

Autobiographical Authority and The Politics of Narrative

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Autobiographical narratives have been a major genre in African francophone literature since the publication of Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté* in 1926. The genre received a major boost during the 1950s and 1960s with Camara Laye *L'Enfant noir* (1953) and Bernard Dadié *Climbié* (1956), *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959), *Patron de New York* (1964), and *La Ville où nul ne meurt* (1968). A new development occurred in 1975 when two women's self-stories appeared: Nafissatou Diallo *De Tilène au Plateau* and *Femme d'Afrique: la vie d'Aoua Kéita racontée par elle-même*. Although autobiographical narratives have decreased in number recently, they still constitute an important part of African prose literature. In this study we will examine the autobiographical narrative and its social and political implications.

First, let us define what we mean by autobiographical narrative. For the purposes of this study it will encompass works labeled autobiography, autobiographical novel, narrative, memoir, and chronicle. How does the reader know that a narrative is indeed autobiographical? Texts such as Birago Diop's four volume *Mémoires: La Plume raboutée* (1978), *A rebrousse-temps* (1982), *A rebrousse-gens: épissures, entrelacs et reliefs* (1982), *Sénégal du temps de* (1987), Jacques Kuoh-Moukouri *Doigts noirs: je fus écrivain-interprète au Cameroun* (1963), Jean Mba Lenou *L'Enfant bamileke: autobiographie* (1971), *Femme d'Afrique: la vie d'Aoua Kéita racontée par elle-même* (1975), Oumar Dia and Renée Colin-Nogues *Yakaré: l'autobiographie d'Oumar* (1982), Bernard Dadié *Carnet de prison* (1981), Andrée Blouin *My Country, Africa: Autobiography of the Black Pasionaria* (1983) are obviously self-stories.¹ It is revealed in the preface to *Un Enfant du Tchad* (1967)

that it is based on the life of the author Joseph Seid. Other texts such as Nafissatou Diallo *De Tilène au Plateau* (1975), Seydou Traouré *Vingt-cinq ans d'escaliers ou la vie d'un planton* (1975), and Ken Bugul *Le Baobab fou* (1982) have first person narrators named Safi, Seydou and Ken Bugul, respectively, and were published as part of Nouvelles Editions Africaines African lives series. Nafissatou Diallo also informs the reader directly, in the forward, that she herself is the subject of *De Tilène au Plateau*. In an interview Ken Bugul insisted that "mon imaginaire part toujours de choses vécues, vraies, entendues, goûtées, touchées" ("Ken Bugul" 154).² N. G. M. Faye writes in the introduction to *Le Débrouillard*, part of Gallimard's "Témoignages" [eyewitness] series: "Mais croyez-moi, ce n'est pas une histoire gratuite que je vais vous raconter, c'est une réalité, du fait que je l'ai vécue moi-même" (7).³ The narrator is also named N. G. M.

When a book is not labeled autobiography nor is part of a special series, it is more difficult to be aware of its roots in personal history. Sometimes the author may provide subtle hints. While "roman" [novel] is inscribed on the title page of *Force-Bonté* and *L'Enfant noir*, it is generally accepted that they are autobiographical texts. The protagonists in both works, for example, share the same first name—Bakary, Laye—with the authors. Laye also insists in the text: "je n'ai relaté que ce que mes yeux ont vu" (80).⁴ *L'Aventure ambiguë*, on the other hand, carries on its title page simply "récit" [narrative], without indicating whether it is fiction or non-fiction. It too is generally considered autobiographical. Bernadette Cailler notes that Samba Diallo, the name of the protagonist, is the Peul equivalent of Cheikh Hamidou Kane (744–46). This leads to problems of genre classification.

Sometimes editors, reviewers, and critics cannot agree on how to categorize these texts. For example, Guy Ossito Midiouhouan considers *Le Débrouillard* (1964), *Histoire d'un enfant trouvé* (1971), *De Tilène au Plateau* (1975), *Souvenirs d'enfance* (1975) novels, while *Dictionnaire des oeuvres littéraires négro-africaines* labels the same works autobiographies. The genre classification of Bernard Dadié's trilogy is even more problematic. Are they chronicles (*Dictionnaire*), novels (Midiouhouan) or travel writings (Blair)?⁵ Sometimes the authors themselves refuse to categorize their work. Batukezanga Zamenga characterizes his *Souvenirs du village* (1971) neither as a novel, nor a tale, nor an autobiography (5). Nevertheless,

what all of these works have in common is that they are based on the real life experience of the author. For that reason I propose the term autobiographical narrative to describe these personal histories, a broader term that accommodates not only first and third person narratives, but other forms as well. Christophe Dially in his reviews of Simone Kaya's *Les Danseuses d'Impé-eya* (1976) comments on this mixture of categories:

... ouvrage d'un genre indifférencié, présente les caractéristiques de l'autobiographie, de l'essai et du roman. Simone Kaya se moque éperdument des genres. Son souci est de conter une histoire gaie, vivante, d'une enfance heureuse. Elle s'inscrit dans la lignée des conteurs africains qui ignorent les contraintes imposées à l'artiste par une catégorie spéciale d'oeuvre. (PA 170)⁶

Dially writes in *World Literature Today*:

Her combination of autobiography, essay and fiction blurs traditional divisions of genre and establishes her in the long line of African storytellers who ignore the constraints of category. (WLT 667).

Dially's concept applies to other narratives as well. Aoua Kéita's first person *Femme d'Afrique* has numerous digressions—the transcription of her mother's stories, campaign songs, and lengthy descriptions of customs. In Zamenga Batukezanga's *Souvenirs du village* the digressions take the form of a list of riddles and transcriptions of stories. Thus, the problem of genre classification of these works can be solved by refusing to be limited by traditionally accepted categories.

Most of the narratives reconstruct a childhood experience that is personal and yet representative as evidenced by the following titles: *L'Enfant noir* (translated into English as *The Black Child* and *The African Child*), *Un Enfant du Tchad*, *L'Enfant bamileke*, *Histoire d'un enfant trouvé*, *De Tilène au Plateau: une enfance dakaroise*, and *Souvenirs d'enfance*. Only *Pélandrova* (1976), *Femme d'Afrique: la vie d'Aoua Kéita racontée par elle-même*, and *Yakaré: l'autobiographie d'Oumar* carry the name of a person in the title or in the subtitle, and thus appear to singularize the experience.

Kocoumbo, *l'étudiant noir* (1960) and *Climbié*, also name the protagonist in the title, but both are third person narratives. In general, however, the emphasis seems to be on the life of an ordinary person, a life that is typical of many others, whether it is that of an aristocratic Diallobé like Samba Diallo or a youngster without a formal education like Seydou Traouré who is forced to work to help the family, it is a representative life, thus satisfying African culture's tendency to emphasize the group. Zamenga Batukezanga, for example, explains that he chose a generic name, Mbadio, for the protagonist of *Souvenirs du village* in order to accentuate the commonality of the African experience: "Ces lignes ne reflètent pas une seule enfance, mais, celle commune à la plupart de mes concitoyens" (5).⁷ Simone Kaya encourages a similar reading of *Les Danseuses d'Impé-eya: jeunes filles à Abidjan* precisely because the narrator most often uses the first person plural pronoun to show that her experience was shared by other girls her age. Jacques Kuoh-Moukouri chooses the same strategy and achieves the same effect in Part Two of *Doigts noirs* to show that his life as an interpreter was like that of many others in colonial Africa.⁸

Why write about one's own life? In African societies, where focusing on the self is considered discourteous, the choice of autobiographical narrative may seem contradictory. These particular authors' choice to do so is neither selfish nor frivolous. Their purpose is to inform, to "set the record straight" for others. As Nafissatou Diallo explains in the preface to *De Tilène au Plateau*, she wants to document for the younger generation the changes that Senegal has undergone since the 1940s. That objective is first illustrated in the opening lines where she reveals that her 1941 birthplace has since become a stadium. Aoua Kéita opens *Femme d'Afrique* in a similar manner by establishing for the reader the former geographical boundaries of Bamako by using present day landmarks. She then traces her involvement with the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain and its role in the transformation of the French Sudan into the Republic of Mali. Andrée Blouin, like Kéita, also traces her development as a political activist in the struggles for independence in *My Country, Africa*: "Within these pages I want to set down an account of my youth and the events that formed me for my work in that still unfinished struggle" (4). But, as she explains in closing, the emphasis is not so much on her personally:

. . . speaking of my life has been my way of speaking of Africa. I want to share my Africa with people who do not yet know what Africa may mean to them.

I want Africa to be loved. I speak of my country, my Africa, because I want her to be known. We cannot love what we do not know. Knowing comes first, then love follows. Where there is knowledge surely there will be love. (286)

The aim to enlighten is shared by all of the writers and made especially clear by the post-independence ones. That Blouin's text is addressed to a non-African audience, however, distinguishes it from recent narratives. In that sense, it resembles the self-stories published during the 1950s and 1960s. *Yakaré: l'autobiographie d'Oumar*, the life story of an immigrant worker recounted orally to Renée Colin-Nogues, is another exception. With its two maps of Senegal (one showing the distribution of its ethnic groups), an introduction and forward by Colin-Nogues providing a brief history of the country, it is obviously geared to non-African readers.

While narratives centered around the lives of political figures like Aoua Kéita and Andrée Blouin are few in number, all of the autobiographical narratives reflect a certain political and historical consciousness. Most describe African life affected by colonialism: Seydou Traouré is confronted by racism, Andrée Blouin is a victim of segregation, Climbié/Dadié comments on forced labor, Dadié recounts his and his fellow activists' prison experiences during 1949–1950. Abakar/Seid is imprisoned in 1945 for questioning a French candidate and later warned by the Président de la Cour Suprême about speaking his mind in public and taking political positions. Oumar Dia cites the fact that migration to cities was caused by the need for money to pay newly imposed taxes. The narrator in *L'Aventure ambiguë* devotes several pages to legacy of the physical and cultural conquest and occupation of Africa. The European school is a symbol of the process:

L'école nouvelle participait de la nature du canon et de l'aimant à la fois. Du canon, elle tient son efficacité d'arme combattante. Mieux que le canon, elle pérennise la conquête. Le canon contraint les corps, l'école fascine les âmes. Où le canon a fait un trou de cendre et de mort et, avant que, moisissure tenace, l'homme

parmi les ruines n'ait rejailli, l'école nouvelle installe sa paix.
(60)⁹

Birago Diop opens *La Plume rabouée* proudly proclaiming that his name and identity owe nothing to colonialism: "Déjà tout jeune j'étais fier de ne m'appeler ni Amadou, ni Abdoulaye, ni Pierre ni Paul et d'avoir un prénom qui ne devait rien (me disais-je) à la colonisation arabe ou européenne" (9).¹⁰

As we have seen above some writers condemn colonialism explicitly. On the other hand, Bakary Diallo in *Force-Bonté* welcomes the French presence and willingly joins the colonial army, becoming one of the famous "tirailleurs" (sharpshooters). At the same time, however, he admires and respects the cultural integrity of the other African troops. In one scene he describes an evening in which they—from Guinea, Ivory Coast, Dahomey, Senegal—sing in their native languages. He is impressed and concludes that in spite of their diversity, they are all brothers. This expression of African solidarity reflects Diallo's racial consciousness that must be acknowledged along with his political naïveté. *L'Enfant noir*, interpreted by some critics as a search to recover lost happiness, has been attacked, in particular, for its lack of overt political messages. That text, like many others, however, is presented from a child's point of view, a child too young to be aware of the oppressive conditions under colonialism. Simone Kaya addresses the issue directly in *Les Danseuses d'Impé-eya*, in which she explains that it was only after she became an adult that she realized that the community gave Félix Houphouët-Boigny such a warm welcome home because he had led a successful revolt against forced labor. As a child she was just caught up in the celebration and did not understand the importance of his actions.

Texts that are situated in post-colonial times are no less politically conscious. Ken Bugul confronts racism in Belgium, Andrée Blouin is vocal about her problems with neo-colonial governments. Diop, Kéita, and Blouin's self-stories also document the achieving of independence.

The social and political implications of these narratives are also derived in part from the fact that they provide realistic descriptions of African life. In this way they subvert the prevailing negative representations of Africans in Western literature and the media.¹¹ Africans in these self-stories are seen as people having traditions, family

ties, religious beliefs, a history, in short, a culture. Autobiographical narratives have the same function as other works by Africans, that is, creating what Jonathan Ngate calls a counter discourse (31). Mimesis and autobiographical discourse combine in these texts and function to subvert caricature and exoticism. One can conclude, therefore, that these autobiographical narratives are didactic in purpose and their authors conscious of their role of valorizing the African experience in order to undo stereotypical misconceptions.

This fact distinguishes African autobiographers from their American counterparts who, according to Albert Stone, are usually old men and women who celebrate their individuality: “. . . the passage of time—long decades in some instances—is required for personal experience and historical consciousness to coalesce” (28–29). For the majority of African autobiographers the synthesis of personal experience and historical consciousness came early in their careers. For Bakary Diallo, Camara Laye, Aké Loba, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Jean Mba Lenou, Seydou Traouré, Nafissatou Diallo, Ken Bugul, Aoua Kéita, and Simone Kaye, their self-stories were their first works, and for Bernard Dadié and Lisembé Elébé, their first prose works.

The francophone African autobiographical narrative functions as a collective voice as it recreates an individual yet representative life. Mimetic discourse is its deliberate strategy. With or without overt messages, it provides an eyewitness account to history. The African writer has inherited, in a way, the role of the traditional storyteller. Unlike this ancestor, however, his or her book has the potential of reaching a larger audience. Aoua Kéita understands the importance of the written text in building a nation:

... les travailleurs, même dans la vieillesse, peuvent continuer à apporter une contribution effective à la construction du pays. En effet, ces hommes surtout ceux ayant un certain niveau intellectuel, débarrassés de toutes préoccupations matérielles, peuvent réfléchir, concevoir et écrire leurs expériences multiples et riches en événements. Ces documents mis en forme par nos enfants plus lettrés, peuvent constituer un trésor historique pour les générations futures. (239)¹²

Kéita makes a case for autobiographical authority—writing one’s own life in order to inform. The inscribing of these particular kinds of

narratives is a conscious act that has historical and political implications.

Notes

1. Although *My Country, Africa* was published in English, I have included it in this study because the author was born in the former French colony of Oubangui-Chari, the present day Central African Republic, and grew up in the Congo.
2. "My make-believe world always comes from real life, true things that were heard, tasted, touched." Unless otherwise noted, the translations are my own.
3. "Believe me, this is not a gratuitous story that I am going to tell you; it is reality as I myself lived it."
4. "I have related only what my eyes have seen."
5. For further discussion on Dadié's form see also Janis Mayes, "Bernard Dadié and the Aesthetics of the Chronicle: An Affirmation of Cultural Identity," *Présence Africaine*, 101-02 (1977): 102-18; Janis Mayes, "Politics, Literature and the Aesthetics of the Chronicle," Introduction, *The City Where No One Dies*. By Bernard Dadié. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1986.
6. ". . . work of an undifferentiated genre, presents characteristics of the autobiography, of the essay and of the novel. Simone Kaya does not care at all about genres. Her concern is to tell an amusing, and lively story about a happy youth. She inscribes herself in the family of African storytellers who ignore constraints imposed on the artist by a special category of works."
7. "These lines do not reflect a single childhood, but, one that is common to most of my fellow citizens."
8. In his study of Zora Neale Hurston's novels, Michael Awkward notices a similar narrative strategy which he calls "shared voice." See *Inspiring Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 55.
9. "The new school shares at the same time the characteristics of cannon and of magnet. From the cannon it draws its efficacy as an arm of combat. Better than the cannon it makes conquest permanent. The cannon compels the body, the school bewitches the soul. Where the cannon has made a pit of ashes and of death in the sticky mold of which men would not have rebounded from the ruins, the new school establishes peace." *Ambiguous Adventure*. Trans. Katherine Woods, 45.
10. "Even when I was very young, I was proud of not being named Amadou, Abdoulaye, Pierre, or Paul and not having a first name that was due (I told myself) to Arab or European colonization."
11. For a full discussion of the image of Blacks in literature and the media see Lemuel

Johnson, *The Devil, the Gargoyle, and the Buffoon: The Negro as Metaphor in Western Literature* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1969); Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985); Léon Fanoudh-Siefer, *Le Mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire dans la littérature française de 1800 à la deuxième guerre mondiale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); Anne-Claude Lelieur and Bernard Mirabel, eds. *Negripub: l'image des noirs dans la société depuis un siècle* (Paris: Bibliothèque Forney, Presses Artistiques, 1987).

12. "... workers, even in old age, can continue to contribute effectively to building the nation. Actually, these men, especially those having reached a certain intellectual level and not preoccupied with material gain, can think, devise, and write down their numerous rich experiences. These documents, recast by our more educated children, can constitute an historical treasure for future generations."

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