

About Tierno Bokar

by Peter Brook

November 19, 2004

All through human history, every society ends up by getting it wrong. In the beginning, there is always a bold rush of energy. This creates new, fresh structures, but they soon turn into institutions which from then on slowly become fossils. This process unfortunately is human. However, a modest little pastime called *theatre* has a big role to play. Theatre exists to reopen all comfortable convictions. It has the best weapons for breaking taboos and smashing barriers. These are scandal, violence and ridicule. But not today. Not any longer. The "shock effect" cannot shock us any more; it is so close to daily life that it has become quite ordinary. Today, our urgent need is elsewhere. It is to catch glimpses of what our lives have lost. The theatre can give us a fleeting taste of qualities long forgotten.

Tierno Bokar is a true story. But who was Tierno Bokar?

In his book *The Sage of Bandiagara*, the great Peul writer Amadou Hampaté Bâ described the life and teaching of a humble and extraordinary man who was his master. His story draws us deep into an Africa that is traditional, animist, impregnated with Islam, shaken by colonialism and torn apart by internal strife. Starting with a tiny disagreement over the meaning of the number 11 as opposed to the number 12, merciless conflicts arise that lead to massacres, to martyrdom. These tragic events create a chain that eventually links a small African village to the highest political decisions of the Second World War.

Tierno Bokar searched for difficulties. He needed them in order to discover if he possessed in himself the patience and endurance he taught to others. One day he said, "I pray God that at the moment I die I have more enemies to whom I've done nothing than friends." Terrible words, if one remembers the solitude of his last days.

He also said, "The only struggle that really concerns me is the one that is aimed at our own weaknesses. This struggle, alas, has nothing to do with the war that so many of Adam's sons wage in the name of a God they claim to love deeply, but whom they love badly because they destroy a part of his creation."

The theme vividly illuminates the question that concerns us all—the power of violence and the true nature of a tolerance that is more powerful still.

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For us to feel truly concerned, theatre needs to be very close to our lives, but to capture our imagination its elements must always be fresh and unexpected. Hampaté Bâ's story unites these two conditions. It offers no answers, but it brings to life a mystery.