

# From Ego-Politics to *Rūḥ*-Politics: Abderrahmane Taha's Insurgent Ethics of *Iz'āj* as a Decolonial Imperative

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## Abstract

This article probes the Moroccan philosopher Abderrahmane Taha's concept of *iz'āj*—literally agitation/disturbance—as an Islamic decolonial option. Reading it through his notion of *al-majāl al-tadāwulī* (the pragmatic discursive field), this study shows how *iz'āj* redirects Walter Mignolo's "body-politics" of epistemic disobedience toward an insurgent *rūḥ*-politics, relocating agency

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in divine trusteeship (*amānah*) and innate human disposition (*fiṭrah*). Against both religionist quietism and secular activist models, Taha's *rūḥ*-centred critique refuses any split between inner purification (*tazkiyah*) and outward struggle: *al-zā'ij*—the epistemoral agitator—fuses ethical sincerity (*ikhhlās*) with justice, and spiritual renewal with social liberation. Anchored in *amānah* (trusteeship) and animated by the logic of *khilāfah* (stewardship), Taha'ian resistance seeks to 'insurgify' political life by recalibrating worldly power through ethical responsibility. Thus, this intervention recasts decolonial resistance as a covenantal ethic that redefines the telos of resistant disobedience itself. To illustrate *iz'āj* in action, the discussion closes with a reading of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961), tracing how communal ritual, personal defiance, and interior crisis each unsettle the materialist and epistemic regimes of colonial modernity. This framework demonstrates that true liberation requires ethical insurgency, resisting the reduction of ethics to private piety. *Iz'āj* thus emerges as an Islamically grounded and morally integrated Islamic decolonial option.

**Keywords:** Abderrahmane Taha, *Iz'āj*, epistemoral agitation, Islamic decoloniality, *Rūḥ*-politics, epistemic disobedience, ethics.

## Introduction

The potential of Islam and Muslim intellectuals to contribute to the cultivation of decolonial options<sup>1</sup> has emerged as a critical interdisciplinary field of inquiry, engaging scholars across the fields of: Islamic studies, philosophy, history, sociology, education and postcolonial theory, among others. Recent scholarship highlight how Islamic intellectual traditions challenge colonial epistemologies by recentering marginalized histories and reimagining global solidarity. Historically, Jason Idrissi Sparkes demonstrated that the emergence of the early modern/colonial world-system in 1492 cannot be fully grasped without recognizing how

European powers actively disrupted and colonized traditional Islam, embedding this process as a fundamental aspect of modernity/coloniality.<sup>2</sup> Emphasizing “a praxis-orientated decolonial–Islamic agenda” Halim Rane et al. articulated how Islam can be a positive force of decoloniality by drawing on the Qur’an and Sunnah as essentially anti-colonial sources through their emphasis on mutual recognition and redress with indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have underscored the importance of Islamic spirituality in indigenous resistance.<sup>4</sup> Many have also called for the decolonization of Muslim subjectivities from the ingrained shackles of the “coloniality of being.”<sup>5</sup> Relatedly, they argue for the decolonization of Islamic studies itself, moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms and taking the Islamic intellectual tradition as the epistemic and methodological yardstick against which imported scholarship should be evaluated and adjusted.<sup>6</sup>

While still nascent, this interdisciplinary debate reflects a growing recognition of Islam’s role in destabilizing colonialities and fostering pluriversal futures. This article builds on that momentum by examining the Moroccan philosopher Abderrahmane Taha’s philosophical repertoire,<sup>7</sup> highlighting its potential to advance decolonial options within what he envisions as *al-majāl al-tadāwulī* (the pragmatic discursive field).<sup>8</sup> If one of the fundamental principles of decolonial thought is the cultivation of indigenous epistemologies—that is, the development of situated knowledges that are both contextually relevant and engaged in shaping a planetary and pluriversal outlook—then this study is an effort to articulate an Islamically-anchored form of epistemic disobedience. Among the diverse and contextually attuned philosophical concepts crafted by Taha, *iz‘āj*, or what I rendered as ‘Epistemoral Agitation,’ emerges as a distinctively Islamic, proactive, and delinking mode of spiritual and epistemic engagement with the world. While epistemic disobedience aims to delink from hegemonic frameworks and construct alternative (non-Eurocentric),<sup>9</sup> transmodern (transcending colonial binaries)<sup>10</sup> and pluriversal (fostering multiple epistemic worlds)<sup>11</sup> worldviews, *iz‘āj* spiritually ‘*insurgifies*’ such formations through the Principle of Stewardship (*istikhlāf*) and the Qur’anic notion of Trusteeship (*amānah*)

as the ethical bridge between God and humanity.<sup>12</sup> Such an extension means that *al-zā'ij* as an epistemoral agitator emphasizes not only the creation of alternative cosmologies but also takes his/her critique to be incumbent upon a dutiful and ethical concern for unsettling the egoistic *nafs* (self) toward justice, and purifying the Ummatic *rūḥ* by embedding ethical responsibility at the heart of decolonial engagement.

*Iz'āj* is an all-encompassing critique that is not merely deconstructive but also transformative, seeking to displace the self and the other from a state of moral decay to one of ethical and intellectual insurgency. Various scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr,<sup>13</sup> Wael Hallaq,<sup>14</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas,<sup>15</sup> and others have emphasized that classical Islamic education was fundamentally designed to cultivate individuals instilled with a profound sense of ethical self-critique—intellectuals engaged in an ongoing process of moral and epistemic vigilance. Such a tradition of critical introspection was intended to discipline the self and shape the contours of subjectivity in accordance with higher ethical “first principles.”<sup>16</sup> While these scholars operate within distinct intellectual domains, they are cited together to establish the foundational premise for Taha’s entire project, specifically the role of ethics in Islamic intellectual heritage. They are invoked to situate Taha’s concept of *iz'āj* as an insurgent revitalization of a classical Islamic educational imperative. Taha’s vision of *iz'āj* encapsulates such a foundational pillar of Islamic intellectual heritage and renders it the initial stepping-stone of his conceptualization of liberationist and insurgent delinking.

Through a rigorous demystification of contemporary political ideologies—across the whole political spectrum—Taha endeavors to cultivate a subject that delinks from the constraints of hegemonic ideological paradigms. He critiques both the marginalization of Islam and its reduction to mere technicalities within the political sphere, stripped of its transcendent significance. In doing so, he aspires to reinvigorate a mode of thought that resists ideological co-optation and remains rooted in an ethically and intellectually autonomous Islamic tradition. Thus, this venture aims to exemplify one possible pathway—among many—for exploring the intersections of Islamic thought and decoloniality. Drawing on his

critical oeuvre, this study delineates how his philosophy offers valuable insights for re-imagining epistemic disobedience within Islamic epistemological and metaphysical frameworks. The value of such an exercise lies in establishing epistemic sovereignty and advancing a *rūh*-political paradigm as an alternative to secular and instrumentalized religious models. It is a potent double critique of *tasayyud* (tyrannical lordship), the pathology of power that corrupts both secular and religious authority. In this way, it moves beyond critique of Western paradigms to cultivate indigenous epistemologies and articulate a decolonial alternative.

To pursue such ends, this intervention adopts a multi-methodological framework, combining conceptual analysis, comparative theoretical engagement, and literary hermeneutics to explore Taha's concept of *iz'āj* and its potential contributions to decolonial theory. The core methodology is conceptual analysis, centered on close readings of some of Taha's works in order to trace the development, coherence, and ethical implications of *iz'āj* within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*. This is supplemented by a comparative approach that places Taha in dialogue with decolonial theorists such as Walter D. Mignolo. Rather than seeking synthesis, the comparison highlights shared concerns and productive tensions across distinct traditions, foregrounding Islamic thought as an active contributor to decolonial discourse. Given that my study centers on Taha's concept of *iz'āj* as an Islamically grounded form of epistemic critique, Mignolo is evoked throughout the analysis because he significantly advanced the decolonial discourse by developing and popularizing the concept of epistemic disobedience; a term which encapsulates a core tenet of decolonial thought and provides a methodological framework for challenging the dominance of Western modes of knowing. Finally, literary hermeneutics is applied to Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961), treating the novel not as a mere illustration but as a generative site of ethical reflection. Close reading uncovers narrative instances of *iz'āj* in action, thereby grounding abstract concepts in lived, affective, and historical registers. While this approach is necessarily selective in its focus on *iz'āj* rather than the entirety of Taha's system, it offers a coherent lens through which to articulate a form of Islamically grounded epistemic disobedience.

## Delinking Coloniality: Epistemic Disobedience and the Rūḥ-Political Turn

In Walter D. Mignolo's seminal manifesto, "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option," the concept of epistemic disobedience emerges as a subversive critique of Eurocentric knowledge systems and a call to reclaim subaltern epistemologies. Mignolo envisions it as a deliberate rupture from Western frameworks of thought, arguing that coloniality—the enduring power structures of modernity—cannot be dismantled through Eurocentric paradigms. He asserts that epistemic disobedience is "necessary because there is no way out of the coloniality of power from within Western (Greek and Latin) categories of thought."<sup>17</sup> Such a critical orientation creates space for "decolonial options as a set of projects that have in common the effects experienced by all inhabitants of the globe at the receiving end of colonial designs to colonize [...] knowledge (languages, categories of thoughts, belief systems, etc.) and beings (subjectivity)."<sup>18</sup> Mignolo argues that epistemic disobedience rejects Western epistemic origins, instead grounding itself in "a different 'beginning.'"<sup>19</sup> Since it would be far beyond the scope of this article to explore every facet of Taha's philosophical efforts to formulate an original Islamic philosophy, with an inherent right to intellectual, philosophical and methodological differences, it would be more relevant to delineate how he also marks 'a different beginning' through his conceptualization of *al-majāl al-tadāwulī*.<sup>20</sup>

*Al-majāl al-tadāwulī* refers to the dynamic and interactive domain where Islamic tradition is constructed, interpreted, practiced and transmitted. The term *tadāwulī* derives from the Arabic root *d-w-l* meaning circulation or interaction, while *majāl* denotes a spatiotemporal context. Linguistically, *tadāwulī* implies both communicative exchange (e.g., dialogue) and practical engagement (e.g., ethical action), reflecting the inseparability of theory and practice in Islamic thought.<sup>21</sup> Such a domain is shaped by a triadic framework which prevents reductionist or ideologically driven readings and ensures a holistic interpretation of the tradition. The first is language (*lughah*), which emphasizes classical Arabic as the primary medium for preserving and transmitting tradition,

ensuring both clarity and ethical efficacy. Second is belief (*i'tiqād*), which serves as the theological foundation, with *tawhīd* (monotheism) as its core principle, ensuring fidelity to Islamic creedal commitments. Finally, knowledge (*ilm*) is regarded not as an abstract pursuit but as inherently praxis-oriented (*amal*),<sup>23</sup> rigorously prioritizing ethical and social benefit over speculative theorization. This synthesis advances a form of hermeneutical ethics whereby interpretations must address contemporary challenges while remaining anchored in the core values of the Islamic tradition.

This is the domain in which *iz'āj* emerges as a socially embedded and committed form of engagement with the world. It represents a radical form of delinking from colonial epistemologies by recentring Islamic intellectual traditions and methodologies around various fundamental Islamic values and principles.<sup>23</sup> However, while decolonial thought envisions coloniality to be the inseparable dark side of modernity, its necessary condition and underpinning logic,<sup>24</sup> Taha separates the spirit of modernity from its various realities and the (mis)applications of its ideals. “For most who have reflected on it [modernity] have confused what constitutes its core—which must be preserved—with what is merely its shell—which may rightly be discarded.”<sup>25</sup> Taha’s engagement with modernity is marked by a subtle yet decisive distinction between its essence and its historical embodiments. He critiques Western modernity for conflating its normative core (ideals that may carry universal value) with its contingent and often corrosive manifestations, which can and must be discarded. In his view, Western notions of critique and rationality are not universal givens but particular applications of reason, among many possible forms. His framework therefore proceeds along two axes: resistance to modernity’s destructive articulations, and the salvaging of its latent potential which he believed to be embedded in human *fiṭrah* (primordial disposition). As he notes, “the meanings embedded in *rūḥ al-ḥadāthah* (the spirit of modernity) are closer to *fiṭrah* than to either the essential characteristics (*khaṣā'is al-māhiyyah*) of modernity or its applied manifestations.”<sup>26</sup> Against this backdrop, Taha advances what he terms an Islamic modernity, a sovereign alternative that confronts the ethical deficits of the Western model by reuniting means and ends

under the horizon of moral value. This modernity demands authenticity and is animated by *ibdāʿ* (creativity), whereby *turāth* (tradition) is not a static inheritance but a living source of innovation.<sup>27</sup> In this paradigm, modernity is no longer singular but plural, as Taha insists that “there are as many modernities as there are creative interventions,”<sup>28</sup> provided that such interventions are guided by the imperative to elevate the human being to higher ethical and spiritual levels.

This is laid out most lucidly in his *Spirit of Modernity* (2013), which stands out as his first serious philosophical critique of Western modernity, assessing it through the very ideals its theorists pursued and the utopian vision that inspired them. His analysis not only lays bare the situatedness of the reality of Western modernity but also seeks to counter the ethical crises inherent in it by embedding moral considerations at the core of social and technological structures, ensuring that progress remains ethically guided.<sup>29</sup> While many decolonial scholars aspire to provincialize Enlightenment notions of Western modernity such as critique, rationality, and universality,<sup>30</sup> Taha sees their conceptualizations within Western contexts as nothing but one of their many possible applications.<sup>31</sup> He maintains that severing epistemological ties with the Islamic tradition on grounds of temporal irrelevance inevitably produces alienation and loss. As such, he champions a rigorous process of recovery, adaptation, and critical reevaluation, guided by the principle that no imported idea merits acceptance until its authentic validity and benefit have been logically verified within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, he laments the reality of contemporary Muslim societies which are blinded by imitation, striving to configure a modernity grounded in *ibdāʿ* (creativity).<sup>33</sup> Many appear to have resigned themselves to the inevitability of the Western model, with both intellectuals and the general public uncritically accepting the assumptions and fallacies embedded in its application, mistaking its flawed execution for the very essence of modernity itself. The core argument of his book is that the pursuit of modernity necessitates a foundation in authenticity, as genuine modernity is intrinsically based on *ibdāʿ*,<sup>34</sup> which, in turn, is contingent upon a creative engagement with *turāth* ensuring that the latter serves as a dynamic source of innovation rather than a constraint.

*Al-majāl al-tadāwulī* is designed to inhibit hermeneutic adulterations of the Islamic tradition by delinking from the imported ideological models foreign to the contextual realities of the Muslim world. Within such a domain, resistance itself—if grounded in *ibdāʿ*—becomes an expression of Islamic modernity, even when it resists certain forms of modernity, “for such resistance confronts the harmful manifestations and values that have clung to modernity, striving instead toward a more humane modernity.”<sup>35</sup> Hence Taha’s emphasis on multiple modernities extends not only across diverse traditions but also within the Islamic tradition itself.<sup>36</sup>

To bring about such creative interventions, *al-zāʿij* (the epistemoral agitator) “shift[s] the geography of reason—in unveiling and enacting geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> Taha’s geopolitical shift occurs through *al-majāl al-tadāwulī*. However, while Mignolo enacts such a paradigmatic displacement through body-politics, Taha opts for what I designate as a more comprehensive *rūḥ*-political displacement. To achieve this end, Taha chooses to initiate radical change within the premises of the egoistic *nafs* (the self and its underpinning reason), offering Islamically-anchored decolonial alternatives to abstract reason, which are better equipped to engender *ibdāʿ* in the Islamic world.<sup>38</sup> These alternatives are undergirded by a *rūḥ* which is “a hidden faculty beyond the *nafs*, one that agitates it toward goodness. The *rūḥ* connects its bearer to the unseen world whenever they engage in *tazkiyah* and safeguard the trusts (*amānāt*) entrusted to them.”<sup>39</sup> Within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*, *al-zāʿij* “is the one who undertakes to unsettle the oppressor through a holistic and heartfelt agitation, guiding him out of tyranny and into justice.”<sup>40</sup> Because the conception of reason underpinning this praxis connects ends not with means but with values,<sup>41</sup> *al-zāʿij*’s “resistant action serves as a generator of values: if values die, he revives them; if they are absent, he brings them into being; if their forces weaken, he strengthens them; and if they become corrupted, he reforms them.”<sup>42</sup>

Mignolo opted for body-politics as the racial/racist darker side of bio-politics, showcasing that the “emerging state technologies [strategies, in other words] of population control that went hand in hand with the emergence of the modern nation-state [...] were applied to the

colonies as well.”<sup>43</sup> He theorizes that “body-politics describes de-colonial technologies enacted by bodies who realized that they were considered less human at the moment they realized that the very act of describing them as less human was a radical un-human consideration.”<sup>44</sup> Taha envisions *iz‘āj* to be enacted by subjects who break the shackles of forgetfulness and ‘remember’ that they are ‘entrusted’ humans. This realization grounds human existence within states of verticality and horizontality,<sup>45</sup> whereby the *rūḥ*-cognizant individuals connect humanity with the unseen world of values through *tazkiyah*, which is an “act that removes the veil of the *nafs* from the *rūḥ*, thereby enabling the connection with *al-‘ālam al-ghaybī* (the unseen world).”<sup>46</sup> By understanding that every action generates both a temporal and spiritual output,<sup>47</sup> agents become intrinsically cognizant that subversive and radical forms of resistance are not only temporal but also spiritual, value-driven and essentially an ethical duty entrusted to everyone.

## Sacred Resistance: *iz‘āj* as Ethical Insurgency and Spiritual Delinking

Such a realization draws on an ethical framework that reshapes the self and broadens its epistemological foundations, shifting the geography of reason toward cultivating what Wael Hallaq, following Taha,<sup>48</sup> deems as the “New Human,” that is, a subject cultivated within a psychoepistemic framework in which the central domain is fundamentally ethical,<sup>49</sup> and who is ultimately oriented “toward the Absolute [which] can only be realized through the Islamic value of *ikhhlās* (sincerity).”<sup>50</sup> Struggling against the ego-self becomes the foundational bedrock of a transformative decolonial liberation from an Islamic perspective. The more *al-zā‘ij* “deepens his *ikhhlās* to God in his actions—meaning that he attributes neither their forms, nor their measure, nor their effects to himself, and seeks no purely worldly aims through them—the more he becomes self-sufficient through God and liberated from all else. He may even reach a state in which gain and loss become equal in his sight.”<sup>51</sup> Such a consciousness engenders the subversive idea that as an agent of *iz‘āj*, duty and responsibility towards God is the ultimate

basis of resistance, insurgent critique and liberation, because “it is this sincerity to God alone that engenders true freedom.”<sup>52</sup> If decoloniality centers knowledge rooted in racialized lived experience,<sup>53</sup> for Taha, to shift the geography of reason is to revolutionize body-politics through a liberationist *rūḥ*-politics. In his reflection on *iz‘āj* as a form of radical socio-epistemic resistance, he writes:

*Iz‘āj* is a reform for society. Undoubtedly, both [political] unrest and electoral processes target the apex embodied by state actors, leveraging the base represented by society. Their sole concern is to replace one set of rulers with another, even if the societal foundation remains unchanged—a foundation that cannot transform at the pace of shifting leadership. *Iz‘āj*, however, cares little for rulers or the state; its focus lies with the governed and society itself. The change it seeks is foundational, not peripheral, for society is the root and the state, its branch. Society has existed without a state, while no state can exist without society. If individuals within society were to engage in *tazkiyah* until they habituate themselves to being agitated toward justice in their mutual dealings, they would become capable of agitating rulers toward justice by instilling within society a spirit of truth and responsibility. Should ethical self-purificatory critique prevail across society, rulers would emerge who have partaken in such a practice, their consciousness imprinted with its spirit. They would then be agitated toward justice in ways inaccessible to those uninitiated in such discipline. Indeed, it is not far-fetched that such rulers could agitate even their peers toward justice through equitable measures and responsible stances.<sup>54</sup>

Taha distinguishes between three forms of resistance to domination: 1) resistance through *sulṭān* (lit., power, strength) that refers to the “power that enables an individual to influence others—compelling them to undertake actions they would not have initiated on their own were it not for this power in his possession”;<sup>55</sup> 2) resistance through *bayān* (lit., clear elucidation) that is underpinned by *burhān* (lit., proof) i.e.,

a discursive/rhetorical resistance undergirded by “reasoned inference in general—whether it is conclusive, as in mathematical reasoning, or probabilistic, as in political reasoning”;<sup>56</sup> and 3) resistance through “compel[ing] the oppressor to renounce injustice and turn toward justice by means of the force of *wujdān* [moral-spiritual conscience/sensibility] as it manifests in *kulliyat al-sulūk* [the totality of conduct/behavior].”<sup>57</sup> He argues that resistance through power typically manifests in three strategies for seizing authority: revolution, rebellion, and coup. Resistance through discourse, on the other hand, seeks to gain authority through processes such as elections. However, resistance through *wujdān*, which can be embodied as radical form of truth-telling, lies within the individual’s ethical responsibility and manifests through *iz‘āj*. It embodies a kind of spiritual agitation whose quintessential role is “elevating from one state to a higher state.”<sup>58</sup> *Wujdān* is the “totality [...] upon which both *burhān* and *sultān* are grounded—so that *burhān* does not degenerate into mechanical calculation devoid of living reason, nor *sultān* into vulgar oppression devoid of living heart.”<sup>59</sup> In this sense, *iz‘āj* serves as a transformative act that seeks to unsettle oppressive systems not merely through the acquisition of political power or the crafting of persuasive rhetoric, but through the cultivation of profound moral and spiritual configurations which *insurgify* the very telos of other means of resistance.

If the political constitutes one of the definitive pillars of the modern project, characterized by its roots in secular rationality and instrumental power,<sup>60</sup> Taha positions the ethico-spiritual as a critical philosophical intervention in the ontological and epistemological foundations of politics. His critique targets the ego-political paradigm—a framework in which the self, construed as an autonomous agent, asserts sovereignty over the material world through a will to power; and whereby such a will manifests in domination, possession, and the appropriation of authority, ultimately leading to self-divination. Taha argues that such a paradigm fosters a logic of *taghyyib*<sup>61</sup>—translated by Hallaq as “Extratranscendentalization”<sup>62</sup>—wherein the human subject reifies its ontological limits in order to arrogate divine attributes (e.g., omnipotence, omnipresence, immortality). This process of self-deification aspires to achieve and perpetuate an expansive and tyrannical lordship that

exhausts both the material and spiritual realms. Taha terms this phenomenon *tasayyud* (tyrannical lordship), which particularly refers to “the self’s exercise of dominion over creation.”<sup>63</sup> It denotes an authoritarian lordship irrespective of the political system or ideological foundation upon which it rests, whether nationalist, socialist, or even Islamic.

This framework resonates with Mignolo’s concept of “egology.” Like *tasayyud*, Mignolo’s conception of ego-politics is contrasted with theo-politics to encapsulate how the “attribution of Godhood to its Western self has caused epistemological, cultural, and planetary ecological destruction.”<sup>64</sup> However, while Mignolo sees “egology” as “a frame of knowledge having ‘ego,’ instead of ‘theo,’ as the central point of reference,”<sup>65</sup> Taha exposes that even the theo-political can operate within the logic of ego-politics. This occurs because the primary objective shifts from *ta‘abbud* (worship as humble devotion to the divine) to *tasayyud*. Religious authority is thereby weaponized to legitimize and expand power through two interrelated mechanisms: first, by engaging in hermeneutical distortions that reinterpret religious tenets to justify authority; and second, by integrating secular ideological frameworks to evade accusations of extremism or traditionalism.<sup>66</sup> Both strategies perpetuate *tasayyud* by subordinating religion to the ego’s hunger for control. In this process, spirituality is distorted into a dogma of domination, and faith is hollowed into a performative identity stripped of its transformative potential. Taha’s analysis focuses on the psychological and existential pathology of *al-mutasayyid* (the ego-political Imperial Man), whose pursuit of power transcends mere political ambition. In his formulation, *tasayyud* represents a metaphysical bondage:

*Al-tasayyud* of the self is an enslavement of oneself before it is of others. *Al-mutasayyid* is not merely fixated on controlling others; rather, his primary devotion is to his own self-worship. He is driven by an insatiable desire for authority, equating power with life itself. So deeply intertwined is his sense of existence with his dominion that he refuses to conceive of a world in which his authority ceases to exist. For him, the thought of his own demise is as unthinkable as the thought of losing power.

He envisions himself as a singular, God-like figure, irreplaceable and indivisible.<sup>67</sup>

Taha exposes the paradox of theo-political power: *Al-mutasayyid*, while ostensibly acting in the name of divine authority, becomes enslaved to his delusions of omnipotence. He conflates political control with existential necessity, constructing a self-referential universe where power is not merely a means but an end—a perverse form of idolatry that substitutes *ta'abbud* with self-deification. Therefore, true liberation does not emerge from merely opposing authoritarian structures but requires an ethical insurgency that delinks the logic of *tasayyud* altogether before or even while opting for a resistive front. Nelson Maldonado-Torres notes that “transmodern thought also recognizes that what is often referred to as religion can be as colonizing as secularism itself [...] Transmodernity transgresses and transcends.”<sup>68</sup> In this sense, Taha’s thought is transmodern as it delinks from the religionist and secularist tendencies which function as extensions of ego-politics. The relentless pursuit of power intensifies *al-mutasayyid*’s desires, deepens his attachments and strengthens his dependency on control, until he becomes utterly enslaved to his desires and obsessions. “His will is hollowed out, his intellect subdued, and his agency reduced to servitude under the very forces he believes himself to be mastering. Thus, at its core, *tasayyud* is nothing but *‘ubūdiyyah lil-nafs* [a servitude to the self], which in turn is servitude to *ṭāghūt* [tyranny in its most absolute form].”<sup>69</sup>

Instead, Taha advances an alternative vision, one that reorients political and intellectual engagement toward a form of *ta'abbud* that resists the appropriation of the divine for worldly lordship. *Ta'abbud* is a form of delinking, as it is neither a retreat from politics nor a surrender to secularism, but an ethical-spiritual realignment that recenters faith in justice, accountability, and the rejection of self-idolatry. It is a reconfiguration of the political itself, wherein power is re-situated as a divinely ordained duty rather than an object of possession, and where authority is exercised through ethical self-discipline rather than coercion. The notion of *iz‘āj*, as underpinned by *tazkiyah*, carries profound ethical and transformative dimensions that cut at the very core of what Nelson Maldonado-Torres

characterizes as the “egolatry of Imperial man.”<sup>70</sup> By agitating toward the ideal, *al-zā‘ij* destabilizes the appropriative and possessive power of *al-mutasayyid*, whose logic of self-deification “does not respond so much to interests in the conciliation with nature as, more fundamentally, to interests in the subordination of other human beings.”<sup>71</sup>

## *Al-Zā‘ij’s* Manifesto

Taha advances that such a destabilization can be engendered by every action, no matter how small and however modest, that opposes *tas-ayyud*, playing a role in freeing *al-mutasayyid* from his self-imposed bondage. If even minor acts of resistance can weaken the structures of oppression, then the transformative potential of *tazkiyah* must be even more significant and far-reaching. It is not merely a disobedient act of immediate gratification but a struggle, a radical epistemological and ethical reform, which displaces ego-politics to a *rūh*-political paradigm, i.e., a framework which is anchored in *fiṭrah*—an innate, prelapsarian metaphysical memory inscribed with divine truths that precede human temporality.<sup>72</sup> As such, the individual is reoriented toward *tashhīd* (Intratranscendentalization),<sup>73</sup> a process driven by purificatory praxis which connects transcendent virtues with the material world. Rather than aspiring to dominate the material through instrumental reason, *rūh*-politics is a grassroots harmonization of human agency with divine ideals, fostering a socio-political order rooted in trusteeship.

*Al-zā‘ij* religiously embodies such a paradigmatic shift under a set of conditions. 1) *Iz‘āj* cannot exist without *inzi‘āj* (inner disquiet) because individuals cannot truly undertake the task of disturbing unjust structures without first experiencing profound personal inner upheaval that propels moral and intellectual refinement. *Al-zā‘ij’s* journey involves traversing the ranks of insight and ethical cultivation. *Iz‘āj*, therefore, is not a mere reaction but a conscious and disciplined praxis of transformation.<sup>74</sup> 2) At its core, *iz‘āj* is a restorative force which seeks to return individuals and societies to their *fiṭrah* by reviving the ethical and spiritual consciousness that has been dulled or extinguished by *tas-ayyud*. In this sense, the role of *al-zā‘ij* is not simply to agitate, but to

reawaken the spirit of those who wield power by challenging them to reclaim their lost sense of justice and moral responsibility.<sup>75</sup> 3) *Iz'āj* does not only confront individual injustices but interrogates the structures of power themselves. Within this framework, *tasayyud* exists in two principal forms: “disruptive domination” (which is coercive and violent) and “elective domination” (which is sustained by tacit consent). Each of these, in turn, manifests in three degrees: “manifest domination” (visible and overt), “hidden domination” (covert and systemic), and “the most concealed form of domination” (so deeply embedded in consciousness that it is mistaken for natural order).<sup>76</sup> True *iz'āj* seeks to expose and dismantle all these layers of control by making the unseen seen and the unquestioned questionable.<sup>77</sup> 4) However, unlike conventional forms of resistance that rely solely on external confrontation, *iz'āj* starts by cultivating *al-wāzi' al-rūḥī* (inner deterrent). It instils in individuals a moral vigilance that compels them to hold themselves accountable before seeking to reform others. Such a form of self-discipline is rooted in “*ḥayā' min Allāh*,” a profound sense of “modesty/humility before the Divine” which merges “love for God” with “awe of His justice.”<sup>78</sup> *Iz'āj* transcends legalistic constraints, for it does not rely on external enforcement but on an internalized sense of responsibility that develops through *tazkiyah* and curtails injustice at its root.<sup>79</sup> 5) Last, but not least, if *tazkiyah* were to permeate society, governance itself would be transformed as the ruler who wrestled with moral disquiet and underwent inner self-criticism, would not rule through tyranny but through a deeply ingrained sense of “ethical stewardship.” In such a vision, the reform of leadership does not begin with external policies because a society infused with *iz'āj* is one where governance is not an exercise in *tasayyud* but in service, one where power is not an entitlement but a responsibility.<sup>80</sup>

Taha implies that true power lies not in the imposition of control but in the ethical cultivation of a society of agitators, a project that begins with liberating the ego-self from the tyranny of its own desires. If decolonial scholars advance “that it is not enough to change the content of the conversation, that it is of the essence to change the terms of the conversation,”<sup>81</sup> then Taha changes the terms and the content of the conversation.<sup>82</sup> *Iz'āj* is the driving force of a resistance that prioritizes

societal transformation from the ground up, rather than focusing solely on replacing leadership. Thus, it challenges the modern colonial emphasis on state-centric reforms and the liberal obsession with institutional change through its emphasis on the deeper and more transformative role of individuals to build a collective moral consciousness. Taha rejects the colonial logic that equates progress with top-down modernization or state-centered governance by emphasizing the primacy of society over the state and,<sup>83</sup> as such, shifts the denunciatory locus of critique and resistance to the communal and ethical.<sup>84</sup> In this vision, politics becomes not a battleground for hegemony, but a space for collective ethical insurgencies, which recenter the spirit as a site of radical and transformative interventions.

## The Tangibility of *Iz'āj*: A Reflection on Urgency and Practicality

As has been noted above, the efficacy of *iz'āj* as a form of resistance lies in its capacity to reawaken the primordial meanings embedded within *fiṭrah*. *Iz'āj* operates not as an elitist practice reserved for exclusive groups of *fuqaha'* (scholars of Islamic jurisprudence) but as a universally accessible praxis contingent on *niyyah* (sincere intention). *Al-zā'ij* unsettles the clerical reduction of salvation to private piety and ritual rectitude. He rejects the quietist illusion that spiritual hygiene alone can redeem a fractured Ummah. True faith is not passive acquiescence but ethical unrest, i.e., a refusal to sanctify silence before tyranny. *Tazkiyah* is not the cultivation of secluded virtue, but the forging of a collective conscience that confronts oppression without compromising the soul. While *iz'āj* emphasizes the transformative power of ethical and spiritual renewal, Taha's framework underscores that decolonial resistance cannot remain confined to intellectual critique alone. As much as academics might idealize transcending dominant paradigms through ideas, dismantling these structures necessitates rehabilitating the material systems that sustain them, a task inseparable from the moral recalibration of both self and society. Thus, *al-zā'ij* embodies a thorn in the side of power, and a mirror to the conscience of the faithful. Resistance, here, becomes

proportional to the individual's level of *tazkiyah* and the strength of the spiritually attuned conscience within *al-zā'ij* which enables discernment between justice and oppression.<sup>85</sup>

Critics may challenge the relevance of *iz'āj* in contexts where democratic opposition appears to suffice as resistance. Taha, however, delineates a critical distinction: whereas oppositional resistance—rooted in secular rationality—aims to reclaim power solely through institutional channels, seeking only peripheral and top-down changes, *iz'āj* operates as a foundational *wujdān*-based *rūḥ*-political displacement. While conventional resistance seeks to redistribute authority, *iz'āj* confronts the foundational structures of power itself, transcending mere leadership changes to prioritize the ethical transformation of the individual as the fundamental unit of society. As Taha clarifies, “the target of *iz'āj* is not to change the authorities [...] but rather to transform the human being—and there is a vast difference between the two forms of change.”<sup>86</sup> He argues that systemic injustice endures even after regime change, as the logic of *tasayyud* persists in the absence of inner moral renewal. Thus, it is imperative to emphasize that *al-zā'ij* must not uphold *tazkiyah* as an isolative ethic divorced from socio-political struggle. His is a mode of resistance wherein inner transformation and structural opposition coalesce, resisting both hegemonic violence and the reduction of ethics to private piety.

Skeptics might argue that focusing on individual *tazkiyah* overlooks the urgency of confronting material injustices (e.g., economic exploitation or political violence), particularly when coercive force seems unavoidable. Taha concedes that *iz'āj* does not preclude physical resistance but insists that *tazkiyah* must precede and guide it. By restoring individuals to their innate orientation toward justice, *iz'āj* equips them to discern when strength or gentleness is warranted. As he notes, “the one who engages in *iz'āj* preserves both the force inherent in their nature and the gentleness that also stems from it. In both cases, they do not resist oppression except through witnessing the divine command.”<sup>87</sup> This balance ensures that resistance remains anchored in *ta'abbud*, transcending the ego's hunger for control. Crucially, Taha elevates moral injustice above material injustice, arguing that corruption of the soul precedes

and perpetuates bodily harm: “moral injustice [...] primarily harms the human soul, with the body possibly suffering as a consequence. In contrast, material injustice [...] primarily harms the body, with the soul potentially being affected as a secondary effect.”<sup>88</sup> This hierarchy underscores *iz‘āj*’s focus on ethical and spiritual repair as prerequisites for addressing material injustice.

### *Iz‘āj* Manifested: Reading Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* Through the Lens of Epistemoral Agitation

Through a reading informed by the ethics of *iz‘āj*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) illuminates the principles of epistemoral agitation through its portrayal of characters navigating the profound spiritual and cultural crisis faced by a colonized Muslim society. Set in the fictional Diallobé country—a representation of Senegal under French colonial influence—the novel provides a concrete manifestation of the tension between indigenous Islamic epistemologies and colonial knowledge systems. The French colonial presence represents not only political and economic domination but also epistemic violence, evident in the establishment of the “new school,” which threatens the spiritual and cultural foundations of the Diallobé through the imposition of Western knowledge systems and the marginalization of indigenous ways of knowing. From this hermeneutical angle, Kane’s narrative exemplifies Islamic decolonial praxis, showcasing how resistance operates across individual, communal, and spiritual dimensions, and collectively illustrating how *iz‘āj* breaks the bifurcation of inner ethical reform and material engagement.

### *Iz‘āj* and the Fragile Ethics of Return

In the Diallobé community, disciples—among them the young protagonist Samba Diallo—are required to beg for their sustenance, a practice that transcends mere survival. Rather than a passive necessity, this ritual cultivates humility and embodies an ethical trade grounded in *tazkiyah*, resisting colonial materialism and individualism. As they seek daily

sustenance, the disciples chant litanies that shift focus from material wealth to spiritual accountability, enacting *iz‘āj* as a moral and epistemic agitation. The invocation, “Men of God, reflect upon your approaching death. Awake, Oh, awake! Azrael, Angel of death, is already breaking the earth for you [...] Listen to its voice!”<sup>89</sup> serves as a deliberate act of ethical disruption. It unsettles the conscience and redirects desire from accumulation to accountability. The moment of death, here, is not feared as annihilation but invoked as a mirror reflecting the soul’s readiness for the afterlife. Through this collective spiritual practice, the disciples contest the colonial logics of profit, commodification, and human supremacy.

Their condition as “poor disciples in quest of their daily pittance”<sup>90</sup> emphasizes mutual dependence and reframes vulnerability as ethical strength. This is reinforced by the chant: “Men and women who sleep, think of peopling by your benefactions the solitude which will inhabit your tombs. Feed the poor disciples!”<sup>91</sup> Here, the ethics of giving is reoriented as a metaphysical investment, compelling the wealthy to anticipate their solitude in death rather than assert power in life. This spiritual agitation, which the narrator notes “terrorize[s] the region by their imprecations against life,” is not destructive but transformative, a moral awakening that contrasts sharply with the colonial pursuit of “joining wood to wood,”<sup>92</sup> a metaphor for mechanical and soulless progress. The litanies agitate the community’s conscience, urging a re-evaluation of priorities and reinforcing *iz‘āj* as a proactive stance against exploitative systems.

Samba Diallo’s personal comportment deepens such a philosophical ethic. Despite his noble lineage, he embraces the humility of his role. When his cousin offers food, Samba “remained serious, focused on his spiritual path.”<sup>93</sup> His refusal of indulgence is not stoicism for its own sake, but a cultivated detachment rooted in *taqwā* (God-consciousness). Later, when mocked by Demba, Samba replies, “you can go away with someone else. I shall not hold it against you,”<sup>94</sup> rejecting pride and hierarchy. He seeks not to affirm the ego, but to efface it so that ethical clarity might emerge. His punishment for wearing new clothes becomes a further moment of reflection: “He was not thinking of his nobility [...] He was reciting to himself the verse which says that God abases and

exalts whom He wills.”<sup>95</sup> Such an embrace of abasement resonates with the Islamic conception of the ethical self as *mustakhlaf*: entrusted, not entitled. The teacher sharpens this point further stating that “the teacher believed profoundly that the adoration of God was not compatible with any exaltation of man. But, at the bottom of all nobility there is a basis of paganism. Nobility is the exaltation of man, faith is before all else humility, if not humiliation.”<sup>96</sup> The text suggests that true nobility lies not in bloodline but in the ascetic labor of spiritual refinement. Samba’s discomfort with his inherited status, “a diadem [...] too much in evidence,” is a critique of unearned privilege and an argument for ethical becoming. While the Qur’an teacher Thierno’s condemnation of nobility aligns with Taha’s analysis of *tasayyud* as a form of self-deification, Samba’s ability to dissolve the distinction between spiritual and material resistance exposes how discourses of religious asceticism conflate humility with self-abasement, potentially reducing *tazkiyah* to performative suffering rather than ethical awakening. Taha’s *tazkiyah*-based *iz‘āj* is transformative precisely because it empowers the self to agitate against injustice, not merely endure it.

Additionally, at the core of *Ambiguous Adventure* lies a profound interrogation of the colonial fracturing of human existence into competing domains of spiritual devotion and material necessity. This schism, introduced through the epistemic violence of Western education, manifests most acutely in Samba Diallo’s crisis of consciousness as he grapples with the artificial opposition between prayer and labor, mirroring the polarization between inner reform and material resistance. His anguished reflection, “why did I think of prayer and life in terms of opposition? He prays, he does not live [...] I am the only one who could have this bizarre idea of a life which could be lived, in some fashion, outside the presence of God,”<sup>97</sup> reveals how colonial modernity imposes a binary ontology alien to the Islamic worldview. Where the Diallobé tradition understands work as an extension of *taqwā* (God-consciousness), colonial rationality reduces labor to instrumental toil, stripping it of its sacral potential. This exemplifies Taha’s critique of *tasayyud*, rendering ethics not ancillary to knowledge or politics, rather their precondition. Thierno’s pedagogy reflects such a fusion. When Samba recalls acquiring

“the Word of God [...] by the whole being,”<sup>98</sup> he affirms embodied cognition. The sacred is not absorbed through abstraction but etched into the self through discipline and repetition. Thierno’s harsh methods are not punitive but pedagogical: they enact *tazkiyah* through a slow cultivation of sincerity. The body-political here becomes not only a matter of social embeddedness. Far from being a site of decay or distraction, it becomes the ground of divine proximity because *rūḥ*-political ethics locates the political within the inner transformation of the self, rendering the latter as the temporal and spiritual basis of structural and systematic insurgency.

Within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*, action is not divorced from divine orientation. By contrast, colonial modernity elevates labor and efficiency above all. The principal’s comment that “the school only teaches men to join wood to wood,”<sup>99</sup> reduces education to mere construction. Samba’s horror at a life “outside the presence of God”<sup>100</sup> articulates a deeper metaphysical dislocation. Where Islamic epistemology sees work as *‘ibādah* (a form of worship), colonial logic sees it in terms of production, detached from soul, community, or eschatology. Samba’s father offers a corrective: “if a man believes in God, the time he takes from prayer for work is still prayer. It is even a very beautiful prayer.”<sup>101</sup> This vision is underpinned by Taha’s *al-‘aql al-mu’ayyad* (supported reason),<sup>102</sup> which unites material effort with spiritual intention. In this paradigm, neither labor nor resistance is envisioned only in material or secular terms. Rather, they become sacramental, i.e., an expression of gratitude and custodianship. Yet, Kane resists synthesis. The Diallobé’s dilemma: “can one learn this without forgetting that and is what one learns worth what one forgets?”—captures the existential paradox of decolonial becoming. The Most Royal Lady’s agricultural metaphor—“We plough [our fields] up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way [...] we bury [our seed] in the earth”<sup>103</sup>—captures the paradox of *ibdā’*: preservation requires transformation, survival demands surrender. Her vision transcends the binary of resistance/accommodation by framing adaptation as an act of ethical stewardship, where sending children to the foreign school becomes a sacred risk akin to planting seeds in barren soil, complacency without severing ties to tradition. The Most Royal

Lady's insistence on teaching the youth to embrace life embodies *iz'āj*'s proactive ethos, which reimagines resistance as the cultivation of life-affirming values within hostile epistemic terrain.

### Insurgent *Wujdān*: The Most Royal Lady's Ethics of *iz'āj*

In *Ambiguous Adventure*, the Most Royal Lady emerges, through the lens of *rūh*-politics, as the novel's most potent narrative embodiment of *al-zā'ij*, mobilizing *iz'āj* as both critique and ethical guidance. She is introduced as the older sister of the Diallobé Chief and the older cousin of the protagonist, Samba Diallo. She holds a pre-eminent position of power and moral authority within the Diallobé ruling elite, possessing a "haughty and imposing visage,"<sup>104</sup> and an "extraordinarily luminous gaze."<sup>105</sup> She is so formidable that the countryside reportedly feared her more than her brother, the Chief. Her authority was historically established by military force and political efficacy, having "pacified the North by her firmness,"<sup>106</sup> a feat that earned her the name, "the Most Royal Lady"<sup>107</sup> from the subjugated tribes. She acts as the vital and decisive counterpoint to the Chief, who tends toward introspection and peace. Her brother implicitly acknowledges her function when he tells the Teacher Thierno, "My brother is the living heart of this country, but you are its conscience."<sup>108</sup> Her actions are driven by such an authoritative conscience. She physically intervenes to halt the trajectory of the protagonist Samba Diallo, proclaiming, "I have warned your great fool of a father that your place is not at the teacher's hearth [...] I am going to put an end to all that."<sup>109</sup>

Designating her as *al-zā'ij* stems directly from the lucidity and *wujdān* of her vision, which refuses the paralyzing binaries torpefying the Diallobé leadership. Her wisdom is anchored in a pragmatic realism that transcends merely preserving the past and accurately assesses the existential colonial threat. She argues that the "foreign school is the new form of the war"<sup>110</sup> being waged against them, and therefore they must learn "the art of conquering without being in the right."<sup>111</sup> This is not a wisdom of retreat, but a prophetic insistence that spiritual truths must be dynamically applied to contemporary historical challenges. She directly

performs *iz‘āj* by standing against the Teacher’s spiritual rigidity and “values of death,”<sup>112</sup> asserting that the community must instead “teach our sons to live.”<sup>113</sup> Her critical urgency is grounded in socio-economic necessity, as she warns that inaction will lead to ruin, stating pointedly that “extreme poverty is, down here, the principal enemy of God.”<sup>114</sup> This wisdom culminates in her decision to frame adaptation as an act of *amānah* and sacred stewardship, captured in her powerful agricultural metaphor, “we plough them up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way [...] we bury them in the earth.”<sup>115</sup> By insisting that preservation demands transformation, she champions a *wujdān*-driven ethical clarity that enables the creative intervention necessary for the community’s survival. Therefore, her political authority is ultimately deployed to enforce a spiritual reorientation of the collective toward life, necessity, and dynamic fidelity.

Through her principled defiance of colonial binaries and internal spiritual rigidity, she enacts a decolonial praxis rooted in Islamic ethics. Her confrontation with Thierno, the spiritual teacher and custodian of the Diallobé tradition, is not simply a generational or ideological disagreement; it is a performative enactment of an *iz‘āj* that disrupts the moral absolutism masked as piety. However, it is paramount to underscore that the depiction of multiple spiritually dedicated figures, particularly the Teacher (Thierno) and Samba Diallo, requires a philosophical distinction vis-à-vis the difference between their ethical devotion and The Most Royal Lady’s specific enactment of *iz‘āj*. Such a distinction is one of kind and telos, rather than merely degree. While many figures embody the essential preconditions for *iz‘āj*, namely, rigorous inner purification and rejection of ego-politics, the Most Royal Lady alone performs the dynamic and generative intervention required of *al-zā‘ij*.

The Teacher Thierno is the dedicated master whose entire life is consecrated to teaching the Word. His harsh pedagogy is based on combating *tasayyud*, as he believed that genuine worship of God is incompatible with the idolization of human beings.<sup>116</sup> His methods, using switches and burning faggots, are a form of demanding suffering to achieve humility and ensure the “pure and limpid”<sup>117</sup> flow of the Word. Similarly, Samba Diallo’s discomfort with his noble status, describing his

patrician origin as “a diadem which was too cumbersome and too much in evidence,”<sup>118</sup> and his participation in ritual begging exemplify *al-inzi‘āj* (inner disquiet) and *tazkiyah* necessary for ethical self-refinement. These characters embody the requisite ethical preparation and self-discipline that prevents resistance from devolving into instrumental calculation.

However, the core distinction lies in how the ethical ideal is applied in a moment of existential crisis. The Teacher’s spiritual profundity leads to paralysis when confronted with the colonial threat, demonstrating that *tazkiyah* alone is insufficient for collective decolonial action. As we have noted before, he risks reducing Islamic ethics to unpracticed virtue whereby fixating on the values of death leads the fossilization of Islam into a shrine of self-sacrifice, where vitality gives way to ritualized remembrance. When faced with the dilemma of the foreign school, he sees the paths as fundamentally opposed and “inflexible.”<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, he admits defeat stating, “but do not ask me what should be done tomorrow morning, for that I do not know.”<sup>120</sup> His moral absolutism prevents him from achieving the dynamic and generative foresight required for *iz‘āj*.

In contrast, the Most Royal Lady embodies *iz‘āj* because her intervention is transformative and aimed at societal reformation. As noted at the beginning of this section, she demands that the Diallobé cultivates the values of life, acting as an epistemoral agitator against the quietism and rigidity of the Teacher. Her proposals, actions, and visions are the necessary creative intervention that breaks the collective paralysis of the community. Thus, while the Teacher embodies the necessary ethical foundation, the Most Royal Lady embodies the active and generative *wujdān*-driven moment of *iz‘āj*, the critical philosophical step that moves beyond inner purity to ethical insurgency. This generative quality of her *wujdān* is dramatically demonstrated in her confrontation with the spiritual authority of Thierno, where she articulates her philosophy as a moral imperative. She declares:

I believe that the time has come to teach our sons to live. I foresee that they will have to do with a world of the living, in which the values of death will be scoffed at and bankrupt. Thierno, I am

not saying that you are wrong. But I think that the new world has upset the old values, and that we ought to find a way of keeping what is essential in them, while adapting ourselves to the life that is coming.<sup>121</sup>

Here, she articulates *iz'āj* not as a nihilistic rejection of tradition but as a moral disturbance that reclaims Islamic ethics as a dynamic and life-affirming force. Her call to “teach our sons to live” is simultaneously a critique of Thierno’s asceticism and an affirmation of *tawḥīd*—the unitive principle that insists on the inseparability of the spiritual and the material. She does not dismiss Thierno’s commitment to spiritual discipline; rather, she exposes its misapplication in the face of historical urgency. Her intervention critiques the reduction of Islamic ethics to metaphysical detachment and reasserts it as a *wujūdān*-driven engagement with worldly life. The Most Royal Lady’s inner moral sensibility grounds her speech in ethical insight rather than intellectual abstraction. When she tells Samba Diallo that “the teacher is trying to kill the life in you,”<sup>122</sup> she is not denying the value of spiritual formation but indicting its instrumentalization toward docility and disengagement. Thierno’s fixation on death as a pedagogical moral horizon risks ossifying Islam into a museum of self-sacrifice, that is severed from the demands of colonial subjugation. The Most Royal Lady’s emphasis on life is thus not a secular deviation but a prophetic insistence that spiritual truths must be reanimated to meet historical challenges.

Such an ethical reorientation is dramatized against the community’s above-mentioned paralyzing dilemma about the worth of learning at the expense of forgetting. It encapsulates the existential stakes of colonial education for the Diallobé, between the promise of technical mastery and the peril of cultural amnesia. In response, the Most Royal Lady sacralizes adaptation as *amānah*. Her agricultural metaphor reinforces such sacredness: “we plough [our fields] up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way [...] we bury [our seed] in the earth”<sup>123</sup> In her hands, adaptation becomes an act of faith, not capitulation. She invokes the image of sowing seeds in fallow soil to signify that the act of sending children to colonial schools must be approached not as cultural betrayal

but as a risk of spiritual stewardship. Her intervention also problematizes the Chief's epistemological impasse. While he hesitates before the possible erosion of values, she insists on distinguishing between the essential and the dispensable. Her proposal to preserve what is essential while adapting to change exemplifies what Taha denounces in those who confuse *al-jawhar* (essence) with *al-lawāzim* (incidental additions). She reclaims such a decolonial discernment through *wujdān*—the ethical intuition that recognizes the core of tradition while challenging its fossilization. Thus, her *iz'āj* diverges sharply from Thierno's rigidity, as seen in his reply: "I do not see how, Madame. We move along parallel lines, and both are inflexible."<sup>124</sup> The "parallel lines" reveals a worldview that sees dialogue as impossible, not because of difference but because of inflexibility. In contrast, the Most Royal Lady's agitation opens the possibility for synthesis, what Kane terms "ambiguous adventure." Her ethical clarity allows her to hold paradox without paralysis, advocating neither wholesale rejection of tradition nor blind embrace of modernity.

Her authority amplifies the weight of her critique. Kane presents her not merely as a dissenting voice but as a commanding presence: "She had pacified the North by her firmness. The tribes subjugated by her extraordinary personality had been kept in obedience by her prestige. It was the North that had given her the name 'the Most Royal Lady.'<sup>125</sup> Her confrontation with Thierno is therefore not an emotional appeal but a politically and morally calculated intervention. Her leadership is characterized by a unique fusion of spiritual insight and strategic foresight. When she says, "If I do not tell the Diallobé to go to the new school, they will not go. Their houses will fall into ruins, their children will die or be reduced to slavery,"<sup>126</sup> she is not fearmongering but articulating a lucid vision of the socio-economic collapse that will follow inaction. What distinguishes her *iz'āj* is that it is not only oppositional but creative, seeking to realign the ethical compass of her community. Her challenge is grounded in *wujdān*, not ideology, and this allows her to speak with both urgency and humility. Her earlier intervention with Samba Diallo, "I have warned your great fool of a father that your place is not at the teacher's hearth [...] I am going to put an end to all that,"<sup>127</sup> is not mere maternal concern. It is an assertion that spiritual vitality

must manifest in the world, not retreat from it. In the Most Royal Lady, Kane stages a profound meditation on ethical leadership in the context of colonial modernity. Her capacity to hold complexity, to discern between the essential and the incidental, and to reframe survival as sacred stewardship makes her the clearest literary figure of *al-zā'ij*. Her legacy lies in her ability to hold paradox without succumbing to powerlessness. She neither sanctifies the past nor capitulates to the present but navigates the “ambiguous adventure” of decolonial healing with a *wujdān*-driven clarity that transcends ideological purity. In a world reduced by colonial logic to “joining wood to wood,” the Most Royal Lady’s voice resounds as a call to reweave the fabric of being, where labor is devotion, adaptation is fidelity, and decolonial survival is nothing less than sacred continuity.

## Conclusion

Abderrahmane Taha’s *iz‘āj* reframes decolonial resistance as an ethically anchored and spiritually transformative praxis, grounded in *tazkiyah* and *fiṭrah*. The *majāl al-tadāwulī* framework offers a roadmap for reconstituting agency, shifting resistance from ego-political domination to *rūḥ*-political stewardship. Taha adamantly insists that ethical transformation is the foundation for sustainable justice, rejecting the binary of inner purification versus external resistance as a betrayal of Islamic ethical ontology. True transformation requires an ethically grounded praxis that unites inner renewal with external struggle. *Al-zā'ij* discloses that Islamically-anchored resistance is animated by a transgressive *ikhhlāṣ* that ruptures the idolatries of the *nafs*’ tyrannical lordship and hegemonic reason. Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* crystallizes these principles: Samba Diallo’s spiritual crisis and the Most Royal Lady’s insurgent critique exemplify *iz‘āj*’s dual focus—agitating against external oppression while cultivating an inner ethical compass capacious enough to bear the trust of *istikhlāf* (ethical stewardship). Beyond Islamic thought, *iz‘āj* challenges decolonial scholarship to integrate transcendence and moral accountability into critiques of power, resisting the reduction of liberation to material or institutional change.

## Endnotes

- 1 Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic world*, 1, No. 2 (2011): 46-66.
- 2 Jason Sparkes, "Tradition as Flow: Decolonial Currents in the Muslim Atlantic," *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*, January, (2020).
- 3 Halim Rane, Debbie Bargallie, and Troy Meston, "Mobilising a Decolonial-Islamic Praxis: Covenants in Islam and Muslim-Indigenous Relations," *Religions*, 15, No. 3 (2024): 1-19.
- 4 Abdelaziz El Amrani, "Desecularising the Postcolonial Resistance: The Role of Islamic Spirituality in the Framing of Moroccan Anticolonial Thought," *The Journal of North African Studies*, 28, No. 5 (2021): 1240-64.
- 5 Iskander Abbasi, "Islam, Muslims, and the Coloniality of Being: Reframing the Debate on Race and Religion in Modernity," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 33, No. 2 (2020): 1-33.
- 6 Joseph E. B. Lombard, "Islam, Coloniality, and the Pedagogy of Cognitive Liberation in Higher Education," *Teaching in Higher Education* (2025): 1-12; Joseph E. B. Lombard, "Islam and the Challenge of Epistemic Sovereignty," *Religions*, 15, No. 4 (2024): 1-14; Joseph E. B. Lombard, "Decolonizing Qur'anic Studies," *Religions*, 13, No. 2 (2022): 1-14.
- 7 In keeping with Abderrahmane Taha's own clarification, made in his response to Wael Hallaq's study on his thought, I follow the name order "Abderrahmane Taha," since he indicated that Taha is his family name rather than Abderrahmane. See Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), xvi.
- 8 In his philosophy, the concept *al-majāl al-tadāwulī* could be rendered as the pragmatic-discursive-cultural domain or field. His formulation and its relevance to the decolonial discussion in the Islamic world is to be found in the next section. Please also note that, when written in full, the concept is transliterated as *al-majāl al-tadāwulī*. However, to avoid redundant repetition of the first definite article (i.e., the / *al-*), where stylistically appropriate we have preferred phrasing such as "the *majāl al-tadāwulī*" and "the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*."
- 9 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 10 Enrique Dussel, "Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, No. 3 (2012): 28-59.
- 11 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

- 12 Mohammed Hashas translates *al-istikhlāfas* “the principle of Caliphate,” and further explains that it “holds the highest rank after divinity itself. God has willed that man does not only care for his private matters but also carries the honorary message of inheriting the world, a deposit (*amānah*) he should ethically care about.” Mohammed Ḥaṣḥas *The Idea of European Islam: Religion, Ethics, Politics and Perpetual Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2019), 190. For a further discussion of how Taha’s project can engage with and transcend alternative, transmodern, and pluriversal perspectives, see Guennouni Idrissi, Achraf. “Misreading the Rūḥ: Taha Abderrahmane, Enrique Dussel and the Ethics of Decolonial Modernities.” *Postcolonial Studies* (2025): 1-24.
- 13 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition* (New York: Harper One, 2010).
- 14 Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
- 15 Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1993).
- 16 Lumbard defines first principles in relation to metaphysics and the underlying structure of classical Islamic knowledge. These first principles provided the link whereby everything was tied to a greater vision of the whole. The goal of knowledge derived from such conceptualizations is to understand things “in relation to the Real, the Absolute, God,” establishing an implicit cognitive hierarchy whereby everything is oriented and driven by the values of first principles. “Islam, Coloniality,” 12.
- 17 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 45.
- 18 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 45.
- 19 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 45.
- 20 For a thorough discussion of the aforementioned issues, see Taha Abderrahmane, *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth* (Dār al-Bayḍā’: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 1994); Taha Abderrahmane, *al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī fī l-Ikhtilāf al-Fikrī* (Dār al-Bayḍā’: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2005); Taha Abderrahmane, *al-Ḥaqq al-‘Arabī fī l-Ikhtilāf al-Falsafī* (Dār al-Bayḍā’: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2006); Taha Abderrahmane, *Su’āl al-Manhaj: Fī Ufuq al-Ta’āsīs li-Namūdhaj Fikrī Jadīd* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Fikr wa-l-Ibdā’, 2015).
- 21 Muhammet Ateş, “The Concept of Majal al-Tadawul (Pragmatic Field) in the Thought of Taha Abd al-Rahman,” *Journal of Kocatepe Islamic Sciences* 5/1 (2022): 38–39.
- 22 For a discussion of the interrelation between knowledge, praxis and resistance within the Islamic Majāl al-Tadāwulī see Taha, *al-Ḥaqq al-‘Arabī*, 70-81.
- 23 For a thorough discussion of these principles, see, Taha Abderrahmane, *Rūḥ al-dīn: Min dīq al-‘almāniyya ilā sa’at al-i’timāniyya*, 4th ed. (Dār al-Bayḍā’: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2017), 23–44.

- 24 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 25 Taha Abderrahmane, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah* (Beirut: Ma'had al-Ma'ārif al-Ḥikmiyyah li-l-Dirāsāt al-Diniyyah wa-l-Falsafiyyah, 2008), 13.
- 26 Taha Abderrahmane, "Taha Responding", in Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 275.
- 27 Harald Viersen, *The Time of Turāth: Authenticity and Temporality in Contemporary Arab Thought*. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2024), 353.
- 28 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 14.
- 29 Taha Abderrahmane, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah: al-Madkhal ilā Ta'sīs al-Ḥadāthah al-Islāmiyyah*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 2013).
- 30 See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "What is Decolonial Critique?," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 41, No. 1 (2020): 157–83; Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas," in *Towards a Just Curriculum Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 147–64; Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies*, 21, No. 2–3 (2007): 168–78.
- 31 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 22.
- 32 Taha, *al-Ḥaqq al-'Arabī*, 71.
- 33 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 11–12.
- 34 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 14.
- 35 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah*, 18.
- 36 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah*, 18.
- 37 Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, No. 7–8 (2009): 14.
- 38 Taha distinguishes three degrees of reason: (1) *Abstract reasoning* (*al-'aql al-mujar-rad*), purely theoretical and detached from ethics/religion (dominant in philosophy); (2) *Guided reasoning* (*al-'aql al-musaddad*), rule-bound and juristic but limited to textual formalism (dominant in fiqh); and (3) *Supported reasoning* (*al-'aql al-mu'ayyad*), which integrates intellect, spiritual insight (*ma'rifah*), and divine grace, grounding knowledge in ethical self-purificatory critique (*tazkiyah*). The hierarchy critiques secular and reductionist epistemologies, positioning Sufi-inflected reason as the highest form of ethical-intellectual praxis. For a detailed exposition of these degree see Taha Abderrahmane, *al-'Amal al-dīnī wa-tajdīd al-'aql*, 2nd ed. (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1997). For a brief sketch of levels of reason in English, see Farid Suleiman, "The Philosophy of Taha Abderrahman: A Critical

- Study,” *Die Welt Des Islams*, 61, No. 1 (2021): 49-50; Mostafa Amakdouf, “Su’āl al-Akhlāq bayna al-Dīn wa-l-‘Aql al-Mujarrad: ‘Alī ‘Izzat Bīgūvītsh wa-Tāha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Namūdḥajan” in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 78–103.
- 39 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 510.
- 40 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.
- 41 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 29.
- 42 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 52.
- 43 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 16.
- 44 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 16.
- 45 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 60. See also Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 14.
- 46 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.
- 47 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 59.
- 48 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 40.
- 49 Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 14. See also Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 73. In fact, Taha inaugurates a rupture with the Western conception of the human by displacing the primacy of rationality as its defining trait, and reinstating the ethical as the cardinal mark of human distinctiveness. Taha Abderrahmane, *Su’āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhamah fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqī li-l-Ḥadāthah al-Gharbiyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2000), 13-14.
- 50 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 27. Taha further explains that the basis of being oriented by the Absolute is a triad of complete sincerity. As an exemplar of Islamic resistance, *al-zā’ij* embodies such a unique paradigm of “*ṣīdq kāmīl*,” one that transcends the personal to include transparency with the Ummah, honesty with the enemy, and integrity in political engagement (the world). As such, *iz’āj* serves not only as a political force but as an ethical and pedagogical model which challenges the prevailing norms of deceit in global political culture. See Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 75-76.
- 51 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 27.
- 52 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 27.
- 53 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 17.
- 54 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 302.
- 55 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.
- 56 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 510.
- 57 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 513.
- 58 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 296.
- 59 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 513.

- 60 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 205.
- 61 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 91.
- 62 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 207.
- 63 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.
- 64 Dustin Craun, “Exploring Pluriversal Paths toward Transmodernity,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11/1 (2013): 93.
- 65 Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 8.
- 66 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 319-335
- 67 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 271.
- 68 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Secularism and Religion in the Modern/Colonial World-System: From Secular Postcoloniality to Postsecular Transmodernity,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, eds. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 383.
- 69 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 271.
- 70 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 114.
- 71 Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 114. See also Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 93.
- 72 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 52.
- 73 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 208.
- 74 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 297.
- 75 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 298.
- 76 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 298-299.
- 77 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 298-299.
- 78 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 300.
- 79 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 300.
- 80 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 302.
- 81 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 4.
- 82 See Masoud Budoukha, “Milestones of Terminological Renewal of Taha Abdul Rahman,” *al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu‘āṣir*, 21, No. 83 (2016): 87–112; Nourreddine Benkaddou, “Philosophical Independence and Renewal of Taha AbdurRahman,” *al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu‘āṣir*, 24, No. 93 (2018): 119–43; Muḥammad Al-Shahabī and Fayṣal A. Būzāhir, “Su‘āl Tajdīd al-Manhaj al-Kalāmī ‘inda Ṭāhā ‘Abd al-Raḥmān: Dirāsah fi Fiqh ‘līm al-Kalām,” *Majallat Namā’*, 7, No. 3 (2023): 124–54.
- 83 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 35.
- 84 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 302
- 85 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 307-308.

- 86 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 309.
- 87 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 312.
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- 89 Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, (New York: Melville House, 2012), 12.
- 90 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 13.
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- 94 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 14.
- 95 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 20.
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- 98 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 72.
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- 100 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 86.
- 101 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 90.
- 102 Mohamed Hashas, "The Trusteeship Paradigm: The Formation and Reception of a Philosophy," In *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Mohamed Hashas, Mutaz al-Khatib (Leiden: Brill), 42.
- 103 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 42.
- 104 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 18.
- 105 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 19.
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- 107 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 20.
- 108 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 32.
- 109 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 20.
- 110 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 34.
- 111 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 33.
- 112 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 25.
- 113 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 25.
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- 117 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 5.
- 118 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 15.
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- 122 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 20.
- 123 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 42.
- 124 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 31.
- 125 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 19.
- 126 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 33.
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