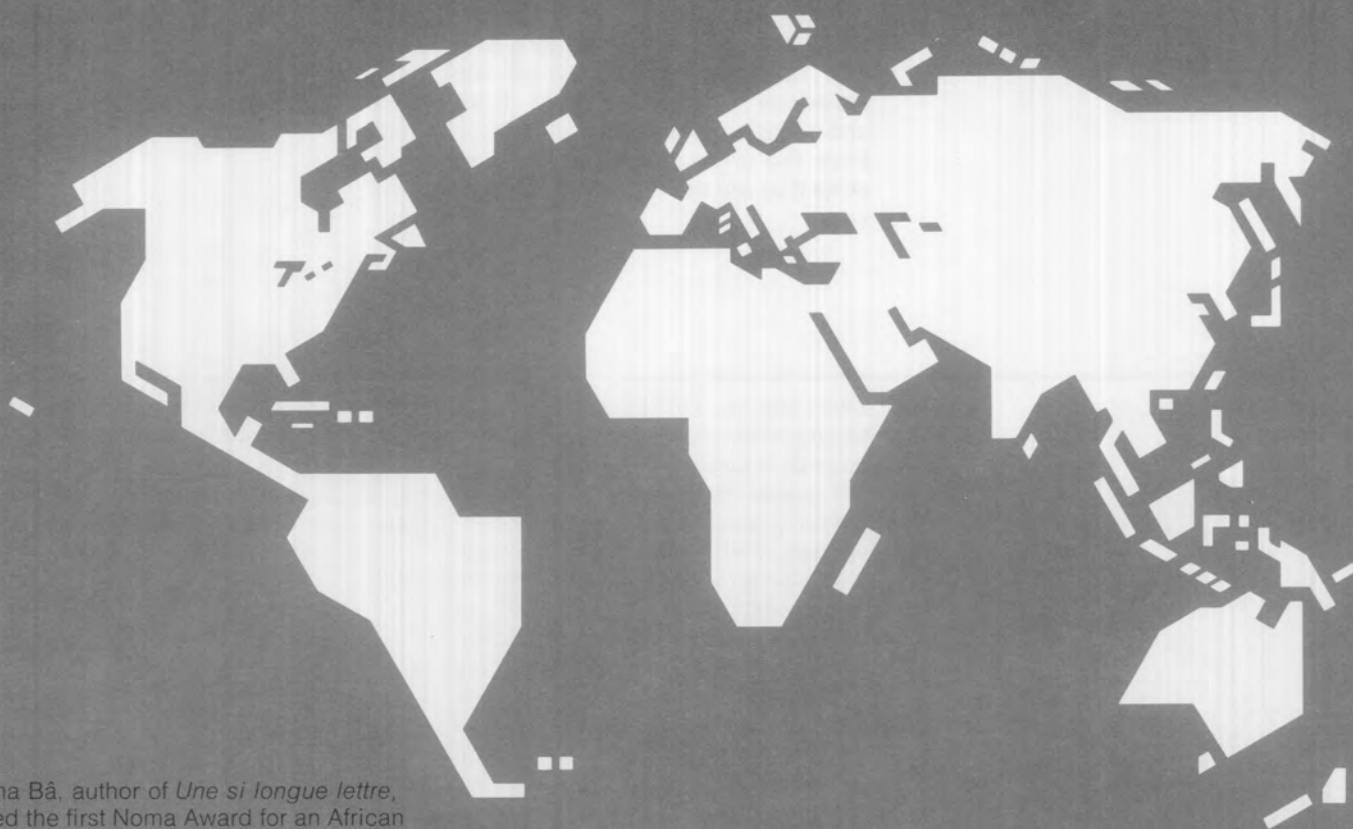


AFRICA ASSERTS ITS IDENTITY
Part II: Transcending Cultural Boundaries
Through Fiction

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



Mariama Bâ, author of *Une si longue lettre*, received the first Noma Award for an African writer published within Africa. Her book treats polygamy and the changing role of women, but the central theme is the necessity for selective modernization.

[BHB-2-'81]

ISSN 0161-0724

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The presentation of the first Noma Award highlighted the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair's Black Africa theme. This new annual prize of \$3,000, endowed by Japanese publisher Shoichi Noma, is awarded to African writers published within Africa. This year it went to a Senegalese woman writer, Mariama Bâ, for her first novel, *Une si longue lettre*.

In announcing the Noma Committee's decision at a press reception in Oxford, England, Professor Eldred Jones, Chairman of the selection panel, said: "Mariama Bâ's novel offers a testimony of the female condition in Africa while at the same time giving that testimony true imaginative depth.... As a first novel, it represents a remarkable achievement to which the Committee, with this award, is giving recognition." Even before the award was announced, more than 15,000 copies of the book had been sold in Africa.

The book was published in Dakar by Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines (NEA), a company established in 1972 by the governments of Senegal and the Ivory Coast and a number of French publishers,¹ to foster African authorship, explain African culture, and produce educational material related directly to African realities and experiences. Since then, the company has rapidly become one of the leading publishers of school texts for Francophone Africa; its impressive list of almost 300 titles includes such distinguished authors as Bernard Dadie, Birago Diop, Cheikh Anta Diop, Amadou Hampata Bâ, Edward Maunick, Lamine Diakhate, Ibrahima Baba Kake, Guy Menga, and, not surprisingly, Senegalese President

Leopold Senghor, whose first complete collection of poetry NEA published in 1974.

Prior to the Book Fair, NEA had sold translation rights of Mariama Bâ's book to Dutch, German, Japanese, Russian, Swedish, and English publishers. At the fair, where such deals are the important business, the list was extended to Arabic, Bulgarian, Finnish, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Yugoslavian editions. American rights were also sold. The German (*Ein so langer Brief*) and the Swedish (*Brev fran Senegal*) editions, both published by Sven Erik Bergh/Berghs, were rushed through so as to appear at the Frankfurt Book Fair. The German edition, however, failed to acknowledge NEA as publisher of the first edition of the novel. Moreover, the publisher thought it necessary to "explain" aspects of African culture to German readers, and a patronizing discussion by a German scholar was included in the book. More offensive to Mariama Bâ, were the banal and inaccurate remarks on the cover, stating that the book was autobiographical, something she had repeatedly denied in interviews.

The Noma Award

Schoichi Noma, who endowed the prize, is president of the Kodansha Publishing Company. Described as the "father of modern Japanese publishing" and as a "benefactor to the publishing and printing industries of developing countries," he sees books as the best means of transcending cultural boundaries and believes that one way of preventing war is to promote the exchange of culture among countries. Before he suffered a stroke in

1971, Noma traveled extensively in less-developed countries where he found what he describes as "book hunger":

These nations were "starving" for a publishing industry.... The dearth was especially acute for children's books.... There is a great gap in the literacy between the peoples of the north and south countries, between the developed and developing nations. Everyone knows that education is important for the progress of mankind, but to accomplish this it is necessary to create a situation where books are readily available to the public. It is only natural that advanced countries aid poorer nations in this area.

The list of Noma's efforts to give such aid is remarkable. He lent his support to the establishment of the Tokyo Book Development Center which serves as a "UNESCO-linked, industry-supported organization for the exchange of culture and the expansion of the publishing industry in smaller nations." In the past 7 years, nearly 150 people from 18 different countries have received training at the center. The organization also sends teams of teachers to other countries. A program for co-publishing children's books cheaply in Asia was also started: at all stages of production, from the collection of material to editing and publishing, Kodansha works with specialists from the country concerned in equal partnership.

Noma has also initiated research into the development of non-Latin typefaces.² Yet another recent example of his response to the needs of the poorer nations of the world was the establishment of a prize,



Mr. Shoichi Noma, described as the "father of modern Japanese publishing" and "benefactor of the publishing and printing industries of developing countries."

Noma Concours for Children's Picture Book Illustrations, in 1979. This competition aims to encourage the improvement of the quality of children's book publishing through contests and awards for illustrators in Africa, Asia, and the Arab states. It was launched during the International Year of the Child and there were 150 entries from 17 developing countries. Noma has also made a grant to a fund used by the International Reading Association to carry out reading surveys, train teachers, and mount campaigns to promote the habit of reading in poor countries.

The presentation of the first Noma Award may turn out to be among Noma's greatest contributions to the active promotion of cultural understanding among nations.

The award is administered by the African Book Publishing Record, a publishing company founded by Hans Zell who has devoted many years to the promotion of publishing in Africa. A committee comprised mainly of African scholars and book

experts, chaired by Professor Eldred Jones, Principal of Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, selects the annual prize winner. This year, 130 books written by Africans from 17 African countries were submitted. They ranged over the three categories of books eligible for the competition—scholarly or academic works, children's books, and creative writing. Eighty-two entries were written in English, 21 in French, and 19 in African languages, including Swahili, Hausa, Shona, Ndebele, Malagasy, Bulu, Chiichewa, and Sesotho. While fiction, drama, literary criticism, children's books, history, and politics were the fields most heavily represented, other subjects such as folklore, football, ophthalmology, insurance, and health education were also included.

In addition to the winner, seven other titles were singled out for special mention. The committee especially commended John Pepper Clark's book, *The Ozidi Saga*, for its "rare combination of scholarship and creativity in collecting, translating, and editing the text of the

great book of the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria so carefully and meticulously." The remaining six books, each nominated for an honorable mention, included: Gabre-Emanuel Teka's *Water Supply Ethiopia: an introduction to environmental health practice* (Addis Ababa University Press, 1977); a 700-page collection of oral tradition, *The Ewes of West Africa* by Charles M.K. Mammatha (Research Publications, Keta, Ghana, 1978); "Ife Music Editions," scores of contemporary African music edited by Akin Euba (University of Ife Press, Nigeria, 1978); *The Walking Calabash*, a children's book by Mercy Owusu-Nimoh (Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977); Bashari Farouk Roubkah's social novel of modern Hausaland, *Hantsi Leka Gidan Kowa* (Albah Publishers, Kano, 1979); and from the Malagasy Republic, *Vieilles chansons des pays d'Imerina* by the late Jean Joseph Rabearivelo (Editions Madprint, 1979).³

Une si longue lettre - "A cry from the heart"

The Noma Award was formally presented to Mariama Bâ at the opening ceremony of the Frankfurt Book Fair. The response to the book and its author by the public, the media, and publishers from all over the world can only be described as stunning. From the moment she arrived in Frankfurt, Mariama Bâ was bombarded with requests for interviews by journalists and photographers; television crews from all over Europe followed her, filming her activities at the fair. Despite the stress of such unaccustomed publicity, she remained dignified and modest. She responded to all questions⁴ with equal seriousness, but kept reminding her audiences of the main objective of the fair and of the message of her book.

In her acceptance speech, Bâ remarked that the prize had brought Africa international attention and expressed the belief that the continued development of this first initiative would gradually allow African culture to "beam out to the world."

We are presently on German soil and we are realizing the concrete results of all of these combined efforts [i.e. the establishment of the award by a Japanese publisher and the work of an international panel].

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this example of exchange between nations which is taking place at this Book Fair. It is impossible not to shout out about this example which comes from men who have consciously sought to magnify and elevate humanity. This example has come from men who have consciously liberated themselves from prejudices and selfish constraints. Let this fruit ripen. From such noble and universal seeds will come the spreading of culture throughout the world. This is the spirit of the fair.

She went on to express the hope that her achievement would serve as an inspiration to women everywhere to "deepen, create, and multiply their efforts on the path toward our common liberation." Her reactions on learning that she had won the award also reflected her awareness of its importance in the promotion of international understanding:

I was very surprised. Even more so because I did not even know of the existence of the prize. And even more, I did not know that my book was being considered for any prize. Nouvelles Editions Africaines sent my book as well as some others to compete for the award. A friend came to my house to tell me I had won. I was unaware of it. I didn't even realize that there was prize money. This friend who came to tell me said, "There you are, you have won this prize, the Noma." I was even more proud and happy because it was not only a prize for Francophone Africa, but a prize for black Africa. That is, all of French- and English-speaking Africa. There were many candidates, so it was a prize which obviously was important.

I was also struck by what it is which really brings men together from all parts of the world. Here is this Japanese man who can be interested in promoting books written and published outside his own country, to promote books in a place where books are so very important. Books are tools, instruments for development. They are of

great importance to our culture. Without culture we cannot go very far. People must be cultured, instructed and educated, so that things can advance. That is what makes such a gesture toward black Africa [which is supposed to be underdeveloped] so good. It is moving, it touches me deeply. In spite of all the other things, in spite of wars, in spite of battles for a piece of land, in spite of all that, we can still have hope in humanity. Man can still be faithful to the human ideal. He can be faithful to the value of man. Because of that there will be more and more light.

That is what I think.

Mariama Bâ believes that her book will also be understood by Africans of other national backgrounds—once it has been translated:

*Unfortunately, at the time I was at school, we did not learn any other language [than French]. This is unfortunate. I will try to learn, but it might be a bit too late! I have read, however, the translation of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. I have read his book. I have also read Le Demagogue which is written by an English author, rather an African*

with English culture. These are two books I have read. And to my great surprise I found the same mentality that is here, the same traditions, the same problems, the same way of doing things, the same reticence, etc. So I believe that if my book is translated into English it will be possible for every African to understand it very well.

Asked if she was pleased that publishers were falling over themselves to secure translation rights and that some French newspapers wanted to publish extracts, she again emphasized the universality of the human experience, particularly that of women:

Naturally, because this book which has so often been described as a "cry from the heart," this cry is coming from the heart of all women everywhere. It is first a cry from the heart of the Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, of the women with the constraints of religion which weigh on her as well as other social constraints. But it is also a cry which can symbolize the cry of women everywhere. Whatever we say, if



Mariama Bâ receiving her prize. Noma, who is confined to a wheelchair, was represented by his son (middle) and other members of the Kodansha Publishing Company.

women were free everywhere, meaning that if they were without chains—yesterday's chains as well as today's chains—I do not think that the United Nations would have thought it necessary to declare an International Year of the Woman. They would not have decided to have the Decade of the Woman. Thus, there is everywhere a cry, everywhere in the world, a woman's cry is being uttered. The cry might be different, but there is still a certain unity. There is the social fact of physiology. The fact that she is the bearer of children. And from the fact of this responsibility, is also the fact of a partner, a man. A man who has not always been loyal to her. I am happy, however, that if this book is translated, there will be many countries who will be able to hear our cry, our own cry. The cry that they utter, the women from these other countries, their cry will not be exactly the same as ours—we have not all got the same problems; but there is a fundamental unity in all of our sufferings and in our desire for liberation and in our desire to cut off the chains which date from antiquity.

The central themes of *Une si longue lettre* are polygamy and the changing role of women. But Mariama Bâ's critical eye has ranged much further: she also comments on the shortcomings of modern education, the importance of trade unions, and the oral traditions which were used to inculcate children with values—now being lost—such as respect for the old and the less fortunate, generosity, courtesy, and gentleness. Aware of the difficulty of reconciling traditional with modern life, she advocates selectivity. Some social constraints and old customs must be abolished; some modern ideas must be rejected. Herself a devout Muslim, she uses the story to illuminate the differences between the selfish manipulation of Islamic practices and sincere dedication to the precepts of the religion. As one reviewer put it, "If it is the task of the modern writer to change the consciousness of his contemporaries, Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, in the context of Senegalese literature, does so in

exemplary fashion: it is a highly relevant and skillful novel."⁵

The story concerns Ramatoulaye, a recently widowed schoolteacher, who is replying to a letter from her friend, Aissatou, reminiscing about their former marriages. Each had married a man who subsequently took a second wife. Aissatou had rebelled: she divorced her husband, took her children out of Senegal, pursued further education, and joined the diplomatic corps. Ramatoulaye accepted her fate with resignation and sorrow. Her husband was a civil servant with a degree in law. Although throughout her married life she had been overburdened by domestic responsibilities as well as her teaching to supplement the family's income, the marriage had been satisfactory until after the birth of her twelfth child: then her husband took a second—much younger—wife. Ignoring the Muslim precept that a polygamous husband should treat each wife equally, Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, virtually deserts her and spends all his resources on this beautiful young woman who is the same age as his own daughters. A few years later, Modou dies of a heart attack.

Mariama Bâ uses the story to show how men and women manipulate both traditional values and the values of the modern consumer society to serve selfish interests at the expense of others. Writing of her husband's recent funeral, the event that precipitated this exchange of letters, Ramatoulaye tells Aissatou about the behavior of the family and friends who attended the various ceremonies associated with his death. In the past, people who come to share the grief of the bereaved would have brought rice, oil, cattle, milk, and other foods, but now all this has been replaced by impersonal gifts of money, for Ramatoulaye a "Troublante extériorisation du sentiment intérieur inévaluable, évalué en francs!" (taking the incalculable subjective emotional experience and placing on it a dollar value). Reflecting on her husband's and others' deaths, she says "Et je pense encore: combien de morts auraient pu survivre si,

avant d'organiser ses funérailles en festin, le parent ou l'ami avait acheté l'ordonnance salvatrice ou payé l'hospitalisation." (And I still think, how many deaths could have been avoided if, before organizing the funeral ceremonies, a parent or friend had bought health insurance or paid for hospitalization.)⁶

Faced with the problems of raising a large family without the support of her husband, even before his death, Ramatoulaye is also confronted with the breakdown of moral standards among the young people in modern Senegal. She finds that her daughters wear trousers and smoke: most devastating of all—one of them becomes pregnant out of wedlock and Ramatoulaye learns about this only through a third party. Ramatoulaye is distressed by her inadequacy to deal with these changes. On the one hand, she is tempted to condemn such behavior, but on the other, she realizes that society has radically altered and that she must make an effort to understand her children. She summons the courage to reject traditional pressures, which would have led her to reject her daughter, and gives the girl the support and compassion she needs.

With painful emotions, yes—but also with irony and humor (for example, Ramatoulaye describes her elderly Muslim husband wriggling in his tight jeans in an attempt to keep up with his young wife)—Mariama Bâ tells Ramatoulaye's story. It is the story of a Senegalese woman's struggle to endure in the face of male egotism in a changing, modernizing society. It is the story of women's predicament all over the world:

Mon coeur est en fête chaque fois qu'une femme émerge de l'ombre. Je sais mouvant le terrain des acquis, difficile la survie des conquêtes: les contraintes sociales bousculent toujours et l'égoïsme mâle résiste. Instruments des uns, appâts pour d'autres, respectées ou méprisées, souvent muselées, toutes les femmes ont presque le même destin que des religions ou des législations abusives ont cimenté.⁷

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIAMA BÂ⁸

Your book, Une si longue lettre, appears to be fairly pessimistic about marriage in modern Senegal, about the possibilities of men and women establishing a satisfactory relationship as a married couple.

No, although I am divorced, I wish I were married. Men and women are complementary. I know many women who prefer to divorce and remain single because their interests do not always work out within a marriage. I am not married, but that is not because I would not prefer to be married.

Is it not true that women in precolonial African society had more power than they do today? Do you not think that modern African women are losing some of their power as they become "Westernized?"

It was rather a limited power I believe. She had power in certain areas, but in other areas she had no power at all. We must not have illusions. It was a moral power. We think of the wisdom of women, their lack of impulse which allows them to react on the basis of thought. We think of the wise, reasonable reactions of women and also that she was the keeper of traditions, of the secrets, etc. But all of that was accompanied by something else. She was not at the prow of the boat. She did not rule in the home. She was asked for advice, she gave it. In some ways you can say that she was the shadow under which the others in the family could rest, but she did not have all that much power. There was power which women had, and it was not negligible, but it was not a power which gave her a dominance over men. She had grandeur, but it was not the woman who dominated the home. For example, when there were battles between kingdoms, she could sacrifice herself for her husband. She could give herself in marriage to another kingdom to stop the conflict. There is a story of a queen which is told. The husband had to give the wife in marriage as a sacrifice. She accepted this so that her husband could continue as the ruler. She had grandeur. She kept up the traditions. She was the voice of reason. But it does not mean that man was her slave.

But is it not true that men continue to fear women's power, their power over their emotions for example? A Senegalese man remarked to me that you must be very careful not to let your wife know how much you love her.

He is a wise man. There is a saying which older men remind younger men. "Love your wife, but do not put her on a pedestal. Do not trust her too much."

In my own research I learned about men's fears of women's powers over their sexual potency through the use of certain "medicines."

Yes, but I do not know if it gives concrete results. There are some women who know how to avenge themselves when their husbands are unfaithful. But although men do not trust women, and are really fearful of them, they are not panicked. Otherwise they would not be polygamous. They would not have three or four women.

So if we agree it is part of men's psychology to fear or distrust women, do you not think that such fears and distrust continue to affect modern marriages?

Yes, you see, this absence of trust is not visible. It does not affect the normal day to day relationships between men and women. This lack of trust is internalized, and it is also present in women. Because of customs, you cannot be assured that you will have this man forever. A woman is obliged to think that even if they are partners today, tomorrow does not belong to her. You may be together for a while, but perhaps the husband is concealing it in his mind that sometime he plans to have another woman. This is not something which openly stands between them, but at the same time as he is thinking about this possibility in his mind, the wife is thinking how she can never be sure she will have him forever. It is always possible that he will take another woman. He is the only one who knows that. So these things are very subtle. It is perhaps a subject for worry, but it does not stop us from living, eating, having pleasure. There are, after all, wars, poverty, hunger—it is a worry but we do not stop living. We keep on building houses, making things, cultivating the land, we still go on.

Such fears do not systematically make men and women enemies, marriage goes on. Perhaps they are more obvious in other places, but here in Senegal, it is all very much under the surface.

In your book you explore women's psychology, but what about men's? Is not the fact that women have the power of procreation which men do not have a factor in the antagonisms which exist between them?

But men have children too. But yes, only women know this miracle of life. They are the ones who know how it happens. They are the witnesses of the beginning of life at childbirth.

One thing which seems to set African women apart from many women in Western society is their confidence in their femininity.

Yes, that is true. We do not imitate men. Yes, African women are fulfilled as women.

I understand that attitudes toward having large families in Senegal are changing?

That is true. People do not want so many children these days because it is harder. It is not the same system of life. We do not have the same needs. Before we lived in nature, without material possessions, cultivating the land and we needed many hands. Life was based on cultivation. There were no plows to work in the fields.

Would you say that African women are more adaptable than are men to the changes which have taken place? Women seem to get great satisfaction out of educating their children.

But you see, we must not have any illusions because there are many difficulties in modern society. It is true that women have their homes, but woman's relationships with her children have changed. It is not like it used to be. The woman does not perform the same educative role with her children she used to perform. She does not have the same power to act with her children. All this has changed. There is first the problem of school. The mother has not been to school, so she cannot participate in the process of the child's gaining knowledge. She cannot ask him any questions about



MARIAMA BÂ ON HER LIFE

I was born in Dakar in 1929 of Senegalese parents. My paternal grandfather is Sarakholé (from Bakel). He was an interpreter in Saint-Louis, then in Dakar where he died. My father was a civil servant, a teller in the Treasury of French West Africa. He was also a politician and was the first Minister of Health after the decentralization bill was passed in 1956.

My mother died when I was very young. I only know her through her photographs. I was raised by my maternal grandparents. I had the good fortune to attend the French school (which is now Berthe Maubert School on Avenue Albert Sarraut) thanks to the perseverance of my father who, whenever he had a holiday, would come to beg my grandparents to continue to grant him this favor.

During school holidays I continued my Koranic studies at the residence of the late Amadou Lamine Diene, which was then on the Route de Bel Air. He had become the Imam of the main mosque in Dakar, and his nephew, the current Imam, El Hadji Mawdo Sylla, was my teacher. The fact that I went to school didn't relieve me from the domestic duties little girls had to do. I had my turn at cooking and washing up. I learned to do my own laundry and to wield the pestle because, it was feared, "you never know what the future might bring!" Our family home (it still exists, it's overlooking the ocean at no. 5 on Rue Armand Angrand before the road to the Slaughterhouse; because this road led to the Slaughterhouse, it faces the sea) is like a compound in the old manner, but with cement buildings. There are four around a vast yard with a mosque in the center which always draws a lot of people at prayer time. You could

always see blind and maimed people in our yard all day long because grandfather provided for them. It was a communal life with cousins, aunts, uncles, and their husbands and wives. I was the first one to do things differently, but since then male and female cousins have followed in my footsteps.

My Education

At the Girls' School

One person was Mrs. Berthe Maubert in primary school (5th grade) who gave us instruction after hours so her school would get top honors at the Primary School Certificate Examination. She taught me the grammatical rules governing spelling in such a way that I cannot forget them. I can hear the sound of her voice to this day.

A year after the Primary School Certificate Examination in 1943, I had the joy of coming first in French West Africa at the competitive examination for entry to the Ecole Normale in Rufisque. My father was away in Niamey and Mrs. Berthe Maubert had the lonely task of overcoming the resistance of my family who had had enough of "all this coming and going on the road to nowhere."

The Ecole Normale in Rufisque

This is where I met Mrs. Germaine Le Goff who "taught me about myself"—"taught me to know myself." She was an intelligent dedicated woman, a highly sensitive woman who was honored as the best French teacher when she taught at the Lycée Van Vollenhoven. In the midst of her triumph of policies of assimilation, she preached for planting roots into the land and maintaining its value. Yet she was broadening our horizons. A

fervent patriot herself, she developed our love for Africa and made available to us the means to seek enrichment. I cherish the memory of rich communions with her, which have made me a better person. Her discourse outlined the new Africa.

What I owe my father

In addition to my schooling, my father strengthened my education. A man of finance but also a man of letters, my father taught me to read. A flood of books accompanied his homecomings. It is from him that I learned how to express myself orally. He would have me recite in French what I had learned, and never tired of stopping and correcting me. I have a vivid memory of Dahomey (now Benin) where he took me with him and where we remained a long time because of the Second World War.

What I owe my grandmother

A religious faith, and a sharp sense of virtue and honor.

I'll omit the boring details of the life of a primary school teacher, of a wife, and a mother.

I have nine children who have grown up, and now have more and more time for women's associations, where we try to do "something," and I have great temptation to write.

My great joys

A good film, a good book, a good discussion.

My favorite authors

Senghor and Birago [Diop], maybe because they make Africa come alive—with emotion and in a truly African way.

his school work so that the child will learn more quickly. In effect, the school comes between the mother and the child. The only education she can give her child is the one she has received, the education her mother gave her when she was a little girl. Her daughter is not being educated in the same way as she was. Her daughter is living in another society where the pressures and the needs are different. Yes, so there are more difficulties for the mother in the education of the children. The education she might like to give her children does not fit the present generations any more.

Would you say that parental authority has been lost?

I am not saying that a mother has lost her authority, but I would say that it has been shaken. It is not the same, it lacks the same solid base, it has lost some of its efficacy. You see there is authority, but an authority which does not find the same docile or passive reception. The objects of parental authority have changed. The objects are no longer docile. The mother has strength and authority, but the relationship has changed.

In your book you lament the fact that girls are smoking, wearing trousers, and getting pregnant when unmarried.

If your daughter would smoke it would not be such a problem for you, but for Ramatoulaye, she would never have dreamed of such a thing and so for this woman it is a big problem. It never existed before. She cannot stop her daughter. The mother teaches what she knows, she gives what she knows, but what she knows does not suit anymore.

When Ramatoulaye's husband deserted her, was she also missing his assistance in rearing the children?

Of course, because Ramatoulaye's husband was not just any man. He was enlightened and knew his duties. It was an ideal marriage. In the book we feel that it was very good before there was this second wife. When, in the book she has to repair the plumbing, when the children have to go to school and all that, she did not know how to do all of these things and it bothered her because before the responsibility

was equally divided. Now she is obliged to do all that, to do hers and her husband's work, and at the same time she has to worry about the finances. They had worked together and had complemented each other before.

How is it that Aissatou was allowed to keep her children when she divorced. Here in Senegal would they not have normally been in the custody of the father?

It was because they were small, that's all. At a certain age the children are always given to the mother. She did not live in Senegal any more, she left with the children. I didn't say it in the book, but when she returned it was only for brief holidays. Here in Senegal there are certain men who divorce their wives. If a man knows the wife loves the children and will give them a good education, he leaves them with her. I have a friend who divorced, who had two children with her husband and when the problem occurred, the husband said, "Yes, as I know her, she takes good care of the children. I know she would be better than me." She was allowed to keep the children. She was more capable than he would have been.

But usually does not the Senegalese law favor men in custody disputes?

No, here in the Islamic religion, if the children are girls, the mother has the priority, if the children are boys, the father. Now the boy raises a problem. At seven years of age he goes to the Koranic School, he is at an age when he can care for himself. At this age the father takes him, but if he is only three or four, the mother is in charge of him. Now we have a new family code in Senegal which is different, which requires inquiries by the court to see where the happiness of the child best lies. If, for example, the father drinks or is not of good character, the court will not give the child to that kind of father, even if they are boys. They give them to the mother. If the mother is a bad woman, one who leaves the house, does not take care of the children, is not moral, she will not get custody of the children.

Is it the welfare officer who investigates?

Yes, she leads an inquiry to see where the welfare of the child lies.

But it is still a risk that a woman takes if she divorces, that she could still lose her children.

Yes, if she is not deserving. But in general if the woman is all right, it is not from this woman they will take the children away. Anyway, a woman who is not a good mother would not worry about losing her children. She does not know how to make her children happy, she is irresponsible, not reasonable. The woman who is a good mother will get to keep her children. In general, good women get their children.

There is a trend in the West for fathers to want custody of their young children. Have you seen the film Kramer vs. Kramer, in which a couple struggle for custody?

I think it would be very funny to give the children to a man, especially when they are infants (laughter). I would like to see them feeding them, changing them, I would laugh.

Can we talk about love? You emphasize it in the book. But it seems to me that while modern Senegalese men want to choose their wife on the basis of love, once they are married, they want their wife to behave as though she had been selected in the traditional way by the family.

Yes, yes, that is exactly right. There are certain things which have to be said about today's society. We are almost ashamed to find love and sentiment. We believe that the way to be is rational and logical, not to admit to any beating of the heart. We have more reason than heart. I believe that what made my book so successful was that it put sentiment, emotion, back into its place. I believe that we are not only animals, an animal without emotions. We are not here just to make children, to eat, to search for clothing, for houses, and so forth. If it were only that, we would be animals. We would have the instincts which would push us to find our food, our protection, to build the strongest houses, not to be cold or hot, to make ventilated houses. But we have something more than the animal. It is our capacity to feel. It is emotion, sentiment which directs our lives and which gives us the capacity to act, not only out of self-interest, but also because there is

the thought of love. But we do not know this very well. We do not know that instead of reason, sentiments can lead us just as well.

How do Senegalese women today envisage that their marriages will be changed by love?

The woman who loves her husband is searching for the happiness of herself and her husband, for the marriage. Before woman was educated, she could still find happiness. She did not have any idea that things could change. For today's woman, marriage is a mixture of yesterday and the present. In this kind of marriage, perhaps a woman has more of a chance to be happy than she did in the past. But it is the same partner which she finds. He has inherited a certain vision of marriage from his father, a certain point of view about marriage and he comes face to face with the woman with all of these ideas which he has

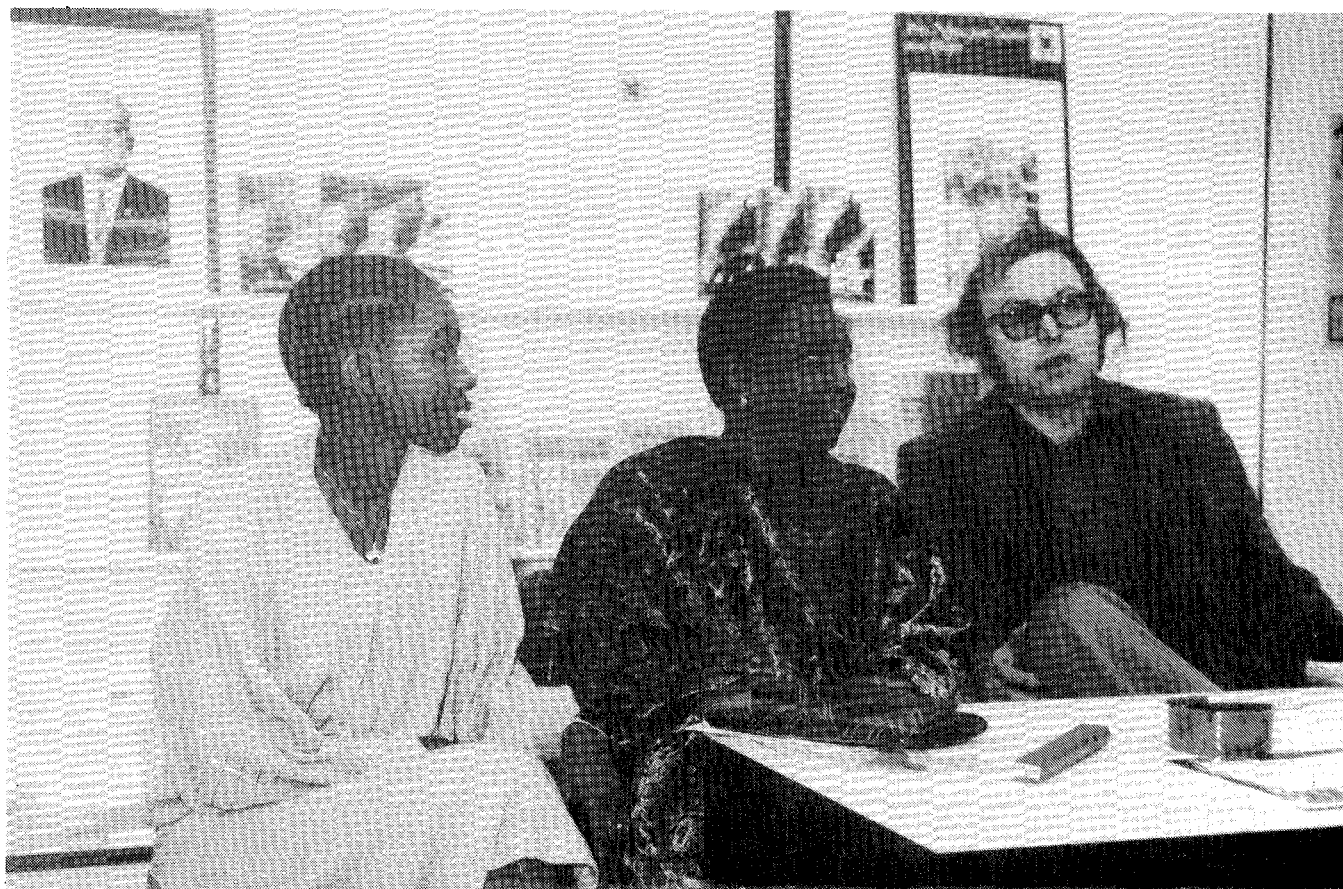
inherited. These include the pattern of conduct for the husband, the way to treat a wife, the children, etc. What women are searching for is not so much to destroy everything from the past. But the man must abandon a part of his power, his privileges from the past. The woman who lives with him must not be a slave as he has learned to expect in his childhood. For example, when they were little girls and boys, a boy was told, "No! No, *you* must not sweep the floor. It is the *girl* who must sweep the floor. Wash the clothes? No, it is the *girl* who washes the clothes. Who must fetch the water? It is the *girl* who must fetch the water." So he comes to marriage with that kind of education in his head. She is the one who must cook, who must wash his clothes, who must do all things for him. He comes this way because he has been taught. If today he wants his wife to be happy, he has to *forget what he has been taught*. He must look at the woman beside him and look at her with different eyes, in a different way. Now you see where the whole conflict lies. For someone

who has had all the advantages, it is very difficult for him to abandon all of these advantages, is it not? To abandon these advantages all of a sudden—it really requires a great, great effort. When you come into a house that is well-furnished, it is very difficult to leave it and go to live in a hut. It is difficult. So men must make an effort. So now we mothers, we mothers who have had the privilege to understand a little and to play a part in the education of our sons, we have tried to raise them so that they do not grow up thinking of themselves as "kings of the family." This is the hope for the future. It is very difficult for men today to forget their background. It is extremely difficult, very hard for someone who has power to willingly give it up.

Do women who base their marriages on love expect fidelity?

She can hope. It is a problem which is not specific to African women. It is a general problem within relationships between men and women. It has been thought that man, not because he is black or white, has a different physiology from that of

Mariama Bâ together with her daughter and Hans Zell, editor of African Book Publishing Record and administrator of the Noma Award.



women. A woman is always more easily satisfied. She is different. There is this polygamous desire which is not specific to the black race, which inhabits all men—black or white. So it is the same problem, a problem which is raised in the book, but not a problem which is greater between black men and black women. Black women and men behave the same way as white and yellow. All men are basically polygamous. This is a general man/woman problem.

Ah, but Western women, at least in my time, expected fidelity when they married. African women with whom I talk do not expect sexual fidelity.

Me, I think (not to discourage you), frankly I do not think that men can be sexually faithful. He can be faithful in thought, in love, in affection, in everything, but sex. I do not believe they can be faithful. All men. I believe in the fidelity of women as strongly as I am skeptical about the fidelity of men. I think that it is easier for a woman to be faithful.

But if you believe this, then why does your character in the book care if her husband takes another wife?

It is because when he takes this second wife, in the long run, practically speaking, he lives with both women and it is as though the two women are merged into one. The same habit, the same desire for changing women, which led him to take a second wife, will push him towards a third and a fourth. Polygamy does not resolve anything. To have three or four wives, even if he has four, will not be enough. That's what I think. Even if there are four, it is like having none; he has not got enough. You see, what counts is to be able to have fidelity of affection, fidelity of sentiment, that he can have a love for the home and respect for his wife. What is important is that there can be the life of the couple in the home rather than to tell her openly, in a legalized way, of his escapades. In my view that is what polygamy means, legalizing a man's escapades.

So you are saying that there are two kinds of women in life: women who are faithful, loyal wives and other women who exist for men's sexual pleasures, for their "escapades."

There will always be. There will always be. When I traveled in France a long time ago a friend showed me an old building where the ministry used to be. He showed me how there was a wall between this building and another, with a door in the wall. He explained to me that some man long ago had built that. On one side his wife and children lived in his house. A wall separated them, but the door allowed him to go through to the other side to his lover without having to pass outside on the street. You can verify this if you go; you will see just what I am describing.

But are you not dividing, classifying women in terms of status associated with being a wife?

I do not divide. It is a matter of chance, fate, which divides women. There are certain women who stay at home, who are married. All the others who have not had the luck to get a husband—it does not mean that they are not necessarily deserving—it is fate, change which makes it so that they are obliged to live in vice. We must recognize this. Some because of vice, some because of their necessity to make a living, others for all kinds of reasons we can understand, who remain what I call "women of shade." But it does not mean that they do not make a contribution to society. We have often seen that great state decisions have, at their roots, not the advice of the wife, the one who we know is in the house, but the woman who can manipulate a man through his desire.

But I do not think you would be so pleased to have your son marry such a woman, say a woman who has had three children by three different men.

But it is not the same thing. She who has many children, who has had these children in a sensible manner, in a proper manner, as I would term it. She can have them anyway she likes, so where is the prejudice? It depends on the situation which existed before the birth of these children. Just because a girl does not have any children, or cannot have any children, this does not make her virtuous. For example, a woman may not know methods of contraception. She "sins" and every time she does, she has a child. Com-

pare that with the girl who does anything with her body, but does not hold in her arms the fruit of what she does simply because she knows some method to prevent conception. I prefer the one who has lots of children because she did not know how to take precautions. She has more virtue than the other.

But is there not a similarity between your views of status differences between women and the caste system in Senegal to which you object in your book?

But caste is not the same. It is not a question of virtue. The girl of an inferior caste may be virtuous. Caste is a social attitude. It is a social layer which has the same faults and the same virtues as the social layer which is regarded as more "noble." Yes, it is not because of caste that makes a person to be without virtue. No, there is no comparison. I believe that within the castes one may observe all the virtues of our race. In the old days, for example, the *griot* came from a lower caste, but they were the first to die in battles. They were the ones who led the warriors who were on horseback so that they would not run away from the battle. They exhorted the warriors to go forward with their cries: "You, the brave, you the brave, your father died at such and such a place, at such a battle. You, the brave, your brother never ran away, he is dead under the dagger. You, the brave, etc. etc." The griot had this exalted role even though he was of a low caste. How could the warrior run away in front of this witness? And the one who is challenging the warriors is also obliged to be present beside them. I do not know if you can understand me, but caste is a social classification of roles. It starts with individuals in determined functions, in determined social roles, and goes on from generation to generation, from father to son. But this repetition does not make the individual members without morality, without virtue. Nevertheless, caste remains as an obstacle for them to marry outside their own caste.

In your book Ramatoulaye objects to marrying someone from her husband's family. But why? Would not this have been the best arrangement for the widow to be taken care of by her husband's family?

The novelist with Olivia Jamin, who translated the interview included in this Report.

The problem is not posed that way in the book. Yes, there is a tradition which says that when a man dies, his younger brother marries his widow. In this way the family circle is not broken, the family circle which has just lost a member. No, here is the brother who is from the same blood as the husband who comes to take his place. Good, but Ramatoulaye has just suffered the loss of her husband, understands that it is not the younger brother who has come to marry her, the widow, but an older brother in the family. And she understands his motivation is totally different. Instead of wanting to assume the moral responsibilities of the dead man, he wants to marry her for his own selfish purposes. She, the widow, has grown children who are working and have financial means. Then there is the fact that the widow has some money. He already has three wives for whom he cannot provide financial support. One of them has to sell fruit to support the house, another does some sewing, etc. to make up for the money he cannot give them. Good, so with this lack of money, how can he come to this widow, Ramatoulaye, to offer help? He does not come to offer help. He only comes for his own selfish interests, for his own benefit. That is why this widow who is so sentimental, who cannot conceive of married life without love, who, because she loved, suffered, and was patient, and was abandoned, but did not divorce... well, how do *you* want her to view this man who wants to marry her without love?

I understand that you participate in work with women's associations. Is this, in your view, an arena for promoting change in the society?

Yes, we talk about these matters and we try to do our best to change things. We try, but these are not groups with any political power which can bring direct pressure on things. We do not have the same effect as a political party. In a political party the approach for changing things is through voting in laws which overthrow old structures, which really bring about change. But we do have some influence on



the political powers because some politicians listen to us. We are tolerated, we are tolerated and given some place. We are helped to bring our aspirations into reality. That is good because there are some countries where it is not accepted for women to form associations, to group themselves without being under a particular political flag. There are some African states where this is not accepted. Here in Senegal we are allowed to form groups, we are allowed to hold meetings, to participate. For example, we participated in the Quinzaine de la Femme de l'Etat. We organized study days, we organized what we wanted. We have also even been received by the President of the Republic. All this means that we can help bring about change in women's situation, in the feminine condition.

Is there any opportunity for men and women to meet together for discussion of some of these issues?

Yes, we look for all possible occasions. For example, in my own women's association, the Soeurs Optimistes Internationales, we do this. We organize dinner debates. The dinners are followed by a discussion on a subject. The problems are opened to men and women and to women who are not members. For example, our husbands come and everyone is free to express his point of view on a subject. When my book was published, we organized a dinner in January to discuss the

subject of the book. There were lots of people. Everyone gave their opinion on the situation of polygamy and on caste. We discussed and everyone had their own ideas. As with every discussion, when we left, after having talked together, after everyone had expressed his own ideas and heard those of the others, we all felt enriched.

Are these associations providing women with some of the solidarity which African women in rural society enjoyed?

No, not really. In traditional society we gathered for instruction, to see one another, to kill time. We left our domestic work, our cooking behind and got together for pleasure. Often we met to eat, to have fun, to dance, to tell stories. It was recreation for us. We have not totally eliminated this recreative side, we still have fun together, amuse ourselves, but only on given occasions. We consult together more now. We do not have time. We do not have the right to waste time if we are going to bring something better to African women.

Was this your first attempt at writing a novel?

Yes, this is the first time that I wrote a serious novel. I have written before when I was a schoolgirl. I wrote essays for homework which were published. I wrote a dissertation which was published by the *Revue Esprit* a long time ago. I have

written articles for newspapers, lots of them, but this book is my first serious effort to see the light. This is my first book.

Are there any major literary influences on your writings which you can think of?

You see my style, my way of writing, it comes from lots of influences, of course, from authors I like to read. One seizes on something from here and there. It is like the honey from the bee. You see the bee flitting from flower to flower, sucking out the liquid, but the honey is really the bee's own unique product. In French we say, "style is man." Everyone has his own personal style, but in this style we find some influences from previous readings he has done. But finally our own writing becomes different, unique, from these influences.

Are you working on another book?

Yes, and it is finished. I do not know if it is going to receive the same reception as *Une si longue lettre*. As a matter of fact, it is the reception of *Une si longue lettre* which makes me more and more hesitant to deliver this work to the publishers.⁹ This first reception was so good, the book has been so well liked, that I wonder what kind of reception will be given to this other book.

Your new book is about mixed marriages. Do you include both possibilities, a white husband, a black husband?

No, not both situations. I have taken the white wife and the African husband as the theme. Here, if it is a black woman married to a white man, we can easily accept that, at least *more* easily accept it. What counts here in Senegal for a girl and for her family is that she gets married to a man who shows himself to be responsible. There are lots of mulatto children here from the time of the colonialists. The colonialists took black women as wives and it never was a tragedy, you see. If the man shows himself to be understanding with the family. If he does what the family expects him to do on the material level and on the level of understanding, there are not many problems. Because here in Senegal, it is the woman who is given into marriage and belongs to the husband's family. It is not the same thing with a man. The man bears the family name. He is the root of the tree which flourishes to give fruit. The fruits contain the seed which will make the race live again and nourish the ground. Thus the problem of a white wife is more interesting from the point of view of the mentality of the man's mother, and from the point of view of society. There are more possible situations. So my book is about a white wife and a black husband.

Do they live in Senegal?

Yes, in Senegal. Otherwise it would not be interesting. If they were in France there would not be any problem. If the book was set in France,

in Europe, anywhere else, there would not be any problem. They could isolate themselves from the parents and the others. It would not be the same thing.

What are your thoughts on the Noma prize?

Really, in some ways one can say that the Noma prize has rekindled the fire of hope. Without wanting to sound pedantic, or being grandiose, let me say again that men must love and help one another. Men must be open and not remain selfishly with what we have. We must do something for others and that is the meaning of the Noma prize for me. This Japanese publisher thinks of promoting African books, to give something so that African literature goes forward. That is the meaning of this gesture for me. The existence of all such prizes is always an encouragement. That is what it really shows. As I was saying earlier, books are an instrument for development and books must not die. We must encourage people to write, to allow the great flourishing of writing. It was through those two books that I mentioned earlier that I learned that I could understand and appreciate Africans in English-speaking African states and that I learned that they were not different from us. Their customs are not different from ours. I rediscovered our customs, our traditions, the way of life of our women, and of our children in their message.

(January 1981)

NOTES

1. French publishing interests in NEA include Fernande Nathan, Editions du Seuil, Presence Africaine, Armand Colin, and Librairie Hachette. The French equity in the company is gradually to be phased out.

2. For a discussion of the significance of the use of scripts other than Roman for making the written word available to large groups of Africans who are now regarded as illiterate, see "Local Languages and Literacy in West Africa" [BHB-2-'77], *AUFS Reports*, West Africa Series, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (1977).

3. This last item is a remarkable book, likely to become a collector's item. The publishers have used a special paper, locally produced by traditional artisanal

methods known since the seventh century; the paper is made by hand from a local papyrus by a special and complicated method, and the book's cover is encrusted with natural flowers to create a simple but most arresting artistic effect. *The African Book Publishing Record*, Vol. VI, Nos. 3 & 4 (1977).

4. One example was "what is your ideal man?"

5. Derk Kinnane, "African book prize goes to Senegalese woman novelist," *UNESCO Features*, 756, 1980.

6. Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979), p. 14.

7. My heart is joyful each time a woman emerges from the darkness. The ground

that has been gained is difficult to hold. There are social constraints, the male ego resists. Used by some, baited by others, respected or scorned, often muzzled, all women share the same fate that has been cemented by religion, and abusive legislation.

8. The interview was first published in the *ABPR* (Vol. VI, Nos. 3 & 4), 1980. Ms. Olivia Jamin accompanied me as interpreter and translator, and I thank her for the many hours she devoted to the material we gathered.

9. Since the interview in July, Mariama Bâ's second manuscript has been accepted for NEA publication.