

## **Teaching Stories from Tierno Bokar**

*Gathered and Rendered into English by Jane Fatima Casewit*

*This essay was first published in the journal, **Sacred Web** ([www.sacredweb.com](http://www.sacredweb.com)), and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sacred Web Publishing.*

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Tierno Bokar was a spiritual guide, sage and teacher, a *murshid*, of the Tijania Sufi brotherhood. He lived in the first half of the twentieth century. His *zawiya*, which was a centre for learning as well as a gathering place for the *dhikr*, the remembrance of God, was located in the town of Bandiagara in present day Mali. His inspiring life and teachings were made known to Western readers through the works of the Nobel-prize winning Malian author Amadou Hampaté Ba who wrote *Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar, le Sage de Bandiagara* (Editions du Seuil). [An English translation of this work by Jane Fatima Casewit is planned to be published by World Wisdom Books in 2008.]



Photo of Bandiagara, in Mali, by Jane Fatima Casewit

Tierno Bokar had an innate understanding of the most profound metaphysical truths and, within the context of the African oral tradition, transmitted these truths through simple stories that were easy for everyone to understand. The following is a sampling of his stories.



## **White Birds and Black Birds**

Not only did Tierno Bokar abstain from judging others, but he went further and tried to make us understand that a good thought is always preferable to a bad one, even when it concerns those whom we consider our enemies. It was not always easy to convince us, as shown by the following anecdote in which he spoke to us of white birds and black birds.

On that day, Tierno had commented for us on the Qur'anic verse:

*And whoso doeth good an atom's weight will see it then,  
And whoso doeth ill an atom's weight will see it then.*  
(Qur'an: 99, vs. 7-8)

“The most beneficial good action is that which consists of praying for one's enemies.”

“How so?” a student exclaimed with surprise. “Generally, people tend towards speaking ill of their enemies rather than blessing them. Wouldn't this make us look a little stupid to pray for our enemies?”

“Maybe,” replied Tierno, “but only in the eyes of those who do not understand. Men certainly have the right to speak ill of their enemies, but they wrong themselves more by speaking ill of them than by blessing them.”

“I do not understand,” the student replied. “If a man speaks ill of his enemy and if his malediction holds, it could destroy the enemy. Shouldn't this rather put him at ease?”

“In appearance, maybe,” responded Tierno, “but this then is only a satisfaction of the egoistical soul (*nafs*, the ego) therefore a satisfaction at a lower material level. From a secret point of view, the fact of blessing one's enemy is more beneficial. Even if one passes for an imbecile in the eyes of ignorant people, one shows by this, in reality, one's spiritual maturity and the degree of one's wisdom.”

“Why?” another student asked him.

To help us understand, it was then that Tierno spoke of white birds and black birds.

“In relation to one another,” he said, “humans are comparable to walls located facing one another. Each wall is pierced by a multitude of small holes where white birds and black birds are nested. The black birds are bad thoughts and bad words. The white birds are good thoughts and good words. Because of their form, the white birds can only enter into holes for white birds and the same for black birds who can only nest in holes for black birds. Now, imagine two men who believe they are enemies of each other. Let us call them Yousef and Ali.

One day, Yousef, persuaded that Ali wishes bad for him, feels full of anger for Ali and sends him a very bad thought. In doing this, Yousef releases a black bird and at the same time liberates a corresponding hole. His black bird flies towards Ali and looks for an empty hole adapted to his form to nest in. If, from his side, Ali has not sent a black bird towards Yousef, that is, if Ali has not emitted any bad thought, none of his black holes will be empty. Finding no place to lodge itself, Yousef's black bird will be obliged to return to its original nest,

taking with him the evil which he was burdened with, an evil which will end up eroding and destroying Yousef himself.

But let us imagine that Ali too has emitted a bad thought. By doing this, he has liberated a hole in which Yousef's black bird will be able to enter in order to deposit part of his evil and accomplish there his mission of destruction. During this time, Ali's black bird will fly towards Yousef and will alight in the hole freed up by Ali's black bird. Thus, the two black birds will have obtained their goal and will have worked to destroy the men whom they were each destined for.

But once their task is accomplished, the birds will each return to their nest of origin because, it is said: *'Everything returns to its source.'* Since the evil they were burdened with is not exhausted, this evil will turn against their authors and will end up destroying them. The author of a bad thought, of a bad wish, or of an ill-spoken word is therefore attacked by both the black bird of his enemy and by his own black bird when this latter returns to him.

The same thing happens with white birds. If we emit only good thoughts towards our enemy, whereas the enemy only addresses bad thoughts to us, the enemy's black birds will not find any place to lodge themselves with us and will return to their sender. As for the white birds who bear good thoughts that we have sent to him, if they find no free place with our enemy, they will return to us charged with all the beneficial energy which they are carrying.

Thus, if we emit only good thoughts, no evil, no ill-spoken words can ever reach into our being. That is why one should always ask for blessings on both one's friends and one's enemies. Not only does the benediction go towards its objective to accomplish its mission of pacification, but also it comes back to us, one day or another, with everything with which it is laden.

This is what the Sufis called "desirable egoism". It is the valid Love of Self, likened to respect for oneself and for one's neighbor because every man, good or bad, is the depository of a part of the divine Light. That is why the Sufis, in conformity with the teaching of the Prophet, do not want to soil either their mouth or their being by bad words or bad thoughts, even by apparently benign criticisms."

Because of the principle that wills that "everything returns to its source" he urged his students to only generate their most pure spiritual vibrations by consecrating their thoughts and tongues to the recitation of the Name of God (*dhikrullah*).



Photo of old mosque in Badiagara, in Mali, by Jane Fatima Casewit



### **The Faithful Dog**

A touching anecdote relating to Tierno's little dog illustrates how the slightest circumstance was for him material for reflection and how he perceived superior realities through everything, even the smallest plant. Here is the anecdote, as he told it to us himself:

“ One day I left for the fields, accompanied by my faithful dog, a sworn enemy of the devastating monkeys of the plantations. The time of the great April heat had arrived. My dog and I were so hot we could hardly breathe. I expected that one of the two of us would end up fainting. Finally, thank God, I saw a *tiayki* whose tight branches offered an archway of refreshing verdure.

My little dog let out small cries of joy and ran his legs in the direction of the benevolent shade. When he had reached it, instead of staying there, he came back towards me with his tongue hanging out, his lip hanging, leaving his pointed white teeth showing. To see his sides frenetically palpitating, I understood how exhausted he was.

I walked towards the shade. My dog showed his joy. Then for an instant, I pretended to continue on my way. The poor animal groaned plaintively but followed me anyway, his head low, his tail curled between his legs. He was visibly desperate, but decided to follow me whatever happened.

This faithfulness touched me deeply. How could one fully appreciate the gesture of this frail animal, prepared to follow me to death without any necessity for himself and without being constrained by anything? He is devoted, I said to myself, because he considers me his master. He proves his attachment by risking his life with only the intention to follow me and remain at my side.

*“Lord,” I cried out, “cure my troubled soul! Make my faithfulness similar to that of this being that I disdainfully call a dog. Give me, as Thou hast given to him, the strength to master my life when it is a question of following Thy will and to follow, without asking where am I going, the way which Thou guidest me upon!”*

*“I am not the creator of this dog; but he blindly obeys me and follows me gently, at the price of a thousand sufferings that could cost him his life. It is Thee O Lord who hast bestowed this virtue upon him. Give, O Lord, to all those who ask it of Thee, as well as to me, the virtue of Love and the courage of Charity!”*

Then I turned around and took refuge in the shade. Completely happy, my little companion came and lay in front of me in such a way that his eyes were turned towards mine, as if to speak to me seriously. His two front legs were stretched out in parallel, his head raised very high, all the while resting, he watched over me so as to not miss any of my movements.

A few minutes later, neither I nor my companion felt the slightest fatigue. ??

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