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AFRICAN WOMEN WRITERS :  
Configuring Change at the Interface of Politics and Fiction

This article explores the space between politics and literature occupied by feminist writers<sup>1</sup> in Francophone Africa. In the social realist novel, these writers have established an arena in which to engage in the politics of gender, modernity and change in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa and articulate a culturally-located discourse of development. The reception of this literary genre in its locality helps reposition the discourse of gender and development within the region, offering a culturally-embedded voice in the gender and development debate that has been marginalised in the framing of the international development agenda for Africa over the past half century.

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**The Gender of Change in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Following the publication of a series of ground-breaking studies in the 1970s on the role of women in the African economy, politicians began to take note of the myriad ways in which the growth of the postcolonial African economy depends upon women. The first wave of gender-sensitive policy-making that emerged from this initial *prise de conscience* operated under the umbrella title of ‘women in development / *femme et développement* (WID/FED). Under WID/FED, policy-makers adopted a corporatist approach to development that accommodated gender by classifying men and women as distinct economic groups occupying identifiable sections of the developing economy.

The limitations of this approach were exposed in a second wave of gender-sensitive policy-making in Africa, known as the gender and development / *genre et développement* (GAD/GED). From the late 1980s, GAD analysis identified gender as a mediator of every aspect of growth in a developing economy.

While GAD was generally lauded as a significant advance on earlier policies seeking to improve women’s socio-economic position in

sub-Saharan Africa, the results on the ground have been disappointing. This essay will seek to demonstrate that a key reason for this failure is the exclusion of culturally-based expertise on how gender mediates development in a locality. This expertise is excluded from the earliest stages of development target-setting and policy formulation processes. Despite decades of effort and expenditure, the gaps between male and female access to various indicators of development remain very high in many countries and even unchanged in some. Even in those countries where gaps have been significantly reduced, the impact of so-called development on the socio-economic position of women has been negligible.

Analyses are now turning to improving the evidence base with a view to providing a better understanding of environmental factors affecting the impact of GAD policy in the locality. These are timely given that the lack of cultural specificity in the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at promoting gender equality has become more rather than less evident over the past twenty years. During this period policies have been increasingly formulated in a policy-making centre that is as far removed from the place of implementation as colonial development policies were from the colonies they ruled in the pre-Independence era. The new globalised metropolis articulates the discourse of an international development community operating predominantly through the UN, the World Bank and the IMF. In its efforts to overcome political resistance to promoting women through development, the centre has increasingly conflated its discourse of change with universal human rights that aim at transcending local political, cultural, linguistic and historical divides. While laudable in intent, and largely successful in undermining the efforts of some governments to evade GAD completely at the national political level, the approach has not proved able to obviate a raft of culturally-specific obstacles at the point of implementation.

### **Towards a Third Wave: the Culture of Gender and Development**

Where this rights-based approach has succeeded in highlighting and even overcoming some of the worst excesses of gender discrimination around the world, it has failed to remove gender discrimination at a rate and in ways that policy-makers hoped and expected. These hopes for change are currently encapsulated in the international community's common development agenda known as the Millennium Development

Goals, defined at the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000 for achievement by 2015. When progress towards these goals was reviewed in 2005 and 2010, it became clear that progress towards the gender equality targets was significantly behind schedule. In fact, at the current rate of progress some targets would not be achieved before the middle of the current century, if at all.

The hypothesis being explored in this article suggests that the evidence base used to formulate and implement policy designed to reduce the gender dimension of socio-economic disadvantage in developing world is currently being undermined by the universalising approach outlined above and the concomitant standardised social science methodology upon which it based. This methodology uses statistical technologies to produce formula-driven policy responses to gender-based discrimination. The strength of the approach lies in its ability to bring the weight of the international community against delinquent governments that refuse to engage in the advancement of women. But its weakness lies in its failure to adapt these broad over-arching principles to the specific cultural context in which the policies are implemented. In practice this failure has meant that no space has been reserved for local stakeholders to integrate their knowledge into the process of formulating policy. The absence of this space for local participation in the framing of the gender and development discourse and its policies has opened up a significant cultural knowledge gap in the policy field.

In an effort to engage with this gap in the policy-making process, the study reported on here is exploring the literary and cultural heritage of sub-Saharan Africa as a rich source of historic and contemporary social knowledge, and one which has the potential to inform the data-driven development agenda prevalent in Africa.<sup>2</sup> The following discussion looks at these sources and suggests ways in which literary analysis can enrich socio-economic analysis of gender and development in the region.

### **Fiction as sociology**

While the role of literature in sociological theorisation has been recognised<sup>3</sup> not least for its potential to « servir le sociologue à relativiser, à montrer la pluralité des “petites vérités”, [...] qui nous anime au quotidien [...] ce que Dantec qualifie de “laboratoire anthropologique expérimental” » (Ricard, 7), in practice the social science theorisation that currently underpins development policy-making is wedded to method-

ologies anchored in an earlier modernist era of empirical reasoning. These methodologies remain heavily dependent on sources of information that are largely numerical as opposed to narrative in character. The potential of literature to nuance our understanding of existing development challenges, in ways not possible in empirical methodology, constitutes the focus of the discussion here as it explores the stories women writers from Francophone Africa have fashioned to critique both the discourses and the politics of gender in the postcolonial era.

From the perspective of feminist standpoint theory, the discussion will argue in favour of the construction of knowledge around social policy-making theory and practice being relocated in its cultural environment. Within this perspective, the hypothesis posited here suggests that social realist fiction illuminates the cultural distance that separates international modes of conceptualising gender and development in Africa from the localised, more 'embedded' constructions of gender expressed in these novels. As such, social realist fiction that focuses on issues of gender in society has the potential to explain why outcomes have fallen short of expectations in development politics in the region for over half a century. Indeed, through their culture-rich analysis of gender, development and modernity in Francophone Africa these texts have already made an invaluable contribution to historical and anthropological studies in the region. As the historian of Francophone Africa, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, has observed: « La littérature de langue française sur les femmes africaines nous apprend beaucoup : plus, à vrai dire, et de façon autrement plaisante que ne le fait la littérature dite savante des anthropologues ou des historiens » (Brahimi & Trevarthen, 5).

The following discussion will look at ways in which novels from countries where French has been maintained as the principal language of published literature, have the potential to inform not only academic and development theory, but also development practice in the region.

### **Political voice in the Francophone African novel**

The two regions chosen to exemplify the articulation of political voice in this literary genre in this discussion are Gabon and Senegal, countries which have occupied fundamentally different economic, cultural and political positions in the post-Independence era.

Angèle Ntyugwetondo Rawiri was the first Gabonese novelist to write about the political alienation of women in postcolonial African society.<sup>4</sup> Within the context of an analysis of the sociological potential in literature, her work and her position as author situate her clearly in the 'outsider within' position expounded by feminist standpoint theorists:

J'étais, quelque part, une déracinée. Je ne me sentais pas chez moi en terre africaine et, en même temps, je ne me sentais pas non plus chez moi en Europe. En Afrique, je ne comprenais pas certaines de nos pratiques. J'ai commencé à réfléchir sur certains problèmes et à en parler autour de moi.

(Bikindou & Baker, 13).

She started writing after returning home to Gabon, having completed secondary and tertiary education in France and a spell working in London as a translator, an extra in Bond movies, and a model. The use of the novel as a vehicle for developing political discourse was an explicit choice for the author:

Dans mes romans transparaît un certain idéal. Au départ, je prends les gens dans leur complexité, dans leur médiocrité. Puis j'essaie, à la fin du roman, de choisir la meilleure voie pour eux. [...] Il faut avant tout que les personnages que l'on met en scène accomplissent un certain idéal. C'est pourquoi je pars des problèmes courants pour montrer que d'autres voies sont possibles.

(Bikindou & Baker, 13).

Her first novel, *Elonga*<sup>5</sup> tells the story of a young teacher who, after an upbringing in Europe, he returns to the land of his father. The drama unfolds around his marriage which soon becomes the object of malicious sorcery. The author's intention was to demystify tradition and expose the dark side of a society that will not embrace change. However, the gap between authorial intention and the book's reception in its locality was the cause of some regret to Rawiri:

Après la parution de '*Elonga*', mon premier roman, j'ai éprouvé un sentiment d'échec. Les gens s'attardaient par exemple sur la couverture qu'ils jugeaient trop luxueuse. Mais ce qui me gêna le plus, ce fut le manque d'intérêt manifesté par la plupart à l'égard des problèmes inquiétants que j'abordais. Mais bon, je ne rêvais pas. Je ne croyais pas changer mes concitoyens en écrivant ce roman. J'ai pu constater que les gens allaient chez les sorciers autant qu'avant la parution d'*Elonga*...

(Bikindou & Baker, 15).

In her second novel *G'amèrakano: Au carrefour*, Rawiri explored a theme developed by Mariama Bâ in *Un chant écarlate*. In both novels we encounter a young woman facing disillusion as her marriage disintegrates under the pressure of countervailing cultural pressures. In Rawiri's case we meet Toula, a girl from a poor part of town stuck in a dead-end job, who sets out to find a rich man to take her away from the drudgery of her daily existence. In Bâ's case, Mireille, the young woman facing disillusion, comes from a rich French diplomatic family. But while her circumstances appear more privileged and her ambitions for the marriage differ from those of Toula, their unions suffer similar pressures and Mireille is left to confront her shattered illusions alone. In Bâ's novel, as in Rawiri's, and indeed in many others of this era<sup>6</sup>, gender discrimination and social injustice are articulated around a conflict between European and indigenous gender roles and expectations played out within what is presented in the novels as the 'modern' Western/European form of marriage.

The final novel in this trilogy explores pressures facing urban, professional women in postcolonial Gabonese society. *Fureurs et cris de femmes* published in 1989 marks a watershed in francophone African writing not least for its forthright attack on the primacy of marriage and motherhood as the defining features of female identity in Gabonese society, but also for its exploration of female homosexuality.

The opening scene sets out the Gabonese postcolonial dream of the professional modern heterosexual couple embarking on family life together. Swiftly this ideal is transformed into a nightmare. We witness Emilienne, the central character of *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, suffering a miscarriage in the smart, modern apartment building she inhabits with her husband, Joseph. The disparity between the apparent professional success of this couple and the marital misery that engulfs their home life signals the key themes of the narrative. For Emilienne her tragedy centres on repeated miscarriages as she and Joseph try for a second child. She associates this lack of maternity with the loss of her husband's affection as he takes up with a series of girlfriends. Emilienne's situation is then exacerbated almost beyond endurance as her one and only child is kidnapped and killed. On the verge of madness, she sheds her previous identity, focused as it was on satisfying an errant husband and carrying her pregnancies to term. From this Emilienne steps into a new sexual identity and embarks on a romantic relationship with another woman.

Rawiri's work highlights a feature common to much francophone writing of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These literary explorations of the pressures and struggles facing women in postcolonial Africa focus on the primacy of the private sphere in determining the quality of women's lived experience. This contrasts with the public discourse of women's advancement where the goals of paid employment, basic education, and access to political representation constitute the focus of the international development agenda.

### **Mame Younoussé Dieng and rural feminism**

Written almost two decades earlier in 1970, but not published until 1997, Mame Younoussé Dieng's *L'Ombre en feu* explored the impact of education, the cornerstone of the international development agenda, on a village community in rural Senegal. Located at the intersection of tradition and modernity in a West African village, the story follows the travails of the central character, Kura, as she tries and fails to reconcile her personal ambitions with the demands of her community. The standpoint of the author focuses on problematizing the ideal of a Western formal education as the privileged vehicle for female emancipation.

This novel engages with a mythology that has grown around *l'école française* and formal education in general in Africa as it impacts upon women and girls. The theory holds that there is a direct relation between access to education and gender equality. It is a belief that is reflected strongly in the current development discourse of the international community, a discourse encapsulated in the third Millennium Development Goal entitled *Gender Equality*:

#### Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Primary target:

- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015

Secondary targets:

- To improve the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education
- To increase the female share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector
- To raise the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament

(summarised from [Undp.org/mdg/goal3](http://Undp.org/mdg/goal3))

In practice the emphasis on access to formal Western-style education has grown to such an extent over recent years as to eclipse the other pillars of gender and development policy, such as economic advancement and political participation.

A key factor influencing this definition slippage has been the lack of consensus in the political elite globally on the desirability of promoting gender equality and the advancement of women in their societies. While political participation and economic advancement have been resisted in many quarters, access to basic education has not.

The myth of formal education's potential to emancipate and remove gender discrimination in society was expertly deconstructed over three decades ago in Mariama Ba's first novel, *Une si longue lettre*. Education as the vehicle of emancipation is articulated in Ramatoulaye's reminiscences of her schooldays: « Nous étions de véritables sœurs destinées à la même mission émancipatrice » (27). This theory is then debunked as Ramatoulaye finds herself confronted with polygyny and the failure of her marriage. This experience stands in contrast to that of her school-friend and confidante, Aissatou, who creates a new identity for herself when faced with the same marital crisis. Where Ramatoulaye is made an outsider within her society as a result of polygyny, Aissatou removes herself and recreates her identity outside the society that has betrayed her. In this regard her formal education becomes a clear advantage but not her salvation. Where Ramatoulaye fails to understand the limitations of her education, Aissatou uses education as a passage to further training. This becomes the springboard for her exit into a new cultural environment and a new identity.

Education plays a similarly complex role in Dieng's novel. While Kura aspires to a life of intellectual fulfilment, her family and village remain wedded to another vision of female fulfilment, one that is accomplished through marriage and motherhood. Dieng presents her story of the aspiring intellectual, Kura, as a tragedy. We witness the protagonist subjected to forced marriage, rape, abandonment and death in childbirth.

The narrator of this grim tale, Kura's uncle Saalif, serves as a metaphor for the international community as he promotes a single and at times contradictory vision of development. Saalif, a teacher, finds himself locked in an untenable position between his discursive master (the international development agenda) and the reality of village life.



Notably, at no point in the narrative is Saalif able to articulate an alternative to the monolithic model that pervades the country in the guise of 'development'.

Dieng attributes the voice of doubt and caution to an agent of tradition, the village chief and father of Kura. Biram loudly resists Saalif's exhortations to grant girls – and particularly his own daughter Kura – access to the local primary school. Eventually he assents but pays a heavy social price. His neighbours withdraw their marks of respect towards him as village chief. In a bid to wear down the villagers' resistance, Saalif organises an impressive graduation ceremony attended by the local administrator who awards prizes to the school's most promising pupils. Kura's father is touched to see his daughter feted as a brilliant student and accepts the offer of a scholarship for her to attend secondary school. The school is located beyond daily commuting distance and Biram is obliged to resort to lodging his daughter with a distant cousin – a practice common in this part of West Africa. The impact of this decision will prove disastrous.

No sooner is Kura installed in the cousin's family home than she is put to work as a household servant. Dieng further debunks mythologies surrounding familial solidarity when Saalif confesses to Kura that he suffered both this type of exploitation and physical abuse as a child when he was lodged with extended family members.

In presenting the reality of secondary education for girls, Dieng is addressing a key issue that is not addressed in the development agenda, namely the absence of progression from primary level. However, this is an issue widely debated in the locality. In an interview with Senegalese novelist Aminata Sow Fall the latter insisted on the critical importance of progression not only to secondary but on to higher education for anyone wanting a voice in the development debate of the nation<sup>7</sup>.

These obstacles to progression are a throwback to the colonial era when the education system was set up in French West Africa to educate the next generation of African administrative assistants who were, for the most part, men. The problems parents still face when sending girls away from home are articulated graphically in Dieng's novel as Kura grows up in cousin Gey's household. Demba Gey makes unwanted sexual advances on Kura. She resists, but is eventually forced to marry him. The forced marriage leads to what Kura experiences as a marital rape. At this point the rôle of female members of the community in pro-

tecting 'traditions' and resisting social change is centralised in the narrative as Kura's mother Mati (the village chief's second wife) insists that Kura accede to Demba Gey's advances: « Accepte de consommer ton mariage pour mon honneur, pour ma tranquillité, pour ma dignité de mère [...] donne-moi ta virginité sur un pagne blanc et je te laisserai faire ce que tu voudras! » (Dieng, 184) Demba Gey finally manages to force himself on Kura and the villagers celebrate: « Gloire à notre fille! Gloire! Gloire! », they chant, « Clamez gloire à notre fille. Virginité! Virginité! C'est le pilier de l'amour ». (Dieng, 195). The marital rape leads to a pregnancy and finally to Kura's death in a local medical station. The story ends with the villagers, led by Mati, wailing the loss of their daughter. « Kura qui a appris le français se prend pour une Blanche. Voilà tout son drame », remarks one villager (Dieng, 178). « Si j'étais homme, je proposerais la suppression pure et simple de cette maudite école. C'est d'elle que vient le mal », (Dieng, 179) notes another. We are reminded here of Binetou in *Une si longue lettre*, whose secondary education did not prevent her from being sacrificed by her mother to familial marriage arrangements. Prior to her forced marriage, Kura describes herself as no more than a slave whose fate is decided upon by her parents. As Biram puts it so succinctly, it is of no matter what she has learned at school, when it comes to marriage and domestic arrangements: « sache que tu n'es qu'une femme, c'est-à-dire un être sans savoir ni pouvoir... la femme n'est rien d'autre qu'un corps; l'esprit c'est l'homme » (Dieng, 169).

Alongside access to education, a key pillar of the international gender and development discourse, as it has evolved over the past fifty years in Africa, has been the goal of improving maternal and infant healthcare. Notwithstanding, numerous novels set in this region during the postcolonial period have pointed to the effective failure of 'modern' health systems to serve women's needs across the region. In one of the more recent examples, Justine Mintsa's *Histoire d'Awu* recounts a birth in a provincial hospital in Gabon, a country theoretically particularly well-endowed with modern health facilities compared with other countries in the region. In the novel, the experience of these modern healthcare facilities is appalling:

Ada était couchée sur la table de travail. Elle tirait nerveusement sur le matelas recouvert d'une crasseuse toile plastifiée.

- Pousse-moi ça ! disait la sage-femme. [...] Pousse imbécile ! Sors-nous cet enfant sinon je te gifle ! [...]

C'est ainsi que Sikolo Ntok fit son entrée dans le monde, dans un hôpital provincial, à l'orée du vingt-et-unième siècle. (Mintsa, 54-5)

The midwife in this saga not only strikes her pregnant patient, she then berates the girl's aunts, Awu and Ntsame, for not being prepared to clean the ward ready for the next patient to give birth. In practice, this 'modern' maternity ward is a frightening, filthy environment in which to give birth and begin a life.

This medical installation serves as a metaphor for development infrastructures across postcolonial Africa where colonial building materials continue to be given precedence over local building styles. Lack of maintenance leads to the degradation of the built environment as materials are either held up in ports of entry or insufficient funding means repairs cannot be carried out in a timely fashion. Just as the physical environment is mal-adapted to the locality, exogenous medical systems do not transpose themselves into culturally diverse environments in identical ways. By way of contrast, Mintsa recounts an almost idyllic Fang birthing ritual earlier in this novel in stark opposition to the horrors Ada experiences in Ebiraneville regional hospital.

### **Aminata Maïga Ka and urban feminism**

The need for Francophone African urban society to engage in evolving culturally and gender-sensitive ways of adapting 'modernity' and managing development is the message that comes through Aminata Maïga Ka's work.

While not considered the best stylist of her generation, Aminata Maïga Ka was consistently cited as the most explicitly feminist and politically engaged writer among a sample of readers, academics, government officials, activists and writers surveyed in Senegal between 1999 and 2009<sup>8</sup>. For those unfamiliar with her work, Maïga first came to the attention of the reading public in Francophone Africa in 1985 when *Présence Africaine* published two *nouvelles dramatiques* entitled *La Voie du salut* and *Le Miroir de la vie*. These were followed by *En votre nom et au mien* published by Nouvelles Editions Africaines - Côte d'Ivoire in 1989 and then ten years later by *Brisures de vies*. In broaching the subject of rape, this her fourth novella, was confronting a taboo subject in Senegalese society. This readiness to confront difficult subjects characterises her writing from an early stage. With its focus on teenage pregnancy, *Le*

*Miroir de la vie* had already marked Amy Maïga out as an explicitly feminist writer.

The role a feminist writer can play in defining the gender agenda of a society was explored with Amy Maïga in the following interview<sup>9</sup>. The interview began recalling the response Mariama Bâ had given to Barbara Harrell Bond when asked if she were a feminist. Bâ rejected the label, Maïga was less reticent:

AMK: In my own way I am a feminist. For me *Yewwu Yewwi*<sup>10</sup> has been too closely associated with the women's liberation movement – it is too adversarial for Senegalese society. We are a society that works on consensus, so we have to tackle problems in our society with tact. As a writer, my role is to set out in my narrative what I see as a social problem. But it is not my job to judge for the reader. The readers can draw their own conclusions.

CHG: There are many ways of defining feminism. What does it mean to you as a Senegalese feminist?

AMK: To me it means working towards equal access to education, economic advancement, equal work for equal pay. It means campaigning against polygamy, and for an equal share of household tasks between husband and wife. Feminism means opposing the caste system, working to end female excision and violence against women. For example my last book - *Brisures de Vies* – dealt with the subject of rape.

In her response, Maïga revealed her familiarity with the official development agenda – placing this in first position in her definition – but immediately she nuanced this with the localised development agenda. When asked how she would like to see a gender and development agenda implemented in Senegal her response departed radically from the international development discourse:

AMK: What matters is how children are brought up. Boys and girls should be given the same domestic chores when they are growing up. Then when they go to school they need to use schoolbooks that do not resort to sexist stereotypes.

Asked how writers engage with issues of gender and discrimination in Senegalese literature she replied:

AMK: There are recurrent themes that are specific to women novelists in Senegal. These are polygamy, forced marriage, how you bring up your children and the caste system. Before the 1990s they were taboo subjects. The change has come about through the impact of democratisation<sup>11</sup>. This has led to the prolifer-

eration of channels of communication. The most important – if we are talking about gender and development – have been the '*radios libres*'. These proliferated during the 1990s, particularly after 1995. This is a poor country, only a few people have television, poor women in the rural communities don't have television, but everyone has access to a radio. They are all listening to the radio every day, right across the country. People are talking about anything and everything. And you don't have to give your name. You can talk about problems in your marriage, unwanted pregnancy, whatever, without fear of any come-back. No-one knows who you are. This has caused a huge social evolution in Senegal. Now there are helplines for social problems, like you have in Europe; there's a rape helpline, there's one for AIDS and one for unwanted pregnancy. I dealt with that matter of an unwanted pregnancy in *Le Miroir de la vie*, and infanticide. *En votre nom et au mien* dealt with relations within the marriage and within the marital home, the place of mother-in-laws, sister-in-laws, the way these relations can undermine the life of the couple.

On the centrality of education to gender and development, Maïga echoed Sow Fall's point that access to education and written language at the highest level, is a crucial prerequisite if you want a voice at national level, not least in a culture where the values of development are calqued on a Western model. In this sense access to French is crucial but not a specifically feminist issue:

AMK: Women writers do not see the pressing problems of the day in terms of language. Frankly there are issues that are far more important. French is a foreign language for us but we have chosen to use it because it means we can publish our work in a world language. This doesn't mean we don't carry on using Wolof or whatever. Actually your work sells better if you write in Wolof. [...] I only recently learned to write in my own national language, Wolof, from a language course on national television.

To the question of what critical issues faced specifically women as opposed to men in a developing world context, the answers were culturally specific:

AMK: There are still many antiquated ideas around. For instance when we were first married, my second husband [the writer, Abdou Anta Ka] liked to do the shopping at the market every morning. But people started to ridicule him so he stopped. Even now there are men who will not be seen out in the evening with their wives - they think this somehow undermines their status. [...] Did you know that there are intellectuals in Senegal who are polygamous? Polygamy in this society shows that you have succeeded socially, that you are rich enough to run more than one household. There was a woman lawyer who made a public speech denouncing polygamy and then three months later became the third wife of a man in Dakar! She explained it by saying she loved

him! That was 15 or 20 years ago. But back then being unmarried was not acceptable. Now you can be unmarried – even Muslim girls are choosing not to marry. On the whole, though, in Senegal and Mali, women are expected to get married – it's the influence of Islam on our culture. Nowadays having a child when you are not married is less of an issue in urban society but still causes great shame for a village girl. I dealt with that issue in *Le Miroir de la vie*.

When asked whether feminist views were listened to in Senegal, she referred the case of sociologist Awa Thiam: “she was so severely criticised after publishing *Paroles aux négresses* that she left Senegal after that.” Maïga then turned to the newspapers spread out on the coffee table between us in the sitting room of her airy villa in the HLM suburb of Dakar: “Look at this – the law outlawing sexual harassment at work - you can get sent to prison for this now!” Pointing to a reference in the paper to the law against female excision she noted how difficult it is to get people to obey a national law that appears to go against a cultural practice. She concluded our discussion by looking forward to her next book.

AMK : I am not writing at the moment but my next book will tackle the issue of how girls are brought up and educated both at home and at school. It is really important what happens in the home.

Amy Maïga never published that work. In 2005, this lifelong feminist and campaigner for women's rights, in Senegal and francophone Africa, died at the age of 65.

Aminata Maïga Ka's life work was a searing indictment of those 'traditions' that keep women from fulfilling their potential in society. Maïga's novels all address the gritty reality of life for the urban poor in modern-day Senegal from a gender perspective. Locating the women and men of her stories within immensely powerful, seemingly indomitable social structures, she resists offering facile one-size-fits all solutions to their problems. Her first novel *La Voie du Salut*, written between 1977 and 1980, focuses on the central role of marriage in a rural woman's life. The often oppressive character of this institution is graphically articulated by a male elder prior to the rural marriage ceremony of Rokhaya, the central character of the first half of the novel: « Dès l'instant que tu es mariée, tu appartiens corps et âme à ton mari [...] Il est ton unique seigneur et maître. » (Maïga Ka, 1985a, 36). The misrepresentation of the Koranic text here is an explicit indictment of the oppressive misuse of Islam in society:

Il [ton mari] est seul habilité à te mener au Paradis où, du reste, tu n'iras qu'en lui obéissant aveuglement. [S]ourde, aveugle et muette, c'est le secret du bonheur. Sache mesurer tes paroles quand tu t'adresses à lui. Ta volonté entière doit être tendue à lui donner pleine satisfaction. C'est à cette seule condition que les enfants qui naîtront de votre union accéderont à l'échelon le plus élevé de la société. (Maïga Ka, 1985a, 36-7)

The second half of the novel focuses on Rokhaya's daughter, Rabiadou, who serves a cipher for '*la génération sandwich*' – a term Kura uses in *L'Ombre en feu* to describe the fate of her generation caught between male interpretations of 'tradition' and a modernity that likewise fails to accommodate her gender. While Kura's fate is viewed through the prism of the international development discourse – represented by Saalif – Rabi's fate is perceived through the perspective of a 'traditional' rural African woman, Rokhaya. Here we see the young French-educated Rabi marrying the 'wrong man', Racine, getting pregnant before she is married, and being betrayed by this man as he is drawn back into oppressive gender roles by his peer group. This includes refusing to go out at night with his wife, « Vous êtes trop toubabs. Ici nous sommes en Afrique, les hommes sortent sans leur femme. » (Maïga Ka, 1985a, 86). Racine then compounds his behaviour by setting up a second household in town with another woman.

The issue Maïga Ka explores here is how to integrate feminist practice into an environment that may then reject this practice on the grounds of it being culturally alien. It is exactly the issue that has repeatedly undermined the efforts of development policy-makers as they seek to introduce policies that can subsequently be dismissed as 'toubab'<sup>12</sup>. By not enabling the cultural discussion to take place before the process of implementation, such policies remain critically vulnerable to being rejected by the body politic. Furthermore, Maïga Ka's analysis exposes 'modernity' as being in many instances as oppressive as 'tradition'.

In her last published novella, *Brisures de Vies*, Amy Maïga addressed the plight of three generations of women in contemporary Senegal. The first is caught in the spiral of urban poverty, the second is devastated by a rape in a rural community, the third, the grandmother of the second, is destroyed by the fate of her grand-daughter, and a fourth has her home life and her social life blighted by domestic violence. In less than eighty pages this little novel provides a richness of socio-economic and cultural detail exemplifying the potential for fran-

cophone African literature on gender and development to add immeasurably to the scientific knowledge base currently used to formulate and implement social policy in developing areas.

### **Conclusions: Narrating Change in Francophone African Context**

The novels explored in this discussion narrate their stories using widely varying scenarios. However, all hold in common the power to undermine at least one problematic myth underlying the formula-driven international gender and development agenda. They illuminate the myriad ways in which women do not represent a corporate '*condition féminine*' in society. This is particularly evident in countries where income differentials remain very wide and where a relatively homogenous 'middle class' is yet to become the majority. The literature published in French in this genre of social realist fiction, communicates social science in a form we do not find in the development studies and economic reports on the region. As such, it offers to fill a gap that contemporary methodologies are unable to reach in the interface between universal philosophy and cultural specificity.

### **Notes**

1. Among the authors alluded to in this essay are Angèle Ntyugwetondo Rawiri, Justine Mintsa, Aminata Maïga Ka, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, and Mame Younousse Dieng.
2. Methodological considerations, notably the need to compare sources drawn from different disciplinary, theoretical and philosophical traditions has led, in the first instance, to this choice of published written social realist fiction as an example of a culturally-specific literary source of information on gender and development issues. The multi-methodological approach of the study compares this source with empirical, data-driven political science reports and social values research (in this case feminist development theory), in an effort to produce a more nuanced understanding of the successes and failures associated with development in the region. See Claire H. Griffiths *Globalizing the Postcolony* (Lexington Books, 2010) for analysis of writers and works not covered in this essay. This book provides a comparison of the sources mentioned above.
3. Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu, among others, have drawn on literary sources to analyse sociological phenomena, but political scientists have been far more reticent in using these sources for policy analysis.



4. Born 1954 in the oil town of Port-Gentil, when Gabon was still a colony of France, Rawiri died in Paris, in November 2010, at the age of 56.
5. Though frequently described as her second novel, Rawiri herself, in an interview recorded in 1988, identified *Elonga* as her first novel and *G'amèrakano: Au carrefour* as her second.
6. One of the most notable explorations of this theme is Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*.
7. These views were expressed in conversation with the author at Aminata Sow Fall's home in Dakar.
8. The first purpose of the survey was to identify how feminist writing was received in those sections of the political and socio-economic elites that traditionally have a voice in national development policy. Secondly, it explored the political impact of this reception and whether writing in this genre was seen as having any potential to influence target-setting and policy-making around gender issues in the future. In this context Aminata Maïga Ka was well known, but women writers were not judged as influential in policy-making. One oft-cited reason was the lack of influence of national bodies in general in agenda-setting, and the predominant influence of the World Bank in this regard.
9. This along with other interviews in the survey, were recorded using professional interpreting note-taking techniques, thus avoiding the need to use electronic recording equipment. The technique relies upon the note-taker capturing the *vouloir-dire* (as opposed to the literal *dire*) of the interlocutor and then transcribing this discourse from interpreting notes into text at the earliest opportunity after the interview. The interview cited here was recorded in this manner. It was translated from the French by the author of this essay.
10. The name given to the Senegalese women's liberation movement founded by Marie-Angelique Savané and others. *Yewwu Yewwi* means 'women rise up' in Wolof.
11. The whole of francophone West Africa underwent structural reforms in the aftermath of the Franco-African summit led by François Mitterrand at La Baule in 1990. These included the introduction of Western-style democratic institutions such as multi-party elections and bicameral parliaments.
12. *Toubab* is a term used to denote a person of European origin or white race.

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