

A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar

opens for him the doors of beatitude.³ A thing becomes that which the Word tells it to be. God says: “Be!” and the created being responds: “I am.”

In the first part of this book we reported some of Tierno’s words. It would have been awkward indeed to focus on his life and to try to outline it without citing something of what he said in relation to those events that were milestones in his life. The master’s words are the essential element of his story. How better to elucidate the “message” that he has left us than to allow the one who unfolded it to speak?

We can never say often enough that the essential characteristic of Tierno’s words was that they were spoken in one of the most humble places in the world, the master seated on an infertile soil that was by turns scorched by the sun and eroded by the rain. Tierno usually spoke in Fulfulde (Fulani). Although he was a good Arabist, which permitted him to study texts in depth, he always taught in the local languages. Besides Arabic, he knew four African languages, as well as the traditional knowledge of the main ethnic groups of the savanna.

He had an aversion to those who expressed themselves in anything other than ordinary language. One of the characteristics of “sorcerers”⁴ was to use impenetrable language, and Tierno often used this same appellation to ridicule those who through intellectual snobbery made a show of expressing themselves only in Arabic, even when addressing people who did not know this language, in the belief that they were dazzling them.

His message was meant to be understood. Had the Prophet not said: “Speak to people according to the level of their understanding”?

I personally collected the accounts and reflections that follow from the mouth of Tierno Bokar. I was always close to him from my earliest childhood. I was born, as they say in Africa, “in his hands.” How many times when I was little did he carry me on his back in my parents’ courtyard! And what wonderful stories he told me that I could not yet understand! My mother had often said that as a rather sullen baby, my face only lit up when he came to take me in his arms.

³ An allusion to the spiritual virtue of reciting sacred texts and divine Names.

⁴ Editor’s note: That is, a person who claims or is believed to have magic powers.

His Words

When I was seven years old, I was entirely entrusted to him so that he could take charge of my religious education as well as the formation of my character and my social comportment. I only left him on the day when, like all sons of chiefs, I was “requisitioned” by the authorities to be sent far from Bandiagara to the French school which was then officially known as the “School for Hostages.” But I came back to be near him during my holidays.

This continued until, as a young man, I became a civil servant and was posted to Upper Volta. No longer able to teach me directly, Tierno transmitted to me, by correspondence, answers to questions that I asked him. He dictated his letters to a friend, Mamadou Sissoko, who knew how to write in French.

It was particularly in 1933 that I received his teaching more intensively and in more depth than ever before. Until then he had, in effect, always taken into account my age and my level of comprehension. That year Upper Volta had been eliminated as an administrative territory. Having been put on extended leave awaiting a new assignment, I took advantage of the time to immediately rejoin Tierno and had the good fortune of being able to spend the better part of this providential year of leave with him in Bandiagara.

It was mainly during this stay in 1933 that I made notes of the teachings and of the anecdotes that are to follow. Moreover, Tierno entrusted me with the mission of making known the schematic teaching that he had invented under the name of *Mā 'd-Dīn* and which appears at the end of this book. It goes without saying that I could only present the exoteric, outward aspect of this teaching, only that which could be written down and presented in the form of diagrams. Esoteric knowledge cannot be presented according to a logical plan. In Islam, as in many other religious traditions, esoteric knowledge is taught by word of mouth and is more akin to a lived experience than an intellectual type of teaching.

We are very aware that any attempt at classifying and labeling this message in its entirety can only be incomplete, even artificial, and would have made the master smile. A book cannot reproduce the full force of these words as they were heard in Bandiagara, where they resonated with such life and love. However, it is incumbent upon us, we who have inherited an oral tradition, to try to transmit what we can of it before time and forgetfulness erase it from the memory of men.