

The Ambiguous Path to Sacred Personhood: Revisiting Samba Diallo's Initiatic Journey in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Ambiguous Adventure

MONIKA BRODNICKA

School for International Training, Senegal (monika.brodnicka@sit.edu)

Ambiguous Adventure, one of the most iconic novels in Senegalese history, recounts the plight of a traditional African society in the face of an encroaching western modernity, with its main character, Samba Diallo, as the face of this momentous struggle. The captivating story inspired numerous critiques that address the text from sociological, religious, and philosophical perspectives. Not surprisingly, most of the interpretations are based on the textual connection to Islam, the religion embraced and practiced by the Diallobé community in the novel, and deal with universal topics such as death, identity, colonialism, initiation, tradition, and modernity. Building on the work done before me on Samba's own search for identity within the Muslim context, I look to pre-Islamic Fulani traditions articulated by Amadou Hampaté Bâ, which better illuminate the process of initiation that leads the human being to transform into a self-realized person. I argue, based on this Fulani metaphysical context, that from the very beginning, Samba Diallo's journey is initiatic in itself, in the traditional Fulani conception of the term, one that is connected to the sacred dimension. In this sense, the Fulani indigenous traditions anticipate Samba's journey toward a sacred identity, highlight a clear roadmap to that very process, and, contrary to many critics, lead the initiate to success.

Key words: Fulani spirituality; initiatic journey; African indigenous philosophy; sacred personhood; tradition versus modernity; mystical death as rebirth; decolonial engagement in *Ambiguous Adventure*; African metaphysics

*Ambiguous Adventure*¹ is a timeless novel that has, in many ways, brought Senegal to the forefront of the philosophical debate on the complexity of colonial realities and African responses to European domination before and after independence. As a contemporary of classics such as *Things Fall Apart*,² *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*,³ and *Death and the King's Horseman*,⁴ *Ambiguous Adventure* reaches to the heart of the (post)colonial drama: the ambiguous situation in which communities face an impossible choice. The choice, in this case, centers around the Diallobé identity, which the community is pressured to either preserve or renounce. Preserving this identity would mean losing their fight for survival within the context of modernity. Renouncing it, on the other hand, would mean losing their defining identity within the paradigm of tradition. Paradoxically, either choice threatens the annihilation of the community, be it physically or spiritually, which, in the end, amounts to the same thing—the loss of self. Samba Diallo, the main character in the novel, serves as a conduit through which the slightest possibility of the survival of the community is tested, as he transitions from his traditional and religious education into the throes of the modern world through secular schooling. In the process of this transition, Samba loses his way, and possibly his faith, and is requested to return to his country to find his way back. In the end, the book leaves the story on an ambiguous note. It is implied that Samba is

killed at the hands of the Fool for his supposed refusal to return to his faith. The situation is further complicated by the last chapter, which expresses a multitude of disembodied voices in an ethereal universe where everything is symbiotically coming together into an eternal union.

The plight of the Diallobé people embodied by Samba Diallo's journey in the novel centers around faith, particularly the Diallobé's profound connection to Islam and its Sufi principles. As such, Samba's relation to his religion is one of the most prominent themes of the novel and serves as a critical catalyst for interpretation. We enter the story during Samba's intense experience of reciting prayer under the stern guidance of his Koranic teacher, Thierno, who, through his tutelage, offers the initiate the possibility to access the divine expression of the Word and the World.⁵ We trace Samba's loss of faith through his encounter with the secular nature of western modernity, which is encouraged by his studies of philosophy that push him to question his relation to the mystical dimension. Finally, we witness Samba's untimely death because of his supposed refusal to reintegrate Islam upon his return and through the otherworldly experiences he encounters in the last chapter. It is no surprise, then, that most critics read the novel through the lens of Islam and articulate Diallobé tradition through Islamic faith and its Sufi dimension. I argue, however, that a more holistic reading of the novel is necessary, one that engages Fulani indigenous traditions and the metaphysics that arises from their worldview, which are the cultural basis of the Diallobé community. This line of thought helps to expand the understanding of initiation, particularly its definition of a successful journey, and of death. More importantly, it offers a different paradigm to interpret realities that cannot be sufficiently understood through western discursive knowledge.

Religion, particularly Islam, plays an important role in the fate of the Diallobé community and their main representative, Samba Diallo. More specifically, their fate, as devout Muslims in West Africa struggling with the aftermath of French colonization, is tied to the influence of western modernity in the region. Concepts such as education, identity, and death have a specific meaning in Islam and are challenged by conceptual norms imposed by France. The challenges are informed by the clash of interpretations of those very concepts, which oscillate between sacred (Muslim) and secular (western) readings. Abdul-Rauf Adebisi, for example, focuses on the concept of education and reads *Ambiguous Adventure* as an important lesson on Islamic schooling and the dangers of losing sight of its message. Adebisi claims, "Samba Diallo is a classical case of incomplete metamorphosis, a prisoner and a liability to himself and a danger to his Diallobe society" (Adebisi 1995: 31).⁶ For Adebisi, Samba's story is a cautionary tale about the importance of pursuing Islamic education and the dangers of secular teachings that undermine the very principles of Islam. Similarly, Andrzej Dziedzic discusses the important role of death in the novel based on the Muslim perspective of this concept. He explains, "*The Ambiguous Adventure* is also a novel steeped in Islam; in fact, it is the first Black African novel that happens in the Muslim domain, a domain where death [...] is a present reality with which the human being has to reconcile" (Dziedzic 1998: 130).⁷ Death, in Dziedzic's valuation, is an ever-present aspect of life, which, in general, has an important religious connotation in alignment with Islamic principles.

In addition to an established interpretation of the novel through a Muslim lens, authors such as Rebecca Masterson, Kenneth Harrow, and Souleymane Bachir Diagne interpret Samba's journey through its mystical aspect, Sufism. Masterson, for example, argues that Samba's true goal of initiation and its ultimate collapse in the story is only revealed through the mystical perspective. She states that the novel, along with its external narrative, "is about the internal journey of a soul whose attachment to the immaterial reality from which it has emerged, is slowly and subtly eroded by means of logical argument, leaving it stranded on the surface of material reality, trapped in a statically objective frame of mind, unable to reconnect with what lies beyond" (Masterson 2009: 22).⁸ In this sense, Samba Diallo

failed his initiation because he lost sight of the real, esoteric aspect of existence. Similarly moving towards mystical interpretation, Kenneth Harrow points out the complementary character of the exoteric and esoteric practice of Islam in the novel. He particularly discusses how the experience of *fana*, a Sufi concept of losing oneself in the greater reality, reveals itself through prayer, the recitation of the Koran, and even death in the novel. Speaking about Kane's last chapter, Harrow notes, "the Sufi author concludes on the same note, with an image of *fana* as the limit of the word and its power of expression" (Harrow 1987: 76).⁹ For Harrow, the mysterious voices exchanging in the last chapter are akin to the experience of Sufi annihilation connected to *fana*. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, on the other hand, discusses the importance of Samba's search for sacred identity. While this search is initiated through Samba's experience of secular writing introduced to him in the French schools, this exoteric, material realm guides the main character to an esoteric, poetic union with God (Diagne 2011: 20-1).¹⁰

In a direct complementarity to the role of Islam and its Sufi dimension in the story, Samba Diallo's death at the end of the novel garners much attention from critics. Samba's death carries much ambiguity, particularly through the last chapter full of abstract images, metaphors, and ideas. Many critics interpret the ending, particularly Samba's death, as literal, as well as an example of his failed journey, the last chapter often being read as Samba's afterlife. In the spirit of a failed journey, Adebisi considers Samba's death a moral consequence of abandoning one's Islamic education. He claims, "Samba Diallo's absurd end is a warning to Muslim parents who see Islam and Islamic education as impertinent to contemporary reality" (Adebisi 1995: 31-2). As such, Samba's death is the ultimate sign of a failure, both of the initiate and his community, in preparing him for the modern world through Islamic principles. Dziedzic, on the other hand, sees Samba's death simultaneously as a political failure and a spiritual victory. He states, "At the political level, [his death] is a defeat. Samba is a political martyr of assimilation who failed in his effort of acculturation. At the spiritual level, on the other hand, death denotes victory, renaissance, reconciliation" (Dziedzic 1998: 38). He explores the meaning of death from an intrinsically Islamic perspective, recognizing its prominent role and dominion in the lives of believers, in which Samba's death is a sign of access to the spiritual dimension. Yet, at the same time, Dziedzic reads Samba's fate as an incomplete metamorphosis serving as a warning to African youth who entertain the idea of indulging in modernity. In the end, Samba's transcendence and reconciliation is relegated to what happens to him after his death, therefore only attaining posthumous success. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, the book's author, similarly reads Samba's journey as a failure during his lifetime, but his death is seen as an escape from the materialistic culture and a triumph of faith (Kane 2011: 31).¹¹ While *Ambiguous Adventure* does not offer a satisfactory resolution to the conflict between the sacred and the secular for the author, Kane argues that his second book, *Les gardiens du temple*, serves as closure to the first novel. In the second novel, Salif Ba, who embodies the ambitions of Samba Diallo, is able to find the right compromise between the spiritual and material worlds during his lifetime. In this sense, the contemporary Diallobé are able to embrace modernity without losing their traditions (Kane 2011: 35-6).¹²

For those authors who are more inclined to read Samba Diallo's plight through Sufism, the main character's death takes on a deeper dimension. Masterson, for example, argues that it is through this mystical perspective that one can understand Samba's true goal and its loss in the story. For Masterson, Samba Diallo's death symbolizes his rebirth, a reconciliation with his spiritual essence that he has lost along the way. She still sees the ending as a death, but a death that mends Samba's break with the spiritual and leads him back to finding meaning. She states, "If the only option given to Samba Diallo is to live in a realm devoid of meaning, then perhaps it is better to find meaning in

death” (Masterson 2009: 45). Despite this reconciliation, however, Masterson considers Samba’s experience during his life a failed initiatic journey, which leads him to forget his spiritual path and separates him from the immaterial reality, “a tragic inversion of the classical model featured in tales of initiation” (Masterson 2009: 22). While Harrow shares Masterson’s emphasis on reading the story through mysticism, he alludes to a different interpretation of the ending, which does not represent a failed journey or even the death of the main character. Harrow states, “[Samba Diallo’s] death does not conclude the novel—its appearance is belied by the stichomythia of disembodied voices, once again ecstatic, extinguished by the expansion of human time into the infinite” (Harrow 1987: 76). Using Sufi concepts such as *fana*, Harrow alludes to the Sufi idea of extinction or dying before you die. This implies that rather than Samba Diallo himself, it is the ego that disappears in the end, hinting at the idea that Samba’s death was more metaphorical than physical.

Keeping the discussions above in mind, most interpretations of Samba’s journey as well as of his death express a sense of failure or loss on the part of the main character. There is an underlying assumption that the journey is cut short by Samba’s departure from his Islamic schooling and his move to France. Samba’s loss of faith and the battle with his demons are considered his downfall. Further, his untimely death at the hands of the Fool is often seen as irrevocable and unequivocal. While some of the Sufi interpretations lean toward a more nuanced reading of Samba’s journey and his death, there is no comprehensive discussion of the journey itself as an initiation and what this implies regarding Samba’s death. This approach is reinforced by the book’s author, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, who similarly holds the belief that Samba’s journey is compromised by his loss of faith and his death. In the spirit of masterpieces having a life beyond their author, however, it is important to consider the possibility that Samba’s journey was intentional and complete and that his death was merely symbolic for a transformation beyond Samba’s current circumstances. I argue that with the support of Fulani metaphysics, a worldview stemming from the culture of the Diallobé people, one can confidently make such a bold assertion.

1 The Metaphysics of the Living Tradition

To dive into an understanding of Samba’s journey as a successful initiation, it is important to reach back to the Fulani culture inherited by the author and embodied by the novel’s characters. Amadou Hampaté Bâ, an initiated Fulani and a renowned traditionalist, presents in his research some of the fundamental characteristics of the Fulani metaphysics, which he calls the living tradition.¹³ This worldview is founded on the interrelation of three main archetypes—the Person, the World, and the Word—that highlight the interrelation of the material, exoteric world and its spiritual, esoteric dimension.¹⁴ The Person represents a medium permeated by active material and spiritual forces, the World embodies the manifestations of the spiritual dimension, and the Word expresses the mystical communication transmitted through the manifest world. In this sense, different physical expressions of personhood, of embodiment, and of communication are always already informed by their underlying spiritual reality. Equally, the three archetypes and their manifestations are constantly interchanging with each other, porously engaging in each other’s expression. Fulani initiation serves as a conduit to fully access this metaphysics, not through understanding but by the person’s full engagement in the process that Bâ calls presence in the world.

For Bâ and his understanding of Fulani metaphysics, the very purpose of the human being is to reach a state of perfection, which can only be accessed through initiation. This perfection, however,

is one that requires a balance between the contradictory forces existing within as well as a conscious participation in the Word and the World. If, as explained in the Fulani tradition, the human being is a confluence of all forces (material and spiritual) existing in the universe, a receptacle that is open and permeable containing interior multiplicity that is multidimensional and dynamic, one is always already interdependent and connected to the human community, the natural world, as well as the spiritual universe (Bâ 1972: 14-17). As one can imagine, however, this multiplicity is very chaotic. To reach balance between these interior contradictory forces, the person needs to undergo initiation, which helps to bring this chaotic multiplicity into harmony. This harmony allows the human being to communicate with the Supreme Being and to maintain the equilibrium of one's environment through the achievement of archetypical Personhood. The initiation that leads to the state of harmony requires a separation from one's environment/community, a period of transition that involves being pushed to the brink of one's existence, and finally transformation that helps one become reintegrated back to one's environment as a changed being, aligned with the archetype of the Person.¹⁵

Looking at Samba Diallo's story from the perspective of the living tradition transforms the way his journey, his relation to his community, and his death can be interpreted. Based on the traditional Fulani paradigm, I argue that Samba's journey does not fail, but rather comes full circle. The initiation of the young Diallobé is neither interrupted after leaving the Koranic school nor does Samba even necessarily die. Through the Fulani paradigm, Samba's story is a story of a successful initiate, who experienced a separation, a transition, and a transformation that prepared him for a balanced reintegration into his society. In the spirit of an initiatic journey, Samba was separated from his Koranic education and Fulani culture when his community, led by The Most Royal Lady, decided to send him to the French school. He experienced a transitional phase when he engaged in studies of philosophy in France, which in turn, led him to question his own identity and belief system. Finally, he experienced a transformation when, at the hands of the Fool, he moved from a purely material existence to an engagement with the spiritual dimension of the universe. As such, the Fool's act at the end brings Samba into a new life by connecting with archetypical Personhood. His metaphorical death serves as a spiritual awakening, where for the first time, he autonomously embraces his faith and recognizes illusory contradictions of his (post)colonial existence.

2 The Passage Toward Self-Realization

Samba Diallo's plight in the novel manifests many of the characteristics discussed by Bâ regarding Fulani initiation. For the majority of the story, Samba is faced by a chaotic bombardment of contradictions between the Diallobé way of life and the French. As the discussion between Samba's father, the Knight, and Paul de la Croix reveals, their respective worlds deal with completely different realities. Paul's world reveres life, light, the material, reason, and science. The Knight's world, on the other hand, venerates death, darkness, the spiritual, intuition, and religion (Kane 1971: 68-78). In essence, it is the difference between the spiritual and material dimensions. Samba's entire journey embodies these contradictions while mirroring the stages of an initiation. From the disciplinary hands of his master in the Koranic school, through the pulpits of a typically western education, and to his return home, Samba's journey leads to a painful, yet vital separation, transition, and transformation onset by the stark differences that he encounters. The metaphor of rebirth of the initiate into the esoteric universe at the end of the novel helps to break the surface of the external world and to reposition the person as an infinite being expressed by the instant of finite life. It is a time when the

seeming oppositions dissipate and become complementarities, when the material and the spiritual show themselves to be two faces of the same coin. Samba Diallo's desire to break from the exoteric world in order to participate in the profound interrelations of the universe helps to realize the final stage of the initiation.

The initiate's journey toward self-accomplishment is sketched by three stages in his life that push him to replicate, question, and, finally, assert his identity in relation to the universe. In the spirit of initiation, the stages are characterized by Samba's separation from his unconscious presence in the universe during his studies in the Koranic school, by his critical transition period through western education, especially his studies in France, and by his reunion with the sacred world, once he returns to his homeland and his roots. Samba's progression from one stage to another shows his maturing relation to the world presented by his surroundings. His experience shows that in order to reach the full accomplishment of himself, he needs to reject a blind presence within the universe and participate in the universe consciously. Like childbirth, with each new stage, the initiate is pushed through the birth canal, and finally detaches himself from the umbilical cord of the womb to learn to breathe on his own.

Samba Diallo's tenure at the *foyer ardent*, or the glowing hearth, helps to define the initiate's first experience with the universe and announces his future role in the relation. The *talibé's* Islamic education equally introduces him to the power of the divine Word and the mystery of its World.¹⁶ Without knowing the meaning of his declamations, the initiate passionately expresses the Word of God with his entire being: "The Word of God flowed pure and limpid from his fervent lips. There was a murmur in his aching head. He contained within himself the totality of the world, the visible and the invisible, its past and its future. This word which he was bringing forth in pain was the architecture of the world—it was the world itself" (Kane 1971: 5). His intense expression of the divine Word, through the memorization of Koranic verses, provides the novice with great internal fulfillment and brings about his intimate connection with the unknown dimensions of the divine World. Although Samba does not actively participate in the Word or the World, because he does not yet live the meaning of his declamations, their intense presence surrounds him. Samba's rigor and passion for the Word of God and intimate relation to the World merits the young boy the favor of the master, as well as the jealousy of his peers, and predicts the accomplishment of Samba's Person. The initiate's unconscious yet enthusiastic presence in the universe gives the young man the first push toward a conscious participation in the sacred World through his unwavering faith.

Once Samba is sent to *l'école étrangère*, or the foreign school, both at home and abroad in Paris, his relation to the Word and the World transforms from presence within the profound universe to existence in an environment and a language of irresolvable contradictions and alienation. During the student's western education, the intricate relation between the Word and the World that Samba Diallo discovered in the glowing hearth is substituted by a complete disassociation between the two elements and between their material and spiritual dimensions. Instead of being in the midst of the interaction between the Word and the World in their material and spiritual expressions, Samba Diallo finds himself outside of their newly individualized domains. Samba speaks of this alienation to an African acquaintance in France: "Here, now, the world is silent, and there is no longer any resonance from myself. I am like a broken balafon, like a musical instrument that has gone dead. I have the impression that nothing touches me any more" (Kane 1971: 139). The French schools teach the new student to objectify the Word and the World, and, as a consequence, to objectify his own person. With the same passion used to pronounce Koranic verses, Samba begins to use reason to distinguish the opposing realities of the two cultures, the Diallobé and the French, that influence his life, separating the material

from the spiritual, religion from science, modernity from tradition. The initiate's procession from the womb toward the outside disrupts the harmony of his fetal life, placing him in a state of aporetic distress.

Samba Diallo's separation from the universe and the resulting crisis at the onset of his French education at home, which follows him to his studies in France, give the student a certain awareness of his surrounding reality. This is the period of transition. Unlike his previous unconscious bliss, the student's new state of alienation awakens him to his loss of the intimate connection with the universe. Awareness of his existential angst sharpens Samba's reasoning skills, helps him understand the sources of his grief, and gives him the base from which he could search for healing. Samba explains to his friend Lucienne: "On this day I should like to plunge, plunge into myself, to the farthest depths of myself, shamelessly [...] the scene is the same. It has to do with the same house, hemmed in by a sky more or less blue, a countryside more or less animated [...] that scene, it is a sham! Behind it, there is something a thousand times more beautiful, a thousand times more true! But I can no longer find that world's pathway" (Kane 1971: 134). At the apex of Samba's crisis, his father requests for his immediate return home. The initiate's return to his origins helps to give Samba the last push that could help him cross the barrier between the external and the internal worlds. At a crossroads of his inner debate about faith at the grave of his Koranic master, Samba is provoked to confirm his faith. At the point of Samba's internal conversation with God, in which the initiate refuses to be abandoned by the Supreme Being, he is allegedly killed by a disturbed disciple of his former master. Rather than marking the end of the story, the point of Samba's death marks the initiate's transformation or rebirth from a struggling human being to an accomplished Person, fully integrated into the Word and the World.

Samba Diallo's experience of integration in the Word and the World, which marks his success in the initiation, brings forward a clear description of participation in the esoteric world. The desire to overcome the superficial understanding of himself within the universe pushes the initiate to the point of transformation. Samba's "death" delivers him to a new dimension of the world and invites him to a dialogue with the shadow that represents the profound, esoteric dimension: "you know that I am the darkness.' — 'I have chosen. I have chosen you, my brother of darkness and of peace. I was waiting for you.' — 'The darkness is profound, but it is peace.' — 'I wish for it.' — 'Appearance and its reflections sparkle and crackle. Shall you not regret appearance and its reflections?' — 'I wish for you'" (Kane 1971: 163). As the conversation progresses, Samba gradually dissolves the contradictions within him that have impeded his comprehension of reality. The shadow helps the initiate to move beyond the circular reproduction of appearance, where the supposed oppositions of darkness and light, of love and hate permeate each other thoroughly. In a world where light comes from profound darkness, Samba's voice and identity blur with the shadow that encourages the experience of his eternity. At once full person and full universe, Samba Diallo sheds the last bits of his ambiguous situation and consciously invites the passage of all the world's forces through him, while skillfully maneuvering the forces toward harmony through the word. The voice speaks: "Be attentive. See what brings about the great reconciliation. The light stirs the darkness, love dissolves hate [...] Be attentive—for, see, you are reborn to being. There is no more light, there is no more weight, the darkness is no more. Feel how antagonisms do not exist [...] Feel how thought [...] is unfurled infinitely [...] you are not that nothing which is confined by your senses. You are the infinite which scarcely holds back what your senses confine [...]" (Kane 1971: 164). The voice that guides the newly born initiate becomes Samba's own voice, which continues to assimilate him to existence in the mystical dimension.

The experience of integration into the universe enacted by Samba brings the initiate to another level of existence. In sharp distinction from Samba's unconscious presence in the Word and World at

the glowing hearth, Samba's conscious participation in the esoteric dimension at the end of the story gives him control of his surroundings. The trajectory that leads Samba to this ultimate point, however, requires the initiate to separate himself from the World in order to return to it with more agency. The initiate's new state, in turn, unravels all of the previous oppositions, needed to progress to a new stage at the time, and integrates him completely into the infinite moment: "Hail to you, rediscovered wisdom, my victory! The limpidness of your wave is awaiting my gaze. I fix my eyes upon you, and you harden into Being. 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" (Kane 1971: 165-66). Like a newborn child, Samba needs to adjust, at first, to the new World, before being able to integrate completely. His integration is a reflection of the undoing of the paradox faced by the Diallobé people.

3 Reflections of Samba's Personhood through the Diallobé Community

Samba Diallo's successful initiation into the conscious presence in the Word and World is a direct reflection of his community's pursuit of social harmony. The student's struggle to understand his role within the world reverberates in the dire situation of the Diallobé, who are faced with an impossible decision that threatens their very existence. The community's two options—to choose western modernity at the risk of effacing their traditions or to choose their traditions at the risk of falling behind in the race for survival created by modernity—have equally negative consequences. Samba's gradual transformation that starts with his unconscious yet blissful presence in the Word and World, that leads him to question his own role in the universe, and that brings about his conscious comprehension of and participation in the mystical dimension offers the Diallobé a possible resolution to their paradox. In turn, the Diallobé help to contextualize Samba's initiation.

The struggles of the Diallobé people mirror the changes of the young initiate in many ways and make his journey richer within the community's context. Like Samba's aporetic situation, the Diallobé face a crisis that is impossible to resolve based on the means offered by tradition or by the ends gained by western modernity. While the Diallobé identity, permeated to the core by religion, cannot adopt the atheistic principles of western science without its own annihilation, it cannot refuse to adopt this modernity which already created a need only to be filled by western science. Despite the apparent contradictions, the Diallobé's decision to send their children to the foreign school can be seen as a final attempt to survive. The Most Royal Lady argues: "The school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care. Perhaps the very memory of us will die in them" (Kane 1971: 42). She uses the metaphor of planting to show that this death is necessary for a rebirth: "What do we do with our reserves of seed when the rain has fallen? We would like to eat them, but we bury them in the earth [...] our best seeds and our dearest fields—those are our children" (Kane 1971: 42-3). By understanding the ideology of western modernity, the Diallobé hope to adjust their ways of living, not by annihilating their traditions, but by adapting their conditions to modern circumstances. In the spirit of resurrection, the Diallobé prepare for their death in order to be reborn as a new community capable of integrating modernity, without losing their traditional science. The struggle of the Diallobé people encompasses the struggles of the solitary student in a productive, communal environment. Samba's difficulties in establishing his own identity are an outgrowth of the society's fight to survive in a world that imposes destruction of the Diallobé's most self-identifying values.

The aporetic situation faced by the Diallobé people is most vividly represented in *Ambiguous Adventure* by the opposition of tradition and modernity. In the novel, the struggle of the Diallobé is symbolized by the spreading light of the west, which represents the invasive quality of modernity, against the retracting shadow of the Diallobé, which stands for the evasive comfort of tradition. While the light champions the visible world and everything that exists within it, the shadow, which strives to preserve the intimate values of the Diallobé world, slowly disappears. The light is personified more specifically by western science that searches the material world for the answers to humanity's problems. The Knight's vision further illuminates the invasiveness of the light and the loss of identity connected to its domain:

A spot on our globe was burning with a blinding brilliance as if a fire had been lighted on an immense hearth. At the heart of this fierce light and heat a swarm of human beings seemed to be giving themselves over to an incomprehensible and fantastic mimicry of worship. Emerging from all sides from deep valleys of shadow, floods of human creatures of all colors were pouring in; and in the measure of their approach to the hearth, these beings took up, insensible, the rhythm which encompassed them, while under the effect of the light they lost their original colors, which gave way to the wan tint that filled the air roundabout. (Kane 1971: 64)

Samba Diallo's father reflects on how the human being is "born to a forest of questions," and how civilization attempts to create an "architecture of responses" that provide comfort and freedom (Kane 1971: 63). However, if the Diallobé are not free then he asks, "slavery amid a forest of solutions—is that worth anything more?" (Kane 1971: 64). For example, as it successfully finds a multitude of solutions, western science objectifies the matter that it studies, and therefore loses the subject or the human it was trying to help. On the contrary, the comforting darkness of the shadow is developed as a profound relation of the Diallobé to religion that attempts to bring the subject into a rapport with the divine. Although religion does not offer concrete solutions to humanity's most dire problems, it salvages the humanity of the subject. The Diallobé's decision, through the directives of the Most Royal Lady, to send Samba Diallo to help settle the fight offers the initiate a chance to embody the community's salvation, one that does not objectify the human or render her or him powerless in front of the invading light.

Samba Diallo's role in the salvation of his community, as well as humanity in general, places his pursuit to become a self-realized Person on a level beyond his individual initiation. On this level, Samba becomes the sacrifice offered, the seed to be buried by his community to appease the painfully corrosive situation of the Diallobé people. At the same time, the young initiate becomes the general conductor that offers salvation from the objectification of humanity, enacted by western science. While searching for the path toward conscious participation in the universe, Samba simultaneously answers his mission to save the Diallobé people from destruction and to protect humanity from extinction. The initiate's subtle transformation, from an unconscious member of his society, to a lucid interpreter of the strengths and weaknesses of both the Diallobé and French cultures, and finally to a conscious participant of the universe, inundates Samba's environment in the same mysterious change. Samba Diallo's transformation frees his society, as well as humanity, from the struggle between two impossibilities: surviving as an object or dying as a subject in a superficial world that only offers solutions for those who lose their humanity. Through his successful initiation, Samba Diallo overcomes this paradox by opening the vaults of the esoteric universe that gives back to the person

the conscious control over their destiny. The eternity of the profound universe, engaged through the initiate, reasserts its position as the infinite source of the temporal world.

Samba Diallo's success as a medium through which the Diallobé people and humanity can reach equilibrium in the exoteric world is also the source of the initiate's development that leads him to a conscious participation in the universe. The last phase of Samba's initiation, in which the shadow communicates the secrets of the infinite world, prepares the initiate for a new relation with his external surroundings. The voice of the shadow encourages Samba to let go of the illusory contradictions offered by the superficial world and to participate in the new depths of their symbiotic relationship. The conversation between two voices relates: "Light and sound, form and light, all that is opposed and aggressive, blinding suns of exile, you are all forgotten dreams. —Where are you? I no longer see you. There is only that turgescence which rises up in me, as the new water does in the river in flood" (Kane 1971: 164). In Samba's move beyond external senses, the initiate becomes the voice of the shadow that participates in the moment of eternity. The ambiguity of the adventure ends at this moment, but its esoteric participation in Samba's existence promises to bring resolution to the Diallobé people as well as to humanity in general. The temporal oppositions that create an imbalance for the Diallobé community and for humanity, such as light and shadow, science and religion, or modernity and tradition, dissolve into one another through a brush with infinity. The possibility of resolving the Diallobé's conflict thus cannot come from the superficial world, but from the depths of its esoteric dimension. To bring balance to the Diallobé community or to humanity, the ones concerned have to reach the profound levels of existence. The only way to reach the levels, however, is through death and rebirth into the eternity of the esoteric world.

4 Samba's Intimate Relation with Life and Death

The success of Samba Diallo's initiation, as well as the vicarious survival of the Diallobé community, are paradoxically dependent on death rather than life, contrary to some of the interpretations discussed above. Rather than equal partners in the dance of existence, true life, through Samba Diallo's rebirth, can only take place at his death. Read as metaphors for the material and spiritual aspects of existence, life and death present themselves with different intensities at various points in Samba Diallo's initiation. At the glowing hearth, for example, death takes precedence over life in order to stress the necessity of one's complete investment in death before being able to fully participate in life. Thierno, the master, explains to the Most Royal Lady when she asks him to lighten the talk on death and his harsh discipline: "I beg you not to tempt me, and to leave its firmness to my hand. After this deep wounding, from a hand that is fatherly, I promise you that this child will never wound himself. You will see from what stature he too will dominate life, and death" (Kane 1971: 25). Contrarily, during Samba's western education, life overshadows death and relegates it to the end of life, rather than acknowledging its presence throughout one's entire existence. This particular relation presents the dangers of losing sight of death in the material throes of life, which forces one to lose sight of life's essence—the underlying spiritual reality. In the end, death saves Samba Diallo from this superficial existence by giving him a new, more profound life, encouraging him to "forget the reflection. Expand [...] See how the appearance cracks and yields" (Kane 1971: 164). This more profound experience pursues constant interconnection between death and life, where death or darkness is always considered the source from which springs all existence.

Samba's intense relationship with death starts from his early days of religious fervor at the glowing hearth. The young *talibé's* Koranic education is reinforced by his master's intense physical punishment and the strict practice of poverty. Through these physical hardships, Samba is taught to live intimately with death, supported by the Word of God and the World that it inspires. The young initiate welcomes this education with patience and passion, without yet being conscious of the message of the Word or the function of its World. As discussed, this message can only be realized at the point of the initiate's transformation, which involves death and rebirth. For the master, it is crucial to injure or nearly kill the life in young Samba so that he will be able to dominate both life and death in the future. In other words, it is from the foundation of death, or the spiritual dimension, that Samba can truly live. However, the intensity of Samba's participation in death through his Islamic training is not yet sufficient to reach a level that would help him dominate life. The initiate does not fully die yet. An inkling of superficial life, in all of its vibrancy and passion, is still present in the *talibé*. Thierno reflects on Samba's demeanor: "The old man's piercing scrutiny had disclosed in this youth what seemed to him—unless combatted early—the misfortune of the Diallobe nobility, and through them the Diallobé country as a whole" (Kane 1971: 21). This quality of nobility, according to Thierno, impedes Samba from experiencing a more profound participation in life through death.

Samba Diallo's initiation into the depths of death that has the potential of mastering life is cut short by his family's decision to send him to the foreign school, at first in another city and later in France. To a certain extent, as Masterson and others argue, French education undoes the master's tireless teaching and discipline. Western education teaches Samba to forget death and to celebrate the superficial aspect of life, presented in the novel as the object or the physical, superficial dimension. Samba's experience on the Boulevard Saint-Michel in Paris is expressed in this way: "These streets are bare,' he was noticing. 'No, they are not empty. One meets objects of flesh in them, as well as objects of metal. Apart from that, they are empty'" (Kane 1971: 119). When Samba Diallo enters the foreign school, he learns how to value life above everything and how to push death to the end of life instead of acknowledging its presence at every moment. Samba Diallo discusses this sentiment with his African friends in France, "Death has become a stranger to me. Everything combats it, drives it back from men's bodies and minds. I forget about it. When I search for it in my thought, I see only a dried-up sentiment, an abstract eventuality, scarcely more disagreeable for me than for my insurance company" (Kane, 1971: 139). The ideals of western education concentrate on the visible world of science, which represents life, and relegate religion that ordains death to the margins of science. This type of education obliterates the necessary experience of death and the resulting relation to the universe familiar to the young man at the glowing hearth. The life acquired through French schooling separates the initiate from his intimate presence with the Word and the World and alienates him from his own identity, as well as from his community.

The initiate's struggles with his new life abroad finally lead him to return to his homeland in hopes of rekindling his presence in the universe, which was marked by a profound partnership with death. Samba's return prompts a new contact with death, incited this time by his former master's unstable disciple, popularly known as the Fool. The incident is provoked by Samba's conscious refusal to let God, and thus the profound, spiritual universe, abandon him, which prepares Samba for the next step in the initiation. It is precisely this refusal that leads to Samba's death, as the Fool, convinced that his new master will always refuse to pray, decides to end Samba's life, although the actual "murder" is insinuated rather than clear. Samba's discussion with the Fool is accompanied with Samba's internal dialogue with God, "'Thou wouldst not know how to forget me like that. I will not agree, alone for us two, to suffer from Thy withdrawal. I will not agree. No [...] — The fool was in

front of him. — ‘Promise me that you will pray tomorrow.’ — ‘No—I do not agree [...]’ — Without noticing, [Samba] had spoken these words aloud. It was then that the fool drew his weapon, and suddenly everything went black around Samba Diallo” (Kane 1971: 162).

The intimate relationship between life and death that arises after Samba’s “death” reconfigures the initiate’s past relationship with the inseparable couple. In this new realm, life springs from death and, together, they transform the whole universe into a partnership where everything is interrelated to everything else, where life is death and death is life. In this sense, the young man’s death moves beyond the experience initiated by the glowing hearth during his studies as a *talibé*, but rather awakens him to a fuller presence of life. The voice in the last chapter states, “Life of the moment, life without age of the moment which reigns, in the luminous arena of your duration man unfurls himself to infinity” (Kane 1971: 165). Samba reaches the state of a full person.

The understanding of death as a necessary and foundational partner to life that engages every moment of existence is crucial to resolve the paradox faced by Samba Diallo and his community. Samba’s completion of his initiation through his symbolic death, for example, makes his community’s rebirth possible, once it is realized that the death of their traditions is necessary in order to give life to other traditions. Yet these new traditions need to still be founded on the spiritual dimension, based on the important role of the shadow, of death. The Most Royal Lady best describes this phenomenon when she tries to convince the Diallobé to send their children to the foreign schools. While asking her people to die in their children’s hearts by allowing the foreigners to fill their children completely, she hopes that the traditional spirit will sprout in different ways. The death of the seed, which is buried in the soil, will generate the birth of a plant (Kane 1971: 57-8). This plant is always connected to the buried seed, just like the Diallobé children will always be connected to their buried traditions, which exemplify the deeper, spiritual knowledge of the Diallobé. Therefore, tradition does not die in the sense of erasure, but rather it develops, evolves, or grows differently, but always from the place of death, the place of the deep, spiritual dimension. In this sense, Samba Diallo dies only to be reborn as a new person, conscious of his responsibility to make life happen through his death.

5 Conclusion

The *Ambiguous Adventure* is a multilayered story about the aftermath of French colonization in West Africa. As a cautionary tale for youth who immerse themselves too much in the western culture, as a portrait of the complex struggle for survival of a traditional community in the face of modernization, or as a warning to Muslims who risk losing their faith when choosing secular education, these layers attest to the dangers of losing one’s core identity and life’s purpose. In many ways, Samba Diallo’s journey serves as a catalyst for all of these issues. It is through Samba, in fact, that the community hopes to answer an impossible riddle of “how one can conquer without being in the right” (Kane 1971: 142). Samba is expected to resolve the ensuing choice faced by the Diallobé: to keep their traditional identity at the risk of losing the fight for survival in an increasingly modern world or to embrace modernity at the risk of losing their traditional identity that is the core of their being. Throughout the novel, Samba embodies this impossibility through his journey. He experiences the aporia firsthand through his painful dissociation as an immigrant-student in France and as a returning expat back home. Therefore, the big question that the novel is trying to answer is whether Samba resolves the paradox, or whether he crumbles under its overbearing weight.

While the answer to the question of whether Samba resolves the paradox or not may seem obvious—after all, he breaks his connection to the divine Word and World, loses his faith during his studies in France, and dies at the hands of the Fool upon his return—the response requires deeper reflection. Already, the ambiguity of Samba’s journey is reflected in many of the book’s critics. For many authors, Samba Diallo has failed to live up to the hopes of his community, to be the savior against the onslaught of western modernity, and to find the right answer to the impossible choice that the community is forced to make. The major signs of this failure were his loss of faith and his untimely death. Other critics, however, take a more nuanced view of the journey. To some, the journey was only a partial failure: a political failure but not a spiritual one (Dziedzic), a spiritual success and a political success in the distant future (Kane), a death but one that brings the hero back to his essence (Masterson). To others, it was more success than failure, where Samba gained access to the sacred through the secular (Diagne), or where the journey brought Samba to mystical experience rather than death (Harrow). I argue, however, that while Samba does not resolve the paradox, which is unresolvable by its very nature as a paradox, he certainly speaks to it through his experiential journey. The crucial aspect, similarly to Chantal Thompson’s reading, is to embrace the instant rather than either of the choices (Thompson 2000: 92).¹⁷

While not all critics pursue the idea of failure in the same way, most of their analysis still originates from the same paradigm, a western metaphysics. This metaphysics searches for the essential nature of reality through rational means, bases this nature largely within the confines of physical existence and/or solipsistic experience, and searches for logical solutions based on the principles of non-contradiction. When read through Fulani metaphysics interpreted by Amadou Hampaté Bâ’s living tradition, Samba’s journey reflects a different paradigm. This paradigm is based on the awareness of the simultaneous and inter-relational existence of material (exoteric) and spiritual (esoteric) dimensions. In this sense, reality is based on the exoteric manifestations of the esoteric dimension, a dimension which is accessible to human beings through initiation. Within this construct, reality cannot be accessed by rational means but rather through a higher level of knowledge that Leopold Sedar Senghor calls intuitive knowledge (Senghor 1962: 8)¹⁸ and that Bâ describes as presence in the world (Bâ 1980: 168). Finally, the logic based on this knowledge is more holistic, subscribing to a both/and mystical philosophy rather than the either/or principles of non-contradiction arising from western, discursive knowledge.

Based on the paradigm supported by Amadou Hampaté Bâ’s living tradition, the interpretation of Samba Diallo’s journey and of his death takes a different turn. Through this reading, Samba’s initiation is a success. The young man successfully passes through the different stages of initiation—separation, transition, and transformation—and reaches enlightenment. Rather than a failure because of the rupture with his Islamic education, Samba’s initiation can only make sense if he leaves the glowing hearth, challenges his identity in the face of western objectification, and transforms into a full, self-realized person in the end. Through his mystical engagement with death, not only does Samba reach the real, esoteric dimension that aligns with the archetypes of Person, World, and Word, but he also vicariously speaks to the paradox faced by his community. During his experience of enlightenment, Samba recognizes that death is not the physical annihilation of the human being. Rather, as a metaphor for the spiritual world, death is the source from which all life springs, the spiritual foundation of all material existence. The human being can’t survive without the spiritual foundation provided by death.

Based on the paradigm inspired by the living tradition, the paradox that burdens the Diallobé community may not be a paradox at all. For Fulani metaphysics, the choice the community has to

make between modernity and tradition or between life and death (where both choices lead to annihilation) is a false choice. One cannot choose between life and death. These two realities are intricately connected to one another, as two sides of the same coin. However, although there is no choice between one or the other, there is clearly an order of importance between the two. According to Samba's master, death is primary because it is at the foundation of all existence, which, as implied in the novel, is the esoteric, spiritual dimension represented by tradition and illustrated by darkness and intuition. Life, on the other hand, is associated with the exoteric, material dimension, relegated to modernity and illustrated by light and rationality. The fight for Diallobé survival has nothing to do with a choice between modernity and tradition, as the book implies at first, but with the prioritization of the esoteric dimension represented by tradition. More than a simple juxtaposition of progressive rationalism and Sufi idealism that Mamadou Bâ proposes, it is the prioritization of mysticism that is at the core (Mamadou Bâ 2011: 41).¹⁹ This is the same prioritization that Amadou Hampaté Bâ alludes to when he talks about preserving esoteric values. He says, "If traditional Africa becomes industrialized without having first found adequate means of expressing the esoteric values of her traditional cultures, she will at once inevitably fall into the same predicament as the West, which, in becoming technocratic and industrialized, has proved incapable of bringing to fruition its esoteric values which well and truly existed" (Bâ 1974: 44).²⁰

Most importantly, it is through the primacy of esoteric values, represented by attributes such as death, tradition, and darkness, that one can promote a humanization of society. The loss of these values, on the other hand, as Bâ implies in his citation above, leads to a predicament that the west is already tending toward, the dehumanization of the person, the loss of self, the victory of the object. Like the buried seed alluded to by the Most Royal Lady, esoteric values nurtured by darkness help humanity spring back to life. As in many stories of creation, from darkness springs the spark that creates the entire universe. Death then, is a necessary stage that ensures our resurrection. This resurrection, however, is always already enriched by the roots buried deep in the soil of tradition. In Samba's case, his death, in the Sufi sense of dying before you die, is a necessary stage that ensures the initiate's resurrection as a self-realized person and a much-needed guide within his community. Yet, although Samba seems to have surpassed material existence, his experience does not sever him from exoteric life. One is only left to imagine what type of plant Samba will grow into and, on a broader level, what kind of modernity will grow from traditions buried by the Diallobé.

Monika Brodnicka is currently an Academic Director at the School for International Training (SIT Study Abroad) in Dakar, Senegal. She previously taught in the African American and African Studies Department at The Ohio State University and in the Philosophy Department at Regis University. Her research and publications focus on African spirituality and Sufi thought and practice in Francophone West Africa. She has recently published "Speech that Takes on Body and Shape: The World as Manifestation of Spirit in West African Religions" and "Iterations of the Divine: The Pursuit of Sacred Personhood in West African Spirituality." Her current book project, entitled *Amadou Hampaté Bâ and the Living Tradition: Mystical Perception as Methodology in West African Religions*, addresses the role of the metaphysical dimension in the Fulani, Bamana, and Dagara religious practices. Brodnicka has studied and researched in several West African countries.

¹ Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (New York: Collier Books, 1971).

² Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Reading, UK: Heinemann, 1986).

- 3 Amadou Hampaté Bâ, *L'étrange destin de Wangrin* (Paris: 10/18, 1982).
- 4 Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975).
- 5 The words Word, World, and Person are capitalized in the text when they reference archetypes.
- 6 Abdou Rauf Adebisi, "Islamic Education in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*," *Muslim Education Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1995): 10-33.
- 7 Andrzej Dziedzic, "La représentation de la mort dans *L'Aventure ambiguë* de Cheikh Hamidou Kane," *Dalhousie French Studies* 45 (Winter 1998): 121-31. My translation.
- 8 Rebecca Masterson, "Islamic Mystical Readings of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 20, no. 1 (2009): 21-45.
- 9 Kenneth Harrow, "The Power and the Word: *L'Aventure Ambigue* and *The Wedding of Zein*," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 1 (1987): 63-78.
- 10 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "From the (Recited) Word to the (Written) Words," *Lingua Romana* 10, no. 1 (2011): 16-21
- 11 Cheikh Hamidou Kane, "The Clash of Culture and Faith in Colonial Africa: An Ambiguous Adventure," *Lingua Romana* 10, no. 1 (2011): 28-32.
- 12 Cheikh Hamidou Kane, "On Earth as it is in Heaven, or The Itinerary of the Diallobé in *Ambiguous Adventure* and *The Keepers of the Temple*," *Lingua Romana* 10, no. 1 (2011): 33-7.
- 13 Amadou Hampaté Bâ, a Fulani traditionalist, living in the twentieth century, was initiated into several cultures from his region, among them both Fulani and Bambara. For him, traditionalists are the repositories of the great oral heritage of their culture. They possess knowledge of discrete elements of initiatory practice or complete knowledge of their tradition. As a rule, they are generalists, who help transform knowledge for practical use. He developed his ideas of personhood in his book *Aspects de la civilisation africaine*. He was also initiated into Sufism by his Sufi Master, Tierno Bokar.
- 14 Discussion on the archetypes of Person, Word, and World can be found in two of Bâ's works: *Aspects de la civilisation africaine* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972) and "The Living Tradition," *General History of Africa*, 1 *Methodology and African Prehistory* (1980).
- 15 The stages of initiation have been extensively studied by Mircea Eliade in his famous work *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (Putnam, Connecticut: Spring Publications, 1994).
- 16 The glowing hearth is the name of Samba Diallo's Koranic school. The *talibé* is the name of the students that frequent such a school.
- 17 Chantal P. Thompson, "L'aventure ambiguë de la femme africaine. Une étude comparée de l'évolution de Samba Diallo et de la femme sénégalaise chez Ken Bugul (*Une si longue lettre*)," *Gendered Memories*, proceedings of the XVth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, "Literature as Cultural Memory" 28, no. 4 (2000): 88-99.
- 18 Leopold Sedar Senghor, "On Negrohood: Psychology of the African Negro," *Diogenes* 10, no. 37 (1962): 1-15.
- 19 Mamadou Bâ, "*Ambiguous Adventure*: A Crossroad Novel," *Lingua Romana* 10, no. 1 (2011): 38-41.
- 20 Amadou Hampaté Bâ, "Traditional Cultures and Social Changes," *Young People and African Cultural Values*, proceedings from the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization: Regional Youth Meeting on African Cultural Values (1974): 38-55.