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ABSTRACT

In this conversation, Samba Niaré shares his professional and intellectual journey, from teacher to committed writer and resilient publisher. He explores his dedication to promoting Malian literature and national languages alongside French, and reflects on his trilogy *Kanuya Wale*, the first Malian novel written in Bambara, which examines social, cultural, political, and gender issues. He also discusses the coexistence of Islam and tradition in Mali, the role of women, and linguistic decolonization through the production and dissemination of knowledge in African languages, while still leveraging Western languages.

KEYWORDS

Malian Literature
Linguistic Sovereignty
Bilingualism
Women and Society
Kanuya Wale
Samba Niaré

Note: This interview was recorded in French and translated into English, with assistance from AI tools and a final review by the author.

About Samba Niaré: Samba Niaré is a teacher by training, having taught at primary, secondary, and vocational levels. He also worked as a reading facilitator with the Association for Reading, Education, and Development (ALED).[1] His passion for promoting literature and combating illiteracy led him to become a playwright, novelist, and publisher.

Niaré believes that rejecting or neglecting African languages in favor of Western ones is suicidal. Instead, he sees the coexistence of Western and African languages as a blessing for Africans and African literature, highlighting his commitment to multilingualism in Mali. In 1996, he put this conviction into action by publishing *Kanuya Wale*,[2] which became the first novel in Bambara,[3] all while continuing to write in French. The Fulfulde[4] translation of *Kanuya Wale* received the ECOWAS[5] Prize for Excellence in African Languages.

He has written around ten plays, including *L'âne et le miel*, *Le Salaire de l'indifférence*, *Graine de chef*, *Tonjonw*, *Filankafow*, and *Le Costume sacré*. Many of his plays have won first prize in various national biennials in Mali.

Niapégué Sanou: Could you tell us about your background and your body of work?
Samba Niaré: One letter sums me up: the letter "E." I am an *enseignant* (teacher) by training, an *écrivain* (writer)—primarily a playwright by chance, and an *éditeur* (publisher) by necessity. My teacher training began in 1966 in Diré, in what was then Mali's sixth administrative region, Gao. It was a fast-track program for training primary school teachers. After finishing my training, I went back to the region of Gao and taught primary school in Ansongo for four years. Later, a transfer took me to Sikasso, where I also taught. Afterward, I requested another transfer and was assigned to Kati in the Koulikoro region, where I continued my teaching. Once I arrived in Kati, I knew I didn't want to stay a primary school teacher until retirement; I had other ambitions.

I sat for the entrance exam to the *École Normale Supérieure*.[6] I used my academic vacation to prepare and was admitted to the first-year literature program. My studies were interrupted by student strikes, but classes eventually resumed. I graduated in 1985 with a Master's degree in Modern Literature, then taught in several high schools.

After a while, I realized I wanted to go further than teaching. That's how I ended up at the National Directorate of Arts and Culture, known then as DNAC and now as the National Directorate of Cultural Action.[7] I worked there for five years as Head of the Literature Division, which brought me into close contact with the world of arts and culture.

A few years later, I decided to leave the civil service willingly to dedicate myself to something else. That "something else" turned out to be publishing, after I received training in Africa and Europe, mainly in France. Today, I run a small publishing house that faces significant challenges, but these difficulties don't deter me from persevering.

Our publishing house, called EDIS,[8] now works with around three hundred authors, primarily academics, that is, thesis authors, whose works we've strived to revive. We created a special program to collect, edit, and publish academic theses, believing these works form the foundation of knowledge and don't deserve to remain unheard. We built an entire policy and program around the distich: "*que valent donc les thèses dès lors qu'elles se taisent?*" (What value does a thesis have if no one ever reads it?) After about ten years, we successfully gathered authors willing to entrust us with their manuscripts. We also searched for other "lost" manuscripts, beneficial for both the authors and for Mali. Some of these authors lived thirty, forty, or even fifty years ago, and some have since passed away. Today, we are proud to say we've ensured these theses are no longer silent. Additionally, we publish everything from fiction and reference works to dictionaries and comics in our main languages—the official languages of Mali—which were previously called national languages. That, broadly speaking, sums up my work as a publisher.

My career as a playwright grew alongside my teaching career. From a very young age, I was deeply interested in theater and made it one of my professional niches. Today, I can say, with modesty, that I've written more than a dozen plays, some of which I published myself at my own expense, because I believe theater shouldn't be limited to stage performance; otherwise, it could disappear, as has happened with many great playwrights before us.

My plays were primarily performed during the National Weeks of Culture[9] and, more prominently, at the National Artistic and Cultural Biennial.[10] I'm proud to be among the few authors who have consistently received the top rankings at five different biennials, between 1980 and 2001. One of my plays was awarded first place in 1980. In 1982, after some controversy and pressure on the jury, another of my plays was moved from first to second place, although I still consider it to have been the true winner. In 1984, another of my plays ranked first again. In 1986, I chose not to compete due to pressures on authors. In 1988, I presented another play that once again ranked first. Later, in 2001, I presented yet another play that also received first place. If I exist today as a playwright, it's essentially thanks to my participation in the artistic and cultural biennials. In 2003, I was asked once again to help revive the biennial, as I had already distanced myself somewhat from civil service. For five years, together with other state officials, I managed the permanent secretariat of the Artistic and Cultural Biennial under the direction of Minister Cheick Oumar Sissoko. However, to this day—thanks to God and consideration—I've never really stepped away from the cultural world. Today, I continue to make my modest contribution to the development of Malian theater and the advancement of culture in general. I was awarded two medals by the Malian authorities: the Medal of the National Order of Merit and the Medal of Arts and Letters.

I'm especially proud to have written *Kanuya Wale*, the first Malian novel published in Bambara. I first wrote it in French and then translated it into other national languages, including Bambara, Fulfulde, Songhai, and Tamasheq. The Fulfulde translation won the ECOWAS Prize for Excellence in African Languages. I also wrote another novel titled *Why It Does Not Snow Here*, a long novel of more than three hundred pages. It's quite a unique work that carries a project I hold dear, a project I consider vital for the future, not only for Mali but for all of Africa. Finally, I've written other shorter works and continue to write.

NS: You describe writing as something that stemmed from your teaching career, yet there must still be another particular factor. We know that in Mali, or in other African countries, being a writer isn't like practicing other professions. When someone becomes a writer, there's usually a particular reason or motivation. What else made you decide to become a writer?
SN: I didn't *decide* to become a writer. I became a writer almost by accident, maybe even out of necessity, because, as I mentioned, my teacher training immersed me in the world of theater and, by extension, culture. At that time, we needed plays, and everything I saw being performed around me didn't satisfy me. Out of necessity, and perhaps due to a small inner calling—a sort of "cultural instinct," so to speak—I began to write. Nothing compelled me; it was simply a passion. I've always found myself, even now, within the sphere of culture. That's how I began to write plays and novels.

It was nothing more than that. I can't explain it otherwise. It wasn't something I planned or trained for. I simply wrote and produced. My works were performed and read, and that gave me immense satisfaction. It made me realize I could be useful, both as a teacher and as a writer, that I could communicate with an audience through my writing, an audience that could access my words even when I'm elsewhere, perhaps even when I'm no longer in this world. That's every writer's dream. It reminds me of something a Chinese sage once said: "If you want to be useful for eternity, either plant a tree or write a book." I made both choices, as I planted trees when I was a teacher, and now I write. My choice to write wasn't determined by anything else.

The difficulties writers face here are the same as elsewhere. Perhaps they are even greater for us because our population isn't highly literate. We live in a country where, after sixty-five years of independence, the literacy rate in French doesn't even reach thirty-five percent. That shouldn't prevent writers from continuing to write. Those difficulties are real, but I've added another dimension to my struggle—if I may call it so—the struggle to ensure that reading doesn't remain confined to the school environment.

We learn to read at school, but it's beyond the school that what was learned should continue its journey—in the family, in the street, in society, and in everyday life. The mistake we often make, as do many intellectuals, is that once we obtain a degree, we stop reading. If we were to reassess many people's capacity to produce, to engage in dialogue, or to understand their world, I bet that many of those who earned their degrees five, ten, or twenty years ago would fail if they hadn't continued reading. They slip, without realizing it, into what I call "post-literacy illiteracy." This problem also affects our esteemed researchers. Once they've written and defended their thesis, many stop reading and producing. They begin to believe they are at the top, while in fact they've already fallen to the bottom. Everything they once learned fades away progressively, without their awareness. Unfortunately, in Africa nowadays, we meet great intellectuals who no longer read, no longer produce, but are content to remain in administrative or political positions. Their countries no longer benefit from their knowledge or skills because those abilities have gradually been eroded, worn away, and lost.

NS: You've been writing since the 1970s, if I'm not mistaken. The majority of your works are in French, but when you wrote *Kanuya Wale*, you decided to make it accessible in Bambara and other national languages. Why that decision?
SN: My first piece of writing dates back to when I was nineteen, well before the 1970s. Unfortunately, I lost it. When I was nineteen, I wrote a collection of fantasy tales. At that time, people used to tell us we had to be home before noon because the djinns would be wandering around at one o'clock. The same was said for the night, that djinns roamed at night. These stories were often told to us, and I gathered and wrote them down. The first person who was supposed to read that text lost it, unfortunately. But it's all right; it remains somewhere in a corner of my memory. That's how my early writing began.

As for *Kanuya Wale*, it was an express commission from a publisher—and there's an entire story behind it. That publisher is actually the one who inspired me to become a publisher myself. When he saw my work, he said to me, "Instead of continuing to write for others, write for yourself and make sure that you, too, become a publisher." I am deeply grateful to him. He has since passed away—may his soul rest in peace. He was like an older brother, warm, supportive, and encouraging. I wrote the entire text—believe it or not—in just one week. The three volumes were produced in a single week. At that time, my second son was still very young, barely eight years old. He would often try to see me, but I would isolate myself at night to write until morning. In one week, I produced those three small books and handed them to the publisher, who was astonished. He said to me, "We had agreed that you would write this text in Bambara, not in French." I replied, "But I cannot write as well in Bambara as I can in French." We then asked a friend to translate it, and that's how it became what it is today. Gradually, I worked with people who had linguistic expertise in other official languages, and the work was translated into at least four of them, which have now been designated as official languages. These translations were distributed widely, and we still have other versions on our machines, awaiting completion in additional official languages.

NS: As *Kanuya Wale* was made accessible in at least four national languages, one may wonder whether this shift was deliberate or shaped by circumstance. Can we say that the work ended up being published in these languages by accident?
SN: It wasn't accidental; it was rather necessary. The editorial policy of the publishing house at that time was focused on the promotion of national languages. This is also my goal; if you look at our emblem, it clearly states: "Promotion of official languages and French." We didn't wait for the State to declare national languages as official. By the way, as if by fate, I had the privilege of participating with other Malian experts in the final drafting of that constitution, which officially recognized and elevated the national languages to the rank of official languages. My mission is twofold: to promote the official languages without rejecting French, and to practice bilingualism productively.

It's a real mistake for academic works to stay confined to academia. Every written work, especially scientific research, should be accessible to everyone, from the grassroots to the top. Researchers collect their material from oral traditions and from local communities. Why, then, after defending a thesis, should that knowledge remain inaccessible to the very people who provided it? It would be better to ensure that once such academic work is completed, there is a restitution of that knowledge at the community level, not in French, English, or Arabic, but in the languages that those communities understand. After all, they are the ones who contributed to the research and who made it possible.

NS: While you stress the necessity of writing in national languages, this choice inevitably raises concerns about readership and visibility. Nowadays, we see that many writers who write in their national languages aren't very well known. Also, their works risk being forgotten or disappearing altogether. Isn't writing in one's national language a risk or obstacle to recognition and success?

SN: On the one hand, no; but from another perspective, perhaps yes, if one believes that fame can come only from abroad or from foreign languages. Fame doesn't come from the language used but from the relevance of the subject chosen. You might be right, however, in saying that writing in French or another international language can make one more visible. That is true. But if that visibility comes at the cost of ignoring our own people—those who don't speak those foreign languages—then we would be making a serious mistake. Someone must always be a pioneer. I'm not claiming to be one; I don't have that pretension. But I believe that those who, after writing in French or English, return to their mother tongues, such as Wolof, Swahili, or others, deserve to be considered pioneers.

It would be a mistake to limit ourselves to internationally dominant languages. Over time, our own languages will inevitably cross borders and spread elsewhere. Take Fulfulde, for example. It isn't spoken only in Mali. The same applies to Songhai and to Bambara; these are cross-border languages. Therefore, we have every reason to adopt a productive form of bilingualism that allows our populations, especially those who didn't have the chance to attend school, to understand us.

Going to school is both a privilege and an opportunity. Even though the laws require everyone to go to school, not everyone can. Sometimes, it's necessary to return to one's mother tongue. However, even then, people must still go to school, not necessarily to learn French, but to learn how to read, write, and transcribe their own languages correctly. That, too, requires a structured program. It is a challenge that our governments must face so that knowledge isn't confined only to French or English. French and English have gone through centuries of evolution to reach their current level of development. It would be tragic to stifle our own languages and prevent them from evolving. This responsibility falls on linguists, policymakers, and writers, who must not neglect or underestimate the value of languages that have survived for centuries.

When we were colonized, we were subjugated both physically and intellectually. Now we must free ourselves from that yoke so that we are not continuously accountable to our former colonizers, nor perpetually dependent upon them. We are the heirs of great predecessors who wrote in languages that most people didn't speak or understand, because it was the elite, not the masses, who received formal education. Today, we must ensure that those who didn't have access to classical education can still learn and share knowledge through the languages they understand.

NS: You said that you are in favor of bilingualism, and you spoke about intellectual decolonization, which reminds us of the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. He began writing in English and later abandoned it to write only in his national language. Ngũgĩ encourages all African writers to write in their own languages. Do you agree with those who call for abandoning French completely and using only the national languages that have now become official?

SN: Not at all. We must not do that. This reminds me of a remark made by Léopold Sédar Senghor,[11] a conviction for which he was often criticized and even misunderstood. He was right. We cannot abruptly abandon a language in which we have been colonized for more than one hundred years. It is impossible to reject French overnight. The process must occur gradually. In fact, we have already begun this process for a long time. Inevitably, we will one day move

beyond it. It may not happen with our generation, but future generations will progressively free themselves from this linguistic domination and will ensure that our languages not only survive but also become true vehicles of knowledge.

I had the pleasure of reading a PhD dissertation written ninety-nine percent in Bambara, employing scientific terminology. The thesis is seven hundred pages long. It is available on our shelves, and we will do everything possible to make sure that this thesis doesn't remain silent and becomes widely known. We also had the honor of producing a six-hundred-page monolingual dictionary in Bambara. This challenges anyone who says research can't be done in our own languages. This belief stems from the intellectual suffocation we have endured since the beginning.

We were prevented from thinking and writing in our own languages. Nevertheless, there was one remarkable exception, a French teacher whose name I have forgotten. He was assigned to Saint-Louis in Senegal. He began teaching in French but soon realized that his students didn't understand him. He then decided to learn Wolof and introduced bilingual instruction. When the authorities discovered this, they thanked him and repatriated him to France. However, he later returned willingly and died in Senegal, among the very students to whom he had wished to teach both Wolof and French, using one language to open the door to the other.

NS: You mentioned your participation in the drafting of the new constitution, relating it to the issue of languages. Since French remains the working language, does it not mean that French continues to hold the status of the official language in practice?
SN: Yes, I did mention the finalization of the constitution. The constitution now officially recognizes the national languages as official languages, but it designates French as the working language. However, this doesn't mean that French remains superior. The constitution is very clear: national languages are elevated to the rank of official languages and will progressively be introduced as working languages, just as French once was.

The bilingualism that exists today shouldn't be perceived as a problem. It is not a contradiction; rather, it is a form of support and enrichment for our country. It is beneficial for Mali to have both a language with international visibility and languages that our people understand. French, in a way, will help us become aware of the importance of our own languages. Perhaps unconsciously, French has made us realize the necessity and inevitability of using our national languages, which have now become official languages.

We must also understand this from another perspective: We can't develop fully while depending on someone else's language. Look at the examples of China, Russia, the Arab countries, even France and the United States, India, or Japan, whose language evolved partly from Chinese, if I'm not mistaken. None of these nations developed using a foreign language. It is therefore illogical, linguistically and scientifically, to believe that we could develop fully using someone else's language.

Such a transformation will take generations. It cannot happen overnight. However, over time, our languages will evolve and will accompany progress. In five, ten, or twenty years, we will likely find ourselves at the forefront of using our national—now official—languages in administration, education, and research, while still maintaining a complementary relationship with French. Our cultural wealth is now double. A Malian citizen today should feel proud to realize that his culture is doubly enriched through both his mother tongue and the French language. French citizens, on the other hand, are nourished by only one linguistic culture. We, however, have the advantage of being nourished by both. Our culture is not hybrid; it is strong because it draws from two sources.

NS: If national languages are now officially recognized, the next question concerns how far this evolution might realistically go. Can we deduce that you hope one day Bambara, or another national or official language, will become the country's working language, replacing French?
SN: Progressively, yes. Political use and social necessity will make it happen over time. However, that is another matter entirely; it will occur as history dictates. Today, Bambara is spoken from Kayes to Tinzawatene. But a responsible State like ours—one that is conscious, cautious, and under multiple pressures—cannot afford to declare, "From today onward, only Bambara or only Fulfulde will be the official language." Doing so would expose the country to deep divisions, fierce rivalries, and possibly fratricidal conflicts that could destroy national unity. Therefore, the State must proceed gradually and with wisdom.

NS: This gradual approach, nevertheless, may seem paradoxical for some people. You say that choosing only Bambara could provoke hostility between communities. But why can we accept French and not one of our own national languages, such as Bambara?
SN: We didn't *accept* French. It was imposed upon us. That is very clear. French was imposed through colonization. I recall a striking remark by a French official—I forget his name—who once said, "Frenchmen, calm down, for if it were not for Africa, France would be speaking German today." What does that mean? It means colonization. French was imposed upon us, and we are now trying to free ourselves from it gradually, not through rejection or brutality, but through reason. A responsible and conscious State cannot afford to act recklessly by rejecting French outright. That would amount to political suicide. I fully support and approve of the State's current approach, which aims to progressively achieve linguistic autonomy.

This process must begin with education, which needs to be completely restructured. No country today, after so many years of colonization, could reasonably declare, "We are cutting all ties now." Such a rupture would be too brutal and would backfire catastrophically. The current policy is a wise one. It will be up to future generations to continue in this direction through the production of literary works, through reading, through cultural exchanges, through research, and through initiatives such as the one you are undertaking now. The goal is not to glorify English, French, German, Russian, or Chinese. The goal is to promote our majority languages, the languages spoken by our people, our thirteen official languages.

NS: Let's now move on to your work, *Kanuya Wale*. In Bambara, *Kanuya Wale* means "an act of love." Of course, one shouldn't judge a book by its title; is it the reason the content of your novel doesn't directly address love, but rather deals with structural, cultural, and even physical violence? Why did you choose that title?
SN: That is an excellent question. It may be what one could call a literary device. The translation isn't mine, but the French title was. The Bambara translator chose the expression *Kanuya Wale*, and I fully agreed with him. An act of love—what does it mean? Love isn't necessarily physical or carnal. It isn't limited to what one feels for a romantic partner. Love encompasses everything around us: our children, our parents, our work, and everything that makes us live and feel useful to one another. That is what I wanted to express through the title. An act of love is a moral, social, and human commitment.

Look at how the novel ends. The apprentice driver could have made the same mistake as his older brother by marrying the young girl born after her mother's ordeal. Yet he didn't take that path. He saw her as a sister, someone he needed to love as a sister, to accompany in life, and to help find her own freedom. That young man, who begins as an inexperienced boy, gains wisdom through life's hardships. His experiences awaken in him a more mature, moral, and human sense of love—love that transcends desire. That, too, is an act of love. You also see characters who are close, not physically or carnally, but spiritually and emotionally. Loving

without possession, without domination; that is what I wanted to convey. That, in essence, is the deeper meaning of *An Act of Love*.

NS: After reading the three volumes, we notice that the issues in *Kanuya Wale* can be grouped into two main categories. The first concerns patriarchy and violence against women, and the second deals with what one could call "modern slavery" and "savage capitalism in large cities." Regarding the first issue, the reader encounters themes revolving around the condition of African women in general and Malian women in particular, such as polygamy, early marriage, and girls dropping out of school because of marriage. As for "savage capitalism" and "modern slavery," we see a wealthy class exploiting the poor, such as the case of drivers who don't want their apprentices to become drivers one day, forcing them to remain apprentices indefinitely. Why did you decide to expose these important social issues?
SN: Writers are often guided by their characters. They are taken in by their evolution. Characters are fictional beings, but in the author's mind, they live and breathe. They have their own lives, even their own histories, though they may not exist physically. That is the reality of writing. Authors—I believe this is true for most of them—are both masters and slaves of their characters. At times, they try to guide them, to give them direction, but then the characters take on lives of their own. Chance, or perhaps intuition, makes the characters appear almost metaphysical. So, the author isn't entirely the master of the game. We may plan to make a character behave a certain way, but in relation to other characters, that behavior can change completely. That is what happened in *Kanuya Wale*. It is part of the creative process, what I call literary destiny.

NS: Can we say that you have become an advocate for women and for underpaid or unpaid workers?
SN: I wouldn't say "advocate." Perhaps it happened by chance through the interplay of the characters. As I said earlier, we are the products of the situations we depict. Even if we disagree with certain things, the evolution of our characters leads us to confront them.

The issue of domestic workers, for example—whom people still call "maids," a term that makes no sense—is a real one. Domestic workers today, especially in cities, often play a greater role in families than their female bosses themselves. That is a social reality. As soon as the sun rises, everyone leaves for work, and the household is left in the care of this girl, who may have received little or no formal education and who often works under difficult conditions. When you return home, you find your children bathed, your house clean, and your food cooked, all by a person for whom you may have little or no regard. That is inhumane.

How can one eat without the person who cooks, or live in a clean house without the one who maintains it? Even if you pay her, that doesn't make her your slave. Our families taught us to respect our mothers, and above all, to respect domestic workers. They are the children of other families. What they earn is often barely enough to live on. Yet, they must eat, survive, and live with dignity. While they are under your roof, they are your responsibility. You must make them feel their humanity, make them feel that they exist, that they are someone's child, passing through your home for a time. Even if you are not a believer, there is always a divine gaze upon you, reminding you: "Be careful. If you mistreat that child, if you mistreat that woman, one day you will face the consequences."

NS: In addition to these social issues, the reader notices that your novel also addresses culture, especially traditional knowledge and the peaceful coexistence between Islam and traditional beliefs. For example, in Benkoro, the village of the main characters, Islam and tradition coexist

harmoniously. Most people are Muslims but still celebrate traditional festivals, use local names, and resort to traditional remedies.

However, in contemporary Mali, as in many African countries, traditional names are becoming increasingly rare, even in remote villages. Most people now have Arabic or Western names that they consider "Islamic" or "Christian." Why did you choose to give your characters local names instead of these Arabic or Western ones?

SN: I will tell you a story. Before I understood the meaning of my first name—Samba in Fulfulde, which, in the Fulani tradition, is given to the second-born son—I was secretly ashamed of it because I didn't understand its meaning. Once I understood it, I embraced it with pride.

Islam came to us; we didn't go to Islam. We preexisted it. The same applies to modern medicine. Before the French arrived, before colonialism, how did people live, eat, or heal themselves? Did they have pharmacies or imported recipes? No. Civilization evolved, and other influences arrived, sometimes provoking misunderstanding or rejection.

Let me take the almost anecdotal example of Seydou Badian Kouyaté,[12] a writer, a statesman, and a development expert. He is almost unknown as a medical practitioner, yet his doctoral dissertation focused on the traditional treatment of yellow fever. That thesis has since been overlooked.

We need to think about the knowledge and way of life that existed before colonization. We shouldn't reject that knowledge but instead seek to understand and integrate it with what came later. Just as we have done with languages, we should do the same with traditional science. If we develop our pharmacopoeia,[13] some may react negatively, but that is due to the way we were educated. Fortunately, there are now faculties of traditional medicine, with trained specialists who continue to advance this knowledge. The intellectual and scientific suffocation we experienced came from colonization.

We must remain true to our culture without rejecting what we have learned through contact with others. Unfortunately, today, many people reject their own culture, even their names. They believe that their baptismal names must sound Arabic. Some have even gone so far as to change the pronunciation of their names completely. For example, instead of saying Boubacar, which already has an Arabic connotation, they "Arabize" it into Abu Bakr—an unnecessary mental drift. Arabs would never "Africanize" their names. We always tend to believe that what comes from outside is better because we were never taught to value what we have.

NS: Since, in the novel, we don't find the familiar Malian names such as Mamadou, Amadou, or Bourama, but rather Dadjuru,[14] Sata,[15] Falako,[16] Seriba,[17] and Soci,[18] can we say that your choice of character names was intentional?

SN: It was both a cultural and a literary choice. On the one hand, it reflects my cultural roots. On the other hand, it comes from my background in dramaturgy, where the names I give to characters carry symbolic meaning. In my plays, characters' names always have meaning, and I follow the same approach in my novels. Instead of using common names that carry no particular meaning, I choose names that identify the characters through their meaning. I rarely use family names; I prefer first names that speak for themselves.

NS: Besides culture, your novel also portrays peaceful Islam. In Benkoro, Muslims of different interpretations coexist peacefully. Is such an Islam still possible in Mali today, where most people are Muslims, given the current context marked by terrorism and hate speech among Muslims themselves?

SN: Let's begin with the meaning of the word Benkoro; it means "ancient agreement" or "old covenant." There is a deep symbolism behind that name. Regarding Islam, I am not a theologian,

but I try to understand it. If Islam were false, how could it have survived for centuries and millennia? It is because the falsehood isn't in Islam itself; it is in the interpretation people make of it. If something endures for centuries, it must contain truth. I see Islam, like Christianity, as a humane religion, a faith that has stood the test of time. The problem lies not in religion but in those who try to manipulate it for political ends. Humanity today has reached extraordinary levels of development; we have gone to the moon, to Mars, yet we still behave as if we lived in the Neolithic age. That is where the real problem lies. It lies in political opportunism and the manipulation of faith for power.

NS: Now, let's focus on the main characters in the three volumes, respectively. In the first volume, *Dajuru*, the reader sees Sata being mistreated and abandoned by her husband. Yet she remains patient and never seeks divorce or justice. From a feminist point of view, a woman shouldn't remain inactive under such conditions. Do you think Sata should be considered a model or a bad example?
SN: The names themselves hold meaning. Dadjuru means "rope of the mouth," that is, a promise or a commitment. Sata means "destiny" or "fate." Let me reveal something: my first book, which had little success, was a collection of lectures I gave around 1976 about women. We shouldn't think that only African or Malian women face mistreatment. The history of women's struggles is universal. Everywhere in the world, human relationships are built on compromise. The history of couples is full of sacrifice, and most of those sacrifices are made by women. Without women, no great man would exist. No artist, writer, or statesman would have achieved greatness without a woman's support, even if she was sometimes taken for granted.

Nevertheless, some feminists idealize life too much. Life isn't ideal. It is full of ups and downs. Every relationship, every marriage, requires compromise. When a problem arises in a couple, it's too easy to shout, "Women's rights are not respected." That is true in some cases, but it isn't the whole story. Balance is essential. A man must acknowledge his strength and dominance, and a woman must assert her worth. Without both, there can be no harmony. I often tell young men, "Respect women. Respect your wives. Without them, you would be nothing." A woman gives life. She could end a man's life in a moment if she wished, while a man could spend a lifetime trying to destroy her. That is the power of women, and that is why they must be honored.

NS: In the second volume, *The Apprentice*, you highlight the condition of unpaid or underpaid driver apprentices who are condemned to remain apprentices forever. Likewise, this volume portrays the infernal life of many other underpaid workers in the city. This issue remains current in Mali. What are your thoughts on that?
SN: I don't have recent data, but I know that there are Malian organizations that have long fought for the rights of domestic and informal workers. Not all households treat their workers inhumanely. There has been some improvement. Domestic workers today often choose families carefully. They look for good employers. Yet, in families with limited or unstable income, workers must adapt to what the household can afford. They receive free food, housing, and care when they are sick. That, too, must be valued.

We must try, as much as possible, to treat humanely those who make our daily lives easier. The State should also intervene to ensure fairness in labor relations. In the past, kindness was part of our social code, but today, everything is being monetized.

Many seasonal workers come to cities to earn a dowry or to help their families, then return to their villages. What seems a small sum in the city can make a great difference in a village.

Our economic realities are not the same as those of other nations, so comparisons are often misleading. Despite our struggles, Mali remains a resilient and profoundly humane society. We may be down, but with faith and perseverance, we'll rise again.

NS: In the third volume, *Firiyatow, The Widows*, Mamuru's wife, refuses to observe widowhood after his death from AIDS, which resulted from his infidelity. Her refusal violates tradition. Do you think her resistance came too late, since her husband was already dead?
SN: Her refusal was symbolic. She wanted to draw attention to her husband's behavior. Everyone knew about his infidelity, yet no one intervened. Her refusal to observe widowhood was a way of saying, "Let this not happen again." She wanted men to understand that women are human beings, not objects. If we exist, it is because of women. We owe them respect. She also recognized that her husband, despite his flaws, sometimes showed restraint out of respect for her. So, she said to herself, "If I refused widowhood out of anger, I must also accept it out of respect, for the good moments." It was her way of honoring him, but also of warning others—men, women, and religious leaders—that women should never again be trampled upon.

NS: After addressing past works and enduring themes, it is natural to turn to your current creative projects. Are you currently working on a new play or novel? If so, what will the main themes be, given Mali's current context?
SN: Yes, I am working on a play that I hope to finish by the end of the year. I will not reveal anything, except that it is purely political. Draw a parallel between a football club manager and a political party leader. This club leader has spent more than 40 or 50 years and cannot even have 1000 supporters. Make the parallel with political parties and leaders.

NS: Finally, since we are in the era of artificial intelligence, which affects how writers create, as a publisher, do you think this will increase fake authors—people who claim to be writers but only copy and paste from machines?
SN: This shouldn't be a concern. Our publishing house recently reviewed a book written by researchers—I will not name them, though they now hold high positions in the State. The book, in two volumes, discusses digital good and digital evil; the second volume focuses on artificial intelligence. After reading both volumes, especially the second, I learned a great deal. Whatever the power of artificial intelligence, it will always remain below human intelligence. There is no danger as long as there is human contact. If I don't interact with AI, if I don't ask it questions, will it produce anything? No. There can't be "fake authors," as long as the human mind is present. Artificial intelligence should operate only within the vision and the limits set by human intelligence.

Notes

1. ALED stands for *Association pour la Lecture, l'Éducation et le Développement*.
2. *Kanuya Wale* means "An Act of Love."
3. Bambara is the most widespread language in Mali.
4. Fulfulde, also known as Fula or Pulaar, is a language spoken in about twenty countries across West and Central Africa, from Senegal to Sudan.
5. ECOWAS stands for the Economic Community Of West African States. It is a regional organization of many West African countries, founded in 1975
6. *École Normale Supérieure* (ENSUP) is the Malian high school teacher training college in Bamako.
7. The National Directorate of Cultural Action (Direction nationale de l'action culturelle, DNAC), now known as the National Directorate of Cultural Action, is a Malian government institution responsible for developing national cultural policies, stimulating artistic and literary creation, promoting the arts and literature, and fostering international cultural exchanges.
8. EDIS stands for *Édition et Distribution* (Publishing and Distribution).
9. The National Week of Culture (Semaine Nationale de la Culture, SNC) in Mali is a major cultural event that celebrates Malian heritage nationwide.
10. The National Artistic and Cultural Biennial of Mali (Biennale Artistique et Culturelle du Mali) is the country's largest cultural event, taking place every two years, bringing together all the regions for artistic competitions aimed at national cohesion and the promotion of cultural heritage.
11. Léopold Sédar Senghor was the first president of Senegal. He was a prominent poet, one of the pioneers of Negritude. Having served in the French Academy, he was one of the strongest proponents of French, which he viewed as a tool of civilization.
12. Seydou Badian Kouyaté was a Malian novelist, playwright, essayist, and politician who wrote the national anthem of Mali upon its independence. He studied medicine in France.
13. In Mali, the term "pharmacopoeia" most often designates traditional drug-making.
14. Dajuru literally means "the rope of the mouth, that is, promise."
15. Sata means "fatal."
16. Falako means "deputy Imam or muezzin or Imam's assistant."
17. Seriba derives from "Seliba" through rhotacism (the change of /l/ to /r/), meaning "big festival, especially Eid al-Adha."
18. Soci means "family ruiner."