African Women, Tradition and Change in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

by

Ginette Ba-Curry, Ph.D.
English Department
Florida International University

Ginette Ba-Curry holds a Ph.D. in Post-Colonial Literatures and a M.A in International Relations from the Sorbonne University, Paris. She teaches in the English Department at Florida International University and is an Affiliate Faculty of the Initiative on Race, Gender and Globalization (IRGG) at Yale University. She is the author of *Awakening African Women: The Dynamics of Change* published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2004.

In a 1995 article about the representations of African women in African literature entitled "Francophone African Women Writers: African Feminism and Womanhood," Professor Ojo-Ade warns literary critics about analyzing African novels from a western feminist perspective. According to him, such approach distorts the message that African characters or authors convey. He also states that in order to interpret female characters in African novels, one must know and respect the culture they come from. Thus, in his views, not taking into account African women's cultural backgrounds is equivalent to misinterpreting those literary productions.[1]

Therefore, it seems important not to underscore the role African women play in their cultural contexts and their place in their families and communities. Ojo-Ade reminds us that any analysis of African women's past, present and future challenges needs to be put in the context of their ancestral African values.

The object of this study is to show the plight of the Senegalese woman in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Senegal through the comparative analysis of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's The Most Royal Lady in *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962) and Mariama Bâ's female characters in *So Long a Letter* (1981). Specifically, it is an examination of how the roles of Senegalese women evolved and changed over a period of time. As a matter of fact, female characters play a central role in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's as well as Mariama Bâ's novels.

Binta Racine: Inspirational Figure in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Life and in *Ambiguous Adventure*

Some time ago, in an interview with Janet Patricia Little, Cheikh Hamidou Kane revealed that there is a direct link between his biography and his first novel *Ambiguous Adventure*. He revealed that he belongs to a very traditional Toucouleur family and his male as well as female relatives played important roles in his childhood. In fact, his family's patriarch, Alpha Ciré Diallo was his paternal great-grandfather and maternal great-great grandfather. Alpha Ciré Diallo was a Fula herdsman from the Yirlabe province (Central Fouta Toro region in Northeastern Senegal) who settled in St. Louis (Senegal) in the early 19th century. Like the main characters in *Ambiguous Adventure*, Kane was born in the religious aristocracy of the Torodbe (according to Boubacar Boris Diop, the people who pray together).[2] Like Samba Diallo, Kane's ancestors have been profoundly impacted by oral tradition and a strong traditional Islamic culture. Patricia Little confirms that Alpha Ciré had four sons and only one daughter called Binta Racine:

> [Binta Racine's] son, Aboubacry (who became a deputy in the independent Senegalese government) describes her as a formidable woman, to whom nobody ever said no.[3]

Kane was named after another son of Alpha Ciré, Cheikh Hamidou. The latter was a leading Muslim teacher and had a great influence on the author. Cheikh Hamidou's son was Cheikh Hamidou Kane's father.

Therefore, Kane seems to have been profoundly influenced by the people he grew up with, specifically by the figure of Binta Racine. Furthermore, commenting on the similarities between *Ambiguous Adventure*'s The Most Royal Lady and Binta Racine, Patricia Little notes that: "…her [The Most Royal Lady] strong pragmatic sense, which is one of her most notable characteristics in the novel, seems also to have been present in the real person."[4]

We can conclude that in real life, Binta Racine (Cheikh Hamidou Kane's aunt), was held in high regards by her brother. Likewise, in *Ambiguous Adventure*, The Most Royal Lady is a charismatic figure:

> In real life, her brother, Hamidou Abdoulaye, who appears in the novel as the Chef des Diallobe did indeed defer to her, being more of a contemplative nature and less the man of action.[5]

Ambiguous Adventure's The Most Royal Lady: The Dignified Woman of the Past

The Most Royal Lady's main characteristic is her royal status, and the resulting authority and dignity she displays in the novel. She shows her compassionate and motherly personality when she interacts with Samba Diallo, her younger cousin. She also reveals her belief in tradition, her oratory gift as the spokesperson of the Diallobe, her sense of pragmatism and finally her foresight in urging her people to send their children to the foreign school.

First, it is important to examine the context of the society in which she evolves. In an article published in *Bridges*, *The Senegalese Journal of English Studies*, Samba Gadjigo explains that Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* is a reproduction in fictional form of the traditional structure of the Diallobe society of the past:

> *… a fictional reconstruction of the political and ideological palingenesis of Diallobe society from the Toroobe Islamic revolution of the late 18th century to the era of colonial domination*.[6]

Furthermore, Little confirms that the Diallobe society portrayed in the author's novel has a lot of similarities with Kane's background:

> The Ile à Morphil, the long island created by the separation of the Senegal River into two distinct branches, in the far north of the country, owing its name to the hunting of ivory that went on there from the mid-seventeenth century, when the French established a trading post in St. Louis. At its southeastern point lies Salde, the colonial chef-lieu de canton (district capital) and it is there, in the foyer ardent (the burning hearth, Kane's name for the Koranic school) that the novel opens. The village is tiny and intimate: the Kane family home lies just across the narrow sandy track from the Koranic school…[7]

The Most Royal Lady belongs to the Toucouleur ethnic group. As a matter of fact, in *Les Toucouleurs du Fouta Toro (Sénégal)*: *Stratification sociale et structure familiale* (1969), Yaya Wane characterizes this society as: "an inegalitarian or hierarchic… based on structural feudalism"[8] and "the main characteristic of Toucouleur society is first of all interpersonal inequality erected into a closed and unchanging system: inequality between castes and sexes, as between generation."[9] Therefore, Kane situates his only main female character in the context of a strong traditional and Islamic setting where the male as well as female individual has to submit to the group.

The readers learn that Samba Diallo, and by extension his aunt were born into the religious, social and political aristocracy dominating a whole area of Senegal: the Fouta Toro. In fact, in the 18th century, with the increasing influence of Islam in the area, the Toucouleur were in power. In addition, in the 19th century, this region extended over the Senegal and Mauritania banks of the Senegal River.

In *Ambiguous Adventure*, though the setting is not identified, (it is called "the little town of L…"),[10] Kane refers to it as "the country of the Diallobe."[11]
Interestingly, The Most Royal Lady is not only a member of a patriarchal family, but she is also aware of the prestige of her origins that make her destined to be a ruler. Actually, within Toucouleur society:

> …she could in any case take on the function of 'honorary male' speaking for her brother, (the chief of the Diallobe) when he was absent or otherwise unable to speak for himself, taking precedence over the man's wife who remained within her restricted feminine role.[12]

According to *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (1997), The Most Royal Lady is a female figure belonging to pre-Islamic society, recalling the "Linguere," the great princess of royal courts. She is the reflection of the historical heroines of the Senegalese past such as the heiress of the Waalo throne, Lingeer Jombot who was in charge of the political affairs of the Waalo region and was succeeded by her sister Nade Yalla, wife of Maroso, the Prince of Kajoor.[13] Also, Lat Dior's mother, Ngone Latir and Lingueer Yaasin Bubu were very popular in the Marabout wars in Kajoor.

As a matter of fact, The Most Royal Lady's birthright and her extraordinary personality enable her to exercise considerable power not only over her brother, the chief of the Diallobe, but also over the country of the Diallobe as a whole.

In the introductory chapters of *Ambiguous Adventure*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane implicitly reveals her origins by the description of her appearance. Samba Diallo is impressed by her countenance in the following:

> When he raised his head, his gaze encountered a haughty and imposing visage, muffled in a light veil of white gauze. They called her the Most Royal Lady. She was sixty years old, and she would have been taken for scarcely forty. Nothing was to be seen of her except her face. The big blue boubou [traditional gown] she wore fell to the ground, and let nothing be seen except the pointed toes of her golden-yellow Turkish slippers, when she walked. The little gauze veil was wound around her throat, covered her head, passed again under her chin, and hung behind. The Most Royal Lady, who could well have been six feet tall, had lost none of her impressive bearing, in spite of her age.[14]

The Most Royal Lady is also a mother figure for Samba Diallo. His personal relationship with her contrasts with his interaction with the Muslim master who makes him suffer to expiate his sins. In a review of Torid Skard's *Continent of Mothers*, *Continent of Hope* (2004), the following comment reveals that in Senegal: "…children called 'talibes' (Muslim students or disciples) are being left by their family under the supervision of marabouts (Muslim priests) for their Koranic education." [15] Kane explains that in the Muslim tradition of Senegal, it is considered as an honor to send his/her children to marabouts.[16] Once the children arrive at the marabout's place, they are the sole responsibility of the teacher. Kane shows that the purpose of children attending the school is to learn the Koran by heart and beg in the streets all day to sustain themselves. Therefore, the begging and the poor conditions of living are to be expected by the "talibes." It also offers to the other Muslims the opportunity to practice charity. This is the reason why the parents of the "talibes" send them to the marabouts. Furthermore, Kane adds that Samba would "pick up the leftovers and then squat in the dirt to eat this scanty meal."[17] Therefore, one of the foundations of such education is to teach not only the Koran but also humility, even mortification in order to prepare the children for the hardships of life. Once the children arrive at the marabout's place, they are the sole responsibility of the teacher."

On the other hand, The Most Royal Lady displays a lot of affection for her young cousin Samba. In the novel, there is no mention of her having a husband and children. Kane tells us that she removes Samba from the house of his Muslim master "almost by force"[18] and Samba stays in her home a whole week. The Most Royal Lady spoils him like a mother. Kane expresses Samba's happiness to be the focus of her love and attention:

> Samba Diallo let himself be pampered with apparently the same profound equanimity of soul as when he submitted to the hearth's bad treatment. Incontestably, he felt happy in the Most Royal Lady's house…[19]

Also, Samba Diallo's aristocratic aunt is the upholder of tradition. Specifically, she belongs to a distant past in Senegalese history. She is strongly embedded in the Toucouleur pre-colonial patriarchal system characterized by its feudal structure. The Most Royal Lady defies the stereotype that the African women of the past were powerless. She exerts a lot of authority in her family and she also witnesses the arrival of a new order brought about at the end of the 19th century by the French colonists. Her central role in the novel is partly due to her social status and the respect her noble background exerts on her society's population. She has her say in the education of her family's children, and is the spokesperson not only of the men but also of the women in her traditional community.

In addition, her oratory gift reveals how persuasive she is. In his 2003 article on “Aspects du féminisme dans l’oeuvre de Cheikh Hamidou Kane,” Joseph Ngangop explains that she stands out by her eloquence, rhetorical skills, her ability to build strong arguments in a declarative mode.[20]

Specifically, he comments that her repeated use of the pronouns “I”, “me,” and “my” conveys authority and helps understand how charismatic she is.[21] In her speech, she uses metaphors that refer to nature, fertility, and growth. Specifically, she compares herself to a baby who does not know where she is going. She also uses the metaphor of the seeds that need to be nurtured instead of destroyed to emphasize the importance of giving children access to western education in order to survive. She does not argue to sell out to the conqueror but rather to prepare and protect her culture from the tornado of French colonization. This image represents destruction and violence. Thus, she expresses the necessity to adequately prepare the new generation. It is key to her community’s survival. She understands that in order to maintain her traditional Islamic culture, she has to plant the seeds of change in the children:

> … ‘people of the Diallobe,’ …remember our fields when the rainy season is approaching. We love our fields very much, but what do we do then? We plough them up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way, recall this: what do we do with our reserves of seed, when the rain has fallen? We would like to eat them, but we bury them in the earth. Folk of the Diallobe, with the arrival of the foreigners has come the tornado which announces the great hibernation of our people. My opinion--I, the Most Royal Lady--is that our best seeds and our dearest fields-those are our children.[22]

Joseph Ngangop also points out that the metaphor of the seed is one of her rhetorical devices that she uses to rally her people to her cause:

> …l’allégorie à travers l’allusion à la graine qui ne peut germer que si elle meurt et pourrit, tout cet arsenal fait partie des stratégies de persuasion qu’elle déploie pour rallier l’auditoire à la cause qu’elle défend.[23]
> […the allegory through the allusion to the seed that can only sprout if it dies and rots, all this arsenal is part of the persuasive strategies she displays to win over her audience].

Furthermore, The Most Royal Lady uses her power as the sister of the king of the Diallobe to convince her people that they should send their sons to the French school. Of special interest to this examination is that for the first time, she invites the women to be part of the village meeting and to partake in the important decision of sending their children to the foreign school. Samba Diallo expresses his surprise at the presence of the women who usually do not attend that kind of public gathering:

> …Samba Diallo was surprised to see that there were as many women there as men. It was the first time he had seen anything like that. The gathering formed a large rectangle, several rows thick, the women on two sides, the men on the other two. They were talking in low tones, and this made a permeating murmur, like the voice of the wind. Suddenly, the murmur fell away. One side of the rectangle opened, and the Most Royal Lady entered the arena.[24]

This description clearly demonstrates that The Most Royal Lady stands out in the group of women who are present at the meeting. However, it is worth mentioning that the women group appropriates a public space that is traditionally reserved to men. They remain almost silent and their voices are muffled. Kane notes that: "They were all talking in low tones, and this made a permeating murmur, like the voice of the wind."[25]

Nevertheless, The Most Royal Lady uses her privileged social status in her community to subvert the patriarchal order by inviting the women to have a more active role in the life of their community that is symbolically represented by the amount of space they fill in the public gathering, equal to the number of men who attend the meeting. Though she has been raised according to strict traditional values stressing that the average women should not play public roles in their community, she demonstrates her open-mindedness and her concern for the women's participation in the Diallobe's decisions. Therefore, she restructures the traditional public space of the Diallobe by including the women's physical presence.

Ironically, her position is ambiguous because she explains that her request to have the women participate is against her will. She clearly spells out that "the woman should remain at home."[26] In Kane's novel, the Most Royal Lady is the guardian of traditional values that ascribe certain tasks and roles to the rest of the women in her group. Her adherence to this status quo paradoxically limits women in their choices:

> I have done something which is not pleasing to us and which is not in accordance with our customs. I have asked the women to come to this meeting today. We Diallobe hate that, and rightly, for we think that the women should remain at home. But more and more, we shall have to do things which we hate doing and which do not accord with our customs.[27]

However, The Most Royal Lady uses the pronoun "we" to demonstrate she is the spokesperson of her community. Though she strongly believes that women should stay rooted in their traditional domestic roles, she acknowledges that compromise is a must for survival because she does not want the traditional culture of her people to be wiped out by the French colonizers. Therefore, she is wise enough to understand that "…we have to compromise with those people (the French colonizers), they're stronger than we are."[28] The Most Royal Lady also sees the need of sending her nephew Samba Diallo to the French school as well as the necessity of women's more active involvement in the public sphere. Thus, she shows a lot of pragmatism. Specifically, her call for women to participate more actively in her community's life parallels her conviction that her nephew Samba Diallo should attend the French school. She acknowledges that in order to cope with the new order imposed by the French colonists, one should provide the next generations of Africans with the tools that will help them preserve their traditional heritage. Samba Diallo praises his aunt for her foresight in the following passage:

> I have an elderly cousin in whose mind reality never loses its just claims. She has not yet emerged from the astonishment into which the defeat and colonization of the Diallobe plunged her. They call her the Most Royal Lady. I should have not gone to the foreign school if it had not been for her desire to find an explanation for our defeat. The day I went to take leave of her, she said to me again, 'Go find out, among them, how one can conquer without being in the right.[29]

The Most Royal Lady sees the colonization of her country as an abuse of power, an infringement upon the ethical values of her people symbolized in the Wolof concept of "Jom." Though the term has no direct equivalent in English, it means dignity as well as courage and respect. Her forced decision to compromise with the colonists is based on the observation that the foreigners invaded her land and showed no dignity and respect for her people's culture. However, despite their lack of "Jom," they were victorious. Therefore, it is vital for her to discover the secrets of the white colonizers' victory in order to be able to understand their ways and more importantly to preserve her traditional values.

Also, The Most Royal Lady's charismatic personality as the chief's older sister also enables her to upstage her brother. He is nowhere around when some main decisions are taken. Samba Diallo explains that nobody questions her authority and the men in her family do not dare challenging her:

> He had often seen the Most Royal Lady stand up, alone, against the men of the Diallobe family. At the moment, she was always victorious, because no one dared hold out against her for long. She was the first-born.[30]

As the only female representative of her group, she also shows a great interest and concern in the education of the Diallobe children. Her views are elitist and she sees the access to French education as the privilege of the selected few. Her argument is that only those children still deeply rooted in their ancestral values and who are brought up to be leaders and role models in their community should acquire that western knowledge. She claims that her grandfather died fighting the white man. He was defeated because they did not possess the secret of conquering without being in the right. Her point of view is that the Diallobe children's access to western education is another form of war. However, she does not think that women should be part of this new crusade:

> The foreign school is the new form of the war which those who have come here are waging, and we must send our elite there, expecting that all the country will follow them. It is well that once more the elite should lead the way. If there is a risk, they are the best prepared to cope successfully with it, because they are the most firmly attached to what they are. If there is good to be drawn from it, they should also be the first to acquire that…our determination to send the noble youth to the foreign school will never be followed by the people unless we begin by sending our own children there. So I think that your children, my brother as well as our cousin Samba Diallo should start the procession.[31]

Therefore, The Most Royal Lady foresees that the foreign school is a necessary evil for the survival of her community.

Mariama Bâ: Her Female Characters's Challenges in *So Long a Letter* (1981).

Unlike Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962) that focuses on one major female protagonist, Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) features several female characters representing a wider spectrum of women in post-independence Senegal.

However, Mariama Bâ like Cheikh Hamidou Kane, portrays different types of traditional women such as Aunty Nabou (Mawdo Bâ's mother) who is "moulded by the old morality, burning with the fierce ardour of antiquated laws."[32] The others are Lady Mother-in-Law, the mother of Binetou and two female storytellers: one appearing at Modou Fall's funeral and the female storyteller reading the cowries to Ramatoulaye.

Aunty Nabou is in many ways similar to Kane's The Most Royal Lady. She is the mother of Mawdo Bâ, the husband of Aïssatou. Her origins are from another area of Senegal called Sine Saloum (North of the Gambia) and she belongs to the Sérère ethnic group. Mariama Bâ explains her family history going back to Egypt.

As a matter of fact, according to Senealese history, under the protection of Emperor Ra, the Sérère left their homeland for the Sahel; then, they moved in the Senegal River valley. In the 12th century, they fled Islam and settled in the country's inner regions where the Sérère kingdoms of Baol, of the Sine and of the Saloum were born. Finally, Manding aristocrats coming from the realm of Gabou (Gabou Bainouk, before Sundiata, Gabou Manding after Sundiata), part of the empire of Mali, eventually mixed with the Sérère Kassinka to form the Guelewar dynasty.

Such glorious past is part of Aunty Nabou's background which is explained in the following passage:

> She bore a glorious name in the Sine: Diouf. She is a descendant of Bour-Sine. She lived in the past, unaware of the changing world. She clung to old beliefs. Being strongly attached to her privileged origins, she believed firmly that blood carried with it virtues, and, nodding her head, she would repeat that humble birth would always show in a person's bearing.[33]

Unlike The Most Royal Lady, Aunty Nabou lives in a post-colonial setting. Specifically, she belongs to a period in Senegalese history when not only men but also women have progressive access to the foreign school. Aunty Nabou has lived in a polygamous marriage[34] before her husband's death and her favorite child is her son:

> …life had not been kind to Mawdo's mother. Very early, she lost her dear husband; bravely, she brought up her eldest son Mawdo and two other daughters, now married…She devoted herself with the affection of a tigress to her 'one and only man,' Mawdo Bâ. When she swore by her only son's nose, the symbol of life, she had said everything.[35]

She disapproves of her son's marriage to Aïssatou and she plans her revenge by raising a female relative to become her son's future wife. Mariama Bâ explains that: "Mawdo's mother, a princess, could not recognize herself in the sons of a goldsmith's daughter."[36]

Therefore, she deliberately takes under her wing young Nabou, the daughter of her brother Farba Diouf. Interestingly, both Kane's and Mariama Bâ's female characters show their concern in their children's education. While The Most Royal Lady focuses on the future leading role of the noble young men from the Diallobe family, Aunty Nabou spends the later years of her life raising her niece. She is also portrayed as a mother figure and raises young Nabou according to traditional guidelines. Her main concern is training her niece to be a good wife for her son:

> Maturing in her aunt's protective shade, she learned the secret of making delicious sauces, of using an iron and wielding a pestle. Her aunt never missed an opportunity to remind her of her royal origin, and taught her that the first quality in a woman is docility.[37]

Aunty Nabou also instills in Young Nabou the virtues of traditional education through the recitation of folktales and the learning of values such as nobility of character and submissiveness:

> It was especially while telling folk tales, late at night under the starlit sky, hat Aunty Nabou wielded her power over young Nabou's soul: her expressive voice lamented the anxiety of the Loved One, all submissive. She saluted the courage of the reckless; she stigmatized trickery, laziness, calumny; She demanded care of the orphan and respect for old age…The kind of oral education easily assimilated, full of charm, has the power to bring out the best in the adult mind, developed in its contact with it. Softness and generosity, docility and politeness, poise and tact, all these qualities made young Nabou pleasant…[38]

Aunty Nabou also plans to send her niece to the French school and the State School of Midwifery.[39] As the future wife of her son, she wants to make sure that the latter receives an education so that she can contribute financially to the well-being of her household. She also believes that her future career of delivering into the world "new followers of Mohammed, the prophet"[40] will give her the opportunity to be a good Muslim woman.

Ironically, Aunty Nabou's interest in her niece's modern education is counterbalanced by her acute awareness that she should also receive a traditional upbringing. She emphasizes that though the school of midwifery is good, women do not need much education.[41] Furthermore, she reproaches Aïssatou, his son's wife, to be too educated and therefore to have a bad influence on her son: "School turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path."[42]

On the other hand, Lady Mother-in-Law, Bintou's mother has no real name. Instead, Bâ focuses on the poor conditions she lives in before her daughter marries Modou. The readers are told that she comes from a neighborhood "where survival was the essence" [43] and "where…she was more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with education."[44] She is also the senior wife in a polygamous marriage and her husband neglects her. Furthermore, her house is described as "her unsteady hut, with zinc walls covered with magazine pages where pin-ups and advertisements were placed side by side."[45] Though she belongs to the same generation as Aunty Nabou, she displays a lack of dignity. Specifically, in *Awakening African Women*: *The Dynamics of Change* (2004), her personality is analyzed:

> During Modou's funeral, Lady-Mother-in-Law still believes that she will be able to receive a monthly allowance out of the estate of the house bought for her daughter. She has him [Modou] sign a document committing him to pay her a salary but she actually fails to realize the house belongs to the common property of Rama and Modou's joint savings…She appears to be extremely materialistic, grasping whatever she can, and totally deprived of morals and dignity...Mariama Bâ even suggests she is a thief since certain items of furniture disappear in Binetou's house after Modou's death.[46]

Her greediness seems to be extreme and she appears as a superficial character. Her daughter Bintou marries Rama's husband who has been promoted to the rank of technical adviser in the Ministry of Public Works. As a result, Lady Mother-in-Law's social status changes overnight. We learn that Modou has built at his expense "an elegant four bedrooms, two bathrooms, pink and blue, large sitting-room, a three-room flat…with furniture constructed by local carpenters for Lady Mother-in-Law."[47] Furthermore, her sudden improved social status enhances her image in her family and community and people treat her with sudden respect. For example, she is the object of increased admiration and envy when her son-in-law pays for her and her husband to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca and they subsequently acquire the titles of Alhaja and Alhaji.[48] She also flaunts her new material gain not only to recapture the attention of her strayed husband but also to increase her prestige:

> Lady-Mother-in-Law emerged from the shadows and took her unfaithful husband back in tow. She held valuable trump cards: grilled meats, roasted chicken and (why not?) banknotes slipped into the pockets of the *boubou* hanging in the bedroom. She no longer counted the cost of water bought from the Toucouleur hawker of the vital liquid drawn from public springs. Having known poverty, she rejoiced in her newfound happiness. Modou fulfilled her expectations. He would thoughtfully send her wads of notes to spend and would offer her, after his trips abroad, jewelry and rich *boubous*. From then on, she joined the category of women 'with heavy bracelets' lauded by the griots. Thrilled, she would listen to the radio transmitting songs dedicated to her.[49]

The other traditional women portrayed by Mariama Bâ are the griot women (storytellers). First, the griot woman attending Modou Fall's funeral has no name. Bâ introduces her as "the Fall family griot."[50] She has been called to perform her role of family historian. Her trade is to glorify the Fall family's virtues and history. Specifically, she praises the Fall blood line by alluding to their ancestor, the former king of Cayor, Madiodio Fall who succeeded to Lat Dior as the sovereign of this region in 1860s.

Though she belongs to a different social caste, this woman shares one common characteristic with The Most Royal Lady: she knows how to draw attention to herself by being quite eloquent and fulfilling her traditional role as storyteller quite well. The following shows how she appropriates language and makes herself heard:

> I have much to say about you Falls, grandchildren of Damel Madiodio, who have inherited royal blood. But one of you is no more. Today is not a happy day. I weep with you for Modou, whom I used to call 'bag of rice.,' for he would frequently give me a sack of rice.[51]

In addition, she prides herself to be a go-between. Likewise, her counterpart Farmata, the griot neighbor of Ramatoulaye, is about Ramatoulaye's age and we learn that they have known each other for a long time. When Ramatoulaye is courted by Daouda Dieng, Rama seeks Farmata's advice on how to handle this relationship. Farmata is the friend, the confidante, the advisor, and she also prides herself in being the go-between, like the Fall griot woman at Modou's funeral: "She was happy, having dreamed of this role right from our youth."[52] Moreover, she seems quite attached to the values of 'wolere" (her old friendship with Ramatoulaye). In addition, she acts as Ramatoulaye's diviner because she knows how to read the cowries. Her predictions seem to be accurate since she sees that Ramatoulaye is about to be courted by another man who is supposed to bring her wealth: "…the grouping of their [cowries] white backs seems to say that 'the man in the double trousers' is coming towards me, the promise of wealth. She prescribes the sacrifices of two white and red cola nuts."[53] Farmata is strongly anchored in tradition. She takes her role as a griot woman very seriously and she considers polygamy as a system that women should accept. Specifically, when she realizes that Ramatoulaye refuses to become the second wife of her suitor Daouda Dieng, Farmata is outraged. She calls Ramatoulaye an ungrateful woman and accuses her of not acting like a true female Muslim and like a woman of her age:

> Bissimilai! Bissimilai! What was it you dared to write and make me messenger of? You have killed a man. His crestfallen face cried it out to me. You have rejected the messenger sent to you by God to reward you for your sufferings…Daouda Dieng, a rich man, a deputy, a doctor, of your own age group with just one wife…many women… would wish to be in your place…You so withered, you want to choose a husband like an eighteen-year old girl.[54]

Finally, in *So Long a Letter*, Aïssatou, Ramatoulaye and their daughters exemplify a new type of Senegalese women born during and after the colonization period. Specifically, Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye belong to the first selected group of women who had access to French education in Senegal. As a result, they have been exposed not only to their original traditional culture but also to western ideas through their white mistress.

In her reminiscences, Ramatoulaye praises the education she and Aïssatou received at the French school, emphasizing their elitist and "uncommon destiny."[55] She sums up the educational and emancipating goals of the white mistress in the following passage:

> To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress.[56]

In the years before and after the independence of Senegal, women's careers in teaching were highly regarded despite the pervasive belief that education was less important for girls because of their domestic and traditional obligations as mothers, sisters, aunts and cousins.

While Ramatoulaye becomes a teacher, Aïssatou graduates from the School of Interpreters in Paris before being appointed at the Senegalese embassy in Washington, D.C. Both belong to the first generation of educated Senegalese women:

> This process undoubtedly changed many of Ramatoulaye's values. Obviously, the origin of Rama's dissatisfaction is created by her allegiance to another set of cultural values…She articulates at a personal level what she considers detrimental to her existence. Polygamy wrecks her whole life and strikes a blow at her self-esteem.[57]

Contrary to the Most Royal Lady, they clearly express that they intend to use their intellectual knowledge acquired in the French school to improve their plight. However, despite their uncommon destinies, they experience failed marriages. Aïssatou's married life ends when her husband weds young Nabou, a relative of his. As for Ramatoulaye, she experiences the abandonment and betrayal of her husband Modou who marries a much younger wife, Bintou before his death. Rama confides that: "In our different ways, we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom."[58]

The only factors that sustain both women in times of conjugal hardships are their careers and their ability to survive financially. Their economic independence enables them to weather the storm and go on with their lives. Interestingly, Ramatoulaye also expresses the jealousy of other women who envy her purchasing power:

> Others…envied my comfort and purchasing power. They would go into raptures over the many 'gadgets' in my house: gas cooker, vegetable grater, sugar tongs. They forgot the source of this easy life: first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working.[59]

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's and Mariama Bâ's novels show that women's progressive access to education can help them redefine the existing patriarchal constructions of gender and female consciousness in modern Senegal.

Like Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou has the courage not only to embrace modernity. She finds the strength to divorce and to start a new life. Therefore, both women are the witnesses of transitional times in the history of Senegal:

> It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We remained young and efficient, for we were the messengers of a new design.[60]

Their progressive attitudes towards life and the upbringing of their children is a far cry from the conservative view of their female predecessors.

Ramatoulaye's daughters exemplify the changing status of Senegalese women in the modern world. Through education, mother and daughters show the catalytic roles that modern African women can play in their development. Ramatoulaye's daughters have been exposed to their mother's suffering and to their father's betrayal. For example, Daba advises her mother to break with her husband that she does not acknowledge anymore as her father:

> Daba's anger increased as she analyzed the situation: 'Break with him, mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me. Do what Aunty Aïssatou did: break with him. Tell me you'll break with him. I can't see you fighting over a man with a girl my age.'[61]

Ramatoulaye's daughters have the potential to alter their existing situation by acknowledging the values of education, economic independence and equality in marriage. She also witnesses a change in gender roles in her daughter's marriage and realizes that Daba's husband plays a more active role in domestic activities. Ramatoulaye contrasts her failed marriage characterized by the absence of communication between husband and wife to the progressive way Daba and her husband handle their relationship:

> Her husband cooks rice as well as she does; her husband who claims, when I tell him he 'spoils' his wife: 'Daba is my wife. She is not my slave, nor my servant.' I sense the tenderness growing between this young couple, an ideal couple, just as I have always imagined. They identify with each other, discuss everything so as to find a compromise.[62]

Daba also belongs to an association of women who help each other and play an active role in the betterment of the condition of women in Senegal:

> I prefer my own association, where there is neither rivalry nor schism, neither malice nor jostling for position; there are no posts to be shared, nor positions to be secured. The headship changes every year. Each of us has equal opportunity to advance her ideas. We are given tasks according to our abilities in our activities and organizations that work towards the progress of women. Our funds go towards humanitarian work: we are mobilized by a militancy as useful as any other, but it is a healthy militancy, whose only reward is inner satisfaction.[63]

Even though Ramatoulaye complains that her grown children are causing her problems, she tries to "respect the privacy"[64] of her teenage daughters Arame, Yacine and Dieynaba whom she surprises smoking in their bedroom behind their closed door. However, she confronts them and expresses her anger and shock at her discovery.

She is also faces the dilemma of allowing her daughters to wear pants that do not suit her tastes. She comes to the conclusion that modern mothers should give their daughters a bit of freedom. The moral standards of the past such as not allowing her daughters to go out or not being visited by male friends have to be reevaluated, not discarded but addressed with more flexibility. Therefore, she draws strength and wisdom from her grandmother's lessons: "For a new generation, a new method."[65]

Furthermore, when it comes to sexual education, she also understands the necessity to adapt her ways of thinking to modern times:

> I did not want to give my daughters a free hand by offering them immunity in pleasure. The world is upside-down. Mothers of yore taught chastity. Their voice of authority condemned all extra-marital 'wanderings.' Modern mothers favor 'forbidden games.' They help to limit the damage and, better still, prevent it.[66]

Overall, the study of Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962) and Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) reveals that the traditional women of the past carried with them ancestral values that have been transmitted to their daughters and granddaughters. Today's Senegalese women face the challenge of living in a modern world still influenced by their past traditions. In order to improve their present condition, they have to go through a transformational process that involves a level of awareness of the possibilities offered to them as the following passage indicates:

> They find themselves restructuring their space of transformation within the educational, economic and political arena. African women can also discover, through the reading of traditional accounts inspirational models who lived in the past...The African queens of the past can inspire, through their deeds (celebrated by oral tradition), a lot of women who draw strength from such a prestigious heritage.[67]

Notes

[1] Ojo-Ade, Femi. "Francophone African Women Writers: African Feminism and Womanhood." *Africa Update*, 2:2 (Spring 1995)
< http://www.ccsu.edu/Afstudy/upd2-2.html#Z3>
[2] Diop, Boubacar, Boris. "Cheikh Hamidou Kane: de l'aventure ambigüe aux gardiens du temple." *Démocratie* 7 n.s (Feb. 1996): 6, 7 and 11.
[3] Little, Janet Patricia. "Autofiction and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambigüe*." *Research in African Literatures* 31:2 (2000): 80.
[4] Ibid., 80.
[5] Ibid., 80.
[6] Gadjigo, Samba. "Literature and History: The Case of *L'aventure ambigüe* by Cheikh Hamidou Kane." *Bridges*, *a Senegalese Journal of English Studies* 3.1 (1991): 32-33.
[7] Little, Janet Patricia. "Autofiction and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambigüe*." *Research in African Literatures* 31:2 (2000): 75.
[8] Wane, Yaya. *Les Toucouleurs du Fouta Toro (Senegal)*: *Stratification sociale et structure familiale*. Dakar: Senegal, 1969, 40-42.
[9] Ibid., 40-42.
[10] Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Oxford, United Kingdom: Harcourt Heinemann, 1972, 50.
[11] Ibid., 83.
[12] Little, Janet Patricia. "Autofiction and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambigüe*." *Research in African Literatures* 31:2 (2000): 80.
[13] Barry, Boubacar. *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 181.
[14] Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Oxford, United Kingdom: Harcourt Heinemann, 1972, 20.
[15] Curry, Ginette. Rev. of *Continent of Mothers*, *Continent of Hope*: *Understanding and Promoting Development in Africa Today*. *JENDA*: *A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, issue 6 (2004)
< http://www.jendajournal.com/issue6/curry.pdf>
[16] Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Oxford, United Kingdom: Harcourt Heinemann, 1972, 8.
[17] Ibid., 14.

[18] Ibid., 39.
[19] Ibid., 39.
[20] Ngangop, Joseph. « Aspects du féminisme dans l'œuvre de Cheikh Hamidou Kane. » *Intel'Actuel* (2), 22-36.
[21] Ibid., 26.
[22] Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Oxford, United Kingdom: Harcourt Heinemann, 1972, 46-47.
[23] Ngangop, Joseph. «Aspects du féminisme dans l'œuvre de Cheikh Hamidou Kane. » *Intel'Actuel* (2), 26.
[24] Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Oxford, United Kingdom: Harcourt Heinemann, 1972, 45.
[25] Ibid., 45.
[26] Ibid., 45.
[27] Ibid., 45.
[28] Little, Janet Patricia. "Autofiction and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambigüe*." *Research in African Literatures* 31:2 (2000): 79.
[29] Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Oxford, United Kingdom: Harcourt Heinemann, 1972, 152.
[30] Ibid., 39.
[31] Ibid., 37-38.
[32] Bâ, Mariama. *So Long a Letter*. African Writers Series. London, United Kingdom: Heineman, 1991, 30.
[33] Ibid., 26.
[34] Ibid., 17.
[35] Ibid., 26.
[36] Ibid., 30.
[37] Ibid., 29.
[38] Ibid., 47.
[39] Ibid., 29.
[40] Ibid., 30.
[41] Ibid., 30.
[42] Ibid., 17.
[43] Ibid., 48.
[44] Ibid., 48.
[45] Ibid., 49.
[46] Curry, Ginette. *Awakening African Women*: *The Dynamics of Change*. London, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Press, 62.
[47] Bâ, Mariama. *So Long a Letter*. African Writers Series. London, United Kingdom: Heineman 10.
[48] Ibid., 10.
[49] Ibid., 49.
[50] Ibid., 7.
[51] Ibid., 7.
[52] Ibid., 67.
[53] Ibid., 40.
[54] Ibid., 69.

[55] Ibid., 15.
[56] Ibid., 16.
[57] Curry, Ginette. *Awakening African Women*: *The Dynamics of Change*. London, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Press, 30-31.
[58] Bâ, Mariama. *So Long a Letter*. African Writers Series. London, United Kingdom: Heineman, 19.
[59] Ibid., 20.
[60] Ibid., 25.
[61] Ibid., 39.
[62] Ibid., 74.
[63] Ibid., 74.
[64] Ibid., 76.
[65] Ibid., 77.
[66] Ibid., 87.
[67] Curry, Ginette. *Awakening African Women*: *The Dynamics of Change*. London, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Press, 141.