

About Tierno Bokar

By Marie-Hélène Estienne

Who was Tierno Bokar?

A great Sufi master, who lived in Africa, or more exactly in Mali, or more precisely in Bandiagara, a small but flourishing town at the foot of the Dogon cliffs. The specific nature of Tierno Bokar's teaching lies in the fact that in the first half of the twentieth century, in a modest African compound, a man who devoted his life to the contemplation of God could share this with others in a way that was modern, open, unique—and he had as his most attentive pupil the writer Amadou Hampaté Bâ.

Tierno Bokar, like Hampaté Bâ, was linked through his family with a Sufi order, the Tidjanya. He was born in 1875 in Segou, a glittering city at the banks of the river Niger, which had only just become converted to Islam. As they penetrated deeper into Africa, the French conquered Segou, and the family of the young Tierno Bokar was forced to take refuge in its own little compound in Bandiagara. It was here that Tierno lived his remaining 47 years. When, at the age of 33, he opened his *zaouia*, he had only 4 pupils, but very rapidly the number grew to 400.

What was it that made Tierno Bokar an exceptional master, whose teaching seems so precious to us today? Firstly, Tierno, which means *master* in Peul—the first name given to him by his parents—was a master who did not like to be called master. One day an enthusiastic young man came to him and declared, "Tierno, I heard of you and your teaching. People only say good things. I wish to choose you as my master!" This was the answer: "Brother in God, although I'm flattered, I've a piece of advice to give you: no man ever corresponds exactly to his reputation, it would be far better for you to spend many months in useful study, listen to me day after day and then week after week, check on what I say, come closer to me month after month, before making your choice. And even then it should not be as a master, but as your guide or your brother."

Listen to the description Amadou Hampaté Bâ gives in his book *Life and Teaching of Tierno Bokar*: "Each of Tierno's gestures was measured; they were expressions of his will. He had completely mastered his body, his presence radiated joy and inner peace.

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By Marie-Hélène Estienne

Everyone knew it was sufficient to sit by him to feel one's worries disappear; we left our cares at his door."

This is how the great poet Maabal describes Tierno:

A constant smile which calls you
A forehead shining like a mirror
A mirror stamped
With the dark point of prostration.

His whole being, his life itself, was teaching. His highest truths were found within the simple actions of ordinary life and so day after day his pupils could be inspired by him, through his words, through his silences. He could always place himself exactly on the same level as his listeners. One day a Dogon who could neither read nor write came to him and asked to be his pupil. Tierno invented for him a very simple form of mnemonic teaching, which he later used for those—and they were many!—who knew no written language. Step-by-step, as he developed the principles of his teaching, he drew in the sand a series of points that gradually stamped themselves on the pupil's memory.

This teaching was divided into three essential parts. In the first part, which he called the Primordial Pact, his starting point was verse 171 of the VII surate where God asks the soul of men the following question, "Am I your Lord?" And the response is, "Yes, we are the witnesses". In each man of God is sealed a fragment of the secret of the divine presence. This fragment enables him to draw from his doubts and his lies the essential truth. Recognizing the troubled times in which the Africans were living, he insisted on the need for each one to make a choice, which would be like an echo of the original yes. A choice between the ascending life made of effort and courage, and the easy descending life which can only lead to the dissolution and loss of oneself.

He called the second *Maddin*. When he was asked the question, What is religion? He answered, "Religion is a way." And he was asked, "How many ways are there?" He replied, "Seventy-three. The first 72 are the ways of error; the 73rd is the way of rectitude, the only one that leads to God". He expressed the basic principles of Islam: submission to God, faith, and perfect behaviour—*Islam*, *Imam*, and *Ishan*.

The third concerned the specific Sufi teaching, based on the three fundamental laws: the law, the way, the truth—*Sharia*, *Tariqa*, *Haqiqa*, laws built on the three pillars, Islam, Imam, and Ishan. He said these three pillars contained all the mysteries; that the great

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By Marie-Hélène Estienne

prophets and the true initiates of every religion know this and those who do not should keep silent. Quoting the prophet Mohammed, he added, "To these who recognize the limits of their science, God will help them to acquire another science, deeper and more divine."

Above all Tierno Bokar taught—and demonstrated by his own openness—tolerance. Religious quarrels were of no interest to him. He had a horror of ostentation. For him there was only one religion open and common to all, crossing the world, in a diversity of forms, but always unique. "We bitterly deplore the contemptuous attitude of certain religious people that leads them to reject as though cacophonous their neighbour's hymns. To combat this tendency, brothers in God, whatever the religion to which you are attached, meditate deeply on this verse: "The creations of the heavens and of the earth, the diversity of your tongues and of your colours are so many marvels for those who can reflect." (Quran 30:22)

Like every Sufi he looked for difficulties; he wished to verify whether he had the patience and the endurance he taught the others. "I ask God that at the moment of my death I have more enemies, to whom I've done nothing, than friends." Terrible words, when one thinks of the period when he was abandoned by all for only one reason—because he had sworn allegiance to the Cherif Hamallah, a man younger than himself. He could then die serene and confident alone with his two wives in his deserted zaouia. He considered that his quiet and happy life in the zaouia surrounded by love and respect had not brought him a trial capable of revealing the degree of his power of resistance, of his supreme capacity to abandon himself to God's will. He took care at the same time that no one else should follow him on this perilous path.

When he, in the end, was able to go to Nioro du Sahel and meet Cherif Hamallah, he was convinced by Hamallah by the stress he placed on tolerance and on submission to God, by his need to place himself on a spiritual and not a temporal plane. He was convinced that the spiritual exercises that the Tidjanya's new "master of the hour" had no other aim than to raise his disciples to the highest level of their being. In brief, he recognized the direct teaching of their master, Si Ahmed Tidjani, founder of the order. In total conformity with the spirit and the letter of Islam, Tierno knew that he had found, in Nioro du Sahel, what he searched for above all, the truth.

"There are three truths: my truth, your truth, and the truth. My truth, just like your truth, is no more than a fraction of the truth. Our truths are crescent moons situated on one side or another of the perfect circle of the full moon. Most of the time, when we argue

About Tierno Bokar

By Marie-Hélène Estienne

and only listen to ourselves, our crescent moons turn their backs on one another. The more we argue the further they move apart. First we must turn them back towards one another, then our two crescent moons will be face to face, and they will gradually come closer and closer and perhaps in the end meet one another in the great circle of truth."

Tierno Bokar Timeline

Tierno Bokar was born in Segou in 1875. His father was a nephew of the great Tidjani conqueror El Hadj Omar, his mother the daughter of an eminent Sufi master.

He arrived with his mother and aunt in Bandiagara in 1893.

He opened a zaouia there in 1918. In 1937 he crossed the whole of Mali to meet Cherif Hamallah in Nioro du Sahel. He swore allegiance to him and, because of this, broke with his entire family.

In 1938, on his return to Bandiagara, he was rejected and abandoned by everyone and forced to close his zaouia.

In 1939 he died. He lies there, in the cemetery, at his mother's feet, under a small tree.

Cherif Hamallah was arrested by the Vichy Government in 1940 and deported to France to a prison camp in Evaux. He died in the hospital of Montluçon in January 1943. He lies in the cemetery there.

Extract from the play *Tierno Bokar*

Amkoullel: Tierno, I would like you—speaking from your own personal experience—to answer my question: What is God?

Tierno Bokar: . . . God! . . . God! . . . God is the embarrassment of the human mind.

Amkoullel: Excuse me, but I'm not any further. I asked you for a precise answer and you tell me God is the embarrassment of the human mind! This doesn't help me out of my own embarrassment. Why is God the embarrassment of the human mind?

About Tierno Bokar

By Marie-Hélène Estienne

Tierno Bokar: I'm happy you've now made your question precise—it's only through a well placed question that the master is able to answer.

God is the embarrassment of the human mind because, on the one hand, if you affirm his existence this does not help you to prove it, neither materially or scientifically. On the other hand, if you deny his existence, then you deny your own existence, which is merely an emanation of himself. But you exist. And if you can't prove God materially, you must remember that the non-visibility, the non-palpability, and the non-sensibility of a thing aren't in themselves absolute proof of its non-existence. God is the embarrassment of the human mind because all that you conceive in your thought and materialize in your words as being God cease for this very reason to be God and are no more than your own way of conceiving him. He is beyond definition.