

ARTICLE

On Earth as it is in Heaven, or The Itinerary of the Diallobé in *Ambiguous Adventure* and *The Keepers of the Temple*

Cheikh Hamidou Kane

As BYU, UCAD, and other places of higher learning commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Ambiguous Adventure*, I am filled with emotion and gratitude as the author of this novel. I am both amazed and filled with joy at the longevity of this work—its fiftieth anniversary, and its expansion to intercontinental notoriety.

My satisfaction, however, comes with one regret. The brightness of this star has overshadowed the work that followed it, *The Keepers of the Temple*...thirty-five years later, in fact! My regret is justified by the fact that neither of these works is fully understandable without the other. Indeed, as an informed observer wrote, “regardless of the angle at which these two novels are comprehended, *The Keepers of the Temple* is to *Ambiguous Adventure* what the downstream of a river is to the upstream, meaning its extension, its logical continuation. All the relevant questions that the young writer asked and discussed in the first novel, and that remained, for the most part, unanswered, are clearly answered and articulated in the second novel.”

The point of view having been thus expressed, which I will later substantiate, was based on an article published in the journal *Ethiopiennes* by Mamadou Kalidou Bâ, professor at the University of Nouakchott, in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. As both his heritage and his first and last name suggest, this man is of the same Fulani ethnicity and Muslim background as Samba Diallo and Salif Bâ, the respective heroes of *Ambiguous Adventure* and *The Keepers of the Temple*. Similarly, he was steeped in Muslim “pulaagu,” he attended The Glowing Hearth, after which he attended the colonial school through graduation. Therefore, he knows what he’s talking about.

Already at their first encounter with the West, the Diallobé knew they were not alone in the world, because they had been Muslim for centuries, followers of a religion that was not initially their own. The appearance of the white man from across the seas in their country came so suddenly and with such devastating violence, as though it were the herald of the end of their world. Would the encounter, the understanding, and coexistence be possible? Or would the Diallobé be doomed

to annihilation by the destructive force of the newcomers?

Ambiguous Adventure and *The Keepers of the Temple* have attempted to give an answer to these questions that touch upon the existence of the Diallobé, on earth as in heaven. The given answer is ultimately expressed as an acquiescence of the possibility of a new and shared world. Indeed, a world united, supportive, fair, equitable, the same to all the sons of the Earth, can and should come to pass and replace the world that the West imposed. Indeed, the West, master of its own deeds, imposed itself on the known world since its discovery and shaped it to its will and for its own benefit.

The Knight spoke about the arrival of this world when he said, “The era of separate destinies has run its course ... But from our long and varied ripenings a son will be born to the world: The first son of the Earth, the only one, also.” This world will serve as a dwelling in which all the sons will take part, “not as a stranger comes from distant regions, but as an artisan responsible for the destinies of the citadel ... All of us, Hindus, Chinese, South Americans, Negroes, Arabs.”

The journey that the Diallobé must undertake in order to reach this Promised Land is dotted with closed doors that need to be opened, and with initiatory thresholds that need to be crossed. In the description that the two novels give of this journey, we can identify seven of these thresholds.

The Old World

1. *From the oral tradition to two types of written record, from Animism to Revelation, and from blind faith to experienced faith.*

Before converting to Islam in the early 11th century, the Diallobé (Fulani) did not use the written word to express themselves, but rather oral tradition. However, even though they had no written scripture, they were aware of the existence of a Supreme Being, Gueno.

The threshold of becoming Muslim having been crossed by the Diallobé led to a transition from an oral tradition to a written one. It also allowed them to cross another threshold, which then led them from Animism to revelation and from contingency to transcendence.

The writing that conveys the revealed word is a form of prayer. The door that the Diallobé would pass through to meet the West, willingly or not, was going to open to them, or at least to a few of them, a second form of writing. It is no longer a sacred writing, a prayer addressing God; a complete understanding of Him is impossible! This type of writing serves as a tool of thought in an investigation of reality. Mastered, it will enable the Diallobé Muslims to progress from a believed and lived faith to a true knowledge of faith.

Prior to the encounter with the West and the discovery of the tool of writing, the Diallobé had, for five or six centuries, been familiar with Islam. The culture and way of life had instilled in the African practice of this religion the virtues of tolerance, openness, and consensus that characterize being in the black man's world, without, however, resulting in any impairment to orthodoxy over the land of Islam. Thus, from the eleventh century until the arrival of the New School, Islam and indigenous culture had interacted to produce what Vincent Monteil has called Black Islam,

which, in strict compliance with principles of revealed religion, was added to the core values of black culture: openness, tolerance, emphasizing education and persuasion more than violence and coercion. Since War Diâbi, king of Tekrur, the ancient state of West Africa at the time of the first contact with Islam, to the present time, we can see Islamic preaching change from a foreign initiative (Arab), to one of black preachers and propagators.

They, therefore, reconciled differences between Islam and the indigenous culture, in part by purging it of its defects that were incompatible with Islam, and also by using its positive values to guide and educate populations in their evolution towards modernity.

In the most recent period of this era, since the eighteenth century, Senegalese preachers and spiritual guides, Fulani for many of them, have particularly distinguished themselves in this way. Ousmane Dème Fouta Toto (aka Ousmane Dan Fodio), Thierno Souleymane Baal and the leaders of the Islamic Revolution of 1776 in Futa Toro, El Hadji Oumar Tall, El Hadj Malick Sy, and Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké helped make Islam throughout the Sudano-Sahelian region and Senegal, among others, a religion of faith, openness, and modernity, despite the adverse opposition of retrogressive cultural traditions and of the values and dictations of the conquering Western world.

If one sees clearly in *Ambiguous Adventure* in what terms the metaphysical and cultural theses and antitheses branch out from the issue confronted by the Diallobé, it is in *The Keepers of the Temple* where one can understand the syntheses, through the speech, example, and practices of Thierno Saïdou Barry, new Master of the Diallobé, and Salif Bâ and Daba Mbaye, figures of Samba Diallo and the Most Royal Lady, as well as Farba Mâri, columnist and defender of endogenous culture of the Diallobé.

Farba Mâri, a Diallobé griot of the great oral tradition, and Daba Mbaye of the same ancestry, by becoming a Doctor and Fellow in History, learned from the New School how the West attempts to make sense of the past. By unifying them as though by marriage, they symbolized the way in which, according to Joseph Ki Zerbo, we must understand the modern identity of an African, meaning, “the return of self to self at a higher level.”

2. *From “the art of conquering without reason” to the victory of reason.*

If in *Ambiguous Adventure* the violence of the first morning meeting of the Diallobé with the West, the devastating destruction of materialism that ensued, and the humiliation and subsequent slavery that followed, made the idea of reconciliation between these two worlds seem impossible, we can, in *The Keepers of the Temple*, understand how and in what way this reconciliation might occur.

Salif Bâ, like Samba Diallo, is a Diallobé Muslim, and student of the New School who, after completing his education and training in agricultural engineering, returned to the country of the Diallobé and began teaching them how better to join wood to wood. By replacing their traditional agriculture with its modern superior, the Diallobé could yield harvests that endured the famines,

shortages, and endemic droughts that had been common to this region.

Thierno Saïdou Barry, the new teacher of the Diallobé, is of the opinion that “God, having made man His servant on earth, should have the world ordered according to His will. Feeding, clothing, protecting, and caring for mankind are holy works – the more efficiently these needs are met, the easier it will be for man to open himself to God” (*Les Gardiens* 48).¹

In the Diallobé society, when it comes to the metaphysical and existential problem of the place that man must make for God in his life, the duties of man towards God and of man towards man, Thierno Saïdou Barry, in responding to the questions of Farba Mâri and of Salif Bâ (the reincarnation of Samba Diallo), makes the following statements: “As creatures of God we have the responsibility, given to us by Him, to not neglect our duty in this world. This means that we must make every necessary effort to protect and increase our material goods in this life. He has endowed us with intelligence and reason, and entrusted all of Nature to us as our inheritance so that we might use these skills to benefit it. In our day, it is the West that has known best how to produce—or to harvest and develop—the knowledge and results of this goal, through the work of men in every part of the earth. We must congratulate ourselves that for the last several generations, although not without hesitation, the Diallobé have followed the path of the West.” (*Les Gardiens* 53). “For the Diallobé, the world which is to come, the Shared World, will have to be watched over and protected by God, or it will not exist ... For the Diallobé, no world is possible without God.”

In the eyes of the Diallobé characters from both novels, one of the principle “stumbling points that oppose Western culture to their own, concerns the relationship between man and society.” It seems, writes Mamadou Kalidou Bâ, “that the evidence of observation allows a large difference to appear, one based partially on the notion of family and its sphere, and partially on the type of relationships that members of society can enter into.” To its Diallobé observers, “the West appears as a cold place where the relationship between men is walled off as much literally as it is figuratively.”

The technological progress that was a driving force of their evolution led to “each individual [defining] their own exclusive evolutionary space, in which another is hardly tolerated, a situation which leads man to an isolation, first material, then psychological and mental, and finally moral.” At the opposite end, for the Diallobé, “man does not exist without the family, without society ... For the Diallobé, there is no possible world without the family, without a united community, without the linking of generations.” Saidou Badian Kouyaté said, “Man enters into the world cradled in the hands of men and leaves it cradled in the hands of men ... Man is the remedy for man, says an Oulof adage.”

The New World

Ambiguous Adventure and *The Keepers of the Temple* closely followed, on earth as in heaven, the path travelled by the Diallobé and the West, since the morning of their first meeting to the ascension of the New World strongly wished for by Samba Diallo’s father. This world in which the triumph of reason overtakes the art of conquering, where God’s and man’s place mutually protect

1 Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Les Gardiens du temple*. Paris: Stock, 1995.

one another, and where justice, equality, and brotherhood will prevail.

It is only this world, both possible and necessary, that globalization signifies and announces, and that that the world's youth ask for and impose: the youth of all the Diallobé on Earth, as well as the youth of the West, together in brotherhood. When the Knight of the Dalmatique declared "The era of separate destinies has run its course ... In that sense, the end of the world has indeed come for every one of us," he spoke not only of the Diallobé, but also the West which, equally, "[cannot] any longer live by the simple carrying out of what he himself is."