

ARTICLE

## From the (Recited) Word to the (Written) Words

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SUMMARY

As shown in the opening scene of *L'Aventure ambiguë*, the Quran is the very Word of God. How is it possible for the Word, always in the singular and uttered in eternity, to enter our human words, in the plural and deployed in time? Does “inimitable” mean “untranslatable”? Sensitive to the mystery of the Word, Samba Diallo had learned to discover and love meaning that was at the same time unknown but still totally present. The “night of the Quran” is a microcosm of the whole novel, as Samba summons to life the Diallobé of the past and present, yet senses that the world created and sustained by the repetition of the Word has come to an end. Orality gives way to the written words, and the passage where Samba explains to Adèle that “they” first conquered him through “their” alphabet is the exact counterpart to the Night of the Quran. As Samba is conquered by letters and words of the Latin script and the French language, he conquers the world of creation vs. recitation. Writing creates an individual who creates it in return. The passage from the Word to words is a passage from responsibility for the community to the affirmation of the individual. The last chapter of the book, yet, can be read as a final reconciliation of the cosmic Word with the individual’s narrative, the re-absorption of the ego into the Ego, of its words into the Word.

KEYWORDS : word – words – oral – written – meaning – creation – recitation – conquer – community – individual – reconciliation

I will start with the following quote from the first pages of *L'Aventure ambiguë*:

Be accurate in repeating the Word of your Lord. He has done you the gracious favor of bringing His own speech down to you. These words have been veritably pronounced by the Master of the World. And you, miserable lump of earthly mold that you are, when you have the honor of repeating them after Him, you go so far as to profane them by your carelessness. You deserve to have your tongue cut a thousand times. (4)<sup>1</sup>

You have, of course, recognized in the words that I have just read the Master of Quranic school’s outburst of anger so well described by C. H. Kane. What provoked it is the fact that his favorite disciple’s tongue (the one he threatens to cut a thousand times) has slipped while reading a Quranic verse. His anger becomes total madness, carrying him so far as to pinch the student’s ear until it bleeds, or to burn his skin with a glowing log. And the reader, in total bemusement, dis-

1 Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *L'Aventure ambiguë*. Paris: Juillard, 1961.

covers that the Master's brutality is proportionate with his deep love for the child, who is the first to think that he deserves the agony inflicted to him for these verses, the true miracle of a Speech which is as God Himself uttered it. "This sentence," which he did not understand, C.H. Kane's text explains, "for which he was suffering martyrdom, he loved for its mystery and its somber beauty" (4).

At the center of the over-sensitive and supercilious vigilance of the Master about the human enunciation of the divine Word, and at the center of the child's wonderment in front of signs pointing towards an unfathomable mystery, is the core Islamic creed that the Quran is the very Word of God, and for that reason is *inimitable*.

A conviction of that nature (inhabiting certainly the Master Thierno) is something people must adhere to with all their heart but also all their intelligence. So what would intelligence say about the demand to repeat the Word of God the way he himself pronounced it, in other words how are we to understand the notion that the Word can be expressed in its totality in our human words? Or, to put it differently, how is it possible for the Word, always in the singular as it is uttered in no time or in eternity, to enter our human words, in the plural, and which are deployed in time? I am asking these questions because Thierno's conviction that the Word is meant for eternal repetition or recitation (meaning of the word "Quran"), in a way that must remain identical to its primordial divine utterance, reflects an issue which is one of those that gave birth to Islamic theology and created different schools of thought. The issue was thus classically formulated: is the Quran created? In other words, shouldn't we consider the movement of its descent (*tanzil*) from the intelligible and eternal realm into the sensible and transient world represented by our human language a translation? The Word of God would remain with Him while the process by which it found its way into human reality and speech could be considered a creation. The narrative of the way in which the Quran was revealed at once, in one single act, to the prophet of Islam and then took twenty-three years of human time to unfold as a revelation in Arabic, could be interpreted that way: the eternal Word of God descended into the illiterate heart of His prophet in a moment of eternity that was then deployed as human words and human duration in the course of the rest of his life. The Quranic notion that while humanity receives the revelation the "mother of the book" (*ummul kitâb*) remains with God could also be read under that light.

This theological question of the created Quran, which became a hot political issue in the Muslim world during the early ninth century at the beginning of the Abbasid dynasty, has many implications. One of them is the translation of the divine word. Does "inimitable" mean "untranslatable"? Could it be (re)translated in different human tongues after that primordial divine translation as Arabic words? Should it be? Why not, when you are not an Arab speaker (and even when you are, as the language of the Quran is quite peculiar) learn the Quran in your own tongue? Turkish nationalism, after the revolution led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s, decided that the Quran would be learned, studied, and quoted in its Turkish version the way the Bible is known by its English version in English-speaking lands. That worked to a large extent, but in all liturgical usages of their sacred Text the Turks, like all Muslims in all the regions of the Islamic world, no matter what tongue they speak, remained attached to the Arabic primordial utterance of the Word.

Somehow, the fact that the Word is not understood, that its meaning is at the same time unknown but still totally present in its sound and its music, is what makes it beautiful and loved. That is the feeling Samba Diallo expresses in the text of *L'Aventure ambiguë* when he says that what he is reading in agony and passion, “he loved for its mystery and its somber beauty.” In a sense, he had learned to discover and to love in the Word meaning prior to meaning.

Another crucial aspect of the attachment to the Arabic utterance of the Word is that the Quranic text creates a bond unifying Muslim people into one community (*umma*), not only throughout space but also throughout time as the reading or the recitation of it remains unaltered, identical, linking past and present generations as an unbroken chain. This is beautifully expressed in *L'Aventure ambiguë* in the passage that presents itself as “the night of the Quran.” A footnote explains what that is: “It was the custom that the child who had completed his studies in the Quran and return to his parents should, in their honor, recite the Holy Book from memory throughout all of one night.” And here is how the scene is described:

From feeling himself listened to, so, by the two beings whom he loved the most [his father and his mother], from knowing that on this enchanted night he, Samba Diallo, was repeating for his father what the knight himself had repeated for his own father, what from generation to generation through centuries the sons of the Diallobé had repeated for their fathers, from knowing that he had not failed in this respect and that he was about to prove to all who were listening that *the Diallobé would not die in him*—from all this, there was a moment when Samba Diallo was on the point of fainting. But he considered that it was important for him, more than for any of those who had preceded him, to acquit himself to the full on his Night. For *it seemed to him that this night marked an end*. This scintillation of the heavens above his head, was it not the star-studded bolt being drawn upon *an epoch that had run its course*? Behind that bolt a world of stellar light was gently glowing, a world which it was important to glorify *one last time*. His voice, which had progressively risen as if linked to the thrust of the stars, was raised now to a pathetic fullness. From *the depths of the ages* he felt, springing up in him and breathed out by his voice, a *long love which today was threatened*. In the humming sound of this voice there was being dissolved, bit by bit, a being who a few moments ago had still been Samba Diallo. Insensibly, rising from profundities which he did not suspect, phantoms were assailing him through and through and were substituting themselves for him. It seemed to him that in his voice had become muffled innumerable voices, like the voice of the river on certain nights.

But the voice of the river was less vehement, and also less close to tears. The voice of the river did not carry along with it this refusal which was now being cried out in the voice of Samba Diallo; nor did it have the accompaniment of this nostalgic chant.

For a long time, in the night, his voice was that of the voiceless phantoms of his ancestors, whom he had raised up. With them, he wept their death; but also, in long cadence, they sang his birth [emphasis added] (71-2).

My reading of *L'Aventure ambiguë* is that the whole text is in this passage as the whole is in the microcosm. In it we can read the protasis followed by an apodosis structure of the novel: this pas-

sage is about Samba Diallo summoning to life the Diallobé of the past and the present, but also at the same time having the strong premonition that the world created and continuously sustained by the repetition of the Word had come to an end. An end that would be, in an apparent paradox that he will understand only later, his own beginning. Although the Word, the Quran, is written (in fact, islamization, from at least the tenth century, transformed the previously oral cultures of West Africa into writing societies) it is fundamentally spoken and recited (from memory): its real nature is oral, as Derrida has explained in his critique of logocentrism. The Word creates and recreates the community of the Diallobé when it is repeated identically to itself, from generation to generation, in a vertical transmission that goes back to God himself as “he has veritably pronounced it” (4). The awesome truth that Samba Diallo experiences during his Night is that he has the responsibility of maintaining the Diallobé by not breaking the chain of the repetition but also that in order for him to be born, in order for him to simply *be*, he had to invent himself by inventing his own (written of course) words.

This novel is about identity only because it is about writing one’s identity, or discovering one’s identity through writing. What I am saying is reflected in another important passage of the book when Samba Diallo meditates on his discovery of the Latin alphabet and what it meant for him. In that passage (159), Samba Diallo is discussing with Adèle his “hatred” of the West or of “them,” which is another name for his “love”: hatred as he puts it is here just “an annulment of love.” As he confessed that “they” first conquered him, he goes on to explain to Adèle who wanted to find out “how they conquered [him], personally”:

Perhaps it was with their alphabet. With it they struck the first hard blow at the country of the Diallobé. I remained for a long time under the spell of those signs and those sounds which constitute the structure and the music of their language. When I learned to fit them together to form words, to fit the words together to give birth to speech, my happiness knew no further limit.

As soon as I knew how to write, I began to flood my father with letters that I wrote to him and delivered to him with my own hand. This was to demonstrate my new knowledge and also, by keeping my gaze fixed on him while he was reading, to establish the fact that with my new tool I should be able to transmit my thought to him without opening my mouth. I had interrupted my studies with the teacher of the Diallobé at the very moment when he was about to initiate me at last into the rational understanding of what up to then I had done no more than recite—with wonder, to be sure. With these new skills I was suddenly entering, all on one floor, a universe which was, at the very first, one of marvelous comprehension and total communion. (159-160)

It is easy to see how this passage is the exact counterpart of the “Night of the Quran” passage. It echoes it and it opposes it. Obviously Samba Diallo is manifesting again his fascination for signs, their sounds and their music, and feeling that he is under their spell in a way that can be seen as analogous, on a radically different plane of course, to how he felt in the presence of the somber beauty of the Quranic verses. Except that here, with the alphabet, he is not dealing with a Word that comes as a totality demanding to be recited; on the contrary, he now has elements that he can

combine to generate the infinite possibilities of writing...He has discovered that like a child who has been offered a construction game, he could play *ad libitum* and *ad infinitum* to create all sorts of words and sentences with a small number of elements. His attitude towards the Latin alphabet is radically different than the *oral* relationship he had with the Word, which may be written but whose reading is for the purpose of recitation and repetition in the imitation of the voice of God. It should be noticed that he interrupted his Quranic studies right at the point when he was going to acquire a new comprehension of the Quranic text that would have given him the tools to analyze it in its elementary components. But he was destined to have such a comprehension of signs and “communion” with them through the written letters and words of the alphabet and the French language. As he is conquered by them he also conquers the world of creation and not of recitation, the world of variation and not of repetition, the world of the written words and not of the oral Word.

The communion Samba Diallo used to have with the Diallobé community, past and present, and the feeling that he had the incommensurable responsibility of maintaining that communion through the repetition of the Quran is no more. Instead, he declares, “After all, I am only myself. I have only me” (126). This thought, which came to him after he read one letter from the chief of the Diallobé giving him news from home, marks the change that has occurred in him. This change can be characterized as his birth to individuality, that birth precisely of which he had a premonition during the Night of the Koran. Writing creates an individual who creates it in return. I want to read that individuality as what Mallarmé has called the “retrenchment,” the “reduction” that is the condition of writing. The passage from the Word to words, from the responsibility for the community to the affirmation of the individual, is the discovery of writing which is, as I read it, the most central question of *L’Aventure ambiguë*. In that sense I would call it a narrative of writing rather than a narrative of identity.

It is true of course that the text presents itself as the drama of identity, that of Africanity or negritude facing the West while it is already deeply penetrated by it. “I am not,” says a Samba Diallo who has discovered hybridity, “a distinct country of the Diallobé facing a distinct Occident” (150). It is also true that the novel has been received and can be read as presenting the dilemma facing Africa as she is confronted with the inevitable transformations imposed by European modernity which is represented in the novel by the figure of Descartes, and especially the French school.

It seems to me much more interesting, and I dare say truer to the central theme of Samba Diallo’s fascination with signs, to read *L’Aventure ambiguë* as the narrative of such a passage to writing. Besides, the classical readings are perfectly compatible with the one I am presenting. And I would like to understand the strange final pages of the text under such a light. They could be read as the self-discovery of writing, the sheer pleasure of a creative, poetic usage of language that the passages have made possible. At the same time, these final pages are a poem in prose and fit well in the Sufi theme of the final encounter and reconciliation. This true poem in prose could be thus read as the final coinciding of the cosmic Word with the individual’s narrative which is at the core of Sufism. And the last words perfectly echo Sufi poetry about the return from exile and the re-absorption of the drop into the sea, of the ego into the Ego, of its words into the Word: “I am without limit. Sea, the limpidity of your wave is awaiting my gaze. I fix my eyes upon you, and you glitter, without limit. I wish for you, through all eternity” (178). As a conclusion, I would like to come

back to the question of language. It could seem that the fascination of Samba Diallo is either with the Arabic script or the French alphabet. What about the language of the Diallobé, his Pulaar language? Cheikh Hamidou Kane, as we know, is a militant for the promotion of African indigenous languages as languages of literature, science, philosophy, etc. This question is a way of making a clarification about the insistence on Arabic as the language of the Quran. That does not mean that it is the language of Islam. In fact, there is not such a thing as a language of Islam. It is not because of anything unique in the Arabic language that it received the Revelation. In fact, the Quran itself in a self-referential way insists on the miracle of the Word of God entering a mere human language as human and ordinary as any other human language. Against the notion that Arabic itself is sacred and that anything Islamic should be written in that language, African populations, like all other communities in other regions of the Muslim world, have developed a rich literature in their own indigenous languages using the Arabic script. As a Senegalese poet in the Wolof language, Seriñ Musa Ka famously wrote, “Ma leebu nak ñi naan wolof baaxul / Tërab wolof bob Yaaram ak wax yëppa yem / Boo ci jublu ngir Rasuululaahi baatin ba am xorom.” This could be rendered as, “Let me say this to those who declare that Wolof is not appropriate here. Rhyming in Wolof, or in the noble Arabic language, or in any other language, amounts to the same thing. To choose any language to praise the prophet of God is to see ennobled its very essence.” Indeed that is the truth that Samba Diallo discovers when from recitation he passes to writing.