

“THE ONLY REALITY IN BLACK AFRICA BACK THEN”: BOUBOU HAMA AND THE INTEGRATION BETWEEN TECHNIQUE AND SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

This article approaches the ideas of a man called Boubou Hama. His life was marked by an active intellectual and political trajectory in Niger, former French colony in West Africa. In a controversial date (1906 or 1909), Boubou Hama was born in a village of Songhay² ethnic group called Fonéki; as a child, he attended schools of the colonial administration until graduating in the *École Normale Supérieure William Ponty* – the biggest and most important educational institution of *Afrique Occidentale Française* [French West Africa / FWA] – as the first professor in the colonial Niger. After working as a professor for almost twenty years, Boubou Hama launched himself, in the 1940s, into political life, working actively in the first Niger’s party – Parti Progressiste Nigérien, [Nigerian Progressist Party / NPP]. After the country’s independence, in 1960, he remained extremely close to the first president, Diori Hamani, occupying different important jobs, as the presidency of the National Assembly, the presidency of the *Conseil National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique* [National Council of Scientific and Technical Research], and the directory of the *Centre Régional de Documentation pour la Tradition Orale de l’Ouest Africain* [Regional Center of Documentation for Oral Tradition of West Africa / RCDTO], to name just a few. Boubou Hama remained in public life until his imprisonment in 1974, when a military coup, perpetrated by Seyni Kountché, took place. His written work is monumental and it addresses different thematics, denoting

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² I opted for maintaining the French spelling used in Boubou Hama’s work when we refer to human groups of Western Africa.

a proficuous intellectual production that does not end until his death, in 1982.

This short biography aims to present an important character of the Nigerian history, so little known in our country. In the core of Boubou Hama's intellectual projects – which were inseparable from his political projects -, education and culture had a fundamental role. For him, the safeguard and the dissemination of properly “African” knowledge, as he called, were essential for the response process to the colonial domination, as well as the uprising process of the black continent in relation to Europe and the rest of the world. In this direction, Boubou Hama was a man who worked intensively so that present cultures of his country became known. While he saw himself and his initiatives as parts of a bigger enterprise of rescue and preservation of traditions, he also used them to develop his own projects.

With this work, I believe I could contribute for the knowledge of a less studied part of Africa's history and its inhabitants. From a questioning about how an important character of Niger understood current “traditional” cultures in his region and how he proposed to use them in his own time, I divided the development of this article in three parts. In a first moment, for contextualization, I will show some information about Niger on the eve and at the beginning of the colonial occupation. Secondly, I will discuss some of Boubou Hama's conceptions about “traditional knowledge”, that is, how this man elaborated the idea of a “Nigerian culture”, which he understood as being present before the colonial times and remained present in his own epoch. Finally, I will examine some aspects about the impacts of colonization on knowledge and its dissemination, analyzing what Boubou Hama proposed in this sense. In time, it should be clear that all translations presented here are my own, and the original texts are available in the footnotes.

Niger: an overview of before and after the colonial occupation

The current country called Niger is located simultaneously in the central and West portion of Africa, and it is the largest country in this part of the continent. Its territory extends through the Sahara as well as through the Sahel, it is bordered by other seven countries and it does not have, therefore, exits neither for the Mediterranean nor for the Atlantic. Such geographic portion was the stage of dynamic and complex internal commercial networks, that developed from the VII century, embracing all the Sahel region of West Africa and that, by Trans-Saharan routes, arrived at the Maghreb (Northern

part of the continent) and the Middle East (Hernandez 2008, 33-36). In this sense, Moraes Farias still calls attention for the exchanges, loans and cultural modifications occurred among different peoples, for example, by commercial contacts, and also warning about the malleability and fluidity that, so many times, are not considered by historiography (Moraes Farias 2006: 225).

It is diverse the populations that end up composing the contemporary Nigerian face, which many were nomads – even if having subsequent settlements and populational establishments – and are different from each other. Even if it is necessary to relativize the idea of ‘unity’ between any human groups in that West Africa’s region, we can name, for example, some that are preponderant in Boubou Hama’s work: the Tuaregue group, Peul, Hausa and Zarma-Shonghay. Niger, on the eve of the colonial occupation, came close to the image of an intersection of different people and cultures, once the peoples, its localization and movements did not circumscribe to a certain area forcedly fixed by the colonizers. However, by the end of the XIX century, the European occupation arrived, demarcating the region that lately would be known as the ‘colony of Niger’. Many of its inhabitants continued to know and refer to themselves by its ethnical compositions; however, in general, all individuals circumscribed to the recent delimited zone came to be known as ‘Nigerians’.

It is true that the European endowments in the West Africa region are prior to the Berlin Conference itself (1884-1885), as demonstrated by the fact that the inhabitants of the *Quatre Communes* [Four Councils] of Senegal – named Dakar, Gorée, Saint-Louis and Rufisque -, called *les originaires* [the originals], had some citizen rights, including the right to vote, as soon as 1848 (Cooper 2014, 6). However, it was during the third French Republic, established after the fall of Napoleon III and maintained between 1871 and 1940, that it was established the colonial organizations more fully defined. Fundamental for the French logistic in the African continent, such administrative unities were the following: the *Afrique Occidentale Française* [French West Africa / FWA], built in 1895 and composed, in its complete shape, by the colonies of Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Guinea, Soudan (currently Mali), Upper Volta (currently Burkina Faso), Dahomey (current Benin) and Niger, and the *Afrique Équatoriale Française* [French Equatorial Africa / FEA], formed in 1910 and integrated by the colonies of Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Chad and Ubangi-Shari.

In the interior of the West portion of the African continent ruled by the French, Niger emerges as a territory that felt violently, through bloody combats that aimed to resist the colonial occupation, the inescapable presence of the European troops. Amidst a huge outpouring of blood that

marked not only the expeditions destined for the colonial conquer, but also the consequent attempts of resistance by the locals, this dry and inhospitable region that would be called ‘the colony of Niger’ succumbed – a little late in comparison with the other territories – to the French advancements. In this sense, initially a military territory (1900-1921) and a colony afterwards (1922-1960), Niger is described by Boubou Hama as being “the perfect colonial type for exploration”, in which peanut, cotton, rubber and skins composed the products of interest to the colonial market (Hama 1974: 103).

Beyond the rules of the market, there were still other French established regimes to which the autochthonous were exposed to that shows the way how the colonial government provoked changes in the structure of the Nigerian society. Among them, I would like to call attention for the implementation of an educational system, controlled by the colonial administration, to where the children from the most diverse localities should be sent to. Such system had a fundamental importance for the constitution of literate elite that was present in the political scene not only before, but after independence. The colonial education was also present in the trajectory of life of Boubou Hama himself, acting as a factor of profound relevance in the intellectual path of this man of culture that was so interested about education, working strongly for the safeguard and propagation of the people’s culture knowledge of the Niger region.

Traditional knowledge and the idea of a “Nigerian culture”

A preliminary elucidation is needed: the term ‘traditional’ is changeable; we also cannot affirm that people and societies remained statically not even before, nor during the colonization, in the same way that we should not understand ‘traditional’ as being a concept of a single definition throughout the times. In this sense, the question that we propose is what Boubou Hama himself understood for that word. Generally, in his texts, such notion refers to the pre-colonial period, but as he considers a more extensively temporality, marked by many different characteristics, as well as by different mutations, Boubou Hama sometimes used differentiations that specified his idea; for example, “Songhay tradition”, “Islamic tradition”, or even adding differences; such as “the Islamic tradition of Sonni Ali Ber’s epoch”.

Beyond that, it is possible to note that the distinction proposed by Hobsbawn between tradition (unchangeable) and costume (changeable) (Hobsbawn 1984: 9-23) does not apply to this case, once Boubou Hama tends to use both terms organically and even interchangeably. In general terms, for him, “traditional knowledge” is a macro idea that inserts a

series of comprehensions, capacities, foundations and information present between societies in the African continent – for which he uses many times the bigger term ‘Africans’ - before the establishment of Europeans and the colonies’ formation (in the formal sense of the term), Obviously, such knowledge also spread during the colonial period, something that proves for the possibility that Boubou Hama had to access them, as we shall see. Given such premises, and in the light of the examples in this man’s texts, the question that interest us to examine is: what was considered as knowledge in the “Nigerian” societies in the pre-colonial period?

In the following excerpt, Boubou Hama shows some characteristics of the Gana Empire (of Soninké origins and the first of the three great empires of West Africa, *circa* the III and XIII century) and the Mossi reign (established from the XII century in the current region of Burkina Faso and with which Boubou Hama himself had contact in his passage, when he was a child, by Ouagadougou³) in relation to the “religious” practices. These two cases serve as examples of what he called “animist society”, which identifies internally a type of specific knowledge. In his words:

In the old [empire of] Gana, the royal fetiche are deposited in a sacred forest. But each region, each village had its tutelar genious. Each family, each caste, had its science or its particular cult.

In the Mossi Empire, it was the Moro Naba, supreme chief of the cult, that had the main fetish of the Empire and, with them, the supreme knowledge that guides the priests and the responsible for political life.

The animist society, emanation of its “superstructure”, inside the same conception of life and man, is strongly integrated with private cults in which action is taken at the level of the individual, the family and the castes.

It is in these base cells that they initiated in art, science, in a professional practice. The initiation regarding the people, the children of the people, it is made in associations or, without social distinction, these children dedicated themselves to the practice of a certain philosophy of life, that of “know what to say” and “know what to do”⁴ (Hama 1978: 13).

³The period lived in Ouagadougou is reported by Boubou Hama in the first volume of his autobiography, titled *Kotia-Nima*.

⁴« Dans l’ancien Ghana les fétiches royaux sont déposés dans une forêt sacrée. Mais chaque région, chaque village avaient leur génie tutilaire [sic]. Chaque famille, chaque caste avaient sa science ou son culte particuliers [sic]. Dans l’Empire Mossi, c’est le Moro Naba qui est le chef suprême du culte, c’est lui qui détient les fétiches principaux de l’Empire et avec eux, la suprême connaissance qui guide les prêtres et les responsables de la vie politique. La société animiste, émanation de sa ‘super-structure’, dans la même conception de la vie et de l’homme, est fortement intégrée dans les cultes particuliers où s’exécute l’action au niveau de l’individu, de la famille et des castes. C’est dans ces cellules de base qu’on s’initie à l’art, à la science, à la pratique d’un métier. L’initiation en direction du peuple, des enfants du peuple se fait dans des associations ou, sans distinction de rang social, ces enfants se livrent

In the text's content, it is notable that words like 'fetish', 'sacred', 'genius', 'cult' and 'priest' are connected with other terms such as 'knowledge' (or 'science'), 'politics', 'conception of life' and 'action', denoting the proximity that it relates to what we will call the 'spiritual' scope and 'technical' scope. Also, regarding the children's learning, the "know what to say" (which relates to the acquisition of knowledge) and the "know what to do" (relating to the learning of an expertise or profession) are considered as a philosophy of life. All these elements are, therefore, connected; for Boubou Hama, such connection seems to be established a long time ago, given its rescue from the antique Ghana Empire. In addition, according to the excerpt analyzed, there was a social, familiar and political organization, which epicenter was found in the cult practice and in the presence of a tutelar genius; that is, the technic was strongly linked to those conceptions belonging to the spiritual sphere. In short, I would like to suggest that, when we think of Boubou Hama's understanding concerning the idea of a traditional "knowledge", we should have in mind the inseparability between all those aspects.

In this same direction, we can imply that, in this man's conception about that context, all spheres of life could be comprehended from "religious" background – that can be an inadequately word, but it is the word that he uses in many of his texts –, or still, that were submersed in a spiritual "dimension". According with Boubou Hama, "animism was, before the arrival of Europe in some of our countries, the only religion that guided the lives of the family and the collectivities. Therefore, it ruled the individual's behavior and society itself. All, in the Black Africa, was made in the framing of our conceptions of life and world"⁵ (Hama 1968: 53). By using the term "everything", Boubou Hama truly reveals the far reach that he considered that the spiritual conception had in relation to people's lives, in its most diverse fields. The reading of his texts also allows to understand what he comprehended by the term "animism", something that embraced conceptions of the world (*Weltanschauung*) that were different not only from Islamism (received, modified and adapted to the Africa' Sub-Saharan context since the XI century) as much as from Christianity (introduced since the contact with Europeans). An essential characteristic from this understanding was the integration of all things; individuals and society, part and everything:

à la pratique d'une certaine philosophie de la vie, à celle du 'savoir dire' et 'savoir faire'. »

5 "L'animisme était, avant l'arrivée de l'Europe dans certains de nos pays, la seule religion qui régissait la vie de la famille et des collectivités. Celle-ci réglait, alors, le comportement des individus et de la société elle-même. Tout, en Afrique Noire, se faisait dans le cadre de nos conceptions de la vie et du monde".

Animism bases the direction of society about its conception of life and the world, about the individual unity imbricated in the group unity, about the “partial” that gains form with the everything that formed it and from which it does not separates from. If “I have your hair or the clothe that touched your body, I have the last completely.”

[...] For animism, there is no remission of sins, because each fault affects the whole of creation, for which are responsible, simultaneously, the individual and the society that assist him⁶ (Hama 1978: 11-12).

This type of social conception also echoes in the way Amadjoy Hampâté Bâ presents the religious vision of the world postulated by African traditions, that presupposed a connection between the visible and invisible universe: “In the interior of this vast cosmic unity, everything is connected, everything is solidary, and man’s behavior with himself and in relation with the world that surrounds him (mineral, vegetal, animal worlds and human society) is object of a very precise ritual regulation which forms can vary according to the ethnics or regions.” (Hampâté Bâ 1980: 173). Equally, we see Léopold Sédar Senghor describes African society as collectivist and communitary, within which someone “fells and think that can only develop his virtualities – his original being – in society and through it, in communion with all other members of the social group, with all men, or even with all other human beings of the world: God, animal, tree or stone.” (Senghor 1971: 307). It is about two men whose lives resemble Boubou Hama’s, as wells as the epoch, the experience in FWA’s territories – the first in Soudan and the second in Senegal -, and study trajectories and similar works, which allow us tot think about the circulation of ideas among African intellectuals.

In the sense of what’s been debated, Hampâté Bâ also suggests that “inside the oral tradition, in fact, the spiritual and the material are not dissociated” (Hampâté Bâ 1980: 169), and the African culture itself “involves a particular vision of the world, or, in better words, a particular *presence* in the world – a world conceived as Everything where all things reconnect and interact” (Hampâté Bâ 1980: 169), both notions shared by Boubou Hama. In this perspective, we can conclude that elements such as knowledge, wisdom, experience and technique are integrated. In his *Essai d’analyse de l’éducation Africaine* [Analytical Essay on African education], Boubou Hama aims to provide a framework under which the Songhay’s and Zarma’s mental universe lies, studying its spiritual life and its daily

6 “L’animisme base la direction de la société sur sa conception de la vie et du monde, sur l’unité de l’individu imbriqué dans celle de l’ensemble, sur le ‘partiel’ qui prend corps avec le tout qui l’a fourni et dont il ne se sépare pas. Si ‘J’ai ton cheveu ou le vêtement qui a touché ton corps, j’ai ce dernier dans son entier’. [...] Pour l’animisme, il n’y a pas de rémission des péchés, car chaque faute affecte l’ensemble de la création dont, à la fois, est responsable l’individu et la société qui l’assiste”.

practical existence. In this rich study, permeated by diverse stories, myths, beliefs and the characters of the spiritual world (gods, *holés*,⁷ spirits, etc.) show in relation to the concrete world. As he alerts, it is not about a fiction; such questions were lived in reality: “but, I know that for the western world all this sounds like a fiction. However, this does not change the fact that this was *the only reality in the Black Africa back then*, the primordial base from which we extract our spiritual and material acquisition, practical and pacific...⁸” (Hama 1968: 140-141).

In this context, education is the other present element. It was also carried out in the material as well as in the spiritual level, reiterating the argument that, for Boubou Hama, these fields were inseparable in that context. A significant example in this sense comes in relation to the Sorkos’ caste – fishermen who inhabited the margins of the Niger river and were the only permitted to hunt great animals from it, the alligator [*caïman*], the hippo and manatee [*lamantin*]⁹ –, by the stories collected by Alfa Mossi and Maïguizo Naïmo along with the Sorko people of Koutougou, Liboré (Niamey) and Gaweï regions:

All Sorkos interrogated about themselves said that it [the alligator] is mean and it became dangerous because of the djinns that protect them. It must be made enchantments to keep away these alligator’s *djinns*¹⁰ when you want to kill them.

The alligators hunting consists in two ways. The first consists in “calling” the alligator reciting “prayers”. As soon as it appears, he is spiked with a harpoon and, then, killed. [...] The second way [...] consists in serving a bait (fish, small animal). In the place where the alligator is, the fish hook is positioned with a bait, that captures it. [...] When it leaves the water, it is beaten with the harpoon or a heavy object. [...]

[...] the Sorko fishermen consider this animal [the hippo] as their ox; they do not fear it. [...] the hippo hunting is always preceded by invocations,

7 In general terms, it refers to spiritual entities that can make contact with humans through rituals of possession, in which the *Holé-Tam* (Holé’s slave) or *Holé-Bari* (Holé’s horse) receives one of them. An example of this connection, one possessed by Dongo, the *Holé* of lightnings, rains and storms, becomes *Dongo-Bari* (Dongo’s horse) and it is recognized by particular powerful shoutings that emanate among others *Holé-Tam*. This issue is approached in some of Boubou Hama’s work, for example his first book, published in 1954 along with Jean Boulnois and called *L’Empire de Gao: histoire, coutumes et magie des Sonrai* [The Gaos’ Empire: history, costumes e the Songhay’s magic].

8 “Mais, je sais que tout cela apparaît à l’occidental comme une fiction. Il n’en demeure pas moins *qu’il fut l’unique réalité d’hier en Afrique Noire*, le fond primordial où nous avons puisé notre acquit spirituel et matériel pratique et pacifique...” Original griffins

9 I will not go into taxonomic merit, given the immense variety and subdivisions related not only to “alligator” as well as “manatee”; I use these words in a generic form, being this way that they are also used, in French, in Boubou Hama’s book.

10 Geniuses. I opted for keeping the term as in the original.

by 'prayers'. [...] From this moment that it is spiked by the harpoon, the animal becomes mean and threatens the fishermen and the *pirogas*. [...] In this critical moment, the Sorko *griot*¹¹ recites the hippo's praises [...] After this invocations, the hippo calms and, following, it is attacked and killed. [...]

As soon as the manatee enters between two stakes, it is caught. The Sorko spikes it with the harpoon and kills it. The prey is taken out of the water; it is washed, then, with water and herbs. Without this washing, the manatee's meat can be dangerous for consuming. [...] This happens because the manatee has a protector genius that can be expelled only in the moment of washing the dead animal¹² (Hama 1968: 86-91).

I would like to call attention for the following: on one side, we can isolate practical actions of strategic, technical and material features, such as the observation and localization of the animals, the use of the baits, harpoons and traps, and the sanitizing washing of the meat; on the other hand, it is possible to discriminate other actions, also practical, directed to the spiritual world, such as enchantments, prayers and invocations, whose basis lies in the belief of the presence of protecting geniuses and in the possibility of direct contact with these animals, which react in a humanized way to men. The text, however, does not separates this two fields; the hunting practice of alligators, hippos and manatee, as described by fishing professionals belonging to the Sorko's caste, it is composed equally, and in the same measure, by 'scientific' techniques and by 'magical' practices. In

11 "Griot is the name given by the French to the diéli which among the bambara means 'storyteller. In time: diéli is the one that has the vital force.'" (Hernandez 2008: 29). And still: "But after all, who are the *griots*? They are troubadours, minstrels, storytellers and public animators for whom the discipline of truth loses rigidity, giving a freer language. Still, it stands out the commitment with the truth, without which they would lose the capacity to act in order to maintain harmony and group cohesion, based on a genealogical function of fixing familiar mythologies in the traditional societies scope." (Hernandez 2008: 30).

12 "Tous les Sorko interrogés à son sujet disent qu'il [le caïman] est méchant et qu'il est rendu dangereux à cause des djinis [sic] qui le protègent. Il faut procéder à des incantations pour éloigner ces djinns du caïman quand on veut le mettre à mort. La chasse aux caïmans se fait de deux façons. La première consiste à 'appeler' le caïman en récitant des 'prières'. Dès qu'il paraît, on le harponne et on le tue. [...] La deuxième façon [...] consiste à se servir d'un appât (poisson, petit animal). Sur l'emplacement repéré, on place le hameçon qui l'attrape. [...] Il sort alors de l'eau. Là, il est abattu à coup de harpon ou de masse lourde. [...] ...les pêcheurs sorko considèrent cet animal [l'hippopotame] comme leur bœuf. Ils n'ont pas peur de l'hippopotame. [...] la chasse à l'hippopotame est toujours précédée d'invocations, de 'prières'. [...] Dès qu'il est harponné, l'animal devient méchant et menace pêcheurs et pirogues. [...] A ce moment critique, le Sorko griot dit les louanges de l'hippopotame [...] Après ces invocations l'hippopotame se calme. Il est attaqué ensuite et tué. [...] Dès que le lamantin s'engage entre deux piquets il est pris. Le Sorko le harponne et le tue. On sort le gibier de l'eau. On le lave avec de l'eau et des herbes. Sans ce lavage la viande du lamantin peut être dangereuse pour la nourriture. [...] Ceci parce que le lamantin a un génie protecteur qu'on ne peut chasser qu'au moment du lavage de l'animal tué." Our griffins.

addition, it is exactly this kind of knowledge that Boubou Hama, in another work, dedicated substantially to that caste, refers when he searches to clarify the reasons of the hunting monopoly of those animals by the Sorkos:

The Sorko has a recognized monopoly of manatee, hippo and crocodile hunting. Even if he can only attack them with the harpoon, it does not mean that the other fishermen, the Hausa of Kebbi, for example, are not capable of doing it also (once they come to Niger to learn the fishing art with the Sorkos), but it is, above all, because manatee, hippo and crocodile harpoon hunting – aquatic animals, river geniuses, as we shall see – it is preceded, accompanied and followed by magical practices, which secrets the Sorkos hold, from father to son, since immemorial times. All the foreigners respect this monopoly, not only mystical but also craft, which makes the Sorkos the river’s masters. Once a not-Sorko fishermen comes to face these animals in the Niger [river], he requires the presence of the Sorko, his magic and his art; and pays him a indemnity¹³ (Boulnois and Hama 1954: 22).

Boubou Hama did not make part of any specific Songhay caste; he was a profoundly interested intellectual for what he considered traditional knowledge, found in the Nigerian territory in his epoch. Thus, the reason of the revival and compilation of these knowledge, professional techniques, forms of education and initiation – which appear in many of his works – is related to Hama’s own plans and projects for Niger and Africa as a whole. Furthermore, I would like to argue that, from the perception of Boubou Hama, a common aspect to what was related to the field of the ‘traditional’ was the contact with the ‘invisible world’ and, more deeply, an understanding of the world that is closely intertwined to the spiritual level. For this man, this was a fundamental trait of the ‘black man’, being this idea the very essence that will be maintained in his ideas and projects throughout his entire career.

Although the castes about which the book *Essai d’analyse de l’éducation Africaine* [Essay of African Education Analysis] is about still exists after the investitures and colonial establishment, this brought many impacts,

13 “Le Sorko a le monopole reconnu de la chasse au lamentin, à l’hippopotame et au crocodile. Si lui seul peut l’attaquer au harpon, ce n’est pas que les autres pêcheurs, les Haoussa du Kebbi par exemple, n’en seraient pas capables, eux aussi (puisqu’ils viennent au Niger apprendre des Sorko l’art de la pêche), c’est surtout parce que la chasse au harpon du lamentin, de l’hippopotame et du crocodile, animaux aquatiques, génies du fleuve comme nous le verrons, est précédée, accompagnée et suivie de pratiques magiques dont les Sorkos détiennent les secrets de père en fils, depuis en temps immémorial. Tous les étrangers respectent ce monopole aussi mystique qu’artisanal qui fait des Sorko les ‘maîtres du fleuve’ et lorsqu’un pêcheur non sorko veut s’attaquer aux animaux du Niger, il sollicite la présence du Sorko, sa magie et son art ; on lui paie une indemnité.”

affecting the most different fields of action and thought in the West-African territory. In this perspective, and referring to the characteristics of the pre-colonial period, Boubou Hama, beautiful and sadly, exposes: “at least that was how our African societies were built before the foreigners came to dispose them as they pleased, in an atmosphere of dissolution which they did not contribute, but destroyed what, after millennia, we have built for the purpose of challenge death and time”¹⁴ (Hama 1968: 194-195).

Impacts of colonization on knowledge and its circulation

If by one side, it is difficult to make affirmations about the actual reach that the colonial establishment conquered in different parts of what came to be the colony of Niger, as well as its inhabitants, on the other side, it is undeniable that the colonial investiture generated impacts. These were more or less profound, more or less felt, according to the people location, however, the French presence caused some degree of repercussion and disorder, for better or for worst. In relation to the FWA, Benoist observes that a lesser reach in the rural areas, where, we can add, the distances as well as the severe weather contributed for more difficulties of access by the colonial administration and, consequently, a less effective contact with the people. According to the author,

It was only before the First World War that French domination was, still not completely, established under the territories of FWA. During a quarter of century that followed, the administration extended its net on the region, without, however, modifying profoundly the traditional society. [...]

The peasants continued to live in a sacralized world and to take from the family's land, and thanks from a collective work, the resources for their sustenance and for the celebration of the community celebrations that rhythm the year¹⁵ (Benoist 1982: 17-18).

In this interpretation, social practices related to work with the

14 “C’était du moins ainsi que nos sociétés africaines étaient construites avant que les étrangers ne vissent en disposer à leur guise dans un climat dissolvant qui n’a pas apporté mais qui a détruit ce que, depuis de millénaires, nous avons construit dans le but de défier la mort et le temps”.

15 “Ce n’est qu’à la veille de la première guerre mondiale que la domination française fut à peu près établie sur l’ensemble des territoires constituant l’A.O.F. Pendant le quart de siècle qui a suivi, l’administration a étendu son réseau à l’ensemble du pays, sans pour autant modifier en profondeur la société traditionnelle. [...] Les paysans continuaient à vivre dans un monde sacralisé et à tirer de la terre familiale, et grâce à un travail collectif, de quoi vivre et de quoi célébrer les fêtes communautaires qui rythmaient l’année”.

land and the different stages that govern the cycles of agriculture would have remained practically intact. In this sense, the comprehension of the world based in spiritual perspective had also been preserve or, more or less, little affected. On the other hand, Boubou Hama understood the colonial settlement and subsequent relations established in the territory as deeply disturbing. In the following excerpt, he seeks to trace a parallel allusive to the contacts established between Africa and different locations. Focusing specifically on the religious perspective and what it refers to traditions, Boubou Hama contrasts the established coexistence between Africans and other people to that established in the impacting colonial relation. Therefore, referring to the established bonds between other populations and different African zones (Maghrebian, Saharan, Sudanese¹⁶), he comments:

In this whole, there was no “duality” between animism and Mediterranean “gods”, between Sudan’s spiritualities and Christianity. Between this and Islamism, but a neighborhood, sometimes intimate, that ended up changing the social tissue and human relations on which animist society rested.

In turn, there was no fusion, assimilation between pre-colonial Africa and colonization, but in fact conflicting contacts that profoundly disrupted African traditions.

Today, there is no congruence of the conception of life and world between the traditional Africa and the ideologies and its dissolving systems, that try to divide our world among stagnant or security influence zones¹⁷ (Hama 1978: 8-9)

On his point of view, the established exchanges – and here we can think of knowledge circulation in general – between different societies contributed to modify them, but we can interpret that they did it in unequal ways: enriching in the case of the contacts maintained by Africa in the pre-

16 Following the steps of Gregory Mann (2015), I opted to maintain this spelling to allude to that region of the African continent. *Sudan* derives from the Arabic expression *bīlad al-sudan*, referring to the Southern part of Sahara that must not be confused with *Soudan*, the French colony later called Mali.

17 “Dans cet ensemble, il n’y avait pas ‘dualité’ entre l’animisme et les ‘dieux’ méditerranéens, les spiritualités du Soudan et le Christianisme, entre celles-ci et l’Islamisme, mais voisinage parfois intime qui changea le tissu social et les rapports humains sur lesquels reposait la société animiste. Il n’y eut pas, *non plus*, fusion, assimilation entre l’Afrique précoloniale et la colonisation, mais des contacts heurtés qui dérangerent profondément les traditions africaines. Il n’y a pas, aujourd’hui, communauté de conception de la vie et du monde entre l’Afrique traditionnelle et les idéologies et leurs systèmes dissolvants qui tentent de partager notre globe en zones d’influence étanches ou de sécurité”. In the second paragraph, I chose to use the adversative expression “in turn”, even though the original has the additive expression *non plus* [either], because I understand that the ideas presented there do not corroborate to those in the first paragraph, but rather counterpose them.

colonial period, and disturbing in the case of relations established during the colonial stage. Regarding this last excerpt analyzed, in the moment that Boubou Hama wrote this text (1970s), the world was divided into two divergent ideologies and subsequent influences zones, characteristic of the Cold War period. The observation that he makes of the distance between those two poles (capitalist and socialist) and Africa – with its own conceptions of the world and peculiarities - it is fundamental for understanding what he elaborated on the role to be played by that continent and, consequently, for his plans for it.

Still considering the colonization impacts, Boubou Hama judges, in the following excerpt, the economic scope as responsible for allowing an opening. This would have, according to him, permitted the introduction of different values from those previously known and established in Africa. One example that we can trace is polygamy – fully practiced in the core of the local costumes, but criticized for being incompatible with the French civil code -, which became one theme of discussion about the status conferred to the FWA's inhabitants in relation to the metropolis (Cooper 2014: 158-164). In Boubou Hama's vision, the disorder was the rule in the colonial process in Africa, to which, however, was able to remain strongly rooted in its own values and conceptions:

In the interior of the colonial system, there was nothing pointed to allow the African civilization to hold itself to a material support. The introduction of the colonial economy in our continent destroyed our own economy structures that started to revolve itself, in vacuum, under its own disturbing and impoverished content.

The western economic, social, political and cultural values then rushed on these open vacuum of our conception of life and world.

However, the proposed assimilation for this continent was never sincere. If such assimilation transformed African society, it was not capable of destroying it; if profound changes were introduced, it did not act sufficiently on it in the sense of an reciprocal economic interest to give a radical reason that would, even more, contribute to make Africa renounce its fundamental values. Of all that, our continent saved a lot of itself, even if, some times, it has stood strongly influenced by the colonial ferment, particularly in the Africa's modern development scope and that of philosophic and scientific language; this is a universal fact that we should study in order to better understand "our humanism", that distinguishes us from others and in which context they want to contest us.

The pre-colonial Africa technique was dominated, in its material as well as spiritual terrain, by castes. They were the economic backbone of African society, controlled by nobles and generous notables. Today, these castes appear within the modern development of our continent (in the savanna) as a phenomenon, above all, social and cultural. (Hama 1968: 368-369).

The colonization influences and the Western knowledge brought and established along with it between the inhabitants of the African continent is undeniable. However, Boubou Hama evokes the strength of the roots in which were anchored values, ways of comprehending the world and knowledge, remembering the importance maintained by the castes in different domains, since the economic to technical from spiritual to cultural. I would like to suggest that this rescue points to where Boubou Hama considered that Africans should return to and what they should hold on in a manner to, therefore, stand not only against the colonial world, but also to what had become western and established in Africa after colonization. My argument, however, is not that this man proposes that return to pre-colonial times, in which castes dominated different scopes of society, but in fact that he preconizes an apprehension of what there was of knowledge in the African continent before the impacts generated by European establishment affected its nature and its dissemination.

Conclusion

The colonial occupation established many modifications concerning the features that the territory that came to be “Niger” had on the eve of colonization. Despite some aspects were maintained or were less affected by the French presence, at the same time there were other elements, such as the FWA organization, the violence in the occupation investitures and resistance fights, the tax implementation, forced labor and the *indigénat*¹⁸, and the installation of educational institutions, that highly affected these populations lives. This is the general context on which Boubou Hama, from the Songhay ethnic group, was born.

A specific type of knowledge, designated as “traditional”, was at the center of this man’s concerns, throughout his works as well as in his intellectual and political trajectory. In the interior of that “African wisdom”, that Boubou Hama understood to permeate all elements of life and society, two spheres, spiritual and technical, were inextricably interchangeable. For him, despite all impacts caused by colonization, values and conceptions of the world present in the African continent were still available and needed to be accessed by all. Boubou Hama had a development project for Niger and for Africa, whose basis was the rescue of the culture of people who lived

¹⁸ The *Code de l'indigénat* (or just *l'indigénat*, for not referring to an unique textual code) was a justice system conducted by French administration in relation to, exclusively, the *indigènes* [autochthonous]. Understood as a legislative regime of exception, the *indigénat* empowered local administration, giving margins to all sorts of arbitrariness.

there and its widespread. In a way to find answers to questions – essentially post-colonial – in his own time, such as what was the role to be played by its continent in the world context, Boubou Hama came back to what he considered fundamentally “African”: the integration of technique and spirituality.

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ABSTRACT

In Niger of the 1900s, the intellectual Boubou Hama worked for the preservation and promotion of a cultural framework. From a specific understanding about “traditional knowledge”, he sought to offer answers in his own time. Under the impacts of colonization, Hama wished Africa to know its own values and conceptions of the world.

KEYWORDS

Niger; Boubou Hama; Traditional Knowledge.

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