

Tribute to Aminata Diaw Cissé: 1959-2017

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Aminata Diaw was our friend. She was my colleague, my sister, my friend.

We became colleagues upon her arrival in 1986 at the University of Dakar. Young and brilliant, with a string of qualifications under her belt, she became one of the first Senegalese women to teach philosophy there. It was still the time to be ‘The first woman to...’ but Aminata was actually the first in many fields. After a high school diploma obtained with distinction (*Mention Bien*) in Senegal, she enrolled into the selective preparatory classes reserved for a student elite, in France. She completed this cycle by obtaining a Doctorate in Philosophy with a thesis on ‘The Political Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’, awarded unanimously with the highest distinction, *Très Bien*, from the jury.

We were also colleagues at CODESRIA, an institution of pan-African academic research, where we shared many intellectual adventures. The Gender Institute (2011) on the controversial theme of religious and cultural fundamentalisms raging in Africa was one such instance of intense opportunity.

We were sisters through our family roots, anchored in the city of Saint-Louis, the former capital of Senegal and the cradle of an urban civilisation of *savoir-vivre* and elegance, which sprang from the encounter of old local traditions with colonial culture. Aminata, who was born and raised in this city, bore the marks of this elegance. She had retained the gait, the voice, the restrained courtesy, the dignity and the sensitive humanity, in short, a way of being Saint-Louisian (*Doomu Ndar*). She could comment on Aristotle, Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Condorcet or Habermas, discuss women's rights or evoke the transformations of Senegalese society, while maintaining the same firm and calm, demure and elegant voice.

Our friendship was forged by an intellectual complicity nourished, on my part, by sincere respect for her person, and a profound admiration for her keen intelligence, her refined culture and her recognised academic expertise. I felt so much affection for her; I think it was mutual.

Aminata Diaw was both a researcher and an activist who did not feel the need to juggle being one or the other. She was not afraid to appear intellectual, for she *was* an intellectual, making equal demands on herself and others. I admired her ability to use her scientific skills in her political and socio-cultural commitments.

As a teacher, Aminata Diaw succeeded in exuding her passion for philosophy, developed over thirty years, to her students, especially to her female students. She encouraged them to develop their full potential, as attested by former PhD students. She set up the Centre for Philosophical and Epistemological Research (*Centre de Recherches Philosophiques et Épistémologiques* – CEREPHE), which supervised all philosophy theses defended at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar. As a political philosopher, she was fascinated and at the same time struck by the fate of African societies, in general, and Senegal, in particular. We had to campaign for the democratisation of our countries. For Aminata, this meant rethinking the state and governance, conducting a critical analysis of the power of intellectual and political elites, of the role of civil society, highlighting the political link between public and private spaces, encouraging ethical conduct in politics, paying close attention to political party alternation (especially its impact on women), redefining the conditions of citizenship, reinventing identities to build a future which makes sense and a political modernity which equally needs to be reinvented. All these questions were at the heart

of her philosophical and political concerns. Aminata's contributions to the publications of Momar Coumba Diop and Mamadou Diouf on the political trajectories of Senegal, her various reflections at CODESRIA, and her articles in regional and international publications are proof of her great contribution to the intellectual output in these fields. Her participation in the National Conference of Senegal (2007-2009) on the renewal of democratic institutions was crucial. Along with the historian Penda Mbow, she fiercely defended the maintenance of secularism in the Constitution. All these issues are critical because they involve discussing and defining the contours of a government that manages populations in general, and women, in particular, including their status, roles and rights.

Aminata was deeply committed to women's causes. Her commitment was feminist: she was uncompromising on women's freedoms and rights. She based her militant action on what she called "a work of intellection". We collaborated in 1999, when I organised the colloquium on Language, Identities and Stakes of Francophone Feminist Research" (*La recherche féministe francophone: Langue, identités et enjeux*) at UCAD. We took the gamble of generating feminist thought and discourse on an African campus that did not care. We won the challenge with her "*Silences du politique et paresse de l'Académie. Plaidoyer pour un recherche féministe* (Silences of politics and laziness in the Academy. Advocacy for feminist research)". In the proceedings, her article invited the [African] academy to break new ground and innovate in the production of knowledge by institutionalising this research. This epistemological break was mandatory in order to describe and understand social realities as gendered realities.

Through numerous national, regional and international seminars, Aminata pursued this reflection on the nature of gender relations, the strengthening of social justice and the citizenship of women. She contributed to other works, discussions and lessons learned in many institutions: African Institute for Democracy, *Rendez-vous de l'histoire de Blois*, DAWN on Globalisation, the African Gender Institute, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the African Feminist Forum, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). The anthology *Women Writing Africa, West Africa and the Sahel* (2005), which Aminata coordinated with Esi Sutherland-Addy (Ghana), was a forceful work of "cultural reconstruction, letting the world hear the voices of African women which have risen over the centuries" (Allan, Busia and Howe, 2005: xviii). During her tenure at

CODESRIA, she raised new issues at the annual Gender Institute and at the Gender Symposium in Cairo.

Aminata's political activism was entrenched in her participation in various women's organisations which she supported with her reflections. As president of the Senegalese Women's Council (COSEF), composed of women from civil society and all Senegalese political parties, she had discussions with these groups on democratisation and the place of women in this process. She contributed, with the crucial collaboration of the Senegalese Lawyers' Association and other groups, to the debate on gender parity. Aminata persisted in this struggle, even during difficult times when several organisations and activists had a frankly hostile attitude. Today, they all take credit for the successful passage of the law on gender parity. Aminata also participated in numerous youth training sessions on important feminist issues: ethics in politics, women's citizenship, women's human rights, critical analysis of provisions related to religion (Shari'a) in the family law, deconstruction of the sources of violence against women.

The task was immense and she put her whole heart into it. Aminata had a heart that shone in her relationships with others, with everyone. Her intellectual qualities would have been almost meaningless if they were not accompanied by such human warmth. We miss her kindness, her sense of friendship, her mischievous humour and her frank smile.

Aminata, we honour your poise, political brilliance and commitment. We owe you every celebration of your life and work.

References

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