PUBLIC LECTURE

The Condition of Women in Africa

Ken Bugul

SUMMARY

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LINDSEY ANDERSON, GLOBAL WOMEN'S STUDIES: Mariètou Mbaye Biléoma grew up in Senegal. During her upbringing, French colonists held political power in her country. This shaped the roots of her education both culturally and academically. During her childhood, she was told to recite that her ancestors were the French, that she descended from people with blond hair and blue eyes. With this deeply imprinted on her mind, she left Senegal and attended a university in Belgium, hoping to connect with her origins in Europe. She thought she was finally in the promised land of her ancestors and that she would feel free. She quickly realized that her expectations were unfulfilled. She was labeled as one of the "others," as if she didn't have a country or an identity. This labeling started Mariètou on a path to discover her identity. She returned to Senegal for six months and then went to France to study again. In France, Mariètou was met with more trauma. She was seen as an exotic object instead of a person. Consequently, Mariètou wrestled with questions about what it meant to be black and a woman. After leaving France, Mariètou decided that she preferred to live in her homeland, Africa. From that point on, she would live in Africa, developing her true identity as not just a black woman but a human.

SUMMER CORRY, GLOBAL WOMEN'S STUDIES: In Senegal, at the age of thirty-five, Mariètou began writing therapeutically. Though she tried to tell other Senegalese about the challenges she experienced as a black woman in Europe, they wouldn't listen due to the lengthy cultural assimilation they underwent in school. Mariètou said, "When you have something to express and no one listens to you, it's through writing that you are heard." In the first book of her trilogy, Mariètou explained her westernized childhood and how she grew up rejecting her own culture. Mariètou followed this first book with a second. This book spoke of her experiences in France and explored her identity within womanhood. The closing book of her trilogy explains how she returned to her African home only to be rejected by her own people. She lived in the streets and struggled to find a place in her community. In this book, Mariètou declares that besides being a black woman, she is first and foremost a human being. We are excited to welcome Mariètou, or Ken Bugul, to speak on the condition of women in Senegal. As she said herself, if Africa is surviving, it is because of the women. Please join with us in giving her a warm welcome.

KEN BUGUL: Hello, everybody. Good morning. No… yes, good afternoon! The last speaker was saying that if Africa is still standing, it is due to the women. That is true. But if the men hear that, *oooh*! That is true that the African women, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, have Africa like a baby in their hands, but they don't show it. They just do. They don't say to the men, "I am doing." No, they just do. So, this is how it is happening. This they say, "Yes, we are doing with the men. But we are not doing much. In Benin, for example, they say, "The men are the fathers of our

children." In the Gulf of Guinea, from Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, they don't say "my husband." You introduce them as "the father of my children." The man also introduces his wife as "the mother of my children." That's why if you are coming to Benin, if you are looking for Ken Bugul, if you say Ken Bugul, they don't know me. If you say Mariètou, no. If you say Mrs. Biléoma, no. But if you say, "The mother of Yasmina," they say, "Oh, yes! The mother of Yasmina, yes! She's traveling. The people are coming. Yes, she's a journalist; she's writing papers. Yeah, we know her." The mother of Yasmina. This is how they talk about relationships between women and men.

I'm very glad to be here with you this morning. I have to go very quickly because we have just thirty minutes to talk, for you to ask questions, because it is very important to have an exchange and to have your point of view – what you think, or what you were thinking, or maybe what you were expecting. You have more information or bring contributions so you can enrich each other to move forward.

I'm sorry for my English. It is not very good. I'm used to speaking French, or even Wolof, but I'll try to do my best, as usual the women are doing. The situation of Senegal – when we talk about countries in Africa, that very big continent, even one country is already a small continent due to the borders drawn by the colonizers in Africa. So, if you come to Senegal – here we are talking about the women – you have the women from the northern part, along the river going from Podor, Matam to Bakel to the Soninké people. You have the south of Senegal, which is separated from a small country called The Gambia. You have The Gambia in the Senegal, and in the south the Casamance is completely different from the northern part because it is a little bit far. They are not the same; they don't belong to the same ethnic group. Most of the time they don't have the same religions because Islamic religions, the Muslim religion, were in the northern part and went down slowly but did not go beyond. And, finally in the middle of the country, you have the Serer people. Our former president Senghor is a Serer. But in the Serer, you have different Serer. You have the Serer-Baol-Diouf, you have the Serer-Ndut, you have the Serer-Niominka from the islands. As the writer Fatou Diome – I don't know if you know her – but Diome is a great Senegalese writer living in France, and she's Serer, but she's a Serer Niominka, from the islands groups near Ndangane, different from the other Serer. And in the Serer, years ago, we don't have many Muslims because they have the traditional beliefs. And, then you have the eastern part of the country, which takes in the Toucouleurs, the Peuls, the Soninkés – and part of the Casamance also joining. It is on that path to the east that, for example, the region where I was born, the Ndoucoumane, is in the center of Senegal, but a little bit to the east side because in the center you have also another region called the Baol. The Baol is a region which produced from the '70s the most important migration movement to Europe, the Baol. And you have in the Ndiambour and the Djolof, which used to be the kingdoms. The main kingdoms of Senegal were based between Ndiambour and the Djolof and the Cayor. But nowadays we don't have any kingdoms in Senegal. So, that shows that that very small, tiny country is already a small continent where we speak eight local different languages, eight recognized – there are some small, small languages – but, eight, we have eight. That's why the government decided that French, the language of the colonizers, would be the official language for everybody, even for those with one of the local languages, the Wolof, that, more or less everybody can understand it or can speak it, etc. We have the Wolof, but we have the Fula, the Pulaar, the Serer, the Jola, the Mandjak, etc.

And, before the first invaders – colonizers – in Africa, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, were Arabic Muslims. They came with the Muslim religion. But before that the traditional society

was that there were men and women, but there was not a patriarchal system or a matriarchal system. You have a man and a woman, and in talking about a man – he's a father, he's a brother, a son, a husband, etc., but his power is not coming from him. His power is with his sister. If you have read *L'Aventure ambiguë* [by] Cheikh Hamidou Kane, there is one character, the Grande Royale, who shows that even men discussing, making decisions, need to have the *caution* [endorsement] of the Grande Royale, who is the sister of the one, the man, the *Badiene*? In Wolof, we say "Badiene" [pronounced differently according to different dialects]. But Badiene has a very important meaning in Senegal. It is the sister of the father. So, to balance the power of the man, he's cautioned, guaranteed, by his sister. And for the woman, it is her brother, *l'oncle* [the uncle, in French], *nijaay* [uncle, in Wolof]. Very important. The uncle, the *nijaay*, the brother of the woman, the Badiene, the Grande Royale in *L'Aventure ambiguë* de Cheikh Hamidou Kane. It is the same, but at that level, it is *l'oncle*, the brother of the woman. So, to bring a balance, believe it or not, we have a patriarchal system, we have a matriarchal system. People are always making that mistake on that in Africa, thinking that "Africa has traditional matriarchal societies." No, no, there is a balance because the masculine element is with the woman, and the feminine element is with the man, to bring balance. Everybody is important in the society. And you have up through the Congo. […] If you've been to Congo, it is the same. You can find that in many African societies.

But when we received the first colonizers, the first invasion – it is not sympathetic to say "invasion"; I need to find another word for that – in the Muslim religion it was with the figure of the man comes because – I'm sorry because we are all believers – they present that God is a man, the prophets are men, and the people who came to bring that religion to us were all men. And they say that the man is responsible, responsible for the family, the food, the clothing, the healthcare, the love, the money. So, we say, *ah bon*, okay. So, the women just stay in their small corner. Somebody will deal with the food, with the clothing, with the health insurance, with the love, with the tenderness, with everything. If something is heavy, the men must take it. This world, it is for the men.

And, then, after that, first colonization, now the French and the colonization – the political, economical and mental colonization came with the Europeans after the slavery trade. They did not care about men or women. If you are young and strong, you are taken as a slave. But the colonizers, because the governors who came were also men, and they came with the patriarchal system, which was running in Europe in those days, reinforced the position and the role of the man in society. We have the religion, and now we have the Christian religion in the colonizers imposing the role of the man – very important. They have to take care of us, this and that, etc.

And, we were running like that to the independence despite the fact that we used to have in Senegal very strong and important women – queens, princesses in our kingdoms in the Waalo, in the Cayor, in the Baol, even in Ndoucoumane, the region where I was born. In Nioro du Rip, closer to The Gambia, we used to have very strong women. Women, queens, in creation, women in the society. But when comes the colonization, the women were behind. For example, the first schools the colonizers opened were in four cities. The colonizers declared that those four cities in Senegal from the coast were French departments, or communities. You call them provinces or something like that. You have Saint-Louis, which was the headquarters. You have Dakar, Gorée, and Rufisque. That's why all of the first female writers came from those French provinces. That is so funny. From Saint-Louis, Mariama Bâ. And even the male writers, because they had schools before. All of us in the rest of the country were considered indigenous. Even up to today, we still

have small problems with the people of Saint-Louis, Dakar, and Rufisque because they are treating us as rural people. We are *Cao Cao*. And we call them the *Tchip Tchip*… But we're from a different area. You know what I'm getting at. They say, "You don't have manners. You're indigenous people. You don't know how to behave." Like the French, it's better. So, now you are joking about that, but before it was a little bit tough. I still have friends from certain areas that call me *Cao Cao* and say that I don't have nice manners. So, I need to be civilized a little bit. And then the progress of the school – because they were considered French, they did not have problems because they were in French provinces. But the indigenous, we were waiting for schools.

I was the last one born in my family. I was the only woman in my family who has been to school because after my birth, there were no schools in my village because the indigenous progress but didn't have schools. So, I was the first one. But for my status of indigenous, telling that the gods, as they say, this blond hair and blue eyes of my ancestors – that politics of assimilation disturbed the minds of the indigenous people. And, in those days we were living among us. The first time I saw a white person, I think I was thirteen, I was running because a white person in our *imaginaire* [imagination] is a devil. While also, in the imagination of the white people, a black is the devil because the devil is black. For the white, and for us, the devil is white. Everybody has evil. That is a balance. And we progressively, with the education of the indigenous, the women from indigenous areas started really challenging. They wanted to have access to education to compete with the citizens of Saint-Louis, Dakar, Rufisque and the Gorée. After the independence, it is most of the first people involved in the beginning of our independence came from the indigenous part of the country.

And, from that, education, the situation was improving for the women, but even when you work and have a salary, at home, the husband will say, "I am the husband. I have to provide your food, your clothing." *Oh, okay, good, good, good…* "I have to pay the bills." *Ah, good, good, good…* You take your salary; you do what you want with it, because the man says, "I do everything because it is my role." *Yes, uh huh, thank you, sir!* And, some of them even say, "You need not even to work." And we let many women who had degrees – who teach, or what – they say, "My husband says I need not work because he's going to fulfill everything." But . . .

When we come now to the 1980s with our terrible, horrible, criminal Programme d'Ajustement Structurel (P.A.S.) from the world bank and international monetary fund – with many restrictions, most of those men with that status were providing, doing. *Papa, yes*. They were sacked. No more equipment. No more job. And they had to stay at home, and that was very bad because when a man sits, he's thinking, he takes time to realize [before he] stands. But the woman, when there is a problem, when she's sitting and hears there is a problem, she just stands and asks for the problem. The attitude of standing and asking for the problem is not the same attitude as sitting and saying, "What is the problem?" It is not physically the same thing. And, when those problems came, it was from that time that the women stand. Now, to take back how our traditional society used to do. If you go to the Gulf of Guinea, for example, in Togo. I know Togo very well. I lived there for five years. In Togo, traditionally they used to say, "The man has to find a plot – a *terrain*, land – to build a house for the family." That is the man's duty. Land, build a house. And you have to teach. When you have that, you can go and talk with your friends. But the woman, traditionally, has to feed, she has to clothe, she has to take care of the education. She has to take care of the transmission of the traditional values. And these are ongoing activities, forever, because every day you eat. If you go to the house, it is ready, the kids are there. I have done my duty, I

have finished but ongoing activities. That's why in the Gulf of Guinea, the women are so dynamic economically, much more dynamic than in West Africa, for example, Senegal, Mali. The women just stand there due to the economic problems from 1980 to 1982.

But that situation also, after the *année internationale de la femme*, etc., in 1975, etc., When the women now stand to work, to find a job, usually we say, "Oh, the Senegalese people, even Mali, the West African people, the women, they like jewels, a lot of gold." They liked wearing gold in those days. So, they took those jewels and sold them to have money to start a business, trade, etc. So, that's why, even if you go to the poorest country in the world, the poorest city in the world, even – for example, if you go to Calcutta – if you go to the poorest area in Calcutta, if you see the poorest woman begging in the street, if you remove the saari [from the wrist], you'll find a small gold bracelet. Because, the woman must always keep some gold. You never know what is going to happen. It is your passport for freedom. You take your gold, you sell it, and you can go. So, the women sold their gold, and they started doing business. With the women working in the offices, women in the hospitals, with women educated, but the women were not educated from the traditional position with religion and with the colonizers. They just sold the gold that the men bought before because the men had to buy the gold for the women before. They sold it.

We met a lot of divorces in Senegal because the men were surprised that suddenly the women now were the ones standing, providing what they needed in the house. They were feeling humiliated, and they did not know how to overcome that situation due to economic problems. We met a lot of divorces because the women took the opportunity to go out and find work and go to the market, to spend all day outside, to come back home late. And the men were saying, "My gosh, it is not possible." And, from the humiliation, now things were changing because the women were not showing [appreciation]. It is me, as the men used to say. The women, they were doing, they were providing the food, everything, But, they put the men in with the children. But, if you take care, if you ask a woman who is selling fish or peanuts in the street, she says, "I have to work because I have to take care of my children and my husband. Yeah, I have to work. I have to find something because the children must eat, must be educated, must be this and that." And, some men are comfortable with that situation and, so, to be considered as part of the children and being cared for by the woman.

I think that economical circumstance, *conjoncture* allows the women in Senegal now to recover their status as a Badiene, in our tribe, our social hierarchy, *hiérarchisation familiale* [familial hierarchy]. And, the importance is not just at the economic level. It is now the children of those women who are struggling – the fact that they are struggling, the fact that the figure of *chef de famille* [family leader] is a feminine figure is changing the relationships with women and boys in the new generations. The children born from that generation of women who stand from the 1980s – the children born now, their attitude without their mother is not the same as without their father. If a young Senegalese boy has an award or something, the first thing he says is, "This award is for my mom. I owe what I am today to my mom. My mom paid for my education. My mom was traveling, selling fish and peanuts in the street. My mom was in the markets. My mom this and that." So, that makes [less] the image of the father, of the man, without that gratitude, without those tributes of the new generation to their mothers is something very strong.

But, these are the boys. The women, the girls of that generation were also thinking that if a boy can do something, me also, I can do it. That's why now we see women in the migration. We

never saw women in the migration. Now you see young women in the migration. They are leaving Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Senegal, Mali, crossing the desert. We have many, many women in the migration because, also, they want to demonstrate that they can do it. And, Youssou N'Dour, one of our famous singers, he was saying that he's the elder son of his mother; he was singing that he's the elder son, he's the son. Very nice song…! And then, after, he made another song: "It is good to be a girl. It is good to be a boy. It is good to be a girl." All are the same, because it has to change because the situation is moving. This is also important not just for economical purposes. That changes also many influences we had from the colonizers and from the regions we received. Because at the time that mothers can stand, they can do, they can go. They travel. They are going to countries alone. Mali, Gambia, Dubai, to buy, some to sell. Some of them are going to Morocco. Some of them are going to Tokyo. Some of them are going to Dubai. Some of them are going to China to buy stock and to trade. Some are in the markets. Some of them are in trade unions. They are in politics. They are at universities. There are many female teachers at the University of Dakar. There are a lot of female writers, even though most of them are not known. They're very interesting, the new generation. We don't read enough of the writing of the young female writers in Senegal. But they are very interesting because they are witnesses of another generation of women in Senegal. But we don't pay attention, a whole new generation of writers. It is important to read what they are writing because they can explain much more of their level, their feelings. Because I'm living with them, I know what is happening.

This is how the conditions of women in Senegal are progressively changing the situation. The only problem we have is that the older girls still don't have access to education. That is one of our main concerns because education is very important. When you are educated, you can change things. But if you don't have access to education, you can't change things. In the process of being educated, you can postpone marriages, you can postpone situations. You say, "No, when I finish my studies, when I go to the university. No, I want to do my doctorate before." And, women can now marry at thirty-five. My daughter is thirty-one, and she's not married. And today, that is very common in Senegal. But before, in my time, no – thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. But in areas where girls don't have access to education, we still find there are marriages with young girls. There are female genital mutilations in the area with the Serer people. We also have that also in the north, with the Soninké people in the Bakel. The Soninké people are still very close to the traditions. And we still have female genital mutilation, unfortunately, in Senegal and early marriages for girls even though we have laws. The Parliament has forbidden the marriage of girls under sixteen and banned female genital mutilation even though they are willing to take the people who do that to jail, etc. But still, when a young girl has no access to education, she has no perspective. You don't offer her anything else. What are you going to do? Are you going to go to school? You have no training. You don't do anything. So, your perspectives are locked. If you can't project yourself, have perspective – what do you do? You return to what you traditionally know – your family, your traditions, your belongings – to exist. You have to exist. But if you have access to education, you have much more perspective. You have another kind of existence instead of being married very early and being a victim of genital mutilation. This is what I can say for you girls who have the problem of time, but you can ask me questions, and I can bring much more information. Thank you so much.

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MAYA BRIMHALL, GLOBAL WOMEN'S STUDIES: Today we have heard Mariètou's research on and surrounding women in Senegal. Within this lecture, she has expounded on the fallacies within governmental interactions, the exploitation of western countries when it concerns Africa and Senegal in particular, and how that has affected the Senegalese woman. As I personally met with Ken Bugul, her written pen name, and heard her journey to where she is now, it is obvious how dedicated and passionate she is about bringing change to how the world interacts with and views Africa. The discovery of her own origins through her education and life experiences highlights an important fact: Africa itself is not poor, the people are poor. But why are the people poor? Because developed countries use African resources for their own benefit and create a false image of what Africa really is. Regardless, Bugul emphasized the daily gratitude people feel in Africa. In the smallest aspects of life, Africans rejoice, for they do not have as much want for the overused technology of the western world. Her lively and joyful countenance proved her claim. This made me reflect on myself and see where I can improve in my goal to live rather than just survive. Bugul showed me how to do that. By starting small, we as humans can make ripples in an effective way. Even if it feels small and insignificant, it still makes a difference that can eventually create a bigger splash globally. The most moving thing that Mariètou mentioned yesterday, and I think it's worth mentioning again, was this: If Africa is surviving, it is because of the women. She explained that the women take care of everything, from education, family, food, and finances. They are the catalysts for change in social circles and families. They are not inferior or victims. Rather, they are happy and maintaining life in their communities. They are beautiful because of their joy in the seemingly insignificant parts of life. My hope is that as we all leave today, we can develop the same outlook on our journeys as human beings and not allow our circumstances to diminish our views on the human race and on women in particular. Thank you.

QUESTION: What role do you think feminism has placed or continues to play in the economic and political liberation of women in Senegal?

KEN BUGUL: The word "feminism." People like me or people of my generation – the women of my generation, and maybe one generation after who are educated, who have traveled–know about the word. But for a country where nearly half of the population has never been to school – they don't even know the alphabet. Those who were aware of the word "feminism" were living in big cities. The first one was a lady called Marie-Angélique Savané, in those days, in 1984, who was talking about feminism and the first feminist movement born in Senegal in those days. But they were attending the meetings, the same who were educated, were traveling, were attending meetings in Denmark, in Italy, within […] the feminist movement.

But, the majority of the Senegalese women don't know about feminism. What is feminism? They don't know. They just know that they have to work. They're struggling to have access to education; they're struggling to have access to property. They used to have property, but religions and the colonizers took those rights. They particularly want access to microcredit. They just need to start their own businesses and take care of their families. That is why the feminist movement in Senegal failed because what they were talking about was not within our reality, our real context, in Africa. The feminist movement has to be the same everywhere. But America is not the same. In America you also have black feminism. But in Africa, we can't talk about black feminism. All of us are black. We don't have any problem. Nobody is going to say, "I'm black," because we are all black. So, even though we understand what is happening in America, it is not our reality. The feminists in Italy or Denmark, talking about up to even the mutilation of the men, in Senegal say

"Aaaaaah! Our men, our husbands, our sons, our brothers – how can they say that!" They can't understand. But if you talk about having the same access to education, same access to property, same access to microcredit, same access to the same salary for the same degrees, the same positions – they can understand it.

But, when we talk about feminism, it is not a word that the majority of the women in Africa can understand. For them, it doesn't have any meaning. And, you can find it in Togo, in Benin, with all the women billionaires of the Gulf of Guinea are talking about feminism, probably – "There's no problem; we don't have any conflicts with the men." Because in those areas the women are much more richer, and they can make their choice – who they want to marry, to have children. That's why they call them the father of our children. From a region even to another region, it changed. For Senegal, usually before now our economic independence, before our emancipation, the women had to wait at home, for the man is coming to say, "I want to marry you." And, most of the time, you have nothing to say because somebody came to marry you. But now – it is happening already in the Gulf of Guinea; I lived there fifteen, sixteen years – where the men, they have to be nice, to please the women because the women don't have time to look at the men because they are busy with their business. When you are busy like that, somebody says to the man, "Oh, okay. I am coming," because they are busy with their business, counting their small money [change]. "Oh, yes? What do you want?" "Nothing, just saying hello." "Oh okay. Hello." Now when they have time free, other men are insisting, "Do you know how to drive? Do you have a driver's license?" "Yes, I have a driver's license." Because they are thinking of somebody who is going to drive them to go and collect their merchandise. And, "Do you know how to read?" Sometimes they don't know how to read. "Yes, I have been to school." "Oh good." So, I can take as the father of my children. But this does not mean that they take them as stupid people. No. They consider them, but it's not the same humiliation as used to happen, for example, in Senegal. So that is why the word "feminism" – we have to find something else for the majority of the women in Sub-Saharan Africa, even in Africa, to understand the need.

But, what they want is to have access to education, have access to healthcare. In particular, that is why I say to talk to the aid of development. But, if you want to *do* something in Africa, not to help for development – nobody can develop us; we have to develop ourselves. But, if you want to do something […], we do for each other, it's *microcredit*. You don't give to them, you *lend*. It is all around the world. It is worldwide. Recognize that when you lend $10 to a woman, she's going to reimburse. Ninety percent of the surveys have demonstrated, from Africa, to Latin America, to Asia, that if you lend money to a girl, a lady, a woman, she's going to reimburse. And for men, it's not the same, according to the surveys done in Asia, particularly in India and in Africa. So, if you want to do something – if you help a mother, you will send three girls to school. You will send three girls to have access to healthcare. You will send girls to emancipation to avoid genital mutilation. And this is how we see feminism in Senegal but not like it's happening, for example, in France or in America. It is not the same. Thank you very much.