

Conversations with Ken Bugul: “I Write My Life As I Want”

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Between February 24 and March 8, 2001, Mariëtou M’Baye Biléoma, otherwise known by her pen name as Ken Bugul, visited Indiana University Northwest as the guest speaker for the annual student research event of the Women's Studies Program, “Celebrating Our Students,” co-sponsored by the Diversity Programming Series, the International Studies Club, the French Club, and the Students' Affairs Office. Throughout the duration of Biléoma’s visit, I had some useful conversations with her around several issues, many of which I took up again at a more structured interview in Richmond, Virginia, as a service to the Women's Caucus [WOCALA], the sponsor of that leg of her visit.

Conversation Topics: writing [as therapy]; origins; heritage; women’s roles; family; woman writer’s conflicts; racism; colonialism; prostitution; women’s liberation; women’s friendships; African languages; gender and sexuality; writer’s roles and responsibilities; homosexuality; lesbianism; sisterhood; autobiography; arranged marriages; publishing; children’s books; tradition, art and culture; economics and development; democracy; human rights; women’s rights; politics and governance.

Azodo: This is almost like asking a redundant question, that is to say, a question to which the answer is obvious. But, for the sake of those that still do not know you, please answer this question. What motivates your writing? In other words, how and why did you become a writer?

Ken Bugul: I don't think I can say when I became a writer, because I still do not consider myself a writer. I have never thought I had the wherewithal, the intellectual ability, the credentials, the intention, nor the aptitude. But, I can say, however, how I came to write. My first book, *Le Baobab fou*, was published in September 1982, followed by two subsequent ones, *Cendres et Braises* and *Riwan ou Le chemin de sable*. All three books

mirror the very deep and radical experiences I went through. It was painful, but also joyful at the same time. In contrast to my origin, my religion, social and economic circumstances, I underwent situations that were totally and completely different from what I could have imagined. I needed to express what I had gone through. I used to tell people about these things in order to gain some inner peace. But, not many people wanted to listen. They were too busy. So, one day in Senegal, I picked up a writing tablet from the floor and I started writing, one page at a time. After a while, I went to the store and bought a notebook. And I continued to write. The more I wrote, the more relief I felt. And the writing continued to flow. The paper did not complain either. That was how I began to write.

Azodo: Since then, you have married. What does your triple heritage as a Senegalese, a Beninese and an African woman mean to your creativity?

Ken Bugul: I have never felt split between my triple heritage. I am just a plain and average woman in the country where I live. When I was in the Congo, I was well adapted there and had my daughter there. I lived five years in Togo and felt at home there. Indeed, I have no preferred country in my writing. In my autobiographical trilogy, I do not see myself as having a split identity. Where I live has no effect on what I write nor does it affect my personality. But, now living in Benin, in Porto Novo, the magic city, I feel more and more influenced by the culture and the environment, particularly the Yoruba culture, given that my adoptive family by marriage is Yoruba. Sometimes I feel that I am no more this or that, but simply just a human being in a big world.

Azodo: How do you cope with the multifaceted roles of parent, citizen, and writer? Are they in some ways in conflict?

Ken Bugul: I was in Togo when I wrote my second book. However, nothing in the book shows that I was living in Togo at the time. I live comfortably now in Benin, but I do not know at this time if I would have to leave there and go elsewhere. Still, I'm always sensitive to happenings in my environment. Now that I'm here, in USA, I am following closely the events and could contribute my opinion if asked.

Azodo: How does your family view your profession as a writer?

Ken Bugul: Many people in my family have heard about my writing, but they hardly know what it is I write about. They just have not read them, for one reason or another. The most important reason is that my sisters, for example, have never been to school. In any case, I think they approve of what I'm doing. I do occasionally have affective problems with relatives, sisters-in-law and others that cannot bear to see that they just cannot drop in at will at any time of the day. I always have to explain to them that I am a writer and need space, peace and quiet to be able to write.

Azodo: Has writing now become a way of life for you? Is it now your primary and/or only occupation/profession?

Ken Bugul: Writing is not a way of life for me. My life is to live, sleep, write, eat, watch television, etc. All these make up my life. I have an art shop, an African restaurant and a pension scheme. I also buy and sell African jewelry. I give lectures. I just do not think one should spend one's life doing one thing alone. I have never been in the habit of holding down a paid job as such.

Azodo: On the writer's responsibility, what do you see as your role vis--à-vis the African reading public?

Ken Bugul: I have no particular goal in mind. I certainly do not possess the intellectual ability to produce to the literary public's expectation. My hometown is a small Moslem village in Senegal, West Africa. I write about my village, because I spent a large part of my life there. I was involved in the community, not to impress people. In my autobiographical writings, I write about my personal concerns, but also what affects other people, because I'm also sensitive to their concerns.

Azodo: I have closely kept your company these six weeks and have observed that alternating between English and French has not been difficult for you. You are fluent in both. How do you perceive the existence of European languages as still a medium of expression for many African writers today, including women writers? In other words, why do you write exclusively in French, and not in Wolof, English, Spanish, or Portuguese?

Ken Bugul: I cannot write in Wolof, although I'm a native speaker of Wolof. Even my fellow citizens of Senegal that write in Wolof use Roman alphabet, since Wolof does not

yet have its own African alphabet system. I am not able to read or write other African languages, like Yoruba, Swahili, etc. Even if I can write in Wolof, I believe my reading public will be quite limited. That said, I'm also aware that the Basque people and the Bretons in France are doing everything now to reactivate their language and their identity. But, how many Wolof people can indeed read Wolof? Yet most of these same people all read French, Portuguese and Spanish.

As a writer, you need to write in the language that your reading public can understand. The Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, has some four hundred to five hundred languages and dialects, perhaps even more. Imagine the difficulty of translating a piece of creative writing into so many languages and dialects. Who is going to read what? Worse, who is going to translate what into so many dialects and languages? Unfortunately, Africa does not yet have a common language. The best we can do, therefore, is to translate for research purposes only into local dialects. That is my opinion on the use of African languages in creative writing. But that does not mean that in Africa we must not work towards finding solutions to the issue. For example, one could consider taking Yoruba, Swahili, Hausa, Fulani, or any of all those widely spoken languages on the continent, and use them as common official languages in the near future.

Azodo: On gender and sexuality, Ken Bugul the protagonist of *Le Baobab fou* experiences a pseudo-lesbian affair, as well as *a ménage à trois* with two homosexuals in Europe. How do you view the sexuality of the modern African woman?

Ken Bugul: I did not actually experience a homosexual relationship in my first book, *The Abandoned Baobab*. What I wrote in the book in question is that I met a man alone in a restaurant, who told me I was young and beautiful, adding that he loved me. I moved in with him. One evening, he summoned me, saying that he had something important to tell me. I was depressed, thinking that he was going to tell me he had fallen out of love with me. He assured me that I was still beautiful and that he still loved me, but added that he had a homosexual tendency and wanted me to know. At first, I did not understand him, being that for the first time in my life, I was being confronted with such a situation. Seeing my disturbance, he explained to me that it was neither a strange thing nor was it a constant urge, but something that happened to him from time to time, namely that sometimes he prefers to sleep with a man. I was flabbergasted, shocked. I cried a little. It was just a terrible thing. I was about 23 years old, and it was around the early 1970s. But the 70s were also the era of women's liberation and new trends. I wondered what was expected of me in such a situation. Then, I rationalized things in this way, being already

used to polygamy back in Africa; I told myself that in Europe a man's *wife* can also be another man...

Still, I do not think that homosexuality is common in Africa. In Europe and America, yes it is, not so much in Africa. In Dakar, Senegal, for example, there are always drag queens, those men who delight in cooking good food, who put on cosmetics, but that is all. All the same, I knew a Senegalese man who was living with an Italian man as his wife. As a little girl, we played between girls the roles of mother and father, touching each other's sex, because we were afraid to play with boys---a girl was expected to get married a virgin....

Wanting to kiss my girl friend in *Le Baobab fou* has nothing to do with lesbianism. It was friendship, pure and simple. It was more of interracial bonding than anything else. She was beautiful and had long hair. But, her parents did not want Africans, Indians or Hispanics in their house, especially Africans, due to past colonial history. At one time, Belgians were killed by Congolese freedom fighters in the days of colonialism and awakening nationalism. So, Belgians still feel pain and suffering from that epoch in history. And I represented what caused them so much pain. And so, they did not want to see me. Yet, those Belgians forgot what they had done in Congo, which was worse than what they were worried about, when compared in terms of horror, human destruction, destabilization, etc.

Azodo: There must be a certain life or manner of living that you explore in your creative writing. Is it about giving voice to women who cannot speak for themselves?

Ken Bugul: Myself. My individuality is common to all my novels, although *La Folie et la Mort* is a little different from the rest. In the trilogy, of course, there are some differences despite similarities. In *La Folie*, it is about politics, economics and society.

Azodo: Do the titles of your novels sound pessimistic to you: “abandoned baobab,” “ashes and embers,” “sandy way,” “madness and death”? Are you remotely a sad person? Do you have a somber view of life in general?

Ken Bugul: No! Not at all! Even in *The Abandoned Baobab*, when things were bad for me, there were times I enjoyed myself, walking in the woods in winter, listening to Bach, going to the Opera. You forget your problems that way. Even in *La Folie...*, the title is rather political. The titles of my books jump right out of the books themselves. In *Le Baobab fou*, the title came right out of the book, because of the tree that died. In *Cendres*

et Braises, I had first called this second book *La Vase infernale*, but a friend suggested *Cendres et Braises*, words he found inside the text. *Riwan or Le chemin de sable* was my choice. A writer friend, Boubacar Boris Diop, suggested I use both titles. *La Folie et la Mort*, arose because of the utter violence in the book. The upcoming detective novel will be special, for I am really trying to be a writer. It is a sort of *roman à thèse*, for the content will bear out the pre-chosen title. Meanwhile, I have postponed work on this detective novel to complete a family saga, which will be published next early in 2003, and titled *De l'autre côté du regard*.

Azodo: What is the publishing environment like now for the female writer?

Ken Bugul: Personally, I have had no problems at all. People have taken my manuscripts to publishers. I am a lucky person, and I believe it is because I'm not a real writer. Publishers do not perceive me as a real writer yet, for I know people who write better than I do, but still have a problem getting their works published. Reading the first few pages of my work tells a reader that I am not a real writer. But, that is what the publishers like, I guess. I write books to relieve the tension I feel inside me. Therefore, I write for therapeutic reasons. Writing opens up a new, exciting world for me. I gave a lady, Annette M'Baye d'Erneville, my first work to read, because I wanted my mother to know about my life. The lady gave my manuscript to a publisher, whom I then met to sign the contract for my first book. The same thing happened with my second book. A friend took it to L'Harmattan. Another friend, Hamidou Dia, read my third manuscript and invited me over for coffee. He gave my manuscript to a publisher. It has been a question of luck and not talent.

Azodo: Up till now, you have written only novels. Are you going to write poetry, drama, short stories, and more essays?

Ken Bugul: When I was younger and more beautiful, I used to write poetry, which I considered to be a part of our human lives. Indeed, I write poetry all the time. I will write short stories and plays after the novels. Novels are just too many words. When I retire, I will write poetry. That will be a good conclusion to my career.

Azodo: You have written for adults. Will you write someday for children?

Ken Bugul: Writing for children will be like writing for myself. I cannot dissociate myself from children. I'll try one day. It is a dream. To write the stories I wish my mother to tell me. I am sure that is how they will be seen.

Azodo: What is your view of the role of oral tradition in African literature? In other words, does your Wolof background affect your written French?

Ken Bugul: The Wolof I speak is different from the one of coastal Dakar, for example. From Dakar to Saint Louis to my village we hardly understand one another, due to dialectical differences. I am persuaded that my cultural background filters into my Wolof and affects my thoughts, writing and behavior.

Azodo: In a recent issue of *Okapi*, a young child adopts you as a mentor. Jean-Yves Dana quotes you as having said, "*J'ai fait de ma vie un roman*" ["I have written a novel out of my life story]. Jean Yves Dana in that issue describes your life's passion as "*se battre contre les idées reçues sur la femme africaine*" [a struggle against imposed ideas on African women"]. Could you explain all of the above?

Ken Bugul: *Okapi* is a French magazine published in Paris for children between the ages of 10 and 12 years. It is a January 2001 issue, perhaps the last number, yet a special one, on Billy Elliot, a British young man, whose family had wanted him to embrace a certain profession that he did not fancy, and who followed his wishes to become a dancer. The journalists working for *Okapi* were asked to choose a mentor whose life mirrors a choice that she/he voluntarily made for herself/himself. It was nice that Jean Yves Dana chose me. I was beside myself with joy. It was fantastic. It was nice to see it acknowledged that in Africa people are living their lives as they want. But, no indeed, I have not lived my life according to my wishes, for I am still dreaming of finding a rich husband, with a magnificent house by the lake or the sea (laughs)....

Azodo: Would you like to see an African club for women writers, apart from any other international organizations, to take care of the peculiar problems of being a woman writer and an African woman in Africa?

Ken Bugul: I do not know about the existence of any Association of African women writers. I do not belong to any such club. I am in my village most of the time, unless I travel. It is only then that I meet some of the women writers. In Benin, I speak about the

same issue to women, but I do not know how we could go about forming one on a continental scale. The last time I met the famous Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, in Durban, South Africa, I suggested to her something like that. We will work on it together, Inch Allah.

Azodo: Keep in mind your latest novel, *La Folie et la Mort*. What do you think of African destiny? Can it be controlled? Can it be changed?

Ken Bugul: Well, Africa is cornered into a mad or crazy situation. Still, we realize we are not crazy or mad, although we do not know how to help ourselves. Right through slavery, colonization, neo-colonization, democracy and globalization, we are made to sit in a certain way while others think for us. They think that we will die, if we are not taken care of. What does Africa want to do about this state of affairs? Africa needs a rebirth. Africa is in need of Renaissance, so that it will become once again intelligent, having a legal system that works in a land where everyone is happy. Africa needs to become once again dynamic. We must not allow ourselves to be pushed around. The Timonier is a King who is not as clever as his people. How can you distinguish the thinking of crazy people from the thinking of those who do not think? Indeed, *La Folie et la Mort* is an allegory. It says that Africa must be reborn in a way that is good for Africa.

Azodo: Still on *La Folie et la Mort*, you present your reader with the story of Mom Dioum, the heroine, who orders her lips tattooed as a kind of rite of passage, in order to enable her regain her equilibrium after a grueling life experience in the city. Yet, the pain becomes so unbearable that she aborts the operation and flees. Fleeing is a shameful act that brings much shame to the neophyte and her family in African traditions of that sort. Only death can wipe out such a stain. Does this story about Mom Dioum have any remote connection to what some women are still going through in Africa today?

Ken Bugul: No woman can really be qualified as ignorant, not even the illiterate one. Women are at the center in everything as mothers, wives, girlfriends, workers, and whatever. I am talking about women all over the world now. In my family, my mother and my father's second and third wives had lip tattoos, but they did not see it as a cruel traditional practice. On the contrary, they saw it as an aspect of their traditions and epoch voluntarily entered into by choice. Now, today, things are different. Things have changed.

Azodo: But, do *you* see lip tattoo as wicked? You know, it is like women being made to wear plates on their lips and ears in East Africa. The higher the woman's supposed standing in society the wider the plate. In effect, such women are silenced by patriarchy and tradition. Yet, they do not know it. Some other women are made to wear heavy metals around their ankles; they are shackled, as it were, put out of action, by men, as is so glaring in the case of Sidi in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Ken Bugul: I repeat that my mother and my father's wives did it. I did not go through it personally after my education and travel. The problem lies in trying to catch up with something after you have missed it. Suddenly, Mom Dioum returns home. At that age, and with the mentality of an educated person, it is not easy for her to understand the practice. Mom Dioum could not go through with it (like Ken Bugul of *Le Baobab fou*). I would like to see Africa regenerate itself and return to its origins (like me). Africa needs to come up fresh again. That is why Mom Dioum and Ken Bugul want to die and be reborn.

Azodo: Your third novel, *Riwan ou Le chemin de sable*, is full of suspense and mystery. It is difficult to understand the coexistence in one novel of the happy marriage of Nabou Samba by her choice and the unhappy marriage of young Rama given away to old Serigne, a Marabout, without her consent. Then again, in *La Folie et la Mort*, Mom Dioum's friend, Fatou Ngouye, never finished her elementary schooling, because she was given away too early in marriage to a young man she never met, was never to meet. What is your message to society about marriage alliances of rural women in Africa? What is your view of arranged marriages in opposition to romantic marriages?

Ken Bugul: Arranged marriages can work, because there is somehow a kind of consensus. I would like to have one with a rich American, a banker perhaps, with an ocean front house (laughs). If I find a man like that, even if I have never met him, I will do everything to make it work (laughs). Yes, arranged marriages can work. The problem is not with arranged marriages, for even when you know each other well the marriage alliance may still not work. In African villages, for example, in my village, arranged marriages have been proven to work, because of the initial consensus between families. Marriage is never an accomplished fact; it is a process. Sometimes, it may work, at other times it may not work. What we must fight against is forced marriage. An arranged marriage is not the same as a forced marriage. Most of the marriages around us are

arranged marriages through friends, family, etc. But forced marriages are different and are not good.

Azodo: In *La Folie et la Mort*, you also write about women who are used as playthings. Characters like Mom Dioum are made to appear and disappear, as if they are supernatural beings, by a mysterious man, Mori, who pretends to have supernatural powers. What can you tell us about the trade in women and sex taking place all over the world today?

Ken Bugul: You mean prostitution?

Azodo: Yeah! Trade in women and sex. Women are imported from places and exported to other places all over the world---Russia, Israel, Africa, and Italy..., and used as sex toys by men.

Ken Bugul: Many women are poor and have family to feed. Such women are used all over the world, from slavery times to the Pushkin era in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries---from the Middle East, Asia, Russia, Romania, Hungary, and Israel. And then we have prostitution with respectable women, what I call underground prostitution. Many women are doing that around the world. Other women are used for sex business. They are told that they will be able to work as cleaning women in hotels or as other workers in offices, in France, Belgium or elsewhere. But, when they come, they are used as prostitutes. When I was last in Paris, I saw girls from Romania and other eastern European countries used as prostitutes, completely drugged. It is sad. This must be fought as a crime against humanity.

Azodo: Mom Dioum chooses madness in *La Folie et la Mort*, as an escape from false accusation for having killed the albino Mori, who was actually assassinated by the agents of the Timonier, the Father of the nation. From your experience, having come recently from Africa, do several women still fall victim to psychological problems due to social exigencies? How often do women take recourse to such a drastic measure as melancholia to escape societal abuse?

Ken Bugul: The story in *La Folie et la Mort* is not autobiographical. It is entirely fictional and based on research. Indeed, to write a book you have to be crazy about yourself. I would like to become a real writer in the next twenty years. In the book in question, there are two fictional female characters in a hospital. They are treated as

psychiatric cases, but the two are really suffering from some nervous conditions. They hide their real problems, which could be the guilt of having committed a crime. It could also be that they did not love their husbands, or they were jealous of other women in their husbands' lives. Such women hide behind "madness," for they are not able to divulge the causes of their problems. Traditional rites are used to treat such neurotic women, for it affords them the opportunity to speak up on the causes of their symptoms. Some men also are victims of neurosis, but it is more common among women, because of women's social obligations.

Azodo: The female protagonist of *Cendres et Braises* is Y, a name reminiscent of Elle in Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropismes*, and K in Kafka's *The Castle*. Who is Y and what is your idea or conception of that character? Did you consciously imitate the great writers of the French *Avant garde* and the French *Nouveau roman*?

Ken Bugul: Intellectuals are smarter than creative writers! We write simple lines and the intellectuals just turn them into something else! Only an intellectual would ask the kind of question you just asked me! In any case, I called the character Y in imitation of a name like X that I see in films. It was only later that I knew the meaning of X in movies. By calling him Y, I meant to minimize my role as the writer and to degrade him, but not the authorial intention, namely, that when you write the unconscious comes through your pen. I still quail at the product every time I reread my first novel, *The Abandoned Baobab*. I cannot believe I wrote the book! The writer's unconscious in any writing is very important. I wanted Y to be an empty character. I wanted to destroy him [Y] by doing him violence, by giving him a small name. I suffered more than he did, for I was more physically and emotionally abused. I could not give him back the violence he gave me, so I gave him a small name to avenge myself. For me, it was a case of *légitime défense*. A man should always be seen as a broach; it may fit a woman or not fit her. If it fits, the woman can wear it, if it does not, it should be discarded.

Azodo: Many critics have observed your formidable oratorical skills, which recall the verbal art of traditional Africa. For one who left Africa early for Europe, abandoned by mother and lived an abusive relationship with the extended family, the French school and culture, how did you acquire those oral skills that are apparent in your writing?

Ken Bugul: My maternal language was oral and my cultural environment was initiatory and oral too. My writing is thus a transcription of my environment. It is different from the

Wolof of the North of my country, for example, which is symbolist, essentially because of the *sky* over there. There is no such sky in my village, and this affects my writing. So, the cultural ambiance affects everything. In the north of my country, they look for the meaning of words in symbols.

The End