



Amadou  
Hampaté  
Bâ

**THE  
FORTUNES  
OF  
WANGRIN**

*translated by  
Aina Pavolini  
Taylor  
with an  
introduction by  
Abiola Irele*

# THE FORTUNES OF WANGRIN



Amadou Hampaté Bâ

*translated by Aina Pavolini Taylor  
with an introduction by Abiola Irele  
and an afterword by the author*

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## INTRODUCTION BY ABIOLA IRELE

Amadou Hampaté Bâ's reputation as an advocate of the African oral tradition and as historian of the continent's precolonial past was well established before the publication of what is now regarded as his masterpiece, and indeed, as one of the most significant texts in all of modern African literature: the work translated here under the title *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. Ostensibly a biography of Wangrin, an African interpreter in the service of French administration during the years of its establishment in West Africa, this is a compelling reconstruction of the colonial experience, and as such, a social document of great significance. The narrative constructed around the facts of Wangrin's life provides a fascinating record of the beginnings of French rule in what used to be known as "le Soudan Français" (the French Sudan), today more commonly referred to as the Sahel. But more important, this book registers the formidable impact of this historical process, as it begins to unfold, upon Africans of every class and station in the region.

The work derives its documentary value from what I have called elsewhere its "concrete quality of representation." This quality endows Hampaté Bâ's account with a sense of objectivity that provides the inspirational ground for the chronicler's art, displayed here in all its expressive vitality. For the factual basis of the account does not preclude a strong emotional tonality that colors the narrative and determines its character as personal testimony. Hampaté Bâ writes here not simply as a detached observer of the events that surrounded the exceptional life he is at pains to record, but as a concerned witness of the unique conjunction of events that marked the violent incursion of the French into the African world.

Perhaps no one was better qualified to provide this testimony than Amadou Hampaté Bâ himself, whose long life was closely interwoven with the very history that he recounts. He was born at the turn of the century in Bandiagara (in present-day Mali), the capital of the precolonial state of Macina, founded only a few decades earlier by the Fulani conqueror El Hadj Omar, who imposed Islam upon the populations throughout the area around the bend of the river Niger. Hampaté Bâ's parents on both sides were closely connected with the ruling elite of the new state and were tragically involved in the drama of its confrontation with the relentless progression of the French colonial enterprise, which put an end

to the existence of Macina as an independent state. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, the French completed their conquest of the Sahelian region with the aid of troops led by Colonel Archinard along the Senegal River into the valley of the Niger, into the very heart of the West African savannah. Shortly before the birth of Hampaté Bâ, Macina was overrun and incorporated into the new colony of Soudan, as part of what was later to become Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF). Thus, although claiming descent from a prestigious line of warriors and rulers, Hampaté Bâ came into the world as a French colonial subject.

His childhood was spent largely within the family circle ruled over by his iron-willed mother, Kadidja. After an early education at the Koranic school, he was enrolled in 1912 at the French primary school in Djenné, a city famous as a center of Islamic learning. The school was known as *l'école des otages* ("the school for hostages"), so-called because, like other schools started at this time by the French in their new colonial empire, it was intended for the children of local notables, as a means of loosening their family ties and cultural links, fostering in them a sense of identification with the French, and thus ensuring (it was hoped) their loyalty to France. Hampaté Bâ began to learn French and to acquire the rudiments of Western education at the school in Djenné. After obtaining his first school certificate, he decided to interrupt his studies in order to rejoin his parents at Bandiagara. At this time he came under the influence of Tierno Bokar, the Sufi religious leader, who began to give him advanced lessons in Arabic and became his life-long spiritual guide. Despite his devotion to the person and the teachings of Tierno Bokar, Hampaté Bâ came to realize that his future lay irrevocably with the new order introduced by the French. He resumed his Western education and in 1918 entered the École Régionale at Bamako. Three years later, he passed the competitive examination for admission to the École Normale de Gorée, in Senegal, for a long time the hothouse of the emerging French African elite. Because his mother objected to his going so far from home, he sought a position within the newly established French administration instead. He was promptly posted to Ouagadougou, in what was then Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), to begin a career as an African auxiliary in the French colonial civil service.

This career took an auspicious turn when he was recruited in 1942 by Théodore Monod, the eminent French anthropologist, as research assistant at the newly founded Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire (IFAN), in Dakar. With this appointment, Hampaté Bâ began a new life as historian and folklorist. His assignments took him through the length and breadth of French West Africa collecting research material for IFAN, and recording aspects of the oral traditions and cultures of the various popu-

lations in the region. He made his first visit to France in 1951 on a UNESCO fellowship, which enabled him to do research at the Musée de l'Homme, the principal institution in France for ethnological studies. He had begun by this time to acquire a reputation throughout French West Africa as a major intellectual figure through his scholarly publications and radio broadcasts on the history and indigenous cultures of the West African savannah. This reputation enabled him to secure sufficient funds in 1958 to found the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako, of which he was named Director. After the independence of Mali in 1960, he formed part of his country's delegation to the UNESCO General Conference, held that year in Paris; it was on this occasion that he made his passionate plea for the preservation of Africa's heritage with the famous statement, "En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle" ("In Africa, when an old person dies, it's a library burning down"). In 1962, he became a member of UNESCO's executive council, and in this capacity exerted his influence in determining that organization's orientation and priorities. At his retirement from public life in 1970, he settled in Abidjan, where he set up an informal school in the extensive family compound, complete with private mosque, that he had constructed at Macory, on the outskirts of the city. Here he spent his time writing his memoirs and receiving visitors from all over the world. At his death in 1991, he left behind an impressive output of some twenty books.

This outline of Hampaté Bâ's biography suggests the immediate connection between his own life and career and the material of this book, for he was himself, in a very real sense, an embodiment of the experience that he ascribes to Wangrin. The parallels between Wangrin's career and his own provided a strong foundation on which Hampaté Bâ could build his narrative. What is more, as he has indicated in the two volumes of his autobiography, the two lives touched at certain crucial points. As he tells the story, it was as a child in the early years of the century that he first caught sight of the man who came to be called Wangrin, at a time when, as monitor interpreter at Bandiagara, Wangrin had just begun his own career in the French colonial service. This early meeting not only favored a strong sense of personal identification with his subject when Hampaté Bâ came to write the story of Wangrin's life, but also conditioned the larger-than-life image he presents of his character.

But more important than a personal fascination with Wangrin going back to a childhood memory, the determining factor in the shaping of Hampaté Bâ's narrative was the shared background which bound him to his character. They belonged to a common universe of values, marked by vivid conceptions of individual rank, personal honor, and social obligations, a universe that Hampaté Bâ has reconstituted in this work with an

evident sense of attachment, all the stronger for having remained more a thing of memory than a living reality. This was a universe that was governed at the spiritual level by a structure of belief that, in constant tension with Islam, has continued to operate as an active force in the collective existence and apprehension. The power of myth as a conceptual reference for understanding the world and as a guide to individual endeavor gives significance to his constant evocation of the deities associated with the personality of Wangrin—Komo, Sanu, and especially Gongoloma-Sooke, his tutelary god—an evocation that must be read as a celebration of a communal vision and sensibility that Wangrin came so powerfully to embody for him.

It is against this background that the impact of French colonization as described in this book needs to be appraised. In the aftermath of their conquest of the region, the French embarked on what they described as “pacification” of the Sahel. Beginning with the drawing of new administrative and juridical lines around local populations, the massive reorganization of political, social, and economic life undertaken by the French had no other aim than to undo the political and social order, which had been in place in the region for centuries, and to substitute systems of their own making. As recounted by Hampaté Bâ in this work and in his autobiography, the French concentrated their efforts on creating new loyalties by dethroning previous rulers and replacing them with selected individuals, who would be beholden to the colonial authorities. An essential plank of this French policy was the systematic devaluation of traditional beliefs and forms of cultural expression, and the active promotion of what can only be called a French ideology, of which an ideal image of France as a benevolent agent of African promotion was the central reference. It did not matter that this ideology was contradicted by the reality of French colonial policy and practice. The civil service which was rapidly put in place, often administered by former officers of the French army, was essentially an instrument of economic exploitation; if, in the circumstances, it had to assume a formal character based upon an elaborate system of procedures and regulations, its essential function was furthered through the more brutal form of forced labor, with devastating effects upon whole communities throughout the expanse of the territories under French rule in West Africa, as also in the other half of the French colonial empire on the continent—in Equatorial Africa.

The social and moral consequences of the drastic reordering of life undertaken by the French in the Sahel are at the heart of the historical reminiscence contained in *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. The most striking aspect of this process toward a new order was the assault upon the local aristocracy. The realignments which the new system provoked account



for the atmosphere of intrigue and the jostling for power that provides the testing ground for Wangrin's project of self-realization as recounted in this book, in which he is presented as an exceptional individual who takes advantage of the moral confusion and cultural misunderstanding generated by the colonial situation for his own self-advancement. The book can be read as the story of a quest—determined, wilful, and even desperate—for self-fulfillment in a world of uncertainty.

In this respect, Wangrin stands out as an individual endowed with a remarkable lucidity, for he is one of the very few among the African population to grasp the import of the new dispensation, the original relation it established between the social order and system of values ushered in by the French, and a new understanding of the individual's standing in the world, manifested henceforth by one's economic success rather than the inheritance of birth and social ties. The story of Wangrin's rise to eminence (and of his eventual decline and fall) thus encapsulates the transition in the Sahel from the self-contained world of a precolonial feudalism to a new political and socioeconomic structure distinguished especially by the denial to Africans of historical initiative.

In the broader cultural perspectives intimated by the work, Wangrin's experience epitomizes the movement from a heritage of life that, for all its limitations, provided an anchor for the self, to an externally imposed and problematic modernity derived from the Western paradigm. It is the narrative uncovering of this fundamental relation between individual fate and the force of events that constitutes Hampaté Bâ's work as an important document of Africa's social history. But if his biography of Wangrin counts as a subcategory of history, it also takes the form of an extended narrative, one in which the *peripeteia* provide the elements of a plot charted along a definite line of development: the single-minded pursuit of a consuming passion, vindicated at first by its apparent triumph, only to be contradicted soon afterward by its tragic undoing. Hampaté Bâ creates a dramatic context for the restless unfolding of Wangrin's life experience, complete with elaborate settings and arresting and colorful dialogue as essential formal components of his narrative presentation. The series of adventures marking his progression is recounted with a verve that reflects the writer's expressive resources. But it is not only the external aspects of Wangrin's life that we witness: we also participate in the evolution of his mental states and are even occasionally provided with insights into his inner life.

Hampaté Bâ's exploration of Wangrin's personality may well appear summary in some important respects, but it is sufficient to establish Wangrin as the quintessential marginal man, burdened with an ambiguity grounded in his existential condition. Wangrin the colonial interpreter,



situated in time and place at the meeting point of two disparate languages, is seen to assume the demanding vocation of arbiter between two cultures in conflict, between two antagonistic value systems. The amorality that he displays through most of the story functions as the regulatory principle of his ambition, but it can also be considered a form of response to his stressful situation, an ethos that he assumes as a moral shield, the sign of his resolve to overcome the limitations imposed upon him and, most important, upon his self-conception. Thus, for all the ambiguity of his representation, Wangrin is far from being a pathetic figure; he emerges rather as an energetic, full-blooded character in a strongly articulated narrative.

He exists moreover in a world bustling with movement. *The Fortunes of Wangrin* presents a vast fresco of peoples and manners, sharply delineated and evoked as much in realistic detail as in symbolic terms. The procession of characters that moves through these pages comprises both Africans and Europeans, swirling around the figure of Wangrin in an incessant play of motives and impulses. The story takes its full life from the activity and interactions of these characters: on the African side, the local notables and the ordinary people whose condition as colonized subjects he shares, and on the French side, the administrators whose paths he crosses with dramatic results, notably Count de Villermoz, with whom he engages in a contest of wills that casts him, at least by implication, as a prototype of colonial rebel.

The scope of Hampaté Bâ's representation of Wangrin underlies the heroic dimension of his work, which, as Eileen Julien has rightly observed, is governed by what she discerns as "an epic impulse." This feature of the narrative is overtly reflected in the interventions of the griot Kountenna, who sings Wangrin's praises by reference to the exploits of the great figures of collective memory in the Sahel, the emperors of Mali and Ségou. Wangrin's adventure is situated squarely within the context of modern experience. At the same time, it is evident that, despite the realism of this narrative, Hampaté Bâ's representation of Wangrin's character corresponds to a recognizable figure lodged within the deepest recesses of the African imagination: that of the trickster in the oral tradition. It is not without interest to observe the affinities between this figure and such characters of European folk consciousness as the French Renart and the German Till Eulenspiegel, a type that is given striking literary embodiment in Molière's Scapin. Wangrin's character may thus be said to be grounded in a universal imaginary, a fact that endows his adventure with a symbolic significance, brought home to the reader by the quest theme through which the narrative development of earthly existence is organized. The obvious connection of the journey motif with the

quest theme in African initiation tales adds a special dimension to this aspect of Wangrin's experience. It is pertinent in this regard to observe that the tragic grandeur of Wangrin's final years confers a certain meditative quality to his story, which can be interpreted not merely as the unfolding of a singular destiny but also, and perhaps in its most authentic quality, as an allegory of our general human condition.

We are taken, then, in this book well beyond the bounds of a factual account of a life, of the kind we associate with standard biography, or the linear progression of events that we recognize as historical. As a text, *The Fortunes of Wangrin* lies at the intersection between history, considered, in the words of Bernard Baylin, as "correspondence to actuality," on one hand, and, on the other, literature, understood as pure projection of the imagining faculty. As Louis Mink and Hayden White among others have pointed out, the formal relation between the two is constituted by the principles of narrative discourse which imply a concern for relevance and coherence in the telling, in order to impose a meaningful pattern on the impersonal flow of time and the undifferentiated flux of experience. The demands of narrative construction thus determine for both genres not only a common rhetorical ground but also a fundamental imaginative framework. It is in this light that we must consider Hampaté Bâ's insistence upon the veracity of his story. One cannot help but observe that he does himself less than justice in underplaying the literary status of his work, in order to emphasize its purely factual reference. Although its documentary aspect makes for credible history, this history is not directly recounted so much as inferred from the circumstances of Wangrin's experience, for which it serves, from the point of view of the reader's engagement with the text, as largely incidental support. The focus here is placed unambiguously upon the personality of Wangrin, so that the historical reference of the work does not in any way undermine the claim to imaginative significance of its comprehensive representation of Wangrin's life and times. It is not the bare facts that matter, but the narrative strategies that have gone into this representation, and lend it an incomparable human interest. The essential consideration here must surely be not the exactitude of the recollection but the evocative power of the account.

These remarks lead us inevitably to the question of form. Hampaté Bâ, who was an accomplished poet in the Fulani language, also enjoyed the privilege of being a second-language writer in French, placed at the confluence of two linguistic systems and two imaginative traditions. He was endowed with a literary consciousness at the critical interface between African and Western forms of discourse. Although a traditionalist, he understood more than most African writers and intellectuals the need

to negotiate a convergence between the singular speech patterns of a formalized orality and the structures of literate expression as determined by print culture. *The Fortunes of Wangrin* illustrates this convergence admirably. The narrative method approximates as nearly as is possible within a written text the performance mode of oral composition and delivery. We are made aware throughout of the interplay and creative tension between the immediacies of speech acts in traditional communities and the conventions of textual production in literate cultures.

Given this quality of the work, and the exceptional vigor that Hampaté Bâ's writing often displays, it was inevitable that *The Fortunes of Wangrin* should have been approached as a novel. But it does not take much reflection to understand that it does not conform to the conception of the Western genre as defined by Ian Watt, for example, with its emphasis on realism and its narrow psychological interest. Samba Dieng's term *conte historique* comes close to suggesting the nature of the work, its integration of the traditional moral fable within a historical narrative. Non-African readers will perhaps be inclined to explain this peculiarity of the work, and its interweaving of the supernatural with a realistic narrative, by reference to the much-abused term "magic realism." The truth, however, is that the variegated character of Hampaté Bâ's work challenges classification. His achievement consists in the creative adaptation of mode to material, reflected here in the complex narrative procedures employed to give expression to the multiple levels of an expansive creative imagination.

Confronted with the singularity of his material, Hampaté Bâ was compelled to recreate the forms of narrative in order to accommodate fully the cultural grounding of his story. The convergence of history, culture, and language in the making of the African text, so much in evidence here, amounts ultimately to the elaboration of a distinctive aesthetic. *The Fortunes of Wangrin* thus provides us with an especially striking example of the relation between theme, language, and expressive mode in African literature. But beyond this formal significance, it points ultimately to the existential import of narrative as a means of ordering experience and of relating to the world.

Abiola Irele  
Columbus, Ohio  
December 1998

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## FOREWORD

This book is the fulfillment of a promise I made to a man I met in 1912. I was then a twelve-year-old schoolboy, and he worked as interpreter for the Commandant<sup>1</sup> of that area. He became attached to me for two reasons: first, because he was very close to my maternal uncle Hammadun Pate and secondly, because of the large number of stories I collected for him at his prompting.<sup>2</sup>

These stories I had heard from Kullel, who at the time was the greatest raconteur of traditional tales along that loop of the Niger. Kullel lived at the court of my adoptive father, Tidjani Amadu Ali, chief of the Luta province until French occupation brought about the political decline of the Tukulors of Bandiagara.

Fifteen years later I came across the hero of this book once again. He had resigned his job as interpreter and set up in business with what seemed at the time a vast amount of capital for any indigenous African to own. This is how we happened to meet again.

A European businessman had been murdered in Diussola. As he had no heir, the administration and liquidation of his property were put in the hands of the Probate Office, where I was employed at the time. Accordingly, my superior and I went to that town where I was received and sheltered by my uncle's friend. As Malian tradition has it, he considered me and therefore treated me as his own nephew.

We were both exceedingly happy to meet again. Remembering what a fine storyteller I had been in my youth, he felt the need to relate to me in detail his adventurous and tempestuous life.

One day he came up to me and said: "My little Amkullel,<sup>3</sup> in days gone by you were a fine storyteller. Now that you have learned to write, you must take down the story of my life and after my death compose it into a book which will not only amuse but also instruct those who read it. I am asking you explicitly not to mention my real name so as to spare my relatives the risk of feeling superior or inferior. . . . Rather, you will use one of my borrowed names—the one dearest to me, 'Wangrin.'"

Every evening, after dinner, from eight to eleven, and sometimes even twelve, Wangrin would recount episodes from his life. His conversation was accompanied by the strains of a lute, played skillfully and indefatigably by his griot, Dieli Madi. We went on in this way for three whole

months. Apart from collecting and noting down carefully a number of tales told by Wangrin himself, later on I had the good fortune of being employed in all of Wangrin's former stations. There, talking with the people who had in one way or another been involved in his adventures, I was able to add to the information already at my disposal.

As for my account of the last years of Wangrin's life, I owe a debt not only to his griot Dieli Madi, who remained faithful to him in the days of his decline as he had been in those of his glory, but also to Romo who, paradoxically, in spite of having been his greatest enemy, had the honor of presiding, with sincere sorrow in his heart, at the funeral of a man with whom he had never for a moment ceased fighting. Finally death proved more effective than strength, ruses, or jealousy, for the sight of Wangrin's remains moved Romo deeply. Before his bier, Romo forgave and asked to be forgiven.

I have faithfully related, then, all that was told to me here and there. Let no one try, then, to look for any kind of thesis, be it political, religious, or other, in the following pages. This is no more than a man's life. But my readers will doubtlessly want to hear a few things about the man whose weird and tumultuous history I am about to recount.

Who was Wangrin? He was a profoundly strange human being with so great a mixture of good qualities and faults that, at a mere glance, it was impossible to describe him, and even less to place him. Wangrin was an eminently intelligent as well as an outstanding man. He was extremely superstitious and from time to time a diehard skeptic. An implacable and sometimes even fierce embezzler when dealing with the rich, he had never stopped being tender-hearted and charitable, and he had always felt an inclination toward helping the poor. His imperturbable self-assurance, leonine daring, and proverbial effrontery were practiced to the detriment of European, Lebanese, and Syrian businessmen, chiefs, and other men who were powerful in his day. But his prowess found its finest expression in his handling of "those gods of the bush," or colonial administrators, who happened to cross his path. Indeed, at that time it was certainly easier to have the weight of Mount Sinai on one's shoulders than the displeasure of the most insignificant of colonial administrators.

Wangrin was able to conquer calmly all the dangers sown along his path by circumstance and to accept setbacks philosophically when his otherwise good fortune took a turn for the worse. Always facetious, he nevertheless kept his word and all his promises religiously. In his bantering way he went so far as to warn his companions of the adversary tricks he intended playing on them. This was the sort of caustic refinement he would often indulge in.

As for me, I am most happy—through this work—to keep a promise made to a man who always kept his, so much so that it was said of him: “Wangrin’s words are gold, and his promises are as durable as bronze.”

Amadou Hampaté Bâ  
6 November 1971



# CONTENTS

*Introduction by Abiola Irele / vii*

*Foreword / xvii*

Overture	1
<b>1</b> The Birth	3
<b>2</b> Diagaramba	10
<b>3</b> First Confrontation	25
<b>4</b> The Beginning of a Career	30
<b>5</b> Where the Calamities of Some . . .	36
<b>6</b> The Storm Breaks	42
<b>7</b> The Count's Messenger	51
<b>8</b> The Trial	56
<b>9</b> The Donkey Who Drank Honey	65
<b>10</b> Romo's Son and Beautiful Pugubila	87
<b>11</b> The Death of a Great Chief and What Came of It	97
<b>12</b> The Ambush	107
<b>13</b> The Calamitous Bird's Egg	116
<b>14</b> A Cumbersome Turban	128
<b>15</b> Where Each Gets His Due	133
<b>16</b> The Dream of the Fulbe Shepherdess	138
<b>17</b> Pretty Much in the Lion's Jaws	145
<b>18</b> Where Wangrin Is Off Once Again to a Good Start	153
<b>19</b> A Profitable Pledge	161
<b>20</b> The Reconversion	167
<b>21</b> An Elephant's Tale	172

<b>22</b>	A Disquieting Arrival	179
<b>23</b>	Pretty Doe of the Markets	184
<b>24</b>	Two Birds with One Stone	191
<b>25</b>	A Narrow Escape	205
<b>26</b>	. . . In Which Romo Keeps His Promise . . . and Wangrin His	209
<b>27</b>	A Souvenir “Crafted by Wangrin”	216
<b>28</b>	First Warning: The Hausa Geomancer	222
<b>29</b>	Madame White-White	226
<b>30</b>	Second and Third Warnings: A Fatal Oversight and the Sacred Python	231
<b>31</b>	Madame “Good Offices”	235
<b>32</b>	An Irreparable Loss	240
<b>33</b>	Last Warning: The Dove with a Black Ring Circling Half Her Neck	242
<b>34</b>	Philosopher Tramp	246
<b>35</b>	The Three Bloods and Death	251
<b>36</b>	Adieu	254

*Afterword* / 257

*Notes* / 261