

## *Iterations of the Divine: The Pursuit of Sacred Personhood in West African Spirituality*

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### ABSTRACT

Fulani and Bambara ontology based on the statement “the people of the person are multiple in the person” points to, first and foremost, the characteristic multiplicity of human nature, which involves participation of all cosmic forces. For Amadou Hampaté Bâ, this means that the human being in these traditions is never considered as a singular, monolithic unity but, rather, as a plural, complex being in perpetual motion. Yet, the implications of the statement reach far beyond multiplicity. Paradoxically, they reveal the path toward human synthesis. As an interior multiplicity, the person is considered unfinished at the beginning, but moving toward completion by way of unification of the manifold selves that constitute the universe. Through this process, the person starts off as a simple medium of the many people within and evolves to become their synthesis, which ultimately leads to the person’s role as reflection of the entire cosmos. Therefore, the aspect of plurality in the concept of personhood is the springboard that launches the transformation of the person from a medium of chaotic forces to an equilibrium point, which ultimately leads to a microcosmic reflection of the universe. By using this approach to interpret the notion of personhood, Bâ challenges the customary notion of ontology in African scholarship and advances a radical understanding of the person based on African mystical foundations.

### INTRODUCTION

Theories of ontology, a fundamental part of the intellectual tradition on personhood in African Studies, have been vigorously debated by Africanist scholars. While the theories themselves are varied and often divergent, the grounding ontology is quite similar. It is a reflection of Western modernist philosophy based on the dualistic concepts of rationalism and empiricism. As a result, the notion of personhood in African scholarship can be placed, for the most part, in one of the two categories. This is evident in the work of scholars such as Tempels, Mbiti, Kagame,<sup>1</sup> and Gyekye,<sup>2</sup> who theorize the concept of the person as force, communal agent, shadow, or soul, respectively. Their definitions of the person are made in relation to Western ontology by either opposing or assimilating some of the essential principles of rationalist philosophy. Critics of this scholarship argue that such theories fixate the notion of the person in an ideological standstill, outside of history and context. In exchange,

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion of Tempels, Mbiti, and Kagame comes from Didier N. Kaphagawani, “Some African Conceptions of Person: A Critique,” *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, Ivan Karp and D.A. Masolo eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 66-79.

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Gyekye, “The Relation of *Ökra* (Soul) and *Honam* (Body): An Akan Conception,” *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze ed., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998): 59-66.

scholars like Shaw,<sup>3</sup> Kaphagawani,<sup>4</sup> and Olupona,<sup>5</sup> encourage a more critical examination of African ontologies that includes a historical context and evolution of the notion of personhood within localized realities.<sup>6</sup> Although this empirically oriented research moves away from Western rationalist ideology, it does not free itself completely from Western ontology, nor does it necessarily intend to do so. Either way, whether through a rationalist or empiricist philosophy, African scholarship on personhood is bound to the dualism that these opposing theories inspire.

Of the many approaches to examine the notion of the person in African traditions, few have the breadth that would sufficiently cover a central aspect of African personhood – the spiritual element of this reality. Yet, most African conceptions of personhood, many of which are derived from religious traditions on the continent, have some notion of the essential role of the esoteric dimension of human identity. Devoid of mystical analysis, Western philosophical methodologies invite debates about the stage at which personhood is reached, how the person negotiates individuality with the community, or whether rationalist conceptions of the person are sufficient. Even discussion about the human soul, such as Gyekye's and Wiredu's debate on the meaning of *okra* in Akan culture, relies on a Cartesian interpretation of the soul, which lacks mystical connotations.<sup>7</sup> In essence, these approaches leave out or, at the very least, marginalize the spiritual aspect of human identity so prevalent in the African notion of personhood. Amadou Hampaté Bâ, along with scholars like Leopold Sedar Senghor and Boubou Hama, attempts to reverse this dualistic trend and offer the much needed mystical analysis to the notion of the person. For the traditionalist scholar familiar with Sufi mysticism,<sup>8</sup> mystical methodology serves as the best approach to interpret realities that involve a spiritual dimension.

Bâ's uniqueness, in his interpretation of Fulani and Bambara ontology, stems from embracing mysticism as his method of interpretation, a method that clearly reflects the understanding of

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Shaw, "Tok Af, Lef Af: A Political Economy of Temne Techniques," *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, Ivan Karp and D.A. Masolo eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 25-49.

<sup>4</sup> Didier N. Kaphagawani, "Some African Conceptions," *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, Ivan Karp and D.A. Masolo eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 66-79.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob P. Olupona, "Major Issues in the Study of African Traditional Religion," *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, Jacob P. Olupona ed. (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Titles like "Personhood and Art: Social Change and Commentary among the Acoli" by J.P. Odoch Pido spring from this very movement.

<sup>7</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). Kwasi Wiredu, "The Akan Concept of Mind," *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, no. 3, (Oct. 1983). Okra is loosely interpreted as soul by Gyekye and as a source of life by Wiredu

<sup>8</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, a Fulani traditionalist, living in the 20<sup>th</sup> 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

personhood in these traditions. Similarly to the broad conception of mysticism in other religions, Bâ is interested in the connection between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the universe. The spiritual and the material, in this case, are not opposites, but inform each other in particular ways. The material world is a reflection of the spiritual world in the sense that it is a physical manifestation of its spiritual underpinnings. To reach this understanding, however, one must embark on a spiritual path that leads to the knowledge of cosmic unity. While the general concepts in mysticism remain the same, the expression of mysticism, based on this framework, varies in different cultures and religions. For the Fulani and Bambara, mysticism places the person at the center of a multidimensional environment, an environment in which the spiritual universe is infused in the material world. As a medium with the potential to synthesize this environment and to align oneself with its Creator, the person serves a crucial role in the mystical understanding of the universe—to become the Guarantor of Harmony and Interlocutor of God. This role can only be attained through the Fulani and Bambara version of the spiritual path of initiation. Therefore, to understand the mystical conception of the world in these traditions, it is important to look at the specific makeup of the person and at the journey required to attain spiritual perfection.

In his major work, *Aspects de la civilisation Africaine*, Amadou Hampaté Bâ discusses the central feature of the Fulani and Bambara ontology through the Bambara expression “the people of the person are multiple in the person.”<sup>9</sup> While this phrase may seem enigmatic at first glance, it offers a clear roadmap to understanding the Fulani and Bambara metaphysical conception of human nature. The statement is born out of the understanding that there are two terms to explain the idea of personhood: in Bambara *maa* and *maaya* and in Fulani *ned'd'o* and *ned'd'aaku*. The first word in the set signifies “person” while the second “the persons of the person.”<sup>10</sup> As they stand, the definitions and the phrase point out the innate multiplicity and complexity of the human being. When paired with the Bambara story of creation, the phrase brings to light the human role as a medium that negotiates this multiplicity. Finally, when discussed in relation to human potential, the phrase reveals the person’s microcosmic capacity. In essence, the multiple persons with the person are the key to unlocking the intricate and elusive ontology within the Bambara and Fulani conceptual perimeters.

Fulani and Bambara ontology based on the statement “the people of the person are multiple in the person” points to, first and foremost, the characteristic multiplicity of human nature, which

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<sup>9</sup> Bâ, *Aspects de la civilisation africaine* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972), 11, my translation. The phrase in Bambara is *Maa ka Maaya ka ca a yere kono*.

<sup>10</sup> Since the idea of the person in Bambara and Fulani cultures is similar, Bâ relies mostly on the Bambara to explain the notion.

involves participation of all cosmic forces. For Amadou Hampaté Bâ, this means that the human being in these traditions is never considered as a singular, monolithic unity but, rather, as a plural, complex being in perpetual motion. Yet, the implications of the statement reach far beyond multiplicity. Paradoxically, they reveal the path toward human synthesis. As an interior multiplicity, the person is considered unfinished at the beginning, but moving toward completion by way of unification of the manifold selves that constitute the universe. Through this process, the person starts off as a simple medium of the many people within and evolves to become their synthesis, which ultimately leads to the person's role as reflection of the entire cosmos. Therefore, the aspect of plurality in the concept of personhood is the springboard that launches the transformation of the person from a medium of chaotic forces to an equilibrium point, which ultimately leads to a microcosmic reflection of the universe.

For Bâ, the distinctive human identity, dictated by Fulani and Bambara traditions, of cosmic multiplicity in search for synthesis, alludes to a particular understanding of the universe. It implies that the constitution of the world is not only material, or exoteric, but also spiritual. More than a material facade, the world's physical manifestations are only the visible expression of a non-material or spiritual reality. Therefore, the multiplicity present in the human being connects the person's material characteristics to an underlying esoteric reality that constantly informs the human exoteric constitution. The multiple persons within a person, in this sense, are not just a question of physiology, psychology, or theory. They originate from a different dimension of reality, one that is intricately connected with the Supreme Being. As a medium of all creation, the human being is at the center of the interconnection between the physical and spiritual components of the universe. Likewise, as a potential synthesis, the person is also the source of balance between these components and the conductor of divine communication in the material world. As a prospective microcosm based on these characteristics, the person in Fulani and Bambara traditions has the potential to become a sacred reflection of the divine reality. This journey begins from the moment of creation.

### **THE STORY OF CREATION**

To better understand Amadou Hampaté Bâ's approach to Fulani and Bambara spiritual traditions, one needs to go back to the source—the story of creation. This Bambara origin story is central in explaining the concept of the person from a mystical point of view. For Bâ, the story not only offers an interesting account of human origins, but it also gives a reason for the complexity of the human being, and, most importantly, it implies how the person is capable of reaching one's ascribed potential

as guarantor of equilibrium and interlocutor of God. In other words, by providing the context and the details of how the first human being was created, the tale reveals the secrets of human identity. First and foremost, the story of creation explains how multiplicity and complexity, involved in the creation of the human being, renders the person a medium of all the forces in the universe and their potential synthesis. Ultimately, the context of the story and the process of creation suggests that the composition of the human being foreshadows the capacity to reach spiritual perfection through microcosmic reflection.

Bâ's retelling of the story of creation is based on the tale taught to Komo neophytes,<sup>11</sup> who learn the details during their sixty-three-day initiation. They recite the genesis of humanity in the following manner:

There was nothing except a Being. That Being was living Emptiness, brooding potentially over contingent existences. Infinite Time was the abode of that One Being. The One Being gave himself the name Maa Ngala. Maa Ngala wished to be known. So he created Fan, a wondrous Egg with nine divisions, and into it he introduced the nine fundamental states of existence. When this primordial Egg came to hatch, it gave birth to twenty marvelous beings that made up the whole of the universe, the sum total of existing forces and possible knowledges. But alas! None of these first twenty creatures proved fit to become the interlocutor that Maa Ngala had craved. So he took a bit of each of those twenty existing creatures and mixed them; and then, blowing a spark of his own fiery breath into the mixture, he created a new Being, Man, to whom he gave a part of his own name: Maa. And so this new being, through his name and through the divine spark introduced into him, contained something of Maa Ngala himself.<sup>12</sup>

As can be seen, all of the necessary elements to understand the mystical constitution and purpose of the person are already present in the story. Although these elements are more fully developed in Bâ's other texts, we already learn from the account that the person is at once plural, complex, and has the potential for wholeness, as the receptacle of the "sum total of existing forces and possible knowledges." The way these forces and knowledges were introduced into the human being, by being mixed and animated by God's breath, foreshadows the possibility of synthesis within the person. Further, the fact that the person was animated by the spark of God's fiery breath and received part of God's name underscores the intimate human connection to the Supreme Being. These two aspects, the human pluralistic relationship to the world and connection to God, reveal the human role of a medium.

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<sup>11</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, "The Living Tradition," *General History of Africa*, vol.1, *Methodology and African Prehistory* (1980): 168-169. The Komo is a secret society of initiation in the Bambara society. Ba was initiated into both the Bambara and the Fulani mystical traditions.

<sup>12</sup> Bâ, "The Living Tradition," 169.

Based on the attribute of mediumship illustrated in the story of creation, it becomes evident that the identity of human beings is based on seemingly opposite characteristics of multiplicity and synthesis. The material and spiritual composition of person highlights this complex identity. Bâ develops, “To contain man, the all-in-one being, Maa Ngala devised a special body, vertical and symmetric, able to contain at one and the same time a piece of all the existing beings.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, as the fusion and medium of all of the created beings that compose the universe, the person is multiple in essence. Bâ explains that “At no moment is the person considered as a monolithic unity, limited to her or his physical body, but just like any *complex being*, *the person lives as a multiplicity in permanent motion. This is not about a static or an accomplished being.*”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the first ancestor is also a synthesis of this multiplicity in permanent motion. Bâ continues, “Synthesis of the universe and crossroads of the forces of life, man is therefore called to become the equilibrium point where it will be possible to combine, through him, the various dimensions of which he is bearer.”<sup>15</sup> It is through this synthesis that the human role as medium reaches its fullest potential, as the guarantor of equilibrium and interlocutor of God. While the synthesis was soundly realized by the first ancestor, it remains only potentially accessible to later generations. The fulfillment of this potential depends on a successful process of initiation that can help the subject reach microcosmic significance.

The story of creation explains how multiplicity and synthesis, essential to human identity, is dependent on the forces that make up the entire universe. But what exactly are those forces and how do they participate in human realization? According to Bâ, in both Fulani and Bambara traditions, the word is the essential force that originates from the Supreme Being and is God’s instrument of creation. Bâ states, “The Bambara tradition of the Komo teaches that the Word, Kuma, is a fundamental force emanating from the Supreme Being himself...It is the instrument of creation: ‘That which Maa Ngala says, is!’ proclaims the cantor...”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is not an accident that Maa, created from all the forces of the universe that de facto came from Maa Nagala’s divine speech, is the synthesis of speech itself. It is precisely because of this phenomenon that the first human being is the only creation that can communicate with God. This is underscored in the story when Maa Ngala breathes life into his last creation and names the person Maa. Most importantly, the Supreme Being created the world to find an interlocutor, to be able to exchange dialogue with creation. Only the first ancestor of the human

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<sup>13</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 14, my translation

<sup>14</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 13-14, my translation

<sup>15</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 17, my translation

<sup>16</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 168, 170-171



being was able to fulfill this desire. Therefore, the key to human synthesis is the ability to control speech in a way that will help to create balance and to communicate with God.

### **THE MULTIPLICITY AND COMPLEXITY OF THE HUMAN MEDIUM**

The very constitution of the human being, (as a medium open to the influence of cosmic forces, which are at once multiple and complex), is an important factor in reaching synthesis. While multiplicity implies the pervasiveness of spiritual and material cosmic forces that infuse the human core, complexity suggests their impossibly elaborate involvement. In fact, complexity indicates that some of these forces are in opposition to other forces, which can lead to duality, contradiction, and imbalance. To surmount these contradictions and to balance all of the energies that permeate the human core, the magnitude of this multiplicity has to be understood. Bâ discusses this magnitude through multidimensionality, dynamism, and permeability. The multiplicity of the human being is best represented by the symbolism of the entire body. Amadou Hampaté Bâ reveals the details in his description of the human body:

The entire body has a symbolism which is quite precise. The head, for example, represents the highest level of the being, pierced by seven large openings. Each of these is the port of entry to a state of being or world and is guarded by a divinity. Each entrance provides access to a new interior door and so on to infinity. The face is considered the primary façade of the habitat of the deeper people of Maa, and exterior signs (gestures, expressions) permit one to decipher the characteristics of these persons. “Show me your face, and I will tell you the manner of being of your interior people,” says the proverb. Each interior being corresponds to a world which rotates around an axis or central point.<sup>17</sup>

This passage elucidates the precise science through which the Bambara understand the complex function of the human being. The detailed symbolism of the body teaches that each bodily cavity is a port of entry to a new dimension, which provides access to additional dimensions. Further, each interior dimension “rotates around an axis,” illustrating the dynamic quality of the contained forces. Finally, the permeability is made evident by the fact that access to these interior beings is given through seven physical openings in the head and that each entrance gives access to a new door, ad infinitum. Most importantly, this relationship between beings and worlds reveals the intimate connection between the physical aspect of the person, such as the head, and the spiritual dimension, which constantly informs the identity of the human being. All three elements of multiplicity, thus, help to explain the characteristic form of mediumship attributed to the human being.

The multidimensional element of the plural nature of the human being not only expresses the

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<sup>17</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 14-15, my translation.

multi-layeredness of the person but also explains the person's connection to the esoteric universe. At heart, multidimensionality stems from the way existing forces in the universe are located in relation to the person. Bâ develops this aspect in another passage on creation. He says that the human being is multidimensional because the forces of those first twenty beings are located on concentric planes of existence—physical, psychological, and spiritual.<sup>18</sup> Bâ explains, “The various beings or states which are inside him correspond to worlds which rise in stages between man and his creator.”<sup>19</sup> All of these worlds are related to each other and are in direct relation to the interior worlds of the human being. In other words, each being present in the human body corresponds to a world or dimension that rises toward the Creator. It is safe to say that the aspect of multidimensionality in the human being helps to explain the connection between the person and the Supreme Being. In essence, the human being, through the physical, psychological, and spiritual states of existence, is a direct reflection of the worlds or dimensions that lead to God.

The dynamic aspect of the human being adds another layer to the original multiplicity with which the person came into being. This aspect is closely associated with the way the human body was created as a receptacle meant to contain all of the forces that exist in the universe. As a result of this construction, not only is the person inhabited by a multitude of beings, but these beings are also in continuous motion. The body, Bâ states, “symbolizes a sanctuary where all beings are moving in a circle.”<sup>20</sup> The circular motion is an effect of the connection to and reflection of the interior beings to a corresponding spiritual world. As explained, each interior being corresponds to a rotating world.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, this constant movement renders the human being a dynamic crossroads or medium, where beings pass through, worlds rotate around their axis, and states change depending on the physical, psychological, and spiritual environment. This dynamism lends itself easily to the chaotic nature of human identity. Within this type of ontology, as Bâ declared, there is no room for a static or a finished being, since the being is constantly animated by the spiritual forces that are the person's original constitution.

Finally, it is important to recognize the open and permeable quality of the human constitution. As a receptacle created to hold all of the existing forces, the human being already prefigures this porosity that leads to internal and external connections with the universe. According to Bâ's

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<sup>18</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 11, my translation

<sup>19</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 16, my translation.

<sup>20</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 14, my translation

<sup>21</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 16, my translation



interpretation of the Bambara and Fulani traditions, “the person is not closed in on himself like a tightly-closed box. He is open in several directions, several dimensions one can say, at the same time interior and exterior.”<sup>22</sup> These directions connect the person with fellow exoteric and esoteric beings, including the human community that is at once one and interdependent rather than isolated or independent. This also holds true for the natural world. As Bâ states, the human being “maintains relations of dependence and equilibrium with [the natural world], codified in the rules of behavior taught by traditional doctrine, *Bembaw-sira*.”<sup>23</sup> If the human being is open in several directions or dimensions, different parts of the body and its openings also reflect this permeability. For example, as stated above, the seven openings in the head represent a port of entry to a state of being or world, which is guarded by a particular divinity.<sup>24</sup> Each entrance has a new interior door, to infinity, implying the great extent of human openness and porosity.

While the forces render the person multiple through the characteristics of multidimensionality, dynamism, and openness, it is important to recognize that this multiplicity also creates complexity. Bâ states, “The psychology of man is thus a complex unity. Like a vast ocean, the part that is known is nothing compared to that which remains to be known.”<sup>25</sup> So, on the one hand, the person is complex because he or she is unknowable. On the other hand, the forces that exist within the human being create permanent conflict within. Bâ continues, “...the diverse elements in him make him the confluence of all the cosmic forces, the highest as well as the basest. The grandeur and the drama of *Maa* stem from the fact that he is the meeting place of contradictory forces in perpetual motion, only a well-executed evolution on the path of initiation will enable him to order throughout the phases of his life.”<sup>26</sup> It is this complexity, initiated by the very characteristic of multiplicity, which initially prevents the human being from reaching the vocation of the guarantor of balance and the interlocutor of the Supreme Being. As Bâ points out in the quote above, the only way to balance these contradictory forces is through embarking on the path of initiation.

The different characteristics of multiplicity—multidimensionality, dynamism, and openness—and the resulting complexity paint a specific picture of the person within the Fulani and Bambara cultures, according to Amadou Hampaté Bâ. This picture illustrates a continuous human interaction with and connection to the rest of creation, as well as with the Supreme Being, through the three main

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<sup>22</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 16, my translation.

<sup>23</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 16, my translation.

<sup>24</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 14-15, my translation

<sup>25</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 15, my translation

<sup>26</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 15, my translation

characteristics of human multiplicity. It also signals the inevitable chaos that this type of multiplicity can create within the human being and throughout the environment, making this experience equally multiple and complex. Further, these characteristics allude to the human connection with the esoteric or spiritual dimension of the universe. The human being is a medium where the material and the spiritual elements of creation meet and mingle. Most importantly, however, the condition of the person through this multiplicity and complexity promises an ultimate synthesis of the diverse attributes of the human being, as well as an alignment of the person with God. As the tale of creation foretells, the destiny of the human being is not to remain as a receptacle in a state of chaos, but as the guarantor of harmony in the world as well as a direct interlocutor of God. It is this general potential within each human being that reveals the two most important roles of the person in the Fulani and Bambara traditions.

### **THE GUARANTOR OF HARMONY AND INTERLOCUTOR OF GOD**

The story of creation and the resulting multiplicity and complexity it bestows on the human being, reveals the special purpose that humans are destined to fulfill. The specific way the person was molded, as a medium of all creation and as God's partial namesake, shows the central role of the human being in the world. Through this unique constitution, the person has the potential to represent the Supreme Being on earth, both as the guarantor of equilibrium as well as God's interlocutor. Bâ implies that each role requires proficiency in both esoteric knowledge and engagement with the world and language. In both instances, it is important to master the rules that govern the universe as well as communication with the world that leads to interaction with the Supreme Being. To become a guarantor of equilibrium, one must understand, observe, and maintain universal laws that keep the cosmic forces in balance. This can only be achieved if the person is aware of the laws in place, knows how to use language to maintain this balance, and accepts the great responsibility of such an endeavor. To become the interlocutor of God, on the other hand, one must be capable of interpreting divine communication through manifested symbols. This involves the ability to discern the symbols through augmented perception and expression and to recognize one's own receptiveness to divine vibrations.

The potential to become a guarantor of equilibrium is contingent upon the unique identity bestowed on the human being during creation. As multiple and complex, the person already possesses the physical, psychological, and spiritual makeup needed to fulfill this position. The ability to synthesize the multidimensional forces and to resolve their innate contradictions grants the human being the capacity to reach it. The lifelong process of initiation helps the person finally attain the

spiritual realization connected to becoming the guarantor of equilibrium. By attaining synthesis of all forces, the person can be called an equilibrium point, capable of managing the balance of all of the forces existent in the universe. As can be easily imagined, the responsibility that comes with being the guarantor of equilibrium is great. What is at stake here is not only personal balance but also harmony within the surrounding environment. As Bâ points out, “Any violation of the sacred laws provokes an invisible perturbation in the equilibrium of the cosmos, expressed on our earth as great upheavals.”<sup>27</sup> Maintaining the balance requires, thus, an understanding of the sacred rules existent in the universe as well as the capacity to use language in such a way that will preserve this equilibrium.

As the name readily suggests, the role of the guarantor of equilibrium is to keep the multiple and often chaotic cosmic forces in balance. This balance is based on the knowledge and observance of a complex set of rules passed on from generation to generation from the original ancestor. The ancestor received these rules from the Supreme Being who taught, “the laws according to which all the elements of the cosmos were formed and continued to exist.”<sup>28</sup> These laws also include regulations for marriage, eating, family, work, etc. Bâ offers examples of how these rules are observed:

Plunged into a universe populated by forces which dwell in and animate all things, the Malian animist was motivated to be careful about his gestures and his words and to respect the laws regarding prohibitions and obligations which govern his relations with the surrounding forces. He will not cut down a tree without first having asked the forces that live in it to leave that site. He will not satisfy his natural needs before excusing himself to the invisible inhabitants of the place, asking them to move away from the spot which he will soil.<sup>29</sup>

This example shows how an individual familiar with Malian traditions might relate to and engage with surrounding forces. Engagement with these forces is based on specific rules, such as asking the forces to relocate in order to cut down a tree. These rules, which could be either prohibitions or obligations, need to be respected so that the balance in the environment is kept intact. Refusing to do so would result in serious repercussions, leading to the loss of balance in the environment. Since the minutest actions affect the delicate balance that exists in the universe, the experienced human being needs to have intimate knowledge of the rules to avoid creating chaos in the world. Knowledge of the rules, according to which all elements in the universe function, is a necessary precursor to keeping them in balance.

In addition to profound knowledge of the rules and regulations by which the universe keeps

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<sup>27</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 136, my translation

<sup>28</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 169

<sup>29</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 122, my translation

itself in harmony, the guarantor of equilibrium needs to be skilled at maintaining this balance. The maintenance of balance is intimately connected to the human use of speech. According to Bâ, speech can preserve or destroy the delicate balance, which exists within and between the material and spiritual worlds. He develops,

In the image of Maa Ngala's speech, of which it is an echo, human speech sets latent forces into motion. They are activated and aroused by speech – just as a man gets up, or turns, at the sound of his name. Speech may create peace, as it may destroy it. It is like fire. One ill-advised word may start a war just as one blazing twig may touch off a great conflagration. In Malian adage: 'What puts a thing into condition [that is, arranges it, disposes it favourably]? Speech. What damages a thing? Speech. What keeps a thing as it is? Speech.' Tradition, then, confers on Kuma, the Word, not only creative power but a double function of saving and destroying.<sup>30</sup>

This passage expresses the important role of the word in maintaining the balance of forces in the universe. As Bâ points out, speech has enough power to create or destroy balance, or peace equally, in the world. Since speech can essentially rouse the forces that are static in manifested things, it is important to know what to say, how to say it, and when to speak to maintain cosmic equilibrium. More than just any speech, however, it is the rhythmic quality of speaking that can rouse the fury or appease the forces that exist in the universe. Bâ states, "if [speech] is considered as having the power to act on spirits, that is because its harmony creates movements, movements which generate forces, those forces are then acting on spirits which themselves are powers for action."<sup>31</sup> The cadence of speech, thus, gives the human being the power to mobilize and transform the world around us, for better or worse.

The knowledge and skill needed to transform the world for better or worse places a great amount of responsibility on the guarantor of equilibrium. The responsibility rests on the precise understanding of as well as engagement with cosmic forces. The human being is the only creature capable of taking on this responsibility by receiving the gift of mind and word from the Supreme Being. As Bâ states, "Synthesis of all that exists, pre-eminent receptacle of the Supreme Force and confluence of all existing forces, Maa, Man, received as his legacy a part of the divine creative power, the gift of Mind and the Word."<sup>32</sup> It is, effectively, esoteric knowledge as well as the ability to use speech to affect the world that makes the human being capable of taking on the responsibility as the guarantor of equilibrium. Bâ explains how the demands to perform this task were already developed from the time of creation: "[Maa Ngala] installed [Maa] as guardian of his universe and charged him

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<sup>30</sup> Bâ, "The Living Tradition," 171.

<sup>31</sup> Bâ, "The Living Tradition," 171

<sup>32</sup> Bâ, "The Living Tradition," 169.

with watching over the maintenance of universal harmony.”<sup>33</sup> This responsibility requires not only maintenance of the immediate environment but also the preservation of the entire universe. It is, thus, the burden of the guarantor of equilibrium to observe the strict rules that determine human behavior toward all beings existent in the universe, as well as to skillfully operate rhythmic language to keep this balance intact. As Bâ puts it himself, it weighs heavy to be Maa.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly to the guarantor of equilibrium, becoming the interlocutor of God is directly connected to the multiplicity and synthesis introduced in the story of origin. According to the Bambara, Maa Ngala made the human being in several stages. The Supreme Being created the first human by first mixing a part of each of the original twenty creatures, by blowing a spark of divine breath into this mixture, and, finally, by naming the person Maa, the first part of Maa Ngala’s own name. While the first stage foreshadows the human potential to become a guarantor of equilibrium, the last two phases, receiving God’s breath and name, allude to the human capacity to become God’s interlocutor. These stages announce the intimate connection between the human being and God. Since this connection fulfills the criteria for mutual communication between the Creator and the human being, the person is the only creature that has the capacity to be the interlocutor that Maa Ngala originally desired. To become capable of communicating with God, however, the human being has to recognize his/her receptiveness to divine speech as it passes via sacred vibrations through the body. Equally, the person needs to learn how to interpret the language spoken by the Supreme Being by way of manifested symbols.

To understand the type of communication exchanged between the human being and God, it is necessary to make a paradigmatic shift in the area of language. Communication between Maa Ngala and Maa in Bambara tradition moves beyond simple modalities of listening and speaking. Speech, according to Bâ, involves a broader range of perception and expression. In terms of perception, speech refers, as Bâ points out, “to realities far more vast than those we usually attribute to [speaking and listening]. It is said: ‘The speech of Maa Ngala is seen, is heard, is smelled, is tasted, is touched.’ It is a total perception, a knowing in which the entire being is engaged.”<sup>35</sup> Total perception, in this case, involves the interpretation of communication through all of the five senses. In other words, speech can be picked up via other means than hearing, such as through the senses of taste, smell, and feeling. Equivalently, the expression of speech can be manifested in other ways than by speaking. According

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<sup>33</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 169

<sup>34</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 169

<sup>35</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 170.

to Bâ, every reality that exists in the world is also speech. Bâ points out, “Everything which *is*, teaches through mute speech. *Form* is language. *Being* is language. *Everything* is language.”<sup>36</sup> This means that every reality in the world, visible or invisible, material or spiritual, is an augmented expression of communication. Every material manifestation, in turn, is a symbol that contains a message from the spiritual dimension, which can be interpreted by augmented perception. The role of the human being in this situation is to decode the messages given in symbolic form by the Supreme Being.

This augmented communication between God and the human being through symbols in the manifest world has a particular process. Speech begins with God sending his word via divine channels to the manifest dimension. It ends with sacred vibrations being transmitted to the human being. When the divine word makes contact with physical manifestations, it becomes sacred, a less pure version of divinity, since it is communicated through material means. Bâ explains this process further,

As they came down from Maa Ngala towards man, words were divine, because they had not yet come into contact with materiality. After their contact with corporeity they lost something of their divinity but took on sacredness. Hallowed in this way by the divine Word, corporeity in its turn gave out sacred vibrations which established relations with Maa Ngala. African tradition then conceives of speech as a gift of God. It is at once divine in the downward direction and sacred as it rises upwards.<sup>37</sup>

The divine/sacred communication initiated by the Supreme Being helps to explain, in part, the connection between the esoteric universe of spiritual forces and the exoteric world that manifests these forces physically. In other words, the esoteric or divine message embodies itself in worldly manifestations to communicate its meaning to those capable of interpreting its symbols. It shows a process in communication where the spiritual dimension and message is always already underlying its physical expression in the symbol.

The vibrations that travel from the divine to sacred dimensions have a particular effect on the human being, which motivates augmented communication. Once in contact with materiality, the sacred word awakens human potentialities of ability, willing, and knowing through its vibrations initiated by the divine Word. Each of these potentialities is then stirred by thoughts at first, then sounds, and, finally, words. Speech, in this sense, as Bâ puts it, “is the externalization of the vibrations of forces,” just like, “every manifestation of a force in any form whatever is to be regarded as its speech.”<sup>38</sup> The person is the only creature that has the capacity to receive the divine word, interpret it,

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<sup>36</sup> Bâ, “African Art: Where the Hand has Ears,” *Unesco Courier: a window open to the world* XXIX (1976): 17

<sup>37</sup> Bâ, “Living Tradition,” 170.

<sup>38</sup> Bâ, “Living Tradition,” 170



and reply back through sacred channels. In this sense, human beings have the ability to read the signs of the world that manifest the messages of the Supreme Being and reply to them by using their own power of the verb. It is precisely this power that can help human beings maintain the balance in the world. Bâ points out, “For just as Maa Ngala’s divine speech animated the cosmic forces that lay static in Maa, so man’s speech animates, sets into motion and rouses the forces that are static in things.”<sup>39</sup> As can be seen, the conversation between God and the human being is expressed, albeit differently, on both ends.

The goal of becoming a guarantor of equilibrium and interlocutor of God would not be reached without initiation. Initiation is the bridge that connects the person who is the medium of multiple cosmic forces and the namesake of God to the destined roles described above. Ba develops,

Man will be taught how he ought to behave towards nature, how to respect its equilibrium and to disturb the forces that animate it, and of which it is only the outward and visible show. Initiation will show him his relationship with the world of these forces and lead him little by little towards self-mastery, the ultimate goal being to become, like Maa, a complete man, interlocutor of Maa Ngala and guardian of the living world.<sup>40</sup>

With the help of this process, the person learns to control and balance the dynamic forces within and restore the same balance to the environment. This equilibrium, in turn, helps the person master the lines of communication with the Creator, stemming from their close kinship, and finally merit the role of God’s interlocutor. While the process of initiation, which leads to this attainment, is kept secret, its role in reaching spiritual alignment and the general tenants of this process need to be recognized.

### **FULLEST REACH OF POTENTIAL THROUGH INITIATION**

At the time of creation, the roles of guarantor of harmony and interlocutor of God were immediately bestowed upon Maa, the primordial synthesis of all creation. As generations succeeded one another, the knowledge instilled in Maa by the Supreme Being was passed on to descendants through a chain of oral transmission. In the passage of time, however, something of the original ancestor’s synthesis was lost, perpetuating chaos and imbalance in the human being. Without innate synthesis of the forces, the original aptitudes and responsibilities are no longer readily available to Maa’s descendants and require special training and preparation to be attained. Bâ explains that these skills can only be regained once the human being returns to the original state. To Maa: “So long as man has not ordered

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<sup>39</sup> Bâ, “Living Tradition,” 171

<sup>40</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 180.

the worlds, the forces, and the people who are in him, he is Maa-nin, i.e., a kind of homunculus, an ordinary man, a man who has not been realized.”<sup>41</sup> Reaching the state of Maa is reaching self-mastery. Bâ continues, “Tradition says: ‘Maa kakan ka se i yere la noote a ba to Maa ni yala,’ which is to say, ‘One who is not able to leave the state of Maa-nin, to return to the state of Maa, is one who is not master of himself.’”<sup>42</sup> In this sense, although not readily available, the roles of guarantor of harmony and interlocutor of God can be sought out through the process of self-mastery.

In pursuit of self-mastery, the person is vulnerable to the duality of forces that often lead to contradiction within and without. While the forces of the original ancestor were already in equilibrium, which allowed Maa to participate fully in the role designated by the Supreme Being, Maa’s descendants need to work toward this balance. Thus, although the person is destined for the role of a universal guarantor of balance and interlocutor of God, she or he is not so automatically.

*Maa*, the place of encounter of all the forces of the universe, invested with the name of God—thus partaking in him—but equally constituted from heavier elements, has, thus, as the essential vocation to be “the interlocutor” of *Maa-ngala*. But if he or she can become an essentially religious and adoring being, and from there rediscover the way of his primary vocation, he or she is equally capable of loving or hating with a great passion, because everything is in him or her.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, despite the essential vocation expected of the person as a guarantor of equilibrium and interlocutor of God, the very nature of the human being is often opposed to this goal. The same elements that enabled Maa to maintain inner and outer balance and speak to Maa Ngala, which are the confluence of forces that constitute the human being, make it extremely difficult for Maa’s descendants to be able to reach and maintain that role, as these forces are chaotic in origin. Therefore, when assessing the person’s capacity to guarantee inner and outer balance via receptacle of all forces, it is not immediately promised that the person can create an equilibrium in the universe. Similarly, when considering the person’s connection to the Supreme Being via name and spark, it does not spontaneously guarantee the person direct communication with God.

To make the switch from chaos to order, from distraction to focus, from mindless chatter to profound communication, one needs to undergo the process of initiation. The person on the way toward becoming Maa, toward the full realization of personhood, needs to find the right avenue to make this synthesis happen. Although the person in his/her multiplicity is already marked with the

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<sup>41</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 17, my translation

<sup>42</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 17, my translation.

<sup>43</sup> Bâ, “La notion de personne en Afrique noire,” *La notion de personne en Afrique noire* (C.N.R.S.: Paris, 1973), 187, my translation

breath of Maa Ngala and with the name of the Creator, he or she needs to learn how to embody this privileged identity. The process of initiation provides the framework through which the synthesis can happen systematically. The goal of the initiation is to align the person with both their individual potential and their universal purpose of guarantor of harmony and interlocutor of God. The journey is often long and arduous and implies some type of contact with the spiritual world. It often requires overcoming original adversities caused by one's environment. It also demands the initiate to face oncoming circumstances that may sway the novice in the wrong direction, away from the inborn potential. Ultimately, initiation forms a person in a way that prepares one for the great responsibility that lies ahead.

Initiation is a transformational practice that helps the neophyte experience a particular presence in the world, which “engages man in his total being.”<sup>44</sup> The process of initiation functions as an infrastructure, throughout the stages of development in a person's life, which facilitates the transformation leading to spiritual awareness. Bâ explains the process,

The development of the person will take place at the rhythm established by the great periods of bodily development, each of which corresponds to a degree of initiation. *The purpose of initiation is to give the psychological person a moral and mental power which conditions and aids the perfect and total realization of the individual.*<sup>45</sup>

The stages of development for the Fulani and Bambara are composed of two main phases, ascending and descending, the apex being the age of sixty-three. Each phase is divided into three segments of twenty-one years, which marks a degree of initiation. Each segment, in turn, is divided into three periods of seven years, which marks a threshold of evolution. The three main phases mark the period of initiation and determine the level of insight the initiate is given— from learning ceremonies to maturation of the teachings, to reaching full spiritual maturity. The major goal of initiation is developing one's potential. Bâ states, “The human person, like the seed of a plant, evolves from an initial capital which is his own potential. This potential will develop throughout the ascending phase of life according to the terrain and the circumstances encountered.”<sup>46</sup> This potential ultimately connects with the human role of guarantor of equilibrium and interlocutor of God.

Based on Bâ's description of initiation, and general development of the process described by scholars such as Mircea Eliade,<sup>47</sup> each initiation consists of three main stages of separation, transition,

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<sup>44</sup> Bâ, “Living Tradition,” 168

<sup>45</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 12, my translation.

<sup>46</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 14, my translation.

<sup>47</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (Thompson, Conn.: Spring

and rebirth. During the first stage, students are removed from their familiar social milieu and placed into a new context. This is a voluntary separation from society and from societal norms of understanding the world. During the second stage, the initiates enter into a primordial space and time, a location that represents the time of creation, which helps to awaken spiritual awareness. This shift is often triggered by a symbolic or even a real brush with death. Finally, initiates are reborn and re-integrated into their society, but with a new status as members who have attained a certain level of spiritual consciousness. The awareness that ensues from initiation involves a visceral understanding of the intimate relationship between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the universe, or as Bâ frames it, “a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together and interact.”<sup>48</sup> By ‘all things’ here, Bâ means all manifestations as well as the esoteric forces that underlie them.

Despite the important role of the esoteric component, the process of initiation is very much connected to the everyday lives of the Fulani and Bambara people. The process of apprenticeship and practice of traditional professions, in particular, exemplifies specific pathways for artisans to become representatives of Maa on Earth. Bâ explains that there is “what is called the way of the smiths (*numusira* or *numuya*, in Bambara), the way of the farmers, the way of the weavers, and so on.”<sup>49</sup> Once the apprentice reaches the appropriate level of initiation, the performance of traditional crafts maintains the harmony in the universe, as well as opens the lines of communication between the human being and the Supreme Being. In other words, each master craftsman becomes a guarantor of harmony as well as an interlocutor of God. The fact that traditional artisans accompany their work with ritual chants or sacramental rhythmic words and that their very gestures are considered language, speaks to this role as an interlocutor. Bâ states, “the instruments or tools of a craft give material form to the sacred words; the apprentices’ contact with the craft obliges him to live the word with every gesture he makes.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the very work performed is an extension of the Supreme Being’s creation that maintains balance within the environment. Bâ develops, “The craftsman’s work was sacred because it imitated the work of Maa Ngala and supplemented his creation. Bambara tradition, in fact, teaches that creation is not yet finished and that Maa Ngala, in creating our earth, left things there unfinished so that Maa, his interlocutor, might supplement or modify them with a view to leading

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Publications, 1998)

<sup>48</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 168.

<sup>49</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 184.

<sup>50</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 184.

nature towards its perfection.”<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, traditional crafts helped to sculpt a person’s being.

Discussing the role of traditional crafts in Bambara culture, Bâ explains, “In fact, the gestures of each craft reproduce in a symbolism proper to each one the mystery of the primal creation ... bound up with the power of the Word.”<sup>52</sup> This explains why every gesture performed by a particular artisan, whether it is leather making, weaving, or metalworking, is considered language that flows from the exoteric to the esoteric dimension and back again. Through their work, these craftsmen are literally materializing divine language, while using tools that already represent or communicate from the invisible realm. The creations are, in fact, symbols of a higher reality, and they give material form to sacred words. This is well illustrated through the work associated with the smith, who is directly connected to the ancestor Maa. The smith, the smithy as a whole, its different components, and the act of metalworking fittingly represent the creation of the universe. Bâ describes the process that goes into the smith’s work:

... the forge is called Fan, but the same name as Fan the primordial Egg from which the whole universe issued forth and which was the first sacred forge ... Before beginning work, he [the smith] invokes the four mother elements of creation ... During his work, he pronounces special words as he touches each tool. Taking his anvil, which symbolizes feminine receptivity, he says: ‘I am not Maa Ngala, I am the representative of Maa Ngala. It is he who creates and not I’. Then he takes some water or an egg and presents it to the anvil, saying: ‘Here is your bride-price’ He takes his hammer, which symbolizes the phallus, and strikes the anvil a few times to sensitize it. Communication established, he can begin to work.<sup>53</sup>

Everything involved in the process of metalwork symbolizes the act of the creation of the universe, including the smith as the representation of the Supreme Being. Further, the whole process is a communication between the esoteric creation of the universe and its exoteric incarnation through the work in the smithy. This is a perfect illustration not only of the initiate as guarantor and interlocutor but also as a microcosmic reflection of the Supreme Being.

### **THE PERSON AS A REFLECTION OF GOD THROUGH THE MICROCOSM/MACROCOSM RELATION**

As the work of the blacksmith illustrates, the human being is, in some sense, God’s representation in the manifested world. In fact, the smith’s work, as described above, reproduces the story of creation in the smithy, while the smith represents the Creator. In discussing the importance of ritual purification before engaging in work, Bâ explains, “He has become pure once again and is equivalent to the primordial smith. Only now can he create in imitation of Maa Ngala, by modifying and fashioning

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<sup>51</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 180.

<sup>52</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 181.

<sup>53</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 182.

matter.”<sup>54</sup> The smith is, thus, a direct imitation or reflection of the Supreme Being. This illustration offers a window into the relationship between the microcosmic and macrocosmic universe. As guarantor of equilibrium and interlocutor of God, the human being becomes a direct reflection of the Supreme Being. In fact, by returning to the state of Maa, the human being in the state of spiritual perfection reclaims as legacy the divine power originally bestowed on the first ancestor, the gift of Mind and Word.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, as Maa, the human being is the microcosm of God’s macrocosmic identity. As Bâ concludes, tradition is concerned with: “the human person as an interior multiplicity, unfinished at the beginning, called to order to unify himself for the purpose of finding his right place within the unities more vast than the human community and the whole cosmos.”<sup>56</sup> The unity grander than the whole cosmos is the unity that makes the human being a direct reflection of the God.

Keeping the process of becoming Maa in mind, as the guarantor of equilibrium and interlocutor of God, the person can be considered a microcosm on two levels. First, as a medium of the ever-dynamic forces of the universe, the person is the direct reflection of the larger macrocosm of creation. Everything that exists in the universe also exists within the human being. Bâ explains: “This is why tradition regards the body of man as the world in miniature, according to the expression ‘Maa ye dinye merenin de ye,’ which means ‘Man is the universe in miniature.’”<sup>57</sup> Since Maa was created from all of the initial beings, which constituted the entire universe of creation, the person is a direct reflection of that universe on a micro level. Second, as the Supreme Being’s interlocutor, the person represents God through name and word. Bâ states: “the divine name with which Maa is invested confers on him the spirit and the fact of participating in the Supreme Force.”<sup>58</sup> Through speech, like God but on a smaller scale, the person is capable to create, as well as control the external environment. Through this understanding, the person is a direct reflection of God, the microcosm of God’s macrocosmic grandeur.

The concept that the human being is the microcosm, a reflection of God’s greatness on earth, is the strongest indication of the mystical undertones present in Fulani and Bambara ontology, based on Amadou Hampaté Bâ’s interpretation. Many mystical traditions, whether they are based on Hinduism or Christianity, have an adaptation of this metaphysical conception of the universe. Bâ’s reading of the notion of person, as a potential synthesis of the sum total of all cosmic forces who

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<sup>54</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 182.

<sup>55</sup> Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” 169.

<sup>56</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 17

<sup>57</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Bâ, *Aspects*, 15



strives to maintain balance and communicate with the Creator, is a characteristically Bambara and Fulani version of the same concept. In addition to the notion of the microcosm, other factors point to the presence of mysticism, such as the relationship between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions as well as the path that leads to union with God. The creation of the human being, the relationship between material realities and the forces that underlie them, as well as the specific type of communication between the human being and God all point to the mystical undertones existent in Fulani and Bambara ontology. Equally, the very process of initiation functions on the premise that initiates will encounter the spiritual dimension during their experience. The fact that Amadou Hampaté Bâ was initiated into both traditions reinforces his authority on this issue. He is also not alone in his interpretation of African ontology. Initiated scholars such as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Boubou Hama, and Malidoma Somé confirm many of the same mystical notions for the Serer, Songhay, and Dagara, respectively. The use of mystical methodology to interpret the Fulani and Bambara notion of personhood not only avoids some Western ontological pitfalls but, more importantly, it better reflects the realities of these traditions. Fulani and Bambara notions of the person, as interpreted by Bâ, already have the conceptions fundamental to mystical thought, particularly the understanding that the physical person is constantly informed by esoteric forces coming from the Supreme Being. Equally, the microcosmic conception of the human being as a potential reflection of God in these cultures overlaps with the mystical traditions of other religions. This methodology also avoids the dualistic confines of rationalist and empiricist philosophy, which separate and isolate the material and the spiritual facets of reality. Instead, mystical methodology supports the participation of the material and spiritual within the world, not as two different realities but as two aspects of the same reality. In this case, the material is the manifestation of the spiritual, which is, in turn, the foundation of physical manifestations. This implies that, while the historical context of the lived reality is crucial to understand the notion of the human being in different African cultures, it is just as important to recognize the metaphysical element of humanity, the being of microcosmic proportions, which is immune to the physical corruption of the person.

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