INTERVIEW

Interview with BYU Students in French 456R (Francophone Studies)

Ken Bugul, Christian Ahihou, et al.

SUMMARY

Transcription and English-language translation of class visit and interview, 1 March 2018

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: Hello, Ken Bugul! It's been two days since we at BYU have had the honor of welcoming you. Today, our students who specialize in Francophone Studies have the pleasure, and are very happy, to have this conversation with you. This semester they have worked on women's writing in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. They have read from a lot of female writers like Mariama Ba, Werewere Liking, Angèle Rawiri and Yaou Régina; they also read and worked on *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*. So, the questions they will ask you will not only be about your books, but on women's writing generally. Without further ado, let us give them the floor. We would like the conversation to be between them and you. They are going to ask you questions, mainly to get to know you better, and to learn a lot more about female writing in sub-Saharan Africa. So again, we are very happy to welcome you here. Thank you very much for coming and joining us for this conversation. The first question will come from Keagan. Yes, Keagan, go ahead!

KEAGAN MATAELE: When you wrote *Le Baobab fou* in 1983, you had Ken, the protagonist of the story, say, "A woman, a black woman didn't have any other role at the time than to be a woman, one who wished to marry a young man in the village." The same protagonist adds a few lines later, "At this time, my worry wasn't a man and a marriage. I was looking. The young man in the village would have slowed my momentum and later on, my conscience." We know the rest of the story, and it was warmly welcomed by your readers and literary critics altogether. But, are you still speaking to the same audience when, 10 years later, you had the narrator from *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* say, "Everyone was a disciple of the Serigne, even his spouses?" How can one be a disciple of the Serigne and his spouse at the same time?

KEN BUGUL: Yes, thank you, Keagan. I will start by answering the last question. Being a disciple in Senegal in the Islamic religion, we essentially have two big religious families that we call Sufi religious ways; there is the Tijania and the Mauridism. Being a disciple is not having a master, but a guide to guide in spiritual choices. Everyone has a Serigne in Senegal. Myself, I am not a good disciple, but I claim to be a disciple in *Riwan*, so it has nothing to do with [a disciple and spouse], we can be [both]. Even if you are not a spouse of the Serigne anymore, we always stay a disciple of the Serigne concerning religious orientation. Someone helps us with the guidance for the choices we want to make. So, we can be young, married, single, divorced or older, but at a certain age in Senegal everyone chose their guide. We don't really like having a master, but in quotation marks "a master" in Senegal is a Serigne. So, it has nothing to do with being his spouse, we can be both. And now, the *Baobab fou*. At the time, to get married or to have a man in your thoughts wasn't any of my concern. My concern was, first of all, that I lived in a great deal of suffering due to the separation from my mom since I was five years old. That separation has been the dynamic of my

life until today, even though my mom died in 1985. I didn't live a familial life with a dad and a mom like everyone else, so my concern was on looking how to diminish my noted suffering. At the time, the only option I had to diminish that suffering was to go to school.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: So, if we understand correctly, the Serigne spouses are not really his spouses?

KEN BUGUL: Four of them are his legitimate spouses, I explained that in the book. These legitimate spouses, because of these masters and guides, don't marry just anybody – it is a dynasty. Well, it also evolves. Before it was very strict, but it has evolved like every royal dynasty. In England, you see that Prince William didn't marry a princess, he married a girl, a commoner. Prince Harry will marry a metis Afro-American, although before it was needed for a prince to marry a noble girl, or a girl from a Royal family, to stay in the dynasty. With the Serignes in Senegal, it was also like that before – it has changed a bit the past few years. So, the four legitimate spouses were chosen, like I explained it in *Riwan*, one on the paternal family side, one on the maternal family side, one needed to be coming from a scholar family – from people that have knowledge – and the fourth needed to be coming from a royal family, so she needed to be a princess or belong to a noble family because the kids born from these 4 spouses will become future Serignes. Any other women outside these four legal spouses, according to Islam, aren't spouses, but women under the protection of the Serigne. We call them *Tara*. They are not mistresses because there is a symbolic connection that is created, a really strong connection, and they will be protected under their Serigne. These women don't have to live with him, or even be in the same region or country as him. So, these are women that are under protection. However, the four legitimate spouses are chosen because of their rank, blood, family, are legal spouses. Traditionally we always say, or we used to say, that because things can change your husband, even though he is not a Serigne, has an extremely sublime role. He would be almost like a little God, the chief of the household, the one that feeds, so naturally we had a certain respect for them. In quotation marks, we were a little bit like disciples of our men even if he wasn't a Serigne – we received that from Islam and colonizers. Nowadays, we see that a man can be the disciple of one Serigne, and his wife can be the disciple of another Serigne. It's about spirituality, and spirituality is personal. We can make our own choices according to our own spiritual aspirations. So, that's what being someone's disciple is about.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: We had many discussions in class on the question of choice, and there was one character that intrigues us the most, Rama. Did she really make her choice to be with the Serigne? And also, outside the case of Rama, are the followers of the Serigne free or must they always stay obedient to the Serigne? I think Keagan has another question about Rama's case, go ahead.

KEAGAN MATAELE: Rama and the narrator don't seem to live their marriage with the Serigne in the same manner. Would Rama be to blame because she wouldn't have found fulfilment with the Serigne?

KEN BUGUL: Yes, the character of Rama, in *Riwan*, did not actually exist in the Serigne's house. Rama doesn't exist at all and there was no Rama at the Serigne's house. But, from writing *Le Baobab fou* to *Cendres et Braises* and to *Riwan*, my writing in general improved a little. As they say, in forging one becomes a blacksmith. In *Riwan* I had already begun to have a passion for writing and creating fictional characters in real situations to show that the narrator could have easily been Rama. That's why I put this fictional character, or the narrator, Rama, and Riwan, as

the madman – the insane woman that the Serigne healed. These three characters, in fact, are the same character. In other words, the narrator was rejected by society and treated as if crazy, so that when she left her mother to go to the Serigne, heads would come out of the houses along the way to say, "Ah, it's the madwoman! Is she married? Does she not have children? Does she not work?" She was a character rejected by a society which treated her as crazy. Riwan also arrived at the Serigne as a madman, and Rama, the fictional character, put herself in the shoes of a someone like Riwan, who would have almost been given to Serigne in the form of gift. Rawan imagines what it would be like for Riwan – she has had a certain level of life and education, has lived in Europe, and knew many things. She has other aspirations, which are not at all spiritual aspirations but simply earthly aspirations; to live, to love a boy, to live the life. For her, the story of spirituality did not interest her, it was time to live now. If we go back to *Le Baobab fou* and *Cendres et Braises*, we realize that the narrator was a character like Rama, and to not make her disappear at the end of the book, I was inspired by a legend that was told in my village in those years to dissuade young girls who are getting married to cheat on their husbands. We imagined that if a woman is married, if she cheats on her husband, she risks having the same fate as Rama, that is, when she goes back home, her house will burn. In this case, her house will burn, or her parents will die. Either way a misfortune would happen, and this was told to deter girls who had just married from deceiving their spouse. This is a legend that is always told in the village. The narrator also identifies with this character, Rama, because a few years ago she had the same aspirations as Rama, to live life, have no need for spirituality, etc. And so, it was three characters that, if I had to work on Riwan, I would have worked a lot on because in fact they're all the same character – the narrator.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: It is interesting to know that these three characters actually form the same character, in the same book. So, as I said earlier, we have read from other female African writers as well, like Anne-Marie Adiaffi. But every time we have read we have made a connection to your books. I think the second question is going to be about *Une vie hypothéquée*, and it comes from Erik.

ERIK BRADY: So, in our class we read in a few passages from the book *Une vie hypothéqué*. Tn this book, the little Yah was constrained to marry the old Behira, to whom she had been promised by her parents before she had even been born. Following the common practice found in *Riwan*, which consists of giving girls as a sign of allegiance to a Serigne who takes them as a wife, can we say that the lives of these girls are also mortgaged like that of the little Yah, even if the cultures and countries are different?

KEN BUGUL: No, it's not the same thing because a Serigne is a being that is not a common mortal. There is the spirituality, the holiness, the notoriety, the wisdom. He is a central personage in the lives of the population – especially in Senegal. So, in the case of marriage it is not a normal marriage, like Nabu Sambe, for example, in *Riwan*. Nabu Sambe *did* marry an old man who was rich.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: And it was a polygamous home, as well.

KEN BUGUL: She was the fourth wife. Nabu Sambe is still alive, by the way; a very, very beautiful woman. And there wasn't this spirituality which made it rise above the ordinary. So, for the girls who were given to a Serigne as a gift, it was as if they received their salvation because of the holiness from the spirituality of being in the proximity of the Serigne. However, in the case of the

Ivory Coast or communities where we find girls married to old men, it was not in. As I was saying earlier, in the Ivory Coast, or in Senegal, or anywhere in Africa really, a country is more like a continent. That, we do not find with the Baoulé, with the Bété, with the Dioula (and the Dioula are from old immigrants who came from Mali, or from Burkina Faso, who arrived in the Ivory Coast and worked in the fields). At the time, agriculture was very developed. There were fields of cola, the cola with which we make Coca-Cola. And these men were very powerful, were very rich. So, families said to themselves, "If we give our daughter to a man who has money, we will profit from this richness." It was a calculation of financial interest and economic interest in general. So there, it is not the same thing. It is money, material.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: So, on one hand there is the spiritual interest, and on the other financial interest.

KEN BUGUL: While there, it is the spiritual interest, and even salvation. It actually goes even beyond that; it is gaining paradise itself. So, it is not the same thing. All the Serignes, well, they have means because they are great landowners who really work the agriculture, who worked even with the colonists because they were the greatest producers of peanuts, and millet. The largest fields belong to the Serignes even to this day. But there are other Serignes who are not necessarily as rich as the great merchants, like in the case of the Ivory Coast where giving one's daughter for money and giving one's daughter to gain paradise are not at all the same thing. So, we might mortgage a young girl, mortgage her life in giving her away, uniquely for financial reasons. But we cannot mortgage the life of someone for spiritual reasons, to gain salvation, to gain paradise, because it's on a spiritual path, a religious one, to conform to religion, and gain spirituality and then gain salvation and paradise. So, these two aspects are opposite. For a young girl who is quite innocent, who has not yet matured spiritually, giving her away, even in the form of a gift because her parents hope for this salvation, is difficult for to understand the importance of saying "with this Serigne we can gain paradise." We do not think of paradise until a certain age, we only think of *life*. So, it can seem mortgaged for a while, but with time, by increasing in spirituality – because you're in a very, very spiritual atmosphere (they live in spirituality all the time) – she can spirituality grow while interest, and money may not. Eating, dressing oneself, having a beautiful home, sleeping in a bed – they're all good, but nothing more. Spirituality will always be missing like that; instead we always pray for God to forgive us of our sins, that he might take us to paradise. So there, like this it is almost already achieved. It's for that reason that in *Riwan* there is a moment when the women were almost in bliss, with what was practically a guarantee, an assurance, of their salvation and of paradise. Already, they are in the antechambers of paradise with this spiritual life, which is why they are so beautiful, so serene. They were serene because paradise was almost guaranteed. While on the financial side, it's just financial. And while he has the means, he can impose, he can blackmail, he can even repudiate them, or banish them, because he has the financial power. There, the life of a girl can be mortgaged.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: As I said earlier, we have read other books, especially the one we started with, *Une si long lettre* by Mariama Bâ. And I think Lindsey has a question for you on that.

LINDSEY MORGAN: "It removes us from the implantation of traditions, superstitions, and customs, it makes us appreciate multiple civilizations without renouncing our own," is what Ramatoulaye, the author of the letter that makes up the book *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ, thinks of colonial school. However, whether it is in *Le Baobab fou* or *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*, colonial

school was the source of your alienation from your culture. Are the two speaking of the same school?

KEN BUGUL: Maybe not. Because you must examine the two authors to begin with. A little earlier, I talked about how there are authors who came from old French towns who had French nationality and kept it. All of those born just before the years of independence automatically had French nationality. So, with French education, as well as French citizenship, the relations between men and women were governed as if it were in France. You had your husband because the women were teachers or nurses and they married civil servants, so they were evolved couples. The rest of the population, or the majority (about 90% of the population) were considered natives who did not have access to French education. Everyone was always submerged in traditional education. With polygamy, everyone lived together in big concessions – parents, children, wives, grandchildren – everyone lived together because it was tradition. On the other hand, those who were civilized were so because they were already French citizens. And, for example, in *Une si longue lettre*, the most surprising thing is that when you see a couple *ton pied mon pied*, as one would say in the Gulf of Guinea, who are glued together arm in arm, it is impossible to believe that the man would marry another girl. But, the most dramatic aspect of this book isn't that he would go marry another girl who he really liked, whom he had met somewhere else, but that the girl who he married was the same age as his own daughter and was even his daughter's friend. So, it's a matter of proximity.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: It's his oldest daughter's classmate.

KEN BUGUL: Exactly. It's the level of proximity in the relationship. So, it's almost like he had married his own daughter, because it's essentially the same girl. Even more so, no one expects the change because they already know the couple as a couple. So, to first, marry another girl, woah, that wasn't part of French education. Secondly, to marry a girl who was the same age as your oldest daughter who was even, I believe if I remember correctly, her peer, who I believe came to their house, that's what was the most scandalous. On the other hand, *Riwan* is about tradition. It's about the things that are carried out in villages. The Serignes don't live in big cities. They live in the countryside because they live in big houses, own fields, and have livestock. It isn't at all the same thing. In these regions, those factors aren't surprising. But for the people who had received a French education, it already surprised them to see him take a second wife, and it surprised them even more to have him married to a young girl who was his oldest daughter's friend.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: When speaking of Mariama Bâ, you always see this aspect of cultures meeting one another. Meaning, the European and French culture, at the French school that had been made, and the traditional life in the village regions. I think that Lindsey also has a question about this concept. Go ahead, Lindsey.

LINDSEY MORGAN: In *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* you wrote – speaking of cultural identity – "Mix the races, it is better and more beautiful," before adding a few lines later on the same page, "Stay yourself with the energy of distress and impose your identity." A few pages later in the same book you say – through the narrator – "I should have remained myself, and even better, opened up to modernity." Doesn't this seem contradictory?

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: Yes, meaning we would like to see, how Mariama Bâ brings up the same problem as you do regarding culture and tradition – more like, tradition and modernity in Africa.

Should we accept modernity that stems from Europe, which is a global force that can't be stopped? Or, should we reject modernity and remain traditionally African instead? In this case, we wonder if we should be searching for authentic tradition – the authenticity of Africa. How can it be found? That's the issue that we are trying to bring up here.

KEN BUGUL: Nowadays, the problem no longer arises. But for those of my generation – Mariama Bâ was a little older than me and Aminata Sow Fall is five, six, or maybe seven years older than me, more or less – we were all of that generation. I was also familiar with the colonial period, even though I was a native, because the colonial school finally came to our village in 1952 or 1953. So, we were confronted with another culture – the French culture. This troubled us in terms of our own identity because the French culture directly opposed our traditional culture: how we lived in families, especially in the villages that I knew best, since I am from the villages. So, going to school with a different culture, and then coming home to find another way of life troubled us. That is why my generation became unstable in terms of our cultural identity.

But, for today's generation, because of globalization, the question of cultural identity in relation to the West doesn't exist anymore. Around the years of independence, people didn't know if they should be westernized or cling to the African culture. So, they started combining the two. But, I think it was after the 1990s, always for economic reasons, there always has to be some kind of shock. In this case, it was the devaluation of our currency, which was protected by the Bank of France, and France decided to devalue our currency. The franc CFA is the currency of the French colonies, the French community, or colony, something like that. And so, from that moment our purchasing power and our power to gain material goods to maintain a certain French-European culture, even in the midst of our destabilization, diminished.

With the devaluation of the franc CFA, the countries colonized by France who had lost most of their purchasing power began to open themselves up to other countries where they could gain other material or culture goods, etc. They began with Morocco since it's nearby, not too far away, and is still on the African continent. Afterwards, they began to go to Turkey. Next, they began to go to Dubai. Then there was India, then Malaysia, and now, China. African women go to China as if they were simply going to the market. They go to China all the time. "I'm going to China. I'm going to Hong Kong." I've never been to Hong Kong, but they go there. So, the fact that they have opened up to countries other than western countries started to wash away this cultural identity that was tied to France. For example, in Dakar, in the suburbs of Dakar, which I believe I spoke about in a book, there are even groups of Indian dancers – Senegalese women who specialize in Indian dances. In terms of television and radio, we have programs called *Allô Bombay!* People began to wear saaris and Indian jewelry, etc. So, taking these steps awakened the new generations.

My generation can always talk about it because we knew what it was like before. But, for the new generations, there isn't a sense of destabilization anymore because the new generations weren't familiar with this influence and politic of French assimilation. The new generations are born in the midst of globalization. In Senegal, there are young Senegalese women who can imitate how Beyoncé dresses, how Lady Gaga dresses, how Rihanna dresses. In hair salons, there are even Rihanna haircuts. In popular neighborhoods, you can ask, "Can you do Rihanna for me today? No, no, I don't want Rihanna. I will get an afro." So now they are open to the world-wide culture.

What is extraordinary is that since the 1990s with the devaluation of our currency, people are not only open to the European and American world, but also the world of Morocco, Turkey, the Middle East and Asia. And, at the same time, since they have broken off their ties with the West, the newer generations have also returned to their origins. Suddenly, they began to bring out fabrics, make bogolan in Burkina Faso, even earlier with Thomas Sankara, making cotton and their fabric, the faso dan fani which is still today the official cloth of Burkina Faso. So, all the sudden, people returned to their own culture, to their own background.

In Africa today, you can see this mixture of one's own culture with other cultures of the world. You can meet a really cool modern girl, and then find her participating in ceremonies later on. You would say, "But that can't be the same girl that I saw earlier!" And in the evening, she is even more different. So, this ability to be able to adapt to other cultures and still be yourself in your own culture, I find that to be an essential acquisition. That's why, contrary to what many believe, I'd say it in France but don't dare say it here in America because I am in Utah and I love Utah and will come back.

One would say, for example, that we are more cultivated, we are more open, we adapt more rapidly. When we go to Europe, we say, "Yes, yes. I know what is going on. Ah yes, I've seen that." "But how do you know that? You live in Africa." "Oh, but in Africa, we know everything!" Because they do know everything. The smallest boys that you meet can tell you what is going on in America, or what is going on in Europe, because they are open to the world and still remain themselves. So, economic factors are usually what bring change to our country. Even with commerce, we don't do much commerce with Europe anymore. Apart from wax in Holland where some factories are needed. But if not, we are much more open toward other countries in the world. And even, going back to Europe, because of the globalization, Europe doesn't have the impact that it used to.

The new generations aren't destabilized by Western culture. So, keep being yourself. As for me and my generation, we couldn't stay ourselves. As for me, I was destabilized by Western culture. I no longer knew if I was African or if I was a westernized French woman. So, my generation hesitated. All I wanted was to be myself in a culture, to have something solid. Because I was always looking for something solid to combat my destabilized cultural identity, as well as destabilization in my family, because I had been separated from my mom.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: That is interesting to know. So, on the idea of the authenticity of Africa, does African authenticity still exist? Should we continue to look at this as a goal?

KEN BUGUL: No, not in this globalized world because authenticity isn't in relation to a continent or a country. It's a matter of yourself, of your convictions, of your ideas, of your aspirations. But, when you have aspirations, and you live in an environment, you hold to your environment through your aspirations. So, you always hold on to reality. For example, I have my older sister – one of my older sisters, because I have one who is 105, and one who is 86 who lives in the village – and I have to take care of her. Each month, I send her money. I have to take care of her, of the family, and respect the familial hierarchy. Because that brings balance to society when we maintain family ties in the hierarchy. It strengthens the sense of belonging, which is crucial. So, in that sense, strengthening the sense of belonging doesn't stop you from opening up to the world.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: Very good, thank you very much, Ken Bugul. Now, Maren is going to bring up a question about a book by Werewere Liking. Go ahead Maren!

MAREN MONSON: There are certain female African writers that refuse all compromise when it comes to the roles of men and women in society, or man's domination over society. In *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*, for example, Werewere Liking defines women by the voice that says, "The primordial atom that cannot be satisfied with a masculine rib to exist." According to the narrator in *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*, however, we hear a different story: "I realized that man was not an object to possess, but a representative, someone with whom we can have experiences. Man, having a multi-faceted nature, could act in unlimited ways. Therefore, as women we should have with him a multidimensional relationship. Make of him a friend, a lover, a husband, a child, a brother, a confidant. We will not confine him to this limited role that suffocates him and makes us pass by so many things." So, should we speak on the side of radicalism and, concerning you, one of flexibility?

KEN BUGUL: Yes, radicalism comes from the religions that were brought to us with colonization. It is these invasions. I'm still looking for a better word because "invasions" is a little. It was then that man's status was defined, as I said this morning. But, in African tradition, we didn't have this exalted role of man in relation to religions like Islam, Catholicism. Therefore, when certain authors complain, it is with regards to those invasions that came to destabilize and exalt this role. For example, we didn't have the reality of tradition, even if you are with your husband, if you're walking home. But, today in Senegal when you see couples you would never think that they're married because they don't have to hold each other, one arm over the other. We don't call each other "dear." We don't say, "I love you" to each other. We don't kiss.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: But we still love each other.

KEN BUGUL: And, we still love each other. We still love each other. However, with occidental culture, you say, "my dear." It's even bothersome for me to say that now. Right now, for example, that no longer exists. Okay, if it's the young people, the very young people, because I have a daughter – although she is a little older now – but when she was a lot younger she would call her boyfriend "baby." "Baby?" I said. "Baby?" It is because in the United States they say, "this is my baby." So, she would say "baby." I asked her, "You call your boyfriend baby?" "Yeah, he is my baby." Well, okay then. So, it became something else. While the culture that we had was more like, your husband comes home, you welcome him, etc. So, when Werewere Liking speaks, it is in relation to Islam, religions, and colonization – where man's status became that way, as I said this morning.

Yet, if we return to normal and traditional (I don't really like that word) life, you just need to leave the big cities, and 70 kilometers from Thiès it changes immediately. This is why the female writers in Thiès aren't interested in writing about men and women, because they aren't familiar with that.

However, Werewere Liking, who is originally from Cameroon and lived in the Ivory Coast (who is a great friend of mine, and is younger than me), she was also writing about religion and colonization. We can call it destabilization for the simple reason that these invasions exalted man's role to the point of crushing the role of women. As for me, from an indigenous environment but

alienated to occidental culture, it was when I returned to my roots that I noticed that the right thing to do was to take man as a husband, because he can be a husband, as a lover, because he can be that, as a brother, because he can be that, as a son, etc.

In Senegal we even see a married woman being called "mother," as if she was that person's mother. Sometimes a woman will call a man "papa." And so, he becomes "papa." Because of this all the men in Senegal are "dads" and all the women are "moms." We call out mom, for example, to say that one must consider each other in all these possible relationships and connections, because you aren't always husband and wife. Some days a couple needs to act like lovers to renew their relationship a little. There are also moments when they need a different type of emotional connection, because one of them doesn't feel well. Perhaps it is the wife who mothers her husband because he is worried. Then it is no longer a relationship of lovers, but really a relationship like that of a brother, or a child, because her husband doesn't feel well. She needs to comfort him, console him. Therefore, that too is a different type of connection. We can have multiple different connections. If we have a concern we can ask him his opinion, "Yes, I just wanted to know what you think about this." In that moment it isn't a relationship of lovers, but one of brother and sister. This possibility to have many connections with a man fortifies the relationship and makes it healthier because it balances out the stress. If a husband's stress erupts, then immediately you come in like a brother and calm things down. When he doesn't feel well you take care of him like a child, reassure him, and in my opinion, it is better to have this healthy, solid relationship where the feelings are very strong because it combines love, friendship, and brotherhood. Having many different connections furthers the development of one relationship. I always say to young women today, "Don't have a relationship with your husband or your boyfriend that is only the type where 'he is mine.' You need to divide it into many pieces, because there are days where you don't have any desire to be lovers, you know. Instead you want to be friends, see the mountain together, laugh at a cartoon together." The more we have these possibilities, the healthier and stronger the relationship. There are less problems, and you don't need to go to the psychologist.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: In other words, having some diplomacy in a couple.

KEN BUGUL: Yes, a multidimensional relationship.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: Multidimensional, very well. So, as I said in the introduction this class is after all, or rather above all, a class on literature, and I believe Chase has a question for you about that.

CHASE LARSON: Ken Bugul, you have said in other interviews, like with *Le Quotidien*, that you write autobiographically. Why have you chosen fiction to write about your personal experiences? Also, do you think that in writing your books as works of fictions, the criticisms of these works have changed in comparison to if you had published them as autobiographies instead of fiction books?

KEN BUGUL: Yes. There's a professor at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin, named Guy Midiohouan, who has written an article, saying that in autobiographical writings, where the author, or even myself, Ken Bugul, have written for therapeutic reasons; she has resolved a problem and now continues to write as "an apprentice writer" utilizing fiction even to speak about personal problems as sources of inspiration, or pretext of the writing. For example, in *Mes hommes à moi*, there is a question about shame. The narrator, peed herself in class and the other children (her classmates) mocked her and she experienced such a terrible shame. I didn't need to write an autobiography using "I." I placed this story in fiction to treat this problem of shame that anyone can feel no matter where they are. There, it was at the school because then I wasn't in a therapeutic writing space. There, I was in.

Since *La Folie et la Mort* I was in writing by passion. With creativity, I reflect on how to make fiction from auto-fiction, even if that pulls from histories that I knew, observed, met or even lived, but which didn't need this autobiographical therapeutic side. It was all to make literature. Starting with *La Folie et la* Mort, it was a writing choice that I made.

Guy Midiohouan said that after writing a therapeutic autobiography, to concentrate on the "self" one is now. [She is] interested in the rest of the world and she is interested in events. So, even if I speak about shame, I'm not the only one to have lived that, others have lived it also. He (Midiohouan) thought that after the writing of *Riwan* I was done with the storytelling, and that now I am interested in what happens outside in the world.

Therefore, it's about going from autobiography to fiction, even if the fiction is always autobiographical, but turned into fiction. It wasn't just a therapeutic approach, it was based in creativity as well. Searching to write or make literature by thinking about how to make it profound, etc. That's the other step. There are two steps to writing: the necessity which led me to autobiographical writing, and the passion of writing, which appears in my other books of fiction.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: I know that in other interviews, you have explained this idea of therapy necessity. Can you very briefly explain that for us?

KEN BUGUL: Yes, write by necessity. It's a race, a question of urgency.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: Why, in your case?

KEN BUGUL: In my case it's because I was in the street. I was rejected and treated like a fool, and nobody wanted to listen to me. I couldn't speak to anyone because I was a fool. Again, I was living in the street. I was homeless, and therefore, I was a fool. I wasn't credible.

If I wanted to relate truths that I had lived, nobody would believe me because I was a fool, living in the street in my own land, as a young woman, around 33 years old. I was living in the street. I had lived all over, I had studied, I'd traveled, I'd known plenty of things, and all at once, to find yourself under the snow and rain trying to find shelter. It was one of those moments where I wanted to get rid of all of my decisions that had led me to be in that situation. That's to say, I couldn't continue living in the street, so the Serigne came to rescue me, taking me under his protection. But even still, people didn't want to hear all the things that I had to say. That was the necessity to write – an urgency – but at the same it was to write for relief.

I was relieved – writing was a relief. It was therapy. Or rather, that's to say it's necessary to say, it's a form of psychotherapy, but through writing. So, I wrote more. As I unburdened myself I felt relieved, I felt liberated, I felt – well, that's why I speak about this therapy. But the necessity and urgency it's from that period of my life when I was in the street. Maybe if I'd been in a house, it wouldn't have been as urgent. But there, living in the street, I was exhausted. It was a question of life and death. I loved living, so I chose life.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: We all love to live, right? No one wanted to listen to you and then you decided to talk to the world; that's literature. We listened to you yesterday talk about politics, and we also know that in your books you address the question of Africa dying of its own accord. Christian has a question for you in that sense. Go ahead, Christian!

CHRISTIAN WHITE: After so many years of independence, why do you still talk about the colonial period in your books?

KEN BUGUL: Yes, maybe I poorly used the word, the word isn't colonial, its neocolonial. Yes, it's neocolonial. It means that all of these old colonial powers still continue to exploit us; we are the market of the world, well, market-rubbish bin now. I said market before, now I write, "market', "dash," "rubbish bin." So, there are still the old colonies, whether they be French, English, Italian, they still want to keep this influence. One talks about *pré carré*, then in this neocolonial period, that we ourselves still have today, because up until today, France continues to exploit her old colonies, like Niger or Senegal. Well, all her old colonies, for economic reasons, for strategic reasons, etc. For economic reasons, the exploitation of our resources, our natural resources, our uranium, our petrol, our gas, our wood, our medicinal plants, etc. Then, whenever there is an election at the United Nations, in order to have strategical influence, France lobbies among its old colonies so that during the voting time her old colonies support a candidate that is French. And so, until now, well until these last 10–20 years, we were in that context.

In 2000, there was a president in Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, whose wife is French from Grenoble, who wanted to cut all that out. He said, "No, now we are in a liberal economy, we are not obliged to always cooperate and work with France," and there they started to open themselves to Arab countries, the Gulf monarchies, to the petrodollar, and then to China – who has come now to occupy the "neocolonial space."

Someone asked me once, "But, now you accept that everyone can come to your country. Wasn't it better to stay with the old colonies?" And, I said, "Of course not. Since we are independent, we are emancipated, we can choose who we like to exploit us, who we like." I don't want to use the other word that I actually used in that interview in France, because there are kids here, but we can freely choose who we want to exploit us.

When Abdoulaye Wade did that, he had a lot of problems with France, who did a lot to get rid of him. Then we saw a new president who arrived and said, "Come back," so the French army was in Senegal again, telecommunications are in French hands, the port, our port is in French hands, and it has now come back to the charge of the Chinese, with much more advantageous conditions, but while not respecting human rights. The president of Turkey just left *(Senegal, at the moment of the interview*. Now there is a diversification among our partners, but we are still exploited despite that. That means that we still aren't able to get rid of [it].

If it's not the French, it's the Chinese, it's the Turkish, etc. We are now 60 years after our independence, a little less now, but we are still that. But at the same time, I say to myself, "Despite that, things change. Africa, it's mutations, we'll pass this so quickly, but…" The independence is 60 years, it hasn't even been, no, it has not even been 60 years. Yes, we'll say almost 60 years.

But it took a century, two centuries, three centuries, for countries to become completely independent. So, I say that we are. There is a collective conscience – it's not even imaginary – there is a collective conscience of what is happening. There are young people who are in the process of rising up, men and women are rising up, in order to say "no." In order to denounce, and say, "Leave us the time." The time it took for America to become the United States, the time it took for France to become a democracy, the time it took. Let us have some time. It has hardly been 60 years since our independence. We have still furnished an effort and I am sure and certain that during the next years things are going to evolve enormously, and the balance of power will change because we are increasingly conscious that we have a strength: our resources. We have a strength: space. We have strength: a young population. All of these resources put together, we are going to change the face of things very, very soon.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: Very good, thank you so much Ken Bugul! We have one more question for you, and it relates to your writing language. Michael is the one who will ask it to you.

MICHAEL DAVIS: We have already talked about the ideas of cultural alienation and colonization in your works. My question is: What role does the French language play in this conversation, in your opinion? Why did you choose to write in French even though you seem to denounce this cultural alienation in your books?

KEN BUGUL: I don't think that cultural alienation has anything to do with language. Language is a medium. It's a means. Therefore, we are not alienated by a language because a living language is a dynamic. One talks about francophone literature and French literature, even though French literature is part of francophone literature – we talk about African literature. When you take an author like the Beninese writer Florent Couao-Zotti, when you read his books – even though he writes in French – you feel the cultural base of the language used, as well as the manner in which he uses the French language to create a new language through constructions and through the invention of words. Not through the etymology of the word but, in cultural context, the sense of the word.

So, we succeed in manipulating, in using… If you've seen the film on Ken Bugul they asked me this question and I said, "For me, the French language is not a bother because if I bring it to the market Dantokpa, for example, I can speak with the women there. If I bring it to voodoo temples, no one complains. This means that we can use this language to express our ideas as a function of our cultural roots. If you look at *Riwan* or *Le Baobab fou*, its first reaction from a Senegalese professor in Dakar, during 1992-1993 (when *Le Baobab fou* came out), said that "This is not French," because the language was used in the context of the cultural base of my region, the Ndoucoumane. The way that one speaks, the tone, the length of sentences, or even a word – if one takes it out and sticks it back in. If I write the word *tchips*, I start with *t-c-h-i* and then occasionally I add an extra *i* to make the word *tchiips.* And in this word, there's everything! It's stuffed!

Often, we'll be asked. I remember that Boubacar Boris Diop said to me when talking about *Riwan*: "The French aren't going to understand this, you need to add explanations." I told him no, because we had made an effort to understand Victor Hugo, Rimbaud, Voltaire, Verlaine, and Cendrars, and we even came to love them. How could we, in my village, understand Rimbaud? All they [the French] have to do is make an effort to understand us. Even teachers and students shouldn't simply interest themselves in the stories, which aren't a big deal to me, but rather in the method of writing and the language – how Africans write.

Even starting with African writers, begin by simply comparing Senegalese writers. Whether you look at authors like Mariama Bâ or Amiata Snow Fall. Whether you look at Abdoulaye Sadji. Whether you take… who wrote the book *Karim* again? That's a great book. All these people came from French communes. Look at a book from Ken Bugul or Fatou Diome. You'll immediately feel the regional difference, because with writing, you even hear the sound of it. The writing is brutal, cut-up. But it shows our way of expressing ourselves. It shows that we try, in writing, to use French by twisting and turning it, by cutting it up in tiny pieces, and by sticking it elsewhere to express our ideas.

I think that there is a lot to work to do on that front and enormous amounts of comparisons to be made between the older indigenous peoples and older citizens. Even they don't write in the same way. There's lots of research to be done. At Gallimard, they have a collection which they call *Continent noir* (*Black Continent*) because the way they write is not like a French classic.

There are always people who say, "That's not literature because what they write is not real French." There are even some people who complain that African writers are in the process of violating the beautiful language of the French Academy. At the same time, there are new Academy members who are now being obligated to look at the way we use French and put it in the Academy dictionary.

President Senghor: *Une station d'essence*. But we don't say *une station d'essence* where we live. We sell gasoline (*essence*) there so it's an *essencerie*. And we're told "*Essencerie?* That's a *station d'essence!*" And we respond, "Because we sell gasoline there, it's an *essencerie!*" That's all because of President Senghor. Before his death, *essencerie* became part of the Academy lexicon. Or *Dibiterie. Dibi*, is a type of braised meat and the place where we go to eat that mead is called a *dibiterie*. Eventually, that word was added.

And recently, the new French President and the French Academy are in the process of considering a dictionary of French from the Ivory Coast. They're working on that, but it's still French! We call it Ivory Coast French because they have a way of using the language, of using the Latin alphabet, but translating it into a socio-politico-economic context unique to the current Ivory Coast. You can speak to an Ivorian, and they are going to speak French. If you aren't paying attention, you won't understand!

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: Absolutely not!

KEN BUGUL: Absolutely nothing! What's more, the French language doesn't belong to France. Three quarters of French vocabulary comes from other languages. Every time we end up saying, "It was a Greek word." Take the *Le Robert* dictionary and look at a word. In Greek, it meant this. In Latin, etc. Often, they're Arabic words. Arabic has an enormous influence on French. *Les jupes (skirts)* and all that there's nothing French about the word *jupe*. *Jupe* is an Arabic word. People are even beginning to write books about this to show that the French language is a blend of other languages that fed into one language. That's why it's a living language, a dynamic language that we can use as well to create our own Universe inspired by our own culture.

Authors like Kateb Yacine said that, "The French language is our spoil of war. We won it from the French colonizer." Tierno Monénembo would say, "Language, I didn't come to it, it came to me." There are a lot of interpretations. But we, we don't – quite the opposite, we are proud to be able to take a colonizer's language and appropriate it to ourselves and to use it more amply. A world of possibilities when using the language by giving it color, light, sounds, flavors, adding spices. We add voodoo, we add everything. And the French language is fine with that because it's a living language that doesn't just belong to France. The person who can use it appropriates it. So, we have no regret, rather in the tenants of Marxism Leninism – perhaps we shouldn't talk about that here.

Back in the day they said "master the dominator's language, master that language, one can address the dominator in his own words, because we master them." Although he has passed away, when Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island, he learned Afrikaans while in South Africa there were riots: "We don't want to learn the Boer language. We don't want to learn Afrikaans." Children died. Hundreds of children. It was a tragedy. And yet Nelson Mandela learned that language in prison.

When he got out of prison, his first speech was in the language of those who put him in prison. All this to show that to appropriate the dominator's language is to have a hold on him, because we can address him in his language, with the words he has created. If he created the word *equality* we tell him, "You talked about *equality*. You talked about *liberty*. You talked about *respect.* You talked about *fraternity.* Those are your words."

So, it's important to learn languages in general. No matter the language. Learn French, Chinese Arabic; and I think that the United States is a country that has made a massive effort to open itself to Arabic and Chinese languages. In France and Europe, that's recent! They just started including Chinese. While in the United States it's been several years, learning Arabic, and even African languages. Even the American Peace Corps learns African languages in the Unites States before going to Africa. They send people who know Yoruba, Wolof, Fon, Gun, Swahili, and they learn it here. So, when they arrive in Senegal: [In Wolof] "Where are you coming from?" "I'm from Utah." "What? Utah?" They speak Wolof better than I do as soon as they arrive. They start the next day because they've already learned. It's important to have that possibility to master the language in order to be able to work in the field and with the people while communicating directly in their language. Overall, the problem of language is not a real problem.

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: All right, we have a time constraint. It was planned for an hour; but we have passed the sixty minutes.

KEN BUGUL: No, we had not started on time!

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: We are happy and as usual it's always nice to talk to you, Ken Bugul. We would have liked to continue all evening.

KEN BUGUL: It's a pleasure!

CHRISTIAN AHIHOU: And we will not be able to finish, but we must stop. We know that in two days you will leave and already we wish you a very good trip; we think about when we will meet again, and we wish you a very good stay for the rest [of your time here at BYU].

KEN BUGUL: If you still have questions, you can write these questions, even if I have not answered well, you can send me these questions by e-mails; I will also answer in writing – there is no problem, I do that a lot, too. Thank you very much!