

The Process of Subjectivation as a Site of Resistance – for the Privileged: The Case of an Aristocratic Peul Africanist

The paper opens with a reference to the French anthropologist George Balandier whose renewal of French anthropology was very much the result of the influence and work of his African partners such as Alioune Diop. Then, presenting examples from the autobiographic work of the Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1900-1991) and a discussion with Kussum Aggarwal's analysis of significant moments in the history of French Africanism, the paper argues that the works of Hampâté Bâ constitute an early example of a subtle but important discursive and epistemological resistance by describing the complexities of African processes of subjectivation during the French colonial period in West Africa.

By Heidi Bojsen

Introduction: Remembering Georges Balandier and Amadou Hampâté Bâ

One of the grand old men in French africanist studies, Georges Balandier, published in 2003 a collection of essays, interviews and thoughts about the development of his academic and intellectual endeavor.¹ In one chapter, he is describing what he learned from and about Africa. His thesis *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire* from 1955 marked a decisive turn in Francophone africanism. The fact that he insisted on describing and analyzing contemporary social and religious practices in West African societies made him an easy target to criticize for his peers. But he succeeded in renewing the field by insisting on taking the political utilization of history into account in his work. More specifically, he broke with the anthropological tradition that had wanted to consider Africa as a continent outside of history. This tradition had constructed an idea of the "traditional" and "primitive" cultures as static and pure and to be the only kind of communities of true scientific interest. As such, Balandier broke with some of the tendencies that Said would later criticize in certain parts of the orientalist academic tradition.

What is interesting in Balandier's account is the fact that he stresses how his perception of his own work as a French anthropologist was influenced not only by his personal history and education as well as by his colleagues in Paris. He was equally influenced by the African intellectuals with whom he became befriended

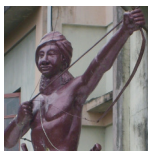
first in Dakar, Senegal and later elsewhere. During the field work that formed the basis of his thesis, he lived with the prominent writer Alioune Diop and his family and he considered the Senegalese writer to be his teacher. From the African fishing community that he observed as well as the ones he got to meet later, he learned that cultural practices in the communities he entered never were atemporal and pure. He always found rites, words, fragments of practices that seemed to come either from missionaries or other ethnic groups, European, African or Arab (Balandier, 2003).

The process of subjectivation taking place here in 1940's and 1950's colonial Senegal was interesting in the sense that Balandier, in his desire to learn, undergoes a process of academic and intellectual subjectivation in which African agents have an impact on how he defines his 'dos' and 'don'ts' as an anthropologist and Frenchman. This process is facilitated by on his own critical perception of his country's colonial policy, but it also forms this skepticism in particular ways.

Balandier's itinerary is one among a number of sources that we have on French colonial history where French and African intellectuals worked together within or around the institutions and conditions of possibility set by colonial administrations and economic structures. What we may have a tendency to forget is that this exchange of knowledge and cooperation also happened in the setting of local rites and institutions within the colonized communities in various forms.

These itineraries of intertwined histories of European and African agents are not only available to us with European protagonists: we also have the tales and works of African intellectuals such as Ahmadou Hampâté Bâ (1900-1991), Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003)

¹ *Civilisés, dit-on*, Paris, PUF, 2003.



and Cheik Anta Diop (1923-1986) to mention a few. Academics or authors, the texts of those who have reflected on their meeting with new cultures and who have used these meetings to formulate more general ideas about culture, social powers, politics, history and identity have all taken part in the process of subjectivation that has paved the way for the work we do today. Yet, we may question how successful they and their followers have been in making their insights known to posterity. As recently as in 2007, the French prime minister, Nicolas Sarkozy found himself in turmoil when he pronounced in his speech in Dakar, that it was time that Africa enter into history. Clearly, his speech had not been written by people adhering to the school of Balandier; the discourse of the first half of the twentieth century had survived in the new millennium.²

Of the three African authors mentioned here, I should like to draw attention to a chosen part of one of the autobiographic narratives by the Malian author Amadou Hampâté Bâ and his portrayal of his own process of subjectivation in a West African colonial school.

The purpose of my reading is not to try to diminish in any way the violence and injustices of the colonial practices or to ignore the impact they had on African societies. However, focusing solely on the actions of colonial agents or on expressions of direct opposition between colonizer and colonized very easily becomes yet again a Eurocentric affair. What makes the works of Kourouma and Hampâté Bâ so important is the fact that they describe a dense complexity of social agency that continues to guide and form the basis for Africans during the colonial period. They do describe various impacts of colonial practices, but as a European reader, it is refreshing to read these two particular authors because the presence of the French colonial administration and its ontology is only present in the periphery. The perspective of the novels is that of the African protagonists and of different African social groups. As such, their narratives give us an account of the very differentiated and dynamic responses to the structures imposed by colonial rule and thus suggest how the processes of subjectivity may have occurred. According to the French political scientist Jean-François Bayart, the accounts of Hampâté Bâ have been used as source material by both anthropologists and political scientists.³

My paper falls into three parts: A clarification of how I understand the notion of 'subjectivation', then a

reading of the autobiographic text by Hampâté Bâ and, finally, a discussion of Kussum Aggarwal's reading of Africanism and its impact on the oeuvre of Hampâté Bâ.

Defining "processes of subjectivation"

In the call for this conference, subjectivation is described as "processes whereby new moral subjects are coming into being via practices of the self."

As a clarifying gesture, I should like to add that in this paper, I conceive these processes as references to situations and moments when an individual *actively enters* and or is interpellated into a position as a subject through verbal or non-verbal practices.⁴ This coming into subject happens in the context of certain "conditions of possibility" of entering into relations. By relations, I mean the ways in which we relate ourselves to other people, are interpellated by their expectations and practices, but also how we relate ourselves to material surroundings and are interpellated by them. Since Foucault, the social context of the new media has expanded rapidly. We should therefore add a third condition of these processes of subjectivation, that of the virtual reality. How we are interpellated and are relating ourselves, creating ourselves as subjects on the internet and through cell phone activity is in some cultures and social groups becoming a quite important factor in the subjectivation process and the postcolonial societies are no exception just like the new media are having a considerable impact on how the relations with the former colonial centers are shaped.

At an overall level, the individual becomes a *moral* subject by administering a number of potential subject positions; some are imposed on her, others are facultative, others seem out of reach. Part of the subjectivity may in fact reside, not in the inhabiting a particular subject position, but in the process of negotiating or moving from one/some of these positions to other ones or inhabiting them simultaneously, thus redefining their boundaries.

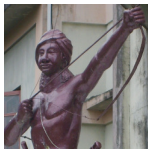
The text of the call does not merely say "subjects", but "moral subject", thus implying that the process of subjectivation inevitably includes a context of *dos* and *don'ts* which the individual must take account of. This may seem like a banal observation and it probably is, but it also connects well with another suggestion from the call:

"Recently, however, the idea that colonial rule depended on making certain types of subjectivity has also been questioned. Rather, it is argued, colonial rule depended on a more tradi-

² See http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discours_de_Dakar_7-3-2010
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8wiy1_discours-de-dakar-de-nicolas-sarkoz_news 7-3-2010

³ Bayart, Jean-François (1989) *L'État en Afrique. La politique du ventre*. Paris : Fayard, L'Espace politique.

⁴ I have elaborated on this combination of interpellation and individual agency in *Géographies esthétiques de l'imaginaire postcolonial* (L'Harmattan, forthcoming).



tional kind of authority. Doubt has also been raised about the extent to which processes of subjectivation can adequately grasp the interactions between colonial power systems and indigenous people.”⁵

This formulation underscores the necessity to be precise about what we mean with “processes of subjectivity”. What events, actions, physical realities do we refer to, when using the phrase? In practice, the answer will often vary when we do case studies. In my understanding of the word (which I believe is sustained by the way Foucault constructs many of his studies) these processes do not merely refer to *verbal* discourse, but also to the relation between the individual and the material world. Studying processes of subjectivation means studying how economics, law and law enforcement, medical practice, food production, not to forget the physicality of our surroundings such as buildings (as we see it in Foucault’s discussion of prisons as panopticons) affect people’s lives and conditions of living.

I think it is safe to say that *all* interactions between colonial power systems and indigenous people are part of processes of subjectivation. Yet, I also believe that we may acquire more precise knowledge about the interactions between social groups interacting in a colonial setting, if we combine this theoretical point of departure with methodologies from other disciplines such as economics, environmental studies, medical studies, etc.

Colonial rule was never a homogeneous regime of discourse, but rather a cluster of very heterogeneous discourses, agents and institutions. With a few exceptions, my work has mainly been centered in the field of Francophone studies, but from what I have read on other colonial histories, I believe that this is a general observation as soon as one makes the effort to study the archival material that can tell us about the people who *were there* or were, in fact, *interacting*. In Francophone West Africa alone, we have the presence of colonial administrators from various disciplines such as military, medical, anthropological, geographical, political, educational fields. Not everyone holding a position in the colonial administration was European. Some came from the French Caribbean, and in the first half of the 20th century, Africans from the four communes of Senegal that acquired French citizenship, as well as African *sujets* who had gone to colonial schools, were working within the administration.

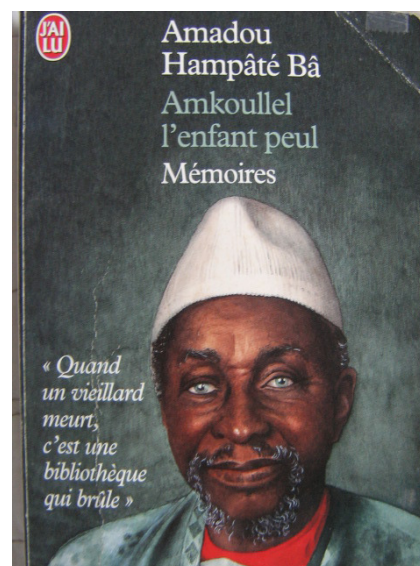
In addition, we have the presence of Europeans who were there as spouses and family or as part of

⁵ The quote refers to the conference call for the conference *Processes of subjectivation: Colonial and Postcolonial Perspectives*, held at Copenhagen University Aug 16-18 2010.

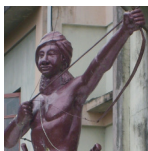
private initiative, geographers, trading companies, anthropologists, missionaries. These were not necessarily in accord with colonial politics and the predominant perceptions of the metropole. Likewise, the category of “indigenous” or “colonized” refers to a wide range of different social groups. They were also active subjects in a range of differentiated interactions with the colonial agents whether they were resisting colonial rule openly, through indirect opposition or whether believing in the career opportunities that seemed available when educating oneself in the colonial school system.

Processes of subjectivation in West African colonial school – the case of a bright aristocratic boy

Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul* (1991) is autobiographic and gives a rather detailed account of his childhood. Born into an aristocratic family in Mali, he was sent to the French colonial school. In 1942, he got a job at the *Institut Français d’Afrique Noire* (IFAN, French Institute of Black Africa) in Dakar and shortly after the independence of Mali in 1960, he worked for UNESCO and was elected into the executive council in 1962.



Amkoullel is sent to qur’anic school which is basically a training of memorizing the Qur’an. But the education of the young boy and his brother is also marked by the tutoring and encounters of different adults, some relatives, others friends or enemies of the family. The narratives of past and present power games and proverbs that the adults are meticulously passing on to the children, are training the boys in both memo-



rising detailed and complex personal histories and providing them with analytical skills.

Amkoullé's entrance into the colonial school is neither the choice of his parents nor of a colonial agent. As in most of Hampâté Bâ's accounts, important decisions are made in a matrix of chance and politics where different people are constantly attempting to promote their interests or taking revenge on others – sometimes by harming or helping those associated with their primary target.

This mechanism is by far the most important and powerful component in the process of subjectivation in the works of Hampâté Bâ.

In this instance, the town in which he grows up, is regularly asked by the colonial administration to provide children from the most prominent families to the colonial school. The leaders of the town have divided the area into neighborhoods and each neighborhood takes its turn in order to meet this request which is considered an evil as impossible to avoid as “death and taxes” in other cultures. The leader in Amkoullé's neighborhood has a grudge against his family and Qur'anic teacher. Therefore he picks both Amkoullé and his elder brother for the selection. This is considered a misfortune as the colonial school, in the mind of the neighborhood leader and many others in the community, most likely will lead the children directly to hell as they will be influenced by the “porc-eating heathens”.

The leader of the neighborhood is portrayed as a villain in so many ways that it is almost a stylistic overkill, but the description conveys some interesting points about the valorization hierarchy as do tales and stereotypical narratives from European contexts. The ‘overkill’ is part of the didactic genre of oral narratives on which Hampâté Bâ's stories are framed. A main point that I will point out here is the fact that the decision made by the neighborhood leader is motivated by a family feud that goes four generations back. Despite the longtime gone origins of the feud, he considers the boys his enemy. The negative portrayal of him is underlined when we are told that he has shown excessive greed when visiting the children's teacher as he has demanded the right to have the best meat for free. In contrast, the “traditional leader” of the town, who is also part of the family feud and allegedly on the same side as the villain neighborhood leader, is acting very nobly sending his own son instead of Amkoullé's older brother as a way of creating peace and a bond of shared destiny between the two families.

This incidence is interesting in our context because it conveys two strategies that are often crossing each other in Hampâté Bâ's writing, strategies used by individuals within a colonial context or merely a social

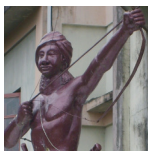
context where the conditions of possibility are a terrain of dominance and resistance between many difference parties.

The dichotomy between Africa and Europe, between colonized and colonizer, is not in the least the most interesting or the most decisive at this point. This is not because Hampâté Bâ is not aware of the massive impact of colonial policies on African communities or world politics at this period, but at this point in his life, the action is elsewhere and the most important direct processes of subjectivation are still being managed by Africans. This excerpt of his tale portrays two strategies, one that will use the colonial conditions of possibility to give in to greed and vengeance and the other, that will use the same conditions as an occasion to make peace and form new alliances of shared destinies and experiences with the people born in the same town as yourself. The narrator of the novel reflects on this:

“When I think of what certain Tall have made my family go through, I always remember the noble behavior of a Tall such as Alfa Maki and I tell myself that one should look past the errors of men and only recollect the good from them. The good is what we have in common; as for the errors, we all have our own and I myself have mine. I remain grateful to Alfa Maki still today for the grandeur of his gesture [...]” (Hampâté Bâ, 1991: 266).

Errors and insufficiencies are related to an individual subjectivity and virtues such as generosity, wisdom and the ability to make strategic alliances are seen as an investment in the future. In this example and in others, the ability to make alliances is the glue that links people together.⁶ Alfa Maki is portrayed as a hero. In fact, he was being wise winning a powerful ally both for himself and his son as Amkoullé and his brother were bright kids of good families. The neighborhood leader is seen as a villain, but the rather one-sided description of him should raise our ‘suspicion’. It could be that he has more sound reasons for acting the way he is without us knowing because the perspective is still that of a child. It could also be that this child is terribly arrogant and has a rather hierarchical and limited understanding of how people in less fortunate social positions than himself are reacting to him and the colonial setting. Finally, moving up at the enunciative level of the text, Hampâté Bâ may be using this character and the scene described to underscore a lesson in nobility and the

⁶ This pragmatic approach to political and social contexts and interests is not only the arena of men. In both Hampâté Bâ and Kouroma's narratives we find strong women who are also promoting their interests through strategic alliances, intelligence, tradesmanship and courage.



valiance that we see in him later as he denounces the neighborhood leader to the colonial *commandant*.

So why give so much time to the description of processes of subjectivation that hardly seem to be related to the colonial powers? Because in order to understand the African presence and agency in this process, it is vital to understand that even to those who went to colonial schools and learned French and the curricula planned for the “*sujets*”, even for those who became French citizens, or for those who never went to the colonial school, colonial administrative rules were always only part of the process, and only very rarely the most pre-dominant one which is not the same as to say that it could not be the most powerful or the most decisive at certain points in their lives.

In both Kourouma’s and Hampâté Bâ’s accounts, the academic content of the school in itself is hardly an intellectual challenge or a source of wisdom. What seems most rewarding for the children is the cultural translation, the acquisition of skills that will let you move back and forth between different social circles. One may get the impression that the processes thus described lead to a social structure in which all friendships are fused into strategic and pragmatic alliances.

This would be a moral judgment that deserves to be nuanced by sociological analysis. In fact, choosing your allies and friends only according to your personal likings is probably a luxury only known by certain social groups in welfare States. In most societies, you cannot rely on the State to provide for you in case of severe illness, for education or for elderly care. You must thus make sure you either have the money, the influence or the ties of loyalty that will ensure that others will assist you in acquiring the skills and possessions held to be necessary in order to lead a satisfactory life. If we consider the histories of welfare States in Europe, even your choice of spouse was seen in relation to issues of securing yourself socially and economically until the 1950s and in fact, income and social status still play a role when people choose friends and spouses in societies where the structures of a welfare State will guarantee a minimum of assistance in case of need. The point is that the focus on these processes of making alliances must also be considered in relation to the physical and material condition of the West African communities.

Let us not make the mistake to think that Hampâté Bâ, because he has grown up in an aristocratic family and has learned French in the colonial school, is more lenient and forgiving in his portrayal of the colonial administration. In fact, the scene that follows the excerpt quoted above testifies to the opposite fact. Here, Amkoullé is brought before the *Commandant du cercle*, who was the highest ranked colonial administrator and officer in each administrative section of a French colony

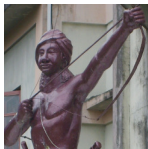
in Africa. The scene is marked by a stark hierarchy between whites and blacks in which mastering French or carrying French clothes, jewelry and golden buttons are functioning as markers of prestige and social status (268-269). When allowed to speak, Amkoullé expresses a strong desire to attend the colonial school for two reasons: He wishes to be able to speak directly to the *Commandant* (having seen the power and status of the interpreter) and he wants to be chief so he may be able to punish the neighborhood leader for his insults.

Amkoullé’s outspoken account of the intrigues of the latter causes a stir during which the neighborhood leader finds himself being punished by a *cravache*, partly because he has insulted the boys, but mostly because he has insulted France and the French (“porc-eating heathens”)(273). The punishment is being executed by a *planton*, an African orderly. Amkoullé then makes the discovery that the orderly, whom he had considered to be a man of authority, was in fact merely destined to open doors and execute the unpleasant deeds of the white man (273). By speaking up, Amkoullé has revealed himself dignified to his caste. As for the *planton* or the neighborhood leader, there is no sympathy or nuances in the description.

The *commandant* is portrayed as a person who does not quite understand all the social plays and nuances that are at stake around him, yet he stays in power due to a power hierarchy that is absolute. An open contestation of the status quo seems inconceivable at this point. However, everyone is trying to position themselves in the best possible way. The absurdity and cruelty of the colonial regime are thus denounced indirectly by the detailed accounts of the importance of even the slightest phrases or material objects connected to prestige. Notably, Amkoullé desires influence and dignity, not money or golden buttons.

The description of life in school mostly depicts the teaching of the French language. Whereas most of the children speak several languages and have been trained in memorizing lessons from the quar’anic school, a few exceptions from this general picture are mentioned. We only get to know them by their ethnic belonging, *bambara*, a word that originally merely meant “foreign” but which colonial agents thought to be an ethnic group and so, during the displacements of various people around the end of the 19th century, they became one.⁷ Bambara became a lowcaste ethnic group, the name of those who came from the *Hinterland* of the colonies and

⁷Bazin, Jean (1999 [1985]) « À chacun son Bambara » in Amselle, Jean-Loup et Elikia M’Bokolo (éds.) *Au coeur de l’ethnie : Ethnie, tribalisme et État en Afrique*. Paris : Édition de la Découverte & Syros. pp. 87-127.



who were considered the furthest away from the evolutionary and civilization ideal of 'Frenchness' in the ontology of the French. In the eyes of the Peul, their status was no better. In Hampâté Bâ's account, their mispronunciation and misunderstandings of the French language cause them severe physical punishment and, implicitly, the account denounces the violence of the colonial institution.

In school, Amkoullél is struck by the fact that he is asked to be seated in front of the chief's son. This is unsettling to him because of the hierarchy of ethnic divisions, royalty and subalterns in which he has been raised. However, the Malian teacher insists that these hierarchies do not exist in the class room: "Go back to the seats I gave you. Here, we have no princes and no subjects. You must leave all that at home, at the other side of the river" (277). The change of ontology is tightly connected to the very concrete delimitations of space as well as the 'civilizing process' that the institution of the school is supposed to deliver.

The teacher's remark is interesting because he does not ask the children to delete this part of their subjectivity process completely; they are merely asked to keep it to themselves in their restricted physical space which is not that of the colonial school. It is a similar logic that we find today in debates on integration in nation-states where immigrants and minorities are allowed to preserve their 'differences' as long as they keep this alterity to themselves, out of sight, and adhere to the processes of subjectivation demanded by official institutions in terms of language, dress code and general behavior.

For the young Amkoullél, the words infer an inconceivable social vacuum: "I tried to imagine a world where there would be no kings and subjects and thus no commanding, no castes of craftsmen or *griots*, no more difference of any kind. I simply couldn't" (278).

Yet later, he refers to a different kind of hierarchy, but without noticing himself that he has observed a paradox of the pretended egalitarian dogma. This occurs when he describes the favorite pupil in the class room. In fact, the boy is a favorite for two reasons: "(he was the best in his class and, incidentally, he was the younger brother of the *boy* who worked as a servant at the governor of the colony)" (286).

The colonial education does not offer a social order without differences, but a social order with other kinds of differences. In Amkoullél's intuitive interpretation, doing well academically *and* being well connected are equally important.

If the misunderstandings of language learning lead at times to the scene of violence and oppression, at other times, they constitute the occasion for a shared laugh between the Malian teacher and the pupils, as

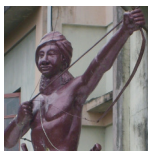
when the teacher pronounces a phrase in French that holds a vulgar sexual meaning in Bambara. The children begin to laugh and only after a while the teacher realizes what is going on and laughs with them (286).

The knowledges and practices of African cultures cannot, after all, be kept entirely out of the class room. Significantly, the low-prestige Bambara, the transformed signifier of 'foreign' and 'otherness' is what makes teacher and pupils laugh together in a shared space of translation that would be inaccessible to the French.

The representation of cultural and social negotiations and complexities as well as the importance of economic, military and political institutions are present throughout the text and there are many more examples than I can list in this paper. Rather than staying within the narrative of Hampâté Bâ, we may also benefit from the work of Kussum Aggarwal who has described the works and positions of a chosen number of French africanists paving the way for or working in the same period as Hampâté Bâ. Inspired by Bourdieu and his notion of 'field', she makes a large detour before addressing the works of Hampâté Bâ directly, but in doing so, she does make some observations that are pertinent in our context.

First of all, she reminds us that the ahistorical and atemporal confinement in which anthropology (with Mauss and Griaule) first set out to describe African communities as 'outside history' ironically has affected the africanist discipline. In fact, to other scholars, the results and conclusions of this discipline seemed of no relevance for other areas or for the field of humanities or of sociology in general, being that Africa was completely isolated in its particular specificity (Aggarwal, 1999: 24)

As for the processes of subjectivation, Aggarwal lines up with other scholars studying colonial histories, when she underlines the implicit paradox of the colonial project. On the one hand, colonial practices included "forced labor" in the most horrible conditions, high taxes without taking heed of income, and what she calls "abusive impositions" (34) which could be measures such as forced migration, drafting, physical abuse, insults, rape, not to mention both random and systematic verbal abuses and humiliations. As in apparent opposition to these facts, Aggarwal mentions the administration, the sanitarian policies and the colonial school system. To Aggarwal, we are here dealing with an "intrinsic incoherence" of the colonial project which could not but "lead to contradictory behaviors": "It is between the poles of refusal and acknowledgement of



the Other that the colonial library is consolidated”⁸, she concludes.

As argument she adds to this conclusion a reference to Casanove, a medical physician who in 1927 described the “psyche” of “*les Nègres*” as “of a fatalist and statique sort”.⁹ In opposition, she presents a quotation by the colonial officer Faidherbe who belongs to what she calls “more enlightened agents” (*acteurs plus éclairés*) because he, in fact, believed that the colonized in Africa would, at some point be able to rule themselves (Aggarwal, 1999: 35).¹⁰ In Aggarwal’s account, Faidherbe is aligned with other colonial officers such as Lyautey in Morocco and Gallieni in Madagascar, but also with the French anthropologist Georges Hardy who worked with Lyautey on psychological pedagogy in Morocco and Albert Sarraut, French governor-general in Indochine (Vietnam) from 1912-1919 and French Prime Minister in brief unstable governments during the IVth Republic in 1933 and 1936 (*ibid.*).

However, despite this plurality in the colonialist policy and of the processes of subjectivation of the colonized populations, none of the anthropologists or officers doubted the necessity or the legitimacy of the colonial regime. Likewise, they did not – like André Gide or Albert Camus – write tales or articles that would denounce the violence or the institutionalized injustice that structured the relationship between colonizers and colonized. Aggarwal is not blind to this limit to the “recognition of the Other” and, as she presents the colonial officer Robert Delavignette who was very passionate about getting to know African traditional customs, she explains how he, despite this interest in African lives never doubts the “white man’s burden” to civilize less civilized peoples.

“Nomatter how enlightened he was, he would never have thought of considering what ideas the Africans might have about their future. Likewise, he would never have thought of asking for the African peoples’ consent to joining this grand franco-african brotherhood that he wished to create” (Aggarwal, 1999: 41).

When Hampâté Bâ and other colonized individuals decided to make careers in the colonial system because it appeared to be the only way to achieve social improvement, such views were, for a long time, the only

⁸ “c’est entre les pôles du refus et de la reconnaissance de l’Autre que s’édifiera la bibliothèque coloniale” (34)

⁹ Aggarwal refers to Docteur Casanove, “Mémento de psychiatrie coloniale africaine” in *Bulletin des études historiques et scientifiques de l’Afrique occidentale française*, 1927, p.154-155. (Aggarwal 34)

¹⁰ Aggarwal refers to Faidherbe’s *Le Sénégal : La France dans l’Afrique occidentale*, Hachette, 1889, p.158.

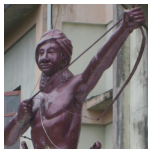
perspectives they would meet from Europeans. One can argue that with the movement *Négritude* and also the cooperation with European Marxists around the formation of labor unions and political parties, other alternatives seemed available. However, for many African intellectuals, educated in the colonial school system and now working within institutions such as IFAN that very much sustained the “enlightened” colonial approach, the discourse of Senghor’s *Négritude* seemed too abstract, and the rejection of colonialism by the Martinican intellectuals Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon altogether too radical. They were speaking from an American perspective and many Africans could not identify with their arguments at first.

This is an observation that Aggarwal makes when studying the accounts of the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, held in 1956 in Paris and the debates following each speaker. Following Césaire’s connection between culture and politics, the Haitian poet, J.S. Alexis, underlines the importance of taking into account the material and sociological differences of Africans living in colonies marked by the economics of the mining industry and those of agricultural economies (Aggarwal 138). Yet, the outcome of the congress is that many authors and artists begin to see culture as a terrain of struggle. If national independence is to be an option, it must have a national culture as part of its platform. If the organizers had wanted only to talk about culture, the contributions of Fanon and Césaire did introduce the awareness of historicity and the scrutiny of racism in the study of colonial cultures (Aggarwal 142).

Hampâté Bâ participated and intervened at the Congress and the insertion of both sociological and political perspectives of power relations cannot have disturbed him much even if he had chosen to convey them in much more subtle ways in his early writings. As Aggarwal concludes, an important outcome of the congress was the fact that African intellectuals were at last subjects of enunciation in the account of what Africa and African diaspora were about.

The first publication by Hampâté Bâ was a collection of oral tales of the Mali empire and written in a way that would fit the colonial regime of thought, yet they would convey their own kind of epistemological resistance. The fact that *L’empire peul du Macina* (1955) was published before the congress suggests that the intersection of culture with sociology and politics was already inherent in his own approach even if he worked about it in different ways than the Caribbean intellectuals.

As an example, he did not refer to the colonial accounts of Peul culture, written by Delafosse amongst others, but founded his account solely on oral accounts



that he collects over a period of several years and on his own collection of Islamic literature, written in Arabic or Peul (Aggarwal 202). In the preface of the work, Hampâté Bâ states that the objective is to reconstitute the way in which “the indigenous narrate their history themselves” (quoted par Aggarwal 202). In this action of collecting narratives about a past empire that is still significant in the social imaginary and relating these narratives with an indigenous tradition of learned training as we hear of it in *L’Amkoullel*, Hampâté Bâ is in fact constructing this cultural platform of self-awareness that the Congress will call for the following year. He is doing it right under the noses of the colonial administration, paid and endorsed by their institutions. Yet, most of his European colleagues stay within the ‘timeless’ framework as we can see by Monod’s preface to *Amkoullel*, a preface that was written in 1991 and still merely places Hampâté Bâ in a timeless rendition of Peul identity without neglecting of course, his qualities as a friend and colleague.

But is my suggestion that this volume constitutes an act of epistemic resistance really correct? In order to answer this question, we must return to what I have earlier described as the dominant terrain for the production of social meaning in Hampâté Bâ’s work, that is, the ability to translate and move between social orders and to analyze the interests and behavior of the people around you. There is nothing in Hampâté Bâ’s texts that suggests that he seems outraged against Europeans and that he feels ‘dominated’, nor does he try to collect a pure and authentic culture, that could be threatened by colonial alienation. Recalling his thoughts in the colonial class, we recall that he finds it absolutely normal that some are inherently superior to others. He is ambitious and he is aristocratic in his views and so, he wishes to acquire as much influence and respect as possible within whatever social order he finds himself.

As such, his epistemic resistance is opposed not only to colonial anthropological accounts that neglect the sociological and political implications of what they describe, it is also opposed to a cult of authenticity that wishes to preserve African cultures by keeping them away from foreign contamination. He is not defending a collective identity as such, but in fact underlining how he has come across many different versions of the Peul history and how he has refuted some with reference to those he believes to be serious traditional narrators and *griots*. His aristocratic attitude collides with democratic republican values. Yet, he is merely taking up the traditional function of the *griot*.

Bringing up the function of the *griot*, it is perhaps relevant to mention the Ivorian author Ahmadou Kourouma. In 1990 he published a remarkable novel, *Monnè, outrages et défis*, on the importance and predicaments of

the importance of the *griot* as historian during the French colonial conquest of Mali. In Kourouma’s understanding, the primary function of the *griot* is to make coherent narratives about the past that make sense to the people of the present in a way that may challenge, but never threaten the king. Because the power center is the king or emperor, the narratives of the *griot* would often focus on his life and political decisions and his narratives would therefore easily appear as hagiographies of the king.

In fact, the father of Hampâté Bâ held such a job and social caste position and as a result, being a *griot* is a destiny that remains an important part of the process of subjectivation that has formed Hampâté Bâ as an author, colonial employee, African intellectual, ethnographer, UNESCO diplomat and what other subject positions he has held.

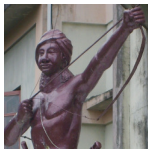
What is strikingly ‘modern’ and emancipating about his approach is exactly this awareness of the social and political function of history. The *griots* and, as a consequence, Hampâté Bâ is not merely a historian, he is also a “historio-graphe”, in the sense that he is constantly aware of and narrating according to the sociological and political use and consequences of his narratives. *Wie es gewesen sei* is not a main issue.¹¹ What matters is to make sense of the past so that the order and prosperity of the present are preserved. When I call this approach ‘modern’ it is not without irony. Because such a qualifier reveals an epistemological bias that considers social and political societies to follow the line of progress that has structured European and Western academics and ontology since religion lost its position as the authoritative representation of truth and social order.¹²

Alternatively, we can merely conclude that he was a better scholar in africanism than those of his European colleagues that kept looking for and thus kept describing an immanent, static and ahistorical indigenous psychological self. He was better because he never neglected to take heed of the individuals that spoke and of the social context with its explicit or implicit power relations that ascribed them to sometimes ambiguous or floating subject positions. Aggarwal makes a similar conclusion and underlines that:

“the critique of Hampâté Bâ does not specifically address the somewhat ambiguous objectives of Western research but is rather revealing the approaches used by africanism, the way it is expanding, without taking sufficiently into account the roles

¹¹ I am of course paraphrasing Leopold von Ranke L. RANKE, *Samtliche Werke* (54 vols.). Leipzig : Duncker und Humblot, 1868-1890, XXXIII, vii.

¹² See also Jean-François Bayart on this matter (*op.cit.*)



played by the African informants in the formation of knowledge about Africa" (219).

My addition to Aggarwal's observation would be that africanism did not take sufficiently into account the roles played by African informants as social subjects, not only in their relation with Europeans but also in their relations and social affiliations with other Africans.

Concluding remarks

At this point, my main assessment has been to demonstrate how the writings of Hampâté Bâ are conveying a complex process of subjectivation that would not be given justice, were we only to analyze it as an opposition between colonizers and colonized, between Europeans and Africans, between dominating authority and dominated subalterns. Furthermore, the work of Aggarwal has facilitated a discussion of how the field of africanism and the diverse positions of African and Caribbean intellectuals in the wake of independence have been part of the context in which Hampâté Bâ grew to finally describe his itinerary in the book *Amkoullel* as well as in its second part *Oui mon commandant* published postmortem in 1994.

I follow Aggarwal in her interpretation of Hampâté Bâ's work as a critique of parts of the africanist methodology that has had a tendency to neglect the subject positions and social negotiations taking place *in medias res* when the ethnographer collects his data and thus affect the narrative that is told as well as the informant.

Yet, I believe that Aggarwal's distinction between "enlightened" colonial agents and those who are not, is unfortunate. This because she never defines what she means by "enlightened" and without questioning the actions of the "enlightened" agents, we would neglect to properly address the *consequences* of the fact that the sanitary policies, the educational programmes and the instauration of administrative apparatus were imposed on the African populations without taking their own desires thus regarding into account.

Imposing good governance based on universal, yet French, values on other cultures is a policy that was inherent in the dynamic of the French revolution, which, as is well known, quickly tipped into revolutionary wars. It has been an explicit part of French expansionism and foreign policy ever since, from Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition in Egypt, the engagement of Napoleon III's engagement in Morocco till Zarkozy's project of a Union of the Mediterranean or his notorious speech in Senegal.

My point here is not based on moral grounds. The works of Balandier as well as of Hampâté Bâ show that

we simply let vital knowledge pass us by, that we enter a heuristic *cul-de-sac*, if we do not take account of the sociological and political *performative* nature of cultural practices as they are available to us through the actions and utterances of other people and ourselves. Studying the consequences of imposing good governance elsewhere, without sharing the authority of enunciation with the targeted populations, without winning the sympathy of the civil society, without understanding the heterogeneity of the processes of subjectivity that structure these societies as well as one's own, is, in fact, a study that would be highly relevant in order to elucidate some of the difficulties of today's geopolitical interventions around the world.

Finally, we should not forget that both Kourouma and Hampâté Bâ are speaking from a privileged position as they have both managed to acquire the necessary skills that permitted them to move between many different social contexts. As in Europe, this astute intellectual awareness of discursive plays is not necessarily a possible means of resistance to everyone. As such, readings and cultural theories that celebrate discursive hybridity as means of resistance may appear involuntarily arrogant because they exclude social groups who conceive the relationship between words and meaning to be direct and transparent. Hampâté Bâ's reading of his own life does not entirely go free of this 'charge'. Nor does my reading of his.

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