

LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

Festac . . . Memories of Lagos

MARIAMA BÂ

INTRODUCTION AND
TRANSLATION BY
TOBIAS WARNER

Introduction

“Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos” (“Festac . . . Memories of Lagos”) is the first piece of new writing by the Senegalese author Mariama Bâ to be seen in decades and her only known poem. Previously unknown to scholars, “Memories of Lagos” appeared in a Senegalese periodical in February 1977—two years before the publication of *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*), her most famous work. Bâ’s oeuvre was thought to be limited to just three published texts—her two novels and a lone piece of juvenilia, “Ma petite patrie” (“My Little Homeland”)¹—as well as the handful of interviews and speeches she gave before her untimely death in 1981. As far as I am aware, “Memories of Lagos” is the first piece of creative writing Bâ ever chose to publish.

“Memories of Lagos” records Bâ’s experiences at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977. This important Pan-African gathering drew over sixteen thousand performers and attendees from across the continent and its diaspora for a celebration of African arts and culture. Bâ was in Lagos to represent *L’Ouest Africain* (*The West African*), a newspaper (and later magazine) published in Dakar under the editorship of her husband, Obèye Diop. Bâ seems to have traveled there with the exiled Haitian writer Jean F. Brierre, who wrote a longer dispatch for the same paper.

Although Bâ went on to become one of the twentieth century’s most written about and widely taught African authors, “Memories of Lagos” slipped under the radar.² There are several possible reasons for this. The simplest is that Bâ published the poem under her married name. Helpfully for the purposes of attribution, *L’Ouest Africain* ran a photo of the author beside the text, and “Mariama Diop” is by all appearances the same person as the author of *So Long a Letter*. Further confirmation comes from Mame Coumba Ndiaye, Bâ’s daughter and biographer, who indicates that her mother did indeed travel to FESTAC to represent Obèye’s paper (128). The omission of this poem from literary history also speaks to the terms through

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which African authors of Bâ's generation tended to be recognized. The aesthetic and political horizons of Bâ's imagination were sometimes assumed to be limited to the novel and the nation, respectively. Such framing was common in research in African literatures for decades (despite notable exceptions), and these proclivities sometimes led scholars to neglect periodicals, poetic forms, and transnational affinities.

When it came to Bâ, I was as guilty as anyone of not looking past her most famous novel. Having written extensively on *So Long a Letter* for my first book, I had no plans to do so again soon. That changed when David Scott invited me to respond in the pages of *Small Axe* to Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel's *Reimagining Liberation*, a book that models an innovative approach to recovering the neglected writings of Black feminist intellectuals. Joseph-Gabriel's work inspired me to return to a writer I thought I knew well. After coming across the reference to the Lagos trip in Ndiaye's biography of Bâ, I checked *L'Ouest Africain* just to see if Bâ might have written anything about FESTAC. And there I found this poem.

"Memories of Lagos" sheds important new light on Bâ's poetic work and above all on an underappreciated pan-African dimension to her thought. Bâ is not listed among the sizable (all male) official Senegalese delegation at FESTAC.³ Her experiences in Lagos speak to what Tsitsi Ella Jaji, following George Shepperson, calls pan-Africanism with a small *p*—eclectic, informal, and at times ephemeral practices of "transnational black solidarity" that circulated at the margins of more defined capital *P* Pan-African gatherings such as FESTAC (Jaji 3). The poem also firmly situates Bâ in the long line of francophone Black women thinkers that Joseph-Gabriel has illuminated—women such as Suzanne Césaire and Eugénie Éboué-Tell, whose decolonial imaginations were premised on transnational engagements and the belief "that decolonization could not be attained without women's political representation and meaningful participation in public life" (21).

Unlike the African men of her generation with whom she shared an elite colonial education, Bâ was a late starter as a writer. She began writing *So Long a Letter* in her late forties and then only with

encouragement from her friend Annette Mbaye D'Erneville. This mentorship was decisive, but Ndiaye's biography quotes a letter from Obèye in which he suggests that Bâ's experiences in pan-African Lagos were the "déclit" ("break-through") that sparked *So Long a Letter* (128).

In "Memories of Lagos," a weary traveler receives a warm welcome. Initially impressed by new infrastructure, she finds the intellectual climate of the FESTAC colloquium more moving.⁴ But the more lasting impressions of the festival are of the environment that surrounds her. The second half of the poem has a breathless quality: sense memories stream by, juxtaposed in a "profusion" of sights, sounds, and embodied experiences of Blackness. The presiding tones are excitement and joy: more than half of the sentences end in exclamation marks.

The style of "Memories of Lagos" is already vintage Bâ. As in her prose, she leans heavily on the incantatory qualities of anaphora: "dances of yesteryear, dances of rites / . . . dances of aggression and war, dances of royal majesty." For all her renown as a portraitist of interiority, apostrophe was her preferred mode. That gift emerges fully formed. At the poem's close, the speaker turns away from recording her own experiences and concludes, in a more restrained and reflective mood, with an address directed toward the festival itself.

In these concluding lines, the speaker declares that Lagos made her hear not "the veiled tom-tom of Black despair" but the "thousand choirs of negritude rediscovered." These are quotations of a poem by her compatriot David Mandessi Diop, "Appel" ("Call"), which evokes the horrors of transatlantic slavery before concluding with a promise that "nous referons l'Afrique" ("we will remake Africa"; my trans.). The poem's reference to negritude could easily be read as polemical, given that Lagos had been the focus of intense negotiations between the Nigerian and Senegalese delegations over what ideological role if any it would play. Negritude was sidelined in Lagos as a Nigeria buoyed by oil money got to set the terms, much to the consternation of Léopold Sédar Senghor, who had made negritude a centerpiece of the 1966 prequel to FESTAC, the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres

(FESMAN) in Dakar.⁵ And yet Bâ's invocation does not neatly align with Senghorian cultural policy: the negritude she conjures is not a timeless Black past but a "frenzy of creative imagination" in the present in which "rhythms [are] modernized on thousand-year-old modulations."

What Bâ took from Lagos was hope, a hope that remaking Africa was possible. In her novels such optimism is tempered by the conviction that any decolonial remaking must also reckon with gender inequality and oppression. Strikingly, in this poem's last, hopeful image, Lagos is proclaimed to be the seed of a new future. This vision of germination would be transposed into the closing lines of *So Long a Letter*, where Bâ's protagonist Ramatoulaye compares her own difficult past to "de l'humus sale et nauséabond [d'où] jaillit la plante verte" ("the dirty and nauseating compost out of which the green plant sprouts"; *Une si longue* 165; my trans.). Bâ's novels went on to worldwide acclaim. This little-known poem suggests that the spark that lit them was transnational and pan-African.

NOTES

1. "Ma petite patrie" is a composition that Bâ wrote as a fourth-year student at the Ecole Normale des Jeunes Filles de Rufisque. In the late 1940s, two French visitors to the school, Maurice Genevoix and Jacques Richard-Molard, were shown a typed version of Bâ's composition as an example of the successes of colonial education. Both seem to have been duly impressed and later quoted her text extensively in their own published works. It is unclear whether the sharing of the composition and its later publication were done with Bâ's consent (Riesz and Bjornson 38–41).

2. Andrade estimated in 2011 that over 150 articles, chapters, and monographs had been published on Bâ—a figure that today would be over 200. *So Long a Letter* was still the sixth most commonly taught work of African literature in 2020 according to Saint and Shringarpure's survey of professors of African literature.

3. See the proceedings of the FESTAC colloquium, which also include the speeches Bâ mentions in the poem (*Colloquium Proceedings*).

4. Held alongside the many cultural events and performances, the FESTAC colloquium brought together hundreds of scholars, artists, and writers for a two-week intensive program on Black civilization that featured public lectures and working groups.

5. For a detailed account of the cultural politics surrounding FESTAC, see Apter. For a sense of the vibrancy of exchanges at FESTAC, see the collection of archival and visual materials assembled and remixed by *Chimurenga* (Edjabe and Adesokan), as well as the photographs of Marilyn Nance (Nance).

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Festac . . . Memories of Lagos

Lagos airport . . .
 Slowness of administrative formalities; slowness of
 luggage arriving!
 Slowness again: the journey to the city . . .
 Finally, fraternal and revitalizing handshakes!
 And the atmosphere of Festac surrounds me . . . Festac?
 It is everywhere: badges on chests, multicolored fab-
 rics with geometric designs,
 Brightening up the streets!
 Objects or animals prominent on sparkling copper
 rectangles!
 Cars with “Festac” license plates in the green and
 white colors of the Nigerian flag!
 Finished public works and construction sites testify
 to large financial investments!
 New: the buildings of the “village,” new: the
 National Theatre in the shape of a kepi;
 Perched high up, the new Tafawa Ballewa Square!
 Heart of the festival: the symposium on “Black
 Civilization and Education,”
 Housed at the National Theatre . . .
 Scholars, writers, artists of the Black world compar-
 ing their ideas.
 Despite the inevitable conflicts in a conversation of
 this scale,
 Their efforts are rewarded.
 The general report, the fruit of the working groups,
 Contributes to the flowering of Black culture
 With a new formulation of the values of civilization.
 Talented speakers, Ki-Zerbo¹ of Upper Volta,
 Théophile Obenga² of the Congo, have put at the
 service of an open-minded audience
 Their knowledge and the results of their research,
 Likely to modify the relationship between the Black
 world and other peoples!
 The exhibitions! A treat for connoisseurs, yes, but
 also for the uninitiated!
 Masks patiently carved out of wood by hatchets,
 In the shade of kapok or flamboyant trees!
 Masks with lips pursed, eyes half closed on an inner
 dream!

Reproductions of people or animals, in gleaming
 bronze,
 With nonchalant or hard lines!
 Woven pagnes in fiery sunny yellow, indigo pagnes
 made for velvety curves!
 A feast for the eyes, Lat Dior Ngoné Latyr³ at the
 Senegalese exhibition,
 Symbol of heroic resistance!
 A feast for the eyes, the tapestries of harmonious
 colors, works of patience!
 Never have cameras captured so much magnificence:
 Plays and films on burning subjects, dances of yes-
 teryear, dances of rites
 That tame pain, dances of aggression and war,
 dances of royal majesty,
 Dances of the hunter’s confrontation!
 Black bodies, slender, with smooth muscles, quick
 to explode!
 I hear, accompanying your progressions, not “the
 veiled tom-tom of Black despair”
 But the “thousand choirs of negritude rediscovered.”⁴
 Dull humming of taut animal skins, beaten by
 drumsticks!
 The winged sound of the flute, the clash of iron rings
 on calabashes,
 Ringing of the bells worn on the feet, rhythms mod-
 ernized on thousand-year-old modulations
 Profusion of costumes, colors, feathers! Frenzy of
 creative imagination!
 Lagos? A second élan of Black people! Lagos? A
 hope for the quenching of sharp thirsts!
 Lagos reinvigorates the seeds of the past to sow the
 future.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

1. Burkinabé scholar, historian, and politician who authored influential histories of Africa. Ki-Zerbo’s lecture at the colloquium was entitled “Culture, Education and Development in Africa.”

2. Congolese philosopher and Afrocentric Egyptologist whose linguistic work extended the theories of Cheikh Anta Diop on the Black African origins of Egyptian civilization. Obenga's lecture at the colloquium was entitled "Egyptian Language and Negro-African Languages."

3. One of the last dammels (rulers) of the precolonial Wolof kingdom of Kajoor (Senegal), Lat Dior fought the colonial conquest by repeatedly sabotaging the extension of an important railroad before falling to the French at the battle of Dékheulé in 1886.

A popular anticolonial icon, Lat Dior was elevated to the status of a national hero by successive Senegalese presidents. The focus on Lat Dior in the official Senegalese exhibition at Lagos speaks to a state-driven search for commensurable symbols of resistance but does not entirely captivate Bâ, who in her poem seems more compelled by the pan-African connections she experiences in embodied performances and material cultures.

4. These quotations are from "Appel" ("Call"), by the Senegalese poet David Mandessi Diop.