

PRESS RELEASE

Ken Bugul on the Condition of Senegalese Women

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SUMMARY

Retrospective press release write-up on Ken Bugul's visit to BYU

Award-winning Senegalese novelist Ken Bugul discusses the economic potential of African women if education becomes more accessible in the rural areas of the continent.

PROVO, Utah (1 March 2018): Before its first colonizers, sub-Saharan Africa was absent of patriarchy or matriarchy. Prior to the Arabs, Muslims, French, Portuguese, and many others who settled in Africa's tropical landscape, the continent experienced a balance of power shared between genders and members of society. Mariètou Mbaye Biléoma, also known by her pen name, Ken Bugul, explores her heritage as a Senegalese woman and the current female efforts to improve Africa's economy at the BYU Women's Studies Colloquium.

In traditional African society, a father's sister and a mother's brother are the power wielders in family decision-making; their roles grant insight and balance to social conversation and organization. However, once Africa was invaded, their men were expected to adopt Western patriarchal responsibilities and, as Bugul mentions, "their women [then] fell behind."

"In Senegal, we used to have very strong and important women who were princesses, queens, and warriors in our kingdoms," Bugul continued. However, as the French built provinces and cities that housed the continent's education, the rest of Africa was left on their own and labeled as "indigenous." Bugul commented, "We were waiting for schools . . . In my family, I am the last and the first to go to school, because up to my birth there was no school. [It] disturbed the minds of the indigenous people."

Women in Senegal were discouraged from working and studying because their husbands reminded them that there was no need for it. However, the need arose in the 1980s when Africa suffered a great economic decline, which Bugul describes as "terrible, horrible, [and] criminal". Many men lost their jobs at the time, but Bugul excitedly explains how it was African women who "stood up" and looked for solutions: "[They] started to really challenge [themselves] because they wanted to have access to education to compete with the [other] citizens."

To support their husbands and children, African women all over the continent began to sell goods for money at local markets. Their business? Gold. Ken Bugul mentions how women became most successful by selling the golden jewelry given to them during better times. She says, "If you go to the poorest of countries, of cities in the world— for example, you go to the poorest area [to] the poorest women begging in the street, . . . if you remove her [sleeve] you will find a small gold

bracelet.” The women in Senegal must always keep some gold because they never know what will happen; it is their “passport for freedom.”

In correlation with the female effort, Senegal saw a rise in divorce. Some husbands were surprised that their wives stood up and provided for the needs of a home. Other spouses became comfortable with the change of events. Overall, women reclaimed their role of power once honored long ago in traditional Africa.

Ultimately, the real impact isn't seen in the economic success, but rather in the lives of Senegal's children. The relationships between the women who took a stand during the turmoil in the 1980s and their sons, have evolved. Bugul shares, “If a young Senegalese boy has something, the first thing they say is, ‘This is for my mom. I owe what I have today to my mom. My mom paid my education. My mom was struggling selling fish and peanuts in the street.’” Furthermore, the girls of the young generation are now thinking, “If the boys can do something, I can do it.”

Yet, Senegalese women still have limited access to the education they need to make a difference. Bugul stated, “when you are educated, you can change things” and claimed that the lack of education for females contributes to the number of young Senegalese girls being illegally married and prevents Senegalese women from earning a Ph.D. today.

Closing her thoughts, Ken Bugul said that the word “feminist” is not among the African female vocabulary. These strong women that roll up their sleeves and go to work are aware of the movement in other continents, but they personally have no conflict with men. However, in matters of accessible education, property, position, credit, and salary, African women are catalysts for change in their families, social circles, and communities. The modern difference, Bugul says, is that “now men have to be nice and please women, because [they] are busy with their businesses.”