faith that cannot tolerate any other faith or practice are glued. Their mission has become their fetish. But the theatre can momentarily unglue rigid beliefs, and show us that they do not span the entire horizon. And that is why Brook concludes, in a time of fundamentalisms and crusades, 'We must learn to believe without believing. Otherwise, belief is poison.' Making theatre has helped Peter Brook to be free, and we respond to his freedom.