

A SPIRIT OF TOLERANCE — WISDOM TALES DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Spirit of Tolerance

The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar

Amadou Hampaté Bâ



"The rainbow owes its beauty to the variety of its shades and colors. In the same way, we consider the voices of various believers that rise up from all parts of the earth as a symphony of praises addressing God."

—Tierno Bokar, a great mystic and spiritual teacher from Africa

Introduction by Louis Brenner

Silver Midwest Book Award for “Culture”

“In Africa, when an old man dies, it’s a library burning.”

—Amadou Hampaté Bâ

“The compelling truth of Bokar’s life as a spiritual leader is this: he refused the temptations of intolerance and rigid doctrine. Religion was a process, he believed. One did not dictate or exclude; one examined and questioned.”

—*The New York Times*

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THIS BOOK’S RELEVANCE TO DIVERSE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

A Spirit of Tolerance has core content that supports objectives in both Language Arts and Social Studies:

- History and sociology of Saharan Africa
- Colonial (French) history of Africa
- A study of a complex African Muslim society of modern times
- Islam as it is really lived, and at times exploited by various interests, in recent times
- In a world where religious faiths are often at odds with each other, this book provides a microcosm of inter-racial, inter-religious, and sectarian tensions in a society
- The story, from cradle to grave, of an inspiring teacher who demonstrated heroism in fostering tolerance and non-violence in the midst of intolerance, violence, and ignorance
- A multi-dimensional biography of a remarkable, but largely unknown, person who suffered terrible persecutions from many quarters for his beliefs
- A sample of elegant and distinctly “African” approach to narrative and history
- Extensive use of allegories, teaching stories, and demonstration of ancient teaching methods
- Many examples of another society’s attitudes toward language and the power of “the word”

ABOUT THE BOOK

Tierno Bokar (1875–1939) was an African mystic and Muslim spiritual teacher. Despite the intense persecution of small-minded zealots, rival clans, and the French colonial authority, Bokar’s personality and simple but profound teachings emerged to live on in this book. Peter Brooks directed the play about Bokar’s life story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Well-known Malian diplomat and author, Amadou Hampaté Bâ was a student of Tierno Bokar. Bâ later became a major voice of African literature. In 1962, he was elected to UNESCO’s executive council, and in 1966 he helped establish a unified system for the transcription of African languages. Bâ devoted his life to recording, collecting, and preserving the wisdom of sub-Saharan Africa: the myths, sayings, anecdotes, and oral teachings of the peoples of the French “Soudan” (present-day Mali, “Upper Volta,” and present-day Burkina Faso).

Wisdom Tales
Stories from Around the World



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1. The author, Amadou Hampaté Bâ, wrote this book to commemorate the life of Tierno Bokar, who had influenced Bâ's own life in many ways. What was unique in the relationship of this student and teacher? Is it still possible, in our lives, to have similar teacher-student relationships?
2. Amadou Hampaté Bâ was clearly very devoted to Tierno Bokar. Explain how Bâ succeeded or failed in making the book objective or unbiased in examining Bokar's life.
3. In the early part of the book, we read a lot about the racial complexity of Tierno Bokar's society. What effect did this have on the events of Tierno Bokar's life, and on Hampaté Bâ's life? What were the other societal factors that complicated the lives of these two people (e.g. French colonial occupation, tribal ties, religious sects, etc.)?
4. What influences in his young life made the biggest impact on Tierno Bokar's development into the person that he became?
5. What aspects of the African society in which Tierno Bokar grew up do you think are the most difficult for Americans to understand?
6. What do you think are the qualities or virtues of Tierno Bokar that would still draw people to him today?
7. In the book, Amadou Hampaté Bâ included a lot of regional history about the part of Africa in which Tierno Bokar lived. He did this, no doubt, in order to help readers understand more about why certain things happened as they did. In what ways is the historical context of a person's life necessary or not necessary in understanding that person fully?
8. The latter part of Tierno Bokar's life, as outlined in the section "The Ordeal," deals with his persecution by various groups. What could he have done differently to avoid this? And should he have done so?
9. The first two paragraphs at the top of page 113 introduce the topic of tolerance in the life and teachings of Tierno Bokar. There are many other parts of the book that deal with tolerance of others. In what ways was Bokar's approach to fostering tolerance effective and in what ways was it not sufficient to enact real change in society?
10. In what ways does Tierno Bokar not fit with your previous understanding of where Muslims live, how they think, what they value, etc.?
11. Tierno Bokar often taught people by telling stories or parables. Think of one of his teaching stories that was particularly useful in getting his point across and explain why setting this in the form of a story was effective.
12. Tierno Bokar had a number of things to say about leaders, their faults, and their strengths. What is the point of the parable "The Throne and the Butcher Boy" on page 153, and in what ways was Tierno Bokar right or wrong about the need and qualifications for good leaders?