

RADIO INTERVIEW

## **Ken Bugul: A Celebrated African Novelist on Migration and Identity**

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BYU Radio Top of Mind

### SUMMARY

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JULIE ROSE: This is Top of Mind. I'm Julie Rose. If you look at the list of countries whose citizens have left for other places over the last decade, Syria's immigrant population has grown the fastest worldwide. The rest of the top ten countries with fastest growing rates of immigration are all in Africa. So, it's not too surprising that migration was something Ken Bugul spoke passionately about during her recent visit to our studio as a guest of BYU's Africana Studies program. Ken Bugul is from Senegal. She is one of French-speaking Africa's most celebrated authors. Her writing deals with independence, loss, inequality, and identity. Her next novel is about migration. It's unfortunate that only one of her books has been translated into English because there's a lot Ken Bugul wishes we in the West understood.

KEN BUGUL: A lot of things to understand about Africa. I think that Africa is not well known, particularly in the Western world. Africa is not a country, it's a big continent – huge continent – and even though we have been through... Colonization is a big issue during centuries for some countries like Senegal, by France and England – and mostly older countries, even Germany and Holland, and all those European countries – colonization was already a big mess, which even after we get independences, still we have the consequences in our mentality, in our behavior.

JULIE ROSE: The European colonizers of African countries left a big mess behind, she says. Starting with the fact that after countries like Ken Bugul's native Senegal gained independence, they did not get a fresh start because their former colonizers didn't actually leave.

KEN BUGUL: Never!

JULIE ROSE: They may not formally be colonies of France, but now you have French business.

KEN BUGUL: French business for their own economic strategies in those days for political reasons but particularly for economic reasons and to continue exploiting the resources and to have the market for the manufactured products, and influence, even, the political path we should have taken to develop, because we got rid of the colonizers. Why? We couldn't make it because influence even in the choice of the leaders.

JULIE ROSE: Still pulling the strings politically, sometimes through bribery and corruption?

KEN BUGUL: Corruption, and even sometimes it is not even corruption, it is like if you don't do what we want, we can destabilize your countries! And we see in the former '60s, from 1960 to the '70s, but from the '60s – '61 '62, '63, '64 – we have seen a lot of coup in most of the countries...

JULIE ROSE: Yes.

KEN BUGUL: Wherever you go, coup – coup three years, two years after independence.

JULIE ROSE: And in the case of Senegal, Ken Bugul says this neocolonial period lasted literally decades after Senegal had ostensibly become independent.

KEN BUGUL: Up to François Mitterrand in the '80s – up to the '80s! It was still! And it is called la *France-Afrique*.

JULIE ROSE: And then Ken Bugul says the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund implemented complicated funding programs with all kinds of requirements that backfired for African economies.

KEN BUGUL: Very complicated! Because World Bank and International Monetary Fund said, “Oh no, you don't know how to run your finance. Now we are going to give you some measures, some you have to follow to have your finances because you don't know how to manage finance.”

JULIE ROSE: Uh huh.

KEN BUGUL: And what does it bring? It brings: “You no more hire?” “You privatize companies?” “You sack people who are workers?” The students when they finish their studies, there's no job because there is no recruitment, it is forbidden, recruitment. You close the boarding schools? You close the boarding schools? How can somebody from my village coming to Dakar to go to the university... You don't have boarding? If now you have to pay? High school, we used to have boarding, all our generation, we went through boarding – No, close, because it takes a lot of money. You close. And so, all those, it was a mess until the year 2000.

JULIE ROSE: It was a mess, until?

KEN BUGUL: A *biggest* mess. And, World Bank and International Monetary Fund recognized officially the failure of those programs in Africa. But you say, “Yeah, we recognize it was a failure.” Just, and you condemn millions of people? And for your failure?

JULIE ROSE: So, what about today? What drives the instability and ethnic tension and poverty in Africa? Well, Ken Bugul bristles at the characterization of Africa as poor.

KEN BUGUL: Because Africa is not a poor continent. Africa is one of the most richest continent in term of resources: mineral, natural gas, petrol, diamond, coltan, rutile. Now we have these rare metals, minerals, these rare soils we need for technology.

JULIE ROSE: Right, for all of our Smartphones and electric vehicles, all use them.

KEN BUGUL: Yeah, smartphones and everything, etc. And, we have the land so because it is a big continent. So, Africa is not poor; it is the African people are poor.

JULIE ROSE: Yes.

KEN BUGUL: That is something you can't believe it! How you are living in a continent full of all those resources and the people are poor?

JULIE ROSE: What is the responsibility of the international community today? What can be done? What should be done? Would you like to see more involvement? Would you like to see just pull out and let Senegal work its problems out?

KEN BUGUL: I think that at the level we are today, all around the world, we need each other. America needs other countries; other countries need America. Senegal needs France, needs America, needs investors, etc. It is the world of liberalism and globalization, but in that issue, you can't go in a country, exploit the resources, leave the people in poverty, and you don't feel guilty for anything because you are thinking of the interests of your country, which – everybody likes his country – is trying, but on human beings, it is a question of ethics and equity.

JULIE ROSE: To treat fairly.

KEN BUGUL: To treat fairly the people.

JULIE ROSE: Yeah, to compensate fairly.

KEN BUGUL: Yeah. Now, we used to have the Western so-called developed country – Western – but now, actually, we have China grabbing all sorts of resources in Africa: the oil in Sudan, the manganese in Gabon, uranium and cobalt in RDC (Democratic Republic of the Congo), uranium in France's Niger?

JULIE ROSE: Cobalt and uranium, yeah.

KEN BUGUL: Yeah. But China does not care. So, the problem of Sudan, the oil: China is grabbing the oil from Sudan. The oil is coming from the south; there was a conflict between the south, etc., and they don't care about respect of human rights, or for ethics, or equity, or for whatever. They don't mind; do whatever you want, we need just the resources! And they leave the people fighting, killing themselves, etc. It is exploitation of the resources which brought the conflict, because if in my region I have the oil, and the northern part is coming to take the oil, and me, I don't have a school for my children, I don't have a small hospital for healthcare, primary healthcare, etc.... How can you? It is not possible! So, when you create those situation, you can expect to see the reaction why people are migrating, for, not only for economic purposes – people use to migrate for economic purposes. They say, "I'm going, if I get money, I return home, and I try to have a business and live with my family" because anybody in this world... Even if I like Utah, I like America, I like France, I like Switzerland, but the best place for me to live is in Africa.

JULIE ROSE: Mmm.

KEN BUGUL: For me, I love Africa, I love living in Africa, but I love living in Africa with a minimum of decency of life, decency – a minimum! So, people now, you get mad when you saw what is happening and the type of leaders so we have in Africa because the exploitation of resources is linked with corruption. We have now to talk about the type of leaders we have in Africa. No respect of democracy, corruption, and the way they are behaving in the society to show that they have money. It is indecent, it is obscenity.

JULIE ROSE: You're saying that there's a tremendous gap between the wealthy and poor?

KEN BUGUL: Yeah, Yes!

JULIE ROSE: And it's very obvious and that angers.

KEN BUGUL: You get mad! And this affects our young people, our youth, because if you don't have access to a good education, not even good – access to some education – you don't have access to any training, you don't have any perspective, you can't even think of tonight or tomorrow – tomorrow, whoa, very far! – you are facing every day how the leaders are behaving and you can see how now poverty from the people is growing. You see all the children in the streets because of the families they don't have decent houses to live with their children, like they throw them even in the street to go to beg, to bring something at home, and even you ask a child of four, five years, six years, seven years, to go and beg in the street. What are you going to ask to a boy of twenty or twenty-two? “Try to cross the Mediterranean, or to cross the Atlantic Ocean, go to developed countries, try to find something to send the money for us to live, to send the children to school, to have access to healthcare,” etc., etc. So, this is... they are not... it is because they don't... it is, how do you say, that bad feeling, *mal-être*, like malaise, something.

JULIE ROSE: Yeah. It's a, well, it's a feeling of hopelessness.

KEN BUGUL: Yes, malaise. Even you ask a young man in Senegal “Where do you want to go?” He say, “Anywhere.” I say, “But which direction? You want to go to Europe? To America? To South America? To Ivory Coast? To China? Or to...?” “Anywhere!”

JULIE ROSE: Anywhere but here.

KEN BUGUL: And, you say, “But, anywhere, where is anywhere, where...?” He'll say, “No, I just want to go! Just go.” Without a destination. That is a drama! And you know that when you go, where do you go? Atlantic Ocean. The desert. Across the desert of Africa to reach the Mediterranean Sea. And from there many thousands of people are dead in the desert, much more in the desert, in the mountains, than in the oceans or Mediterranean.

JULIE ROSE: Just getting through the desert to the waterfront is deadly and dangerous.

KEN BUGUL: Yes. This is, this is a big drama. But, the responsibility is still the responsibility of the leaders we have in Africa. Corrupted. They don't mind the population, the people. They just want to get rich, they just want to keep the power.

JULIE ROSE: Across Africa Ken Bugul points to presidents who've been in office since the 1980s. They have way exceeded their term limits and they refuse to leave, they're clinging to power

through violence and corruption. Meanwhile, she has little patience for the international community's typical response to these leaders.

KEN BUGUL: Be careful. You have to leave the power or just, you know, those type of sentences.

JULIE ROSE: Just lip service.

KEN BUGUL: Yeah, like in the United Nations they highlight sentences, declarations, they have voted, resolution number this and that. But, no effect, just talk, talk, talk, talk! We are fed up of that. So, if the international community does not take care of how the leaders, African leaders, are treating the people, they must expect violence, terrorism, migration.

JULIE ROSE: I'm speaking with Ken Bugul. She is a celebrated author, one of the best known in French-speaking Africa. We see throughout your career, in your novels, this struggle to understand who you are, to understand what home is, where you can feel at ease. What is the message about belonging that you are sending to your readers today?

KEN BUGUL: Yeah, to the readers, to the young people in life, to myself. And so is because my generation, we born during the colonization period. I born during the colonial period, and the influence from the education I received was colonial education, French education.

JULIE ROSE: You were French in your mind!

KEN BUGUL: Yeah, so the policy, the politics of the colonizer was to make some assimilation. And we have to keep in your mind that your ancestors are Gaul, they have blue eyes, they have blond hairs, and you are singing "La Marseillaise," and you must behave like a assimilated person from France. So, when I was going to Belgium I did not go there because I wanted to go to Europe. I was going there to say, "That is the promised land where my ancestors are from!" And they told me, "You are not from here." I say, "What? Where I'm coming from? Who are mine?" I knew that I was black, I born Africa, in Senegal, etc. So, I have to go back to Africa now to find my origins. I needed my people and culture. It is when I found now my way because I was so disappointed though I had to go back, and the belonging of, the feeling of belonging at that I was very strong and very true because it was in my reality. In Africa I live with black people, the environment, the food, even the taste of the food, etc.

JULIE ROSE: So, like home for you?

KEN BUGUL: Yeah, home. And, the feeling of belonging makes you stronger, prouder. It is from your belonging, what you are, that you can now open yourself to the rest of the world because you are deeply rooted in belonging. And, from that now you can open to the world, and wherever you go, you always know that you have your deep roots somewhere.

JULIE ROSE: Your hope is that these young people who are migrating for better opportunities for education, for a way of life, that they can still retain a sense of home within them?

KEN BUGUL: Yeah, they are suffering a lot. I'm traveling all around the world. I met many migrants, people who migrated from the country, and the feeling is that despite all the things, all the... etc., they're still suffering from... homesickness, because you can't feel comfortable more

than in your place, in your home, in your land, where you're born, where you have your belongings, cultural, environmental, feeling, taste. So, but to have that feeling of belonging, you must be in your own country, already got the basis of the education of who you are. But now we are listening much more, we are much more liberal listening to Beyoncé, to Rihanna... or to the Eagles, etc., than listening to our traditional songs while talking about our culture, our history.

JULIE ROSE: Ken Bugul's novels are part of that culture and history. She's one of the most celebrated authors in French-speaking Africa. Her next book is about migration. We spoke during her recent visit to BYU as a guest of the Africana Studies program. I'm Julie Rose. This is Top of Mind.