

ARTICLE

The Clash of Culture and Faith in Colonial Africa: An Ambiguous Adventure

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The situation that I described in *Ambiguous Adventure* is indeed that of a conflict between culture and faith, a foreign invader and a conquered people, about the colonial occident conquering the country of the Diallobé. The conflict between what is of a religious nature and a secular nature is, without any doubt, the most structuring element of the book since it is manifested in all the stages of the story of Samba Diallo. We can see it in most of the dialogued scenes that punctuate the text and it even governs the writing of this novel. Likewise, my second novel, called *The Keepers of the Temple*, gives some answer to what seems like an impossible reconciliation that paralyzed the country of the Diallobé and led Samba Diallo to a deadlock.

Therefore, I wish to talk briefly about a few essential aspects of this conflict between the culture of faith that is characteristic of colonial Africa, and the secular culture of the colonizing occident. In order to do so, I would like to identify the deep roots that are at the origin of these two orders, before showing the possible reconciliations.

1) **The clash of culture and faith**

If I strived to describe the historical context in the first few pages of *Ambiguous Adventure*, it is mostly because I wanted to underline the different aspects of this conflict between the two cultures.

In fact, this country of the Diallobé is entirely ruled by a culture of faith, a mystical faith which is turned toward darkness and gives the afterlife a supremacy that the West has subjugated by force. The Western world has, since the Renaissance, been engaged in a process of secularization that first “began, timidly, by putting God ‘in parentheses.’ Then two centuries later, having acquired more assurance, they decreed ‘God is dead’” (100).¹

But the West, in this same process of secularization, developed a scientific culture which permitted it to slowly become the “master and possessor of nature.” It is in this sense that it appears that the atheistic or agnostic thought of Nietzsche is in solidarity with the industrial era, with capitalist accumulation, because, “God was no longer there to measure and justify ... Industry was blind, although, finally, it was still possible to accommodate all the good it produced ... But already this phase is past ... After the death of God, what they are now announcing is the death of man” (101).

1 Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. London: Heinemann, 1972

It is this West, materially mighty and spiritually weak, that creates for the Diallobé, and therefore for all the colonized people, an unparalleled historical circumstance, which places them in a dilemma with serious issues: how can one acquire the West's rationalism without losing one's faith? How can one escape the cultural and material underdevelopment that is at the origin of one's defeat and submission without losing God's presence in men's hearts? This dilemma is raised in the first scene of *Ambiguous Adventure*, in which the characters, who represent the order of faith, express the ambiguous situation in which they were placed by their encounter with the modern West: "The question is disturbing nevertheless. We reject the foreign school in order to remain ourselves, and to preserve for God the place He holds in our hearts. But have we still enough force to resist the school, and enough substance to remain ourselves?" asked the teacher (10). These contradicting premises reveal the acute dimension of the conflict between faith and culture, returning again in the mouth of the teacher of the Koran where it acquires a grave dimension: "it is certain that their school is the better teacher of how to join wood to wood, and that men should learn how to construct dwellings that resist the weather ... We must build solid dwellings for men, and within those dwellings we must save God" (11).

The same conflict between faith and the order found in rationalist culture returns in chapter six of part one in which we see characters that incarnate the opposing values of these two culture: on one side the Knight, representative of a culture of faith that not only believes "in the end of the world" but "hopes for it firmly"; on the other side is Paul Lacroix, the incarnation of an agnostic culture that affirms in a peremptory way that "the world will not come to an end" (75). While the representative of the order of faith advocates a reassuring "universe," by denying the unplanned, the partisan of rationalism exalts a scientifically coherent world which frees man from "childish and absurd fears" (76). If Paul Lacroix, imbued with certainty, takes pleasure in this rational and coherent universe, the Knight experiences the same paradox as the other characters who are attached to faith, for, despite his attachment to the latter values, he chose to place his son in the western school in the hope of seeing born in him "a son born to the world: A first son of the earth; the only one, alone" (80). This first son of the earth, child of faith and reason, will have a mission to save God in a globalized world at the risk of dying under the weight of evidence, under the weight of triumphant materialism.

Samba Diallo, this child of faith and reason, during each stage of his journey does not cease to live in a dramatic, even tragic fashion. He fights a battle of heart and reason, aware that it is necessary to preserve at any cost his faith in God, his intimacy with the I Am. And yet, Cartesian rationalism works its way into him, creating a crack in his heart, each day increasing the distance that separates him from the fervent home of the teacher of Diallobé. This is how, one night, the face of the teacher of Diallobé appeared to him in a hallucinatory vision, pathetically imploring him to finally save his soul from confusion and from a separation from God: "Master, what is left for me? The shadows are closing in on me. I no longer burn at the heart of people and things ... I implore the grace of your outcry in the darkness, the shout of your voice, to revive me to the secret tenderness ..." (161). It appears, in this way, that all of Samba Diallo's journey is entirely an illustration of *Ambiguous Adventure*, of a being torn between two cultures that seem primarily antagonistic: on one side, that of faith, of death, and of the resurrection, on the other, that of reason, of life, and of salvation here on earth. And yet, despite the apparent relentless opposition between these two

orders, their reconciliation manifests in the end of *Ambiguous Adventure* and in *The Keepers of the Temple*.

2) **From conflict to resolution**

Of course, Samba Diallo's death can be considered the symbol of his failure to reconcile faith and reason, and through him, the failure of the Diallobé to build strong dwellings and to save God inside these dwellings. However, the ambiguity of this death allows him to see a possibility of reconciling these two orders. In fact, Samba Diallo's refusal to live without God makes the fool's gesture an act of deliverance that puts an end to this agonizing struggle that torments Samba Diallo's conscience at the last stage of his course.

In truth, we find in chapters seven and nine of the book a man who has been exhausted by the trial of his life in the Western world, seriously affected in his faith, and who is unable to pray, or rather, unable to "communicate" as before with the Master who created him. Only the fool, who is the accomplice of the Diallobé's teacher in the secret and mystic vision of things, understands the profound causes of Samba Diallo's tragedy. They have both experienced the western life and the same metaphysical tragedy. Moreover, it is through the symbolism of "exhaustion" that he designates the terrible trial that drives Samba Diallo away from God and from the mosque: "Yes, teacher of the Diallobé, you are right. You are tired. They are so tiring, aren't they? Rest now. When you have rested, we will go to the mosque" (165).

This understanding of the private tragedy of Samba Diallo by the fool confirms itself in chapter nine (second part) where the same scene is repeated, in order to reveal the meaning of the fool's gesture. The fool invites Samba Diallo to pray again. Samba firmly replies, "People are not obliged to pray. Do not tell me to pray, do not tell me anymore, ever." To which the fool replied, "Yes, teacher of the Diallobé. You are right. You are still tired. When you have rested from their fatigue, you will pray" (172).

It is this exhaustion inflicted by the western world and its culture that the character is expressing inside himself, a true Cartesian "cogito" in which "nihilism" comes back and seems to consecrate faith's defeat: "I do not believe –I do not believe very much anymore, of what you had taught me. I do not know what I believe. But the extent is so vast, of what I do not know, and what I ought indeed to believe" (173).

If the fool can accept that Samba Diallo will not pray at the teacher's grave (which is the act of a surrogate), he cannot admit his refusal to accomplish the sunset prayer, a mandatory prayer, a foundation of Islamic faith. In fact, as the Islamic Prophet said, prayer is a criterion that distinguishes the believer from the non-believer. While the fool asks him with a frenzied fervor to pray, Samba Diallo, still talking to himself, seeks to "clouer Dieu au pilori" and expresses out loud his refusal to live without God's presence. "Thou wouldst not know how to forget me like that. I will not agree, alone for us two, to suffer from Thy withdrawal. I will not agree. No ..." (174). The last words ("I will not agree") are the ultimate expression of the ambiguity. He speaks to God and to the fool who just told him, "Tell me that you will pray tomorrow at last" (174).

These private words that he spoke out loud, either because of inadvertence or distraction,

give to the fool's gesture and to Samba Diallo's death a mystical dimension. Samba Diallo, by refusing to live without God, becomes a martyr in the same ranks as "so many people [who], here and elsewhere, have fought and are dead, joyously ... In dying amid the great clamor of battles waged in the name of your Friend, it is themselves whom all these fighters want to banish, so that they may be filled with Him" (173). In this light, we see Samba Diallo's death as an escape from the temptation of materialistic culture and a triumph of faith, which thereby maintains its supremacy.

We must remember that in Muslim Sufism, the highest level of the mystical quest is to die within oneself in order to meet the Friend and to fuse with Him. Isn't it the same death that Mansour Hallâj chose, the greatest Muslim mystic of all time, condemned to death after proclaiming his extinction (*fanâ*) in God? We will therefore understand the importance of the last chapter of *Ambiguous Adventure* that establishes the end of the ambiguity with death. In fact, Samba Diallo's soul is welcomed by the voice of the darkness that, step by step, removes him from the appearance, makes him forget about "the reflection" and "blinding suns of exiles", dissipates the antagonism in order for the "the great reconciliation" to take place. And with that, "The light stirs the darkness, love dissolves hate" (176).

The "voice of darkness" invites the spirit to realize its rebirth in a world where "there is no more light, there is no more weight, the darkness is no more. Feel how antagonisms do not exist" (176). And Samba Diallo's soul can savor the mystical ecstasy that seizes those who will be radiated through "the singular light of the depths" that is not "circumventing" but is "penetrating" the entirety of the being in order to permit him to access the truth, to rediscover its infinitude, and to enter in the place "where there is no ambiguity" (177).

At this point, the one who was cut off from this earthly world finds again the mystical taste (*zawq*) of maternal milk that, in Muslim Sufism, is the sign and the symbol of truth. It all finally comes back to the return to an eternal moment, because for the Muslims, death is merely a way back to one's primary state: "We belong to God and it is to Him that we return" is what is said when a person's death is announced. In accordance with Sufism's language, the symbols of the river, light, time, darkness and the sea are used here to represent the great and ultimate reconciliation with the being that constitutes death: "The sea! Here is the sea! Hail to you, rediscovered wisdom, my victory! The limpness of your wave is awaiting my gaze. I fix my eyes upon you and you harden into Being. I wish for you through all eternity" (178).

As we can tell, the last words of *Ambiguous Adventure* express the end of the confrontation between the Diallo's spiritualism and the West's materialism that was at the origin of the rupture of Samba Diallo's being. Isn't this a kind of triumph of the order of faith over the order of a materialistic culture? Henceforth, the character of Salif Bâ, in the second novel *The Keepers of the Temple*, would be, in a sense, the reincarnation of a Samba Diallo who was able to reconcile the Diallo's fervent faith and the rationalist culture of the modern West.

If I chose to have the confrontation between culture and faith as the main subject of *Ambiguous Adventure*, it is because the encounter of Muslim Africa with the modern West was a shock of two cultures having two opposing views of the world: on the one hand a culture of faith turned toward darkness, ruled by spirituality and mysticism, and on the other hand a rationalist culture,

with triumphant materialism, whose main goal is to make those who express it “masters of the exterior” at the risk of dying slowly under the weight of evidence. In this way, all those who tried strongly to resist the colonial West in the country of the Diallobé , as the Senegalese Sufi masters, fought in the name of faith in order to keep God in men’s hearts and dwellings. We can mention among them Ousmane Dan Fodio, El Hadji Oumar Foutiyou Tall, El Hadji Malick Sy, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, l’Almamy Samory Touré etc ... who all battled, at their own peril, aware that they were “among the last men on earth to possess God as He veritably is in His Oneness ...” (10). Their battle still continues today in the context of globalization, where we see those who are not part of the West “in all latitudes, aquiver with covetousness, then metamorphosing themselves in the space of one generation, under the action of this new egotism which the West is scattering abroad” (69).

This confrontation between faith and agnostic culture is far from being resolved. It is, in my opinion, the paradigm of the ambiguous and perilous adventure of the modern man, whatever his country, religion and culture might be.