

Identity and Autobiography in *Ambiguous Adventure* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Babacar M'Baye*

Abstract: Although they evolve out of separate parts of the Atlantic Ocean, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) are two similar autobiographical novels that examine parallel dilemma of people of African descent who attempt to overcome the dualities and other quagmires that racial and colonial oppressions have created in their lives and in their relationships with modernity and traditions. Yet the two novels do not dwell in pessimism since they suggest the remarkable ways in which people of African descent rise from the predicament and schism of racial and colonial dominations in order to create viable notions of modernity that help them establish a neat balance between the traditions of their ancestors and those of the Europeans that either alienated or tyrannized them. Coming from such adversity, Blacks of Africa and the Diaspora are able to reconstruct their lives, maintain their sanity, and envision a world of infinite possibilities.

Keywords: Racism. Colonization. Modernity.

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) are two novels written by two Black writers from two different parts of the world. Yet the two novels are not thematically unrelated to one another because they are both autobiographical fictions that represent the dilemma of a male person of African descent who searches for his identity and roots and attempts to make an inventory of his past and construct a notion of modernity that is heavily influenced by the traditions of his ancestors and the heritage of racism and colonization in Africa and the Black Diaspora. In *Ambiguous Adventure*, modernity develops from the remnants of French colonization in West Africa, the experiences of Samba Diallo in the colonial French school prior to his higher education at the University of Paris, and the creative and dynamic values that the Diallobé traditions have instilled

* Ph.D. Assistant Professor Departments of English. Kent State University. Kent, OH 44242.

<i>Revista Lingua & Literatura</i>	FW	v. 12	n. 18	p. 83-102	Ago. 2010. Recebido em: 21 fev. 2010. Aprovado em: 30 jun. 2010.
--	----	-------	-------	-----------	---

in him. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, modernity emerges from the troubling legacy of racism that complicates the unsteady relationships between John Grimes and his stepfather Gabriel. These dynamics lead John to seek refuge in modern education and in the solidarity of the African American church. By representing the unsettling lives of fictional characters that go back to their roots in an attempt to gain a better understanding of their identity and cultures, Kane and Baldwin explore important parts of their biographies as they interpret their own relationships with the cultures and history of their people. In so doing, they participate in a shared intellectual tradition in which African modernity merges with the history of the Black Atlantic world through parallel experiences of double-consciousness, search for roots, and the affirmation of a dynamic African identity that is in constant dialogue with European culture.

In his introduction to *An African Treasury: Articles, Essays, Stories, Poems by Black Africans* (1960), Langston Hughes said that when he first began to gather the material for his anthology, he noticed in most of the African writings that reached him “an accent of Africaness—blackness, if you will—not unlike the racial consciousness found in the work of American Negro writers a quarter of a century ago. The Harlem writers of that period, however, had to search for their folk roots. The African writer has these roots right at hand” (p. 10-11). Hughes’s assertion suggests major and complex parallels between African and African American literatures and cultures that can be fully-understood through a study of the representation of folk roots in *Ambiguous Adventure* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Go Tell It on the Mountain was first published in 1953 as an autobiographical text that reveals the complicated relationships that Baldwin had with his stepfather David Baldwin whom his mother had married when Baldwin was a toddler. As Trudier Harris argues in “James Baldwin” (2001), “Not only did his [Baldwin’s] stepfather assert that James was ugly and bore the mark of the devil, but he refused to recognize James’s native intelligence of his sanctioning by white teachers. This painful autobiographical material would provide the substance of Baldwin’s first novel” (p. 20). The novel is narrated through the voice of John Grimes, a fourteen-year-old boy, who struggles with his repressive stepfather Gabriel and with religious conversion. In the first part of the book, John is anxious as he realizes that the freedom and education that he wants to have are in the White world, outside the religion and the preachhood that his parents expect him to uphold when he becomes adult. “Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” (p. 11). In the second part of

Mountain, the narrator takes us back and forth to the South and up North in Harlem where most of the story takes place. The flashbacks allow the reader to see the dualism that overwhelmed John's father Gabriel, his mother, Elizabeth, and his aunt Florence before and after they migrated North in the early part of the twentieth century.

A major issue in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is Gabriel's dissatisfaction about the John's relations to the modern school and Whites. The root of Gabriel's frustration is traceable to his association of this school with Whiteness, a color that he, in turn, identifies with the brutality that his defunct mother encountered in the South during slavery and the racism that subjugates his son Roy. When the latter rushed home after he was "gashed by a knife" by a group of White boys he was fighting with, Gabriel furiously blamed the incident on John's influence (p. 45-46). As John looked at the wound, his step-father told him, "You see . . . It was white folks, some of them white folks *you* like so much that tried to cut your brother's throat" (p. 45). This statement suggests Gabriel's projections of his own fear, frustration, and powerlessness about White racism on John whom he represents as an accomplice of their sin. The narrator describes, "'With the air of one forcing the sinner to look down into the pit that is to be his portion'" Gabriel "moved away slightly so that John could see Roy's wound" (p. 45). This scene shows how Gabriel projects his fear of racism on John because he is unable to deal with its subjugation. Standing near Roy, he tells Elizabeth: "You can tell that foolish son of your something, . . . him standing there with them big buckeyes. You can tell him to take this like a warning from the Lord. This is what white folks does to niggers. I been telling you, now you see" (p. 46). Here, Gabriel perceives himself as a victim of a destructive 'White evil' in which he sees John as a participant.

Gabriel's perception of the "White" world as "evil" is not a mere product of a fictive imagination or a result of an insane, subjective, instinctual perception of the world, since it derives from his assessment of the historical relationships between Blacks and Whites in the United States as being primarily marked by oppression. As Fred L. Standley suggests in his essay, "'But the City Was Real:' James Baldwin's Literary Milieu" (1995), within the above interpretive reference and context, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* "is not a novel about religion per se; rather, it is a sociopolitical novel which subtly but savagely indicts a white controlled society that has radically delimited the lives and hopes of blacks by the pernicious doctrine and damnable practices of black inferiority that have led to fear, isolation, alienation, hatred, despair, and destruction" (p. 146).

Baldwin was not insensitive or untouched by the grim materialist and racial realities that paralyzed Gabriel since these conditions mirrored those of his own stepfather. In her essay “Reconciling the Spirit: The Father, the Son, and Go Tell It on the Mountain” (2006), Carol E. Henderson writes: “The ghosts of his father’s past become his own as Baldwin realized, upon his father’s death, that the bitterness he held in his heart was a symptom of a larger concern that was part [of] his father’s personality, and also the result of a racial divide that consumes America” (p. 4).

In an attempt to oppose the racial and historical burden that weighs on both David Baldwin’s and Gabriel’s hearts, Baldwin depicts John as an alternative character who transcends the marring legacy by deciding to use the modern (or secular) school as an antithesis of the religious school in which Gabriel predestines him to stay. Seeking to withstand what he perceives as his father’s wickedness, John imagines a life in which “He was a poet, or a college president, or a movie star; [in which] he drank expensive whisky, and he smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green packages” (p. 19). This dream of a fancy life helps John resist the life of the pulpit that his father wants him to have. John’s use of school as a refuge from racism and a tool of liberation is another autobiographical element that derived from Baldwin’s own life. “As Clarence E. Hardy III suggests in “James Baldwin as Religious Writer: The Burden and Gifts of Black Evangelism.” (2009), “only a year after he started preaching Baldwin felt his faith slowly ‘crumbling’ as he ‘began to read again’ and return to the world of books he had seemingly left behind . . . , he began to see religion as a phase he needed to end if he wanted to become the writer he hoped to be” (p. 62). John and Baldwin are similar because they both use modern education as a means of circumventing the strict religion of his father in an attempt to better understand their identities

Like Baldwin, John draws on the power of modern education as a means for avoiding the harsh religion of his father. John wants to escape to the White world where he intends to get an education that will help him counter Gabriel’s intolerance and abuse. One morning, when his school principal, who is “a woman with white hair and an iron face” looked down at him and said “You’re a very bright boy, John Grimes . . . Keep up the good work” (p. 20), John realized that he detained the power that would free him from his father’s cruelty. He felt as if the words of his principal

gave him, from that time on, if not a weapon at least a shield; he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself; and that, perhaps, with this power he might one day win that love which he so longed for. This was not, in John, a faith subject to death or alteration, nor yet a hope subject to destruction; it was his identity, and part, therefore, of that wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father. His father's arm, rising and falling, might make him cry, and that voice might cause him to tremble; yet his father could never be entirely the victor, for John cherished something that his father could not reach (p. 20).

This statement reflects John's strong desire to use western education as a tool that can provide him with the intelligence and resolve to move upward and, alternatively, resist his stepfather's moral and physical oppression. John's attempt to use education as a "shield" from Gabriel's dominance is a metaphor for Baldwin's own endeavor to use secular tradition as a protection against his own father's ill treatment. In an attempt to avoid his father's wrath, John goes on a brief exile on top of a hill where he met an elderly White man. The narrator says: "At the bottom of the hill, where the ground abruptly leveled off onto a gravel path, he nearly knocked down an old white man with a white beard, who was walking very slowly and leaning on his cane. They both stopped, astonished, and looked at one another. John struggled to catch his breath and apologize, but the old man smiled. John smiled back. It was as though he and the old man had between them a great secret; and the old man moved on" (p. 34-35). This quotation suggests the accidental ways in which John and the old White man accidentally collide with each other. Despite the coincidental quality of their encounter, John and the White man understand that there is a connection between them, which is the "indeterminate" and "ambiguous" unfolding of the American experience. As suggested in the mutual attention, look, and smile that the two characters give to each other, John and the White man know that they share a common experience in a history that is "a great secret" since it has a lot of "mysterious" things untold. The implicit and coded non-verbal exchange between the two characters signifies the silenced and unsettled experienced of Blacks and Whites in American history.

During his entire life, Baldwin had sought to understand the mystery that America represented to him. His relationships with the country changed as he began to re-interpret this ambiguity. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, he says that his views about America changed as a result of his European journey, beginning in 1948, which made him realize that his Blackness was no longer more important than his being an American who, like any White person, was a product of historical displacement. He wrote: "In my necessity to find the terms on which my experience

Revista Língua & Literatura. Frederico Westphalen, v. 12, n. 18, p. 83-102. Dez. 2009.

could be related to that of others, Negroes and whites, writers and non-writers, I proved, to my astonishment, to be as American as any Texas G.I. And I found my experience was shared by every American writer I knew in Paris. Like me, they had been divorced from their origins, and it turned out to make very little difference that the origins of white Americans were European and mine were African—they were no more at home in Europe than I was”(p. 4). In perceiving himself as an American just as “any Texas G. I.,” Baldwin developed a universalism in which he detached himself from any fixed racial or cultural group. During the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, he remained a humanist who perceived himself as an American writer who identified with people of all races, complexities, and lifestyles. This cosmopolitan Baldwin redefined his relationships with Euro-American culture in terms that celebrated diversity in race, cultures, and lifestyles. In a word, he refused to be put in a fixed category and preferred to view himself as an American. In the beginning of *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin states: “Once I was able to accept my role—as distinguished, I must say, from my “place”—in the extraordinary drama which is America, I was released from the illusion that I hated America” (p. 5). This statement shows how Baldwin was able to free himself from the delusion of racial hatred in order to take a position where differences in American society are reasons for celebrating the diversity of the nation.

Another example of Baldwin’s newfound universalism is noticeable during his visit to Bowling Green State University in 1979 when he stressed the importance of his American and Westerner identity and experience.¹ In “Dark Days” (1980), Baldwin describes his first impressions about race relations in the United States during his the first day of a class that he visited in winter 1979 at Bowling Green State University. He wrote: “One of my white students, in a racially mixed class, asked me, ‘Why does the white hate the nigger?’ I was caught off guard. I simply had not had the courage to open the subject right away. I underestimated the children . . . The subject, I confess, frightens me, and it would never have occurred to me to throw it at them so nakedly . . . What my students made me realize (and I consider myself eternally in their debt) was that the notion of interracial tension hides a multitude of delusions and is, in sum, a cowardly academic formulation” (“Dark Days”, p. 46). Baldwin’s comments suggest his conviction that

¹ David Leeming, Baldwin’s biographer, wrote: “In the spring of 1977, he [Baldwin] gave a lecture at Bowling Green State University that lead to his ‘second career’ as a teacher in the late seventies and early eighties” (p. 336). According to Leeming, Baldwin returned to Bowling Green State University in the spring of 1978 as a writer-in-residence for a month (p. 339). See: LEEMING, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1994, p. 336; and CHAMPION, Ernest. *Mr. Baldwin, I Presume: James Baldwin – Chinua Achebe, A Meeting of the Minds*. New York: UP of America, 1984, p. 9.

racial difference and historical conflicts are less important than the common identity that Americans share. The quotation shows that Baldwin became an advocate for racial understanding and pluralism, a status that he maintained up through his death in 1987 in his home in St. Paul de Vence, France. Additionally, Baldwin's statement reflects his belief in how Americans can undercut racial differences and focus on the essential humanity and Western experience that unite them. In "Dark Days," Baldwin discussed how he was impressed when he noted that the racially diverse students in his literature class were united by a sense of shared desire to know, experience, and grow. He wrote:

They began talking to one another, and they were not talking about race. They were talking of their desire to know one another . . . each was trying to enter into the experience of the other. The exchanges were sharp and remarkably candid, but never fogged by an unadmitted fear of hostility. They were trying to become whole. They were trying to put themselves and their country together. They would be facing hard choices when they left this academy. And why was it a condition of American life that they would then be forced to be strangers? (p. 13).

This quotation shows that Baldwin grew to admit that the notion of racial enmity between Americans is an illusion since it opposes the human experience and desires that the people share. In this sense, he dismissed the sterile notion of racial divisions and emphasized mutual love as the value that all Americans should learn to share. In support of Baldwin's emphasis on shared experience and pluralism, critic Louis H. Pratt argued that Baldwin spoke for all Americans (p. 102). Taking on Pratt's lead, Irving Howe and David Levin said that Baldwin was the voice of every American.²

Yet, although he embraced his hybrid American identity, Baldwin made sure that his African American culture was not neglected. This connection is visible in the ways in which John surrenders to the power of the African American Baptist church, which reconciles him with Gabriel on a spiritual level, even if the latter remains stiff towards him. John's transformation is

² In "Black Boys and Native Son," Irving Howe said that Baldwin was "one of the two or three greatest essayists this country has ever produced," and that he "emerged as a national figure, the leading spokesperson for the Negroes" (p. 120). In a similar vein, David Levin argued that "Baldwin has come to represent for 'white' Americans the eloquent, indignant prophet of an oppressed people, a voice speaking in print, on television, and from the public platform in an all but desperate, final effort to bring us out of what he calls our innocence before it is (if it is not already) too late" (p. 239). See HOWE, Irving. "Black Boys and Native Sons," *A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics*. New York: Horizon P, 1963, p.120; and LEVIN, David. "Baldwin's autobiographical Essays: The Problem of Negro Identity," *Massachusetts Review*, n. 5, Winter 1964, p. 239.

visible in the final scene in the Temple of the Fire Baptized where John experiences an agonizing religious trance on the threshing floor until he is rescued by the voice of his friend Elisha. The narrator says,

And a voice, for the first time in all his terrible journey, spoke to John, through the rage and weeping, and fire, and darkness, and flood:

“Yes,” said the voice, “go through. Go through.”

“Lift me up,” whispered John, “lift me up. I can’t go through.”

“Go through,” said the voice, “go through.”

Then there was silence. The murmuring ceased. There was only this trembling beneath him. And he knew there was a light somewhere (p. 202).

The last part of the quotation suggests John’s double consciousness towards African American culture. While he credits this culture for carrying him through spiritual salvation, he is unwilling to let this culture confine him in the pulpit. The narrator’s inference that “there was a light somewhere” for John suggests the myriad possibilities and directions that John’s life could take, especially since Gabriel still refuses to express open admiration for John. Yet when John tells him, “My witness is in Heaven and my record is high,” Gabriel retorts, “I want to see you live it. It’s more than a notion” (p. 207). Gabriel’s last remark shows that he cares for John’s future life in fatalistic ways.

Ambiguous Adventure

Like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Ambiguous Adventure* is the story about the coming-of-age of a Black boy whose identity is strongly influenced by his religious upbringing and his relations with the modern school. Samba’s relations with his Coranic teacher Thierno are akin to those between John and Gabriel. Like Gabriel, Thierno is hard on his disciple who he perceives as vulnerable to the influence of Whites and their modern school. Yet, unlike Gabriel’s, Thierno severity towards his pupil emanates from tough-love rather than nemesis. The uniqueness of Thierno’s intimacies with Samba is apparent when Kane explains: “The teacher thought that man had no reason to exalt himself, save definitely in the adoration of God. Now it was true—though he fought against the feeling—that he loved Samba Diallo as he had never loved any disciple. His harshness toward the boy was in ratio to his impatience to rid him of all his moral weaknesses, and to make him the masterpiece of his own long career” (p. 23). Gabriel has a similar outlook on life, since he is ascetic and finds pride and pleasure only in the adoration of God. Like Thierno, Gabriel is unable to experience joy in physical exultation or music. Moreover, like Thierno, he is

are obsessed with expiating societal sins by killing a supposed moral weakness and corruption in the bodies and mind of his pupils. Yet, paradoxically, both teachers want to crown these pupils as disciples in the end of torturous rites of passage.

In *Ambiguous Adventure*, Samba Diallo goes through the same dualistic and intercultural processes that John experiences in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Like John, Samba develops complicated relationships with Europeans and a universalism that allow him to reappraise and value his regained Black identity. Like John's, Samba's identity was cast in religion. While John's was formed in Christianity, Samba's was shaped in Islam. Samba Diallo's identity, character, and worldviews stemmed from the stratum of a Diallobé folk culture, where a community of women and men influence his relations to society and his conception of the larger world. In *Ambiguous Adventure*, Diallobé folklore is noticeable in the blend of pre-Islamic and Islamic elements that shape his identity. For example, while he is sleeping in the house of his Coranic teacher Thierno, Samba is awakened by the sound of tom-toms that the Royal Lady has requested to be played to convene the Diallobé to a meeting. The narrator says,

There was a brief muttering, then a muttering that was long drawn out. The tone changed, it rose in the scale, there was a brief muttering, then a long muttering. The two tones blended, there were two simultaneous voices, one long, one short.

Sudden movements began to be noted in the surge of sound. Something unguessed started to rush through each muttering's whole spinning sound. The spinnings were multiplied. The drive was a paroxysm. Samba Diallo woke up. The earth was being shaken by beatings on the tom-tom (p. 44).

This passage reflects the irresistible power that pre-Islamic Diallobé traditions such as the use of traditional instruments for communication, artistic pleasure, and communal gatherings have on Samba's psychic. The loud music and the assembly are primordial African customs that predate the important Sufi-Islamic traditions of ascetism, simple living, and non-musicality that Thierno embodies. Yet, such ascetism was not totally alien to pre-Islamic Diallobé culture, since in most traditional African cultures, including that of the Toucouleur ethnic group in which the Diallobé belong, music was associated with the Devil. "Custom demands that the women ask the devil for permission to play their instruments before doing so. Instruments are considered to belong to the devil, and young girls and widows are not allowed to play them lest they bring down on themselves the devil's vengeance" (NIKIPROWETZKY, p. 81). The last part of this assertion is consistent with Thierno's social ideology that is grounded on total ascetism and

disregard of the worldly passions of music or dance. Thierno's ascetism is noticeable when the narrator says:

Two occupations filled his life: the work of the spirit and the work of the field. To the work of the field he devoted the strict minimum of his time, and he demanded from the earth no more than he had to have for his extremely frugal nourishment and that of his family, not including his pupils. The rest of his days and nights he consecrated to study, to meditation, to prayer, and to the education and molding of the young people who had been confided to his care (p. 7).

By contrast, the Royal Lady, Samba's aunt, is interested in the earthly passions and materials of the community, and preserves pre-Islamic Diallobé customs, such as the sounding of music for communal gathering, even when she proposes that the Diallobé take their children to the French school. While the Royal Lady believes that this school "will kill in them [children] what today we [Diallobé] love and rightly conserve with care" (p. 46), the Royal Lady believes that "We [Diallobé] should agree to die in our children's hearts and that the foreigners who have defeated us should fill the place, wholly, which we shall have left free" (p. 46). This passage should not be taken as a metaphor for a cultural defeat or submission of the Diallobé towards the French. Rather, it should be interpreted as an allegory that invites the Diallobé to seize the knowledge of the West while knowing that traditions, such as the privileged place of the Blacksmiths and the tom-tom players in their lives, will survive in the world of their children who will come back from the French school.

There are striking similarities between Thierno and Gabriel that deserve particular attention. Like Thierno, Gabriel is ascetic to a point when he is unable to take part in the physical and emotional rejoicing in the church. Seeking spiritual outlets and rewards, Gabriel is physically and emotionally detached in the church and unaffected by the downpouring of feelings, trance possessions, wailing, crying, music, and dance in the house of worship. For instance, Gabriel is unmoved when John successful becomes awakened on the threshing floor of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Baldwin writes:

"Praise the Lord," said his father. He [Gabriel] did not move to touch him [John], did not kiss him, did not smile. They stood before each other in silence, while the saints rejoiced; and John struggled to speak to the authoritative, the living word that would conquer the great division between his father and himself. But it did not come, the living word; in the silence something died in John, and something came alive. It came to him that must testify (p. 207).

Unlike Gabriel, Thierno has intimate and quite harmonious relations with Samba and is most delighted to envision him as his disciple. When Samba goes to announce his departure for L [the town of Louga in northwest Senegal], Thierno affirms his eternal relationship with his pupil by imploring divine protection for him. Kane writes: “Lord,” the teacher had prayed in thought, “never forsake this child. May the smallest measure of Thy sovereign authority not leave him, for even the smallest particle of time” (p. 66-67).

This statement suggests the crucial significance of the master-student relationship among the Diallobé, which is traceable to the core of Toucouleur society since the Islamicization of this community. In “The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro” (1975), David Robinson dates the beginning of Islamicization in Futa Toro to the seventeenth century southern Mauritania where the *zwaya* (clerics) led by Nasir Al Din attempted to form a state and organized Berber clans to oppose groups of Arab migrants who were involved in slave raiding and pillaging in Futa and Wolof states to the south (p. 189). As Robinson suggests, one major formation in Futa Toro was the emergence of the *Torodbe* or

“the beggars for alms” who formed the leadership and much of the membership of the reform movement and became the ruling class of the Almamate. The *torodbe* and other Tokolor are part of the Futankobe (“those of Futa”) or all the inhabitants of the middle valley, including significant minorities of the Soninke in the east, Wolof in the west, and Moors and pastoral Fulbe scattered throughout the country (p. 188).

The above statement provides crucial historical information that helps us contextualize *Ambiguous Adventure* and understand the origins of both the leadership and religious roles that Thierno play in the novel and the tradition of alm-seeking that he instills in his pupils Samba and Demba. This is an early African-Islamic educational philosophy that permeates the folklore of many West African societies, especially those of the Wolof and the Toucouleur.³⁴ The tradition of alm-seeking reveals the richness of an enduring African tradition in which teenagers learn humility, physical and emotional resilience, independence, and spiritual survival over materialism

³ In “The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro” (1975), David Robinson writes:

Tokolor is derived from Taktur, the name recorded by Arabic geographers for an Islamic state contemporaneous with the kingdom of Ghana and probably located in the middle valley. It is used by Wolof and other Senegambians for the sedentary Fulbe of Futa, but the people themselves prefer the term *hal pular* (“speakers of Pular”) (p. 188).

and oppression through the practice of fending for their own food daily in a community that highly values these virtues and ethics. Drawing from this folklore of his Pulaar ethnic group, Kane beautifully shows, in the litanies that Samba and Demba recite, the importance of an African-Islamic poetic tradition that has survived in Senegal to this day despite the existence of the French school. Kane describes:

The three disciples took up the refrain in Chorus:

“Who will feed the poor disciples today? Our fathers are alive, and we beg like orphans. In the name of God, give those who beg for His Glory. Men who sleep, think of the disciples passing by!”

They fell silent. Samba Diallo spoke alone:

“Men of God, death is not that night which traitorously floods with darkness the innocent and lively ardor of a summer day. It warns, then it mows down in the full mid-day of the intelligence.”

Again came the chorus from the other three:

“Men and women who sleep, think of peopling by your benefactions the solitude which will inhabit your tombs. Feed the poor disciples!”

“Men of God, you are warned,” Samba Diallo took up the theme again. “One dies lucidly, for death is violence in triumph, negation imposing itself. From now on, may death be familiar to your spirits . . .”

Under the morning wind, Samba Diallo improvised edifying litanies, with interpolations by his comrades, at the closed door of his cousin, the chief of the Diallobé. The disciples would go about so, from door to door, until they had collected victuals enough for their day’s nourishment. Tomorrow the same quest would begin again. While seeking God, the disciples would know no other way of supporting life than by begging, whatever their parents’ wealth might be (p. 13-14).

This statement suggests key aspects of Senegalese religious folklore such as the use of songs, call-and-response, improvisation, and collaboration that instills among the young beggars-of-alms important philosophical, artistic, spiritual, and practical life skills that they may not be able to obtain from the French school.

Samba’s experiences at the French school are very similar to those of John Grimes. Samba ventures open-mindedly and willingly into the modern school of Whites in an attempt to learn what the African school principal calls how “to join wood to wood—to make wooden buildings” (p. 9). Samba’s immediate experience with the French school is apparent in his early interactions in the classroom of Mr. N’Diaye and in his relationships with Jean, the son of Mr. Lacroix. The narrator depicts this classroom as an extension of French colonial influence in Africa that is allegorized and satirized through the early attitudes of two French pupils, Jean and his sister Georgette, towards Samba in the classroom. Kane writes:

The story of Samba Diallo is a serious story. If it had been a gay recital, we should have told you of the bewilderment of the two white children, on the first morning of their sojourn among little Negroes, in finding themselves in the presence of so many black faces. Such were the peripheries of this vast movement of approach that Jean and his sister felt it was closing about them, little by little, like some fantastic and patient ballet. What was their childish surprise, one might have said, to realize after some time, how much, under their kinky heads and their dark skins, their new schoolmates resembled those they had left behind in Pau . . . (p. 50-51).

This statement suggests the veil of Blackness through which Jean and Georgette perceived Samba to epitomize the mass of stereotypes through which the French represented the identity of the first Africans who were sent to the French school. Kane emphasizes the children's attitudes towards Samba, not in an attempt to generate Western empathy towards Africans, but in order to suggest the drastic impact of colonization on them. Kane wants to draw attention on the striking contrast between the seeming innocence of French cultural assimilation policy through education and its serious flaw in not preparing the French to view Africans as equal human beings. Kane was unfamiliar to this assimilation that had shaped the lives of many Senegalese and other Africans during the twentieth century. Kane experienced this cultural assimilation since, as Donald Herdeck suggests, "at age ten, he was sent to a French school" and, after he finished his secondary and high school education, lived in France where he studied for the license in law at the University of Paris (p. 175). Samba's relationships with Kane are also apparent in an interview with Maryse Condé in which the Senegalese author said:

Samba Diallo doesn't only reflect the life of Cheikh Hamidou Kane, but [. . .] he represents a whole generation, that is to say at least several dozen people whom I've known, who found themselves confronted firstly by the problems of the Koranic school, then, around the age of ten or twelve, by the problems of entering the Western school system, and who then found themselves at university in Senegal or in Europe. Therefore, as it were, Samba Diallo is more representative of a whole group and a whole generation than of my own personal story (LITTLE, p. 75).

Finally, as apparent in the essay "Islamic Mystical Readings of *Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Ambiguous Adventure*" (2009) in which Rebecca Masterton says that Samba Diallo, wrestles with philosophical questions throughout the narrative (p. 21) According to Masterton, "Ambiguous Adventure is not, therefore, merely about the social, cultural and philosophical adjustments that African Muslim society was forced to make under French rule, but about the tragic loss of this precious knowledge, which occurred with the imposition of the French educational system, and the devastating effect that that has upon Samba Diallo" (p. 22). It could

be argued that Kane wrestled with the nightmare of the disappearance of rich traditions because, as Marc Caplan has pointed out, “his [Kane’s] novel elegizes the lost autonomy of his native culture” (p. 945). Caplan later writes: “For Samba Diallo, like Kane, the tradition must be elegized because, having been to France and back, he believes that it is a relic, one that is in imminent danger of disappearing, along with the purity of the values associated with it” (p. 949). Kane’s and Samba’s experiences with French school and culture is similar to the predicament that W.E.B. Du Bois had in his early schooling in Barrington, Massachusetts, where he first learned what it means to a “problem” in American society due to one’s color. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois says,

I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil (p. 4).

Du Bois’s experience of invisibility triggers a racial consciousness similar to that of Samba. The forced isolation of both individuals in the European school makes them realize their double consciousness, or ambiguous position, in the Western world, that characterizes Black modernity. Standing in “limbo” between their traditional cultures and their “becoming,” modern, and Westernized cultures in which they are compelled to negotiate the stringent forces of racial prejudice, both Samba and Du Bois are compelled to draw from their interior intellectual, spiritual, physical, and emotional force that Du Bois’s concept of “Black Strivings” describes in order to survive. Both individuals consciously chose to master Western knowledge in order to resolve their dilemma. Samba decides to appropriate Western science and technology for African development. As Lilyan Kesteloot observes, Kane’s alternative to under-development is “the coexistence of traditional and modern societies” and the integration of “the culture of Descartes and a certain African mysticism” (*Black Writers*, p. 351). In a similar vein, Du Bois developed survival-tactics that blend African and European cultures (*Souls* 5) and seek to master the sum-total of Western knowledge. In an attempt to disrupt the veil of stereotyping, ignorance, and invisibility around him, Du Bois pledges to wrest the “opportunities” and “prizes” that were kept for Whites only (p. 4). He says: “Some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam

my head—some way” (p. 4). Du Bois’s resolve to achieve equality through appropriation of the knowledge of modern or Western schools is the same weapon of resistance that Kane has utilized through his portrayal of Samba Diallo’s experience, suggesting the strong linkage between the experiences of Blacks of Africa and of the Diaspora in their struggle to regain their rightful place in a modern world they helped build.

Go Tell It on the Mountain and *Ambiguous Adventure* are two pivotal works of Black folklore that reveal the double consciousness and experiences of invisibility which prompt people of African descent to venture into the European school in an attempt to achieve equality and a whole sense of self. In their attempts to negotiate their relationships with their immediate Black cultures and the modern school, both John and Samba realize the importance of their traditional Black folklore in their conception of their universe and their place in it. Similarly, both Baldwin and Kane celebrate Black folklore and appreciate the importance of traditions in their vision of Black modernity.

References

BALDWIN, James. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. 1953. New York, NY: Dell, 1981.

_____. *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York: Vintage International, 1961.

_____. Dark Days. *Esquire*. Oct. 1980, p. 46.

CAPLAN, Marc. Nos Ancêtres, les Diallobes : *Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Ambiguous Adventure* and the Paradoxes of Islamic Negritude. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. v. 51, n. 4. December 01, 2005, p. 936-957.

DU BOIS, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1994.

HARDY III, Clarence E. James Baldwin as Religious Writer: The Burden and Gifts of Black Evangelism. *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*. Douglas Field (Ed.). New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2009, p. 61-82.

HARRIS, Trudier. James Baldwin. *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, (Eds.). New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2001, p. 20-22.

HENDERSON, Carol E. Reconciling the Spirit: The Father, the Son, and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. *James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain: Historical and Critical Essays*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2006, p. 1-12.

HERDECK, Donald E. Kane, Sheikh Hamidou. *African Authors: A Companion to Black African Writing*. v. 1, 1300-1973. Washington D. C.: Black Orpheus P., 1973, p. 175.

HUGHES, Langston, (Ed.). *An African Treasury: Articles, Essays, Stories, Poems by Black Africans*. 1960. Jove/HBJ, 1977.

Kesteloot, Lilyan. *Black Writers in French: A Literary History of Negritude*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1974.

LITTLE, Janet Patricia. Autofiction and *Cheikh Hamidou Kane's L'aventure ambiguë*. *Research in African Literatures*. v. 31, n. 2, April 17, 2000, p. 71-90.

PRATT, Louis H. *James Baldwin*. Boston: Twayne, 1978.

MASTERTON, Rebecca. Islamic Mystical Readings of *Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Ambiguous Adventure*. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, v. 20, n. 1, 2009, p. 21-45.

NIKIPROWETZSKY, Tolia. The Griots of Senegal and their Instruments. *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*. 15; 1963, p. 79-82.

ROBINSON, David. The Islamic Revolution of Futa Toro. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, v. 8, n. 2, 1975, p. 185-221.

STANDLEY, Fred L. But the City Was Real: James Baldwin's Literary Milieu. *The City in African-American Literature*. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler (Eds.). Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1995, p. 138-149.