

Student Reports

Ken Bugul: A Unique African Woman Novelist and Message

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During summer 2009, I traveled to Benin to conduct an interview with the African writer Ken Bugul at her home in Porto-Novo. Ken Bugul is the pseudonym used by the Senegalese writer Mariétou Mbaye Biléoma. Her novel *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (*Riwan or the Sandy Track*) was awarded the 1999 prestigious literary prize Grand Prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire.

In collaboration with my dissertation director, Dr. Carol Murphy, I prepared a questionnaire, which highlighted the two principal axes that characterize the Bugulian novels: first, her conception of the word tongue, and second, what she expresses with it in her fiction. Some of my questions follow.

For example, what does emotion effectively have to do with the notion of “mother tongue,” a theme that she developed in her presentation at the 2009 Gwendolen M. Carter Conference hosted by the UF Center for African Studies. How did the loss of her mother, who abandoned her at a very young age, affect her choice of language or tongue as well as her writing skills? Has the loss of her mother produced in her writing a unique tongue different from that of other African women who express themselves in French? Does she worry about not being understood by her readers, since her tongue is not the admissible one in an African society in which women are not allowed to talk about everything and any way? And finally, for whom is she writing?

Ken Bugul graciously welcomed all my questions, answered them fully and even went beyond my expectations. Her tongue for example is exclusively hers since she did not have any chance to learn it from anyone. On contrary, life had forced her to make it up by herself. So, she is not embarrassed at all by being understood or not. The orality in her writings is the manifestation of her will and need to hear herself while she is writing.



In many ways this interview will help structure my dissertation. For the moment, I aim to write an article for publication that will convey the content of our conversation. Finally, I would like to thank the French Graduate Committee for having awarded me the Else Duelund scholarship to travel to Benin.

Christian Ahihou is a doctoral student in Languages, Literatures, and Cultures studying French. Funding for his research was provided by the Else Duelund scholarship.