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Some thoughts on *L'Afrique humiliée*

An engaged intellectual, writer and figure in Malian politics, Aminata Dramane Traoré was born in 1947 in Bamako and went on to become Mali's minister of culture and tourism from 1997 to 2000. One of the lights of the alterglobalization movement, she wages her battle on all fronts – GMOs, cotton, privatization, migrants' rights, urban environment, political sovereignty, food security, and so on.

Following *L'Etau ou L'Afrique dans un monde sans frontières* (1999), *Le Viol de l'imaginaire* (2002) and *Lettre au président des Français à propos de la Côte-d'Ivoire et l'Afrique en général* (2005), in which she analyses the crises unfolding in Africa in light of the ravages of the neoliberal system, her latest book, *L'Afrique humiliée* (2008), lays bare the evolution of relations between France and her former African colonies in the age of neoliberal globalization and President Nicolas Sarkozy's 'chosen immigration'. In it she does some straight talking, as her book blurb shows:

We peoples of Africa, formerly colonized and now re-colonized under cover of globalized capitalism, repeatedly ask ourselves: what have we come to? The rich countries fear our presence when it is not capable of adding to what they already have, fear our differences when they are too visible. Useless, the new castaways crammed into their makeshift crafts supposed to carry them to the *terra firma* of Europe. Invisible, the desperate men trekking across hellish deserts. Undesirable, those who are handcuffed and escorted back to their country of origin. But Africa's humiliation does not reside solely in the violence to which the West has accustomed us. It also resides in our own refusal to understand what is happening to us. For there is not a Europe endowed with values and progress, on the one side, and, on the other, an Africa beset by darkness and misfortune. This vision, which some of us tend to internalize, shatters as soon as one pinpoints the mechanisms of domination, pauperization and exclusion. The challenge we face today is to imagine possibilities for a future centered on human beings: a reappropriation of our destinies that calls on our

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languages, our reference points, on social and cultural values that are familiar to us. (Aminata Traoré, *L'Afrique humiliée*, Paris, Fayard, 2008)

In an interview in Paris with Letizia Cravetto on 2 April 2008, Aminata Traoré talked about her struggle, which she carries on by writing.

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I have invested in writing as a privileged site of expression and a form of freedom in analyzing Africa's place in our increasingly troubled and violent world. I do not know of any other way I could have made myself heard. For years I have been writing about the women of Africa, among whom are my mother and one of my sisters, the potters, the weavers, and so on. But it is my publications on the consequences of neo-liberal globalization that have prompted the greatest response. I analyze this globalization using what I know of it from experience in my own country, Mali, whereas in other countries of Africa, the 1990s were to be the start of a genuine alliance between elected leaders and their peoples. Nothing of the sort happened, because national realities do not exist in their own right. Institutional and financial actors – as remote as they are anonymous for our peoples – have more power than we do over those to whom we entrust our destinies. This reality, which is by no means confined to Mali or to Africa, is particularly painful in our countries owing to the lack or even absence of social forces, unions and political parties able or willing to counter the prevailing discourse. As a result, most of the leaders sign up to economic reforms that daily worsen the situation of our continent. Our local protests are powerless due to the iron grip of the IMF, the World Bank, the European Union, USAID and others, who decide what Africa – and the South in general – should be and become. For them the word 'cooperation' means organizing spaces that do not belong to them to suit their own strategic interests. They preach free circulation for their capital, their goods and services as well as for their nationals, while attempting to put those they do not need for their economic growth under house arrest.

These practices become even clearer to us with the criminalization of 'undesirable' migrants. Until recently no-one fired real bullets. They were stigmatized, rejected and humiliated, but they were not confined in camps, dumped in the desert or beaten to death as in [the enclaves of] Ceuta and Melilla in 2005. The manhunt has thus become one of the dimensions of the selective and paradoxical globalization movement. The rich, 'civilized' countries continue to get richer on the backs of the rest, but they no longer hesitate to adopt stricter laws, build higher and higher walls and raise a veritable army (FRONTEX) against innocent people. All of this is intolerable,

totally absurd but also highly revealing of the true nature of the present world order.

Because I come from a continent that has been plundered and 'stigmatized', I feel duty bound to account for the double-speak and the imposture of the proponents of globalization as well as for the betrayal by a good proportion of Africa's political and intellectual elites, who have thought only of enticing the famous financial investors. The right, having shed its complexes, has no sense of humility and does not remember – or claims not to remember – certain pages of Africa's history. I am all the more dismayed – as a woman and a mother – because I know that it is the young people who pay a particularly heavy price for the asymmetrical power relations. The relationship between mothers and their children is such, in our countries, that when the human, economic, social and political rights of young people are infringed, we the women of Africa are viscerally affected.

Most of the young people who emigrate to the poles where wealth is concentrated hope to help out their mothers, in the first place, who, through their children's success, are avenged for the many deprivations in their lives, among which illiteracy and lack of money. That is what I hear and see around me.

One of the young men turned back at Ceuta and Melilla said: 'I left because I could no longer stand to see my mother working her fingers to the bone and suffering from hunger.' Those women who know this – something that is entirely new – accept the cutting of the umbilical cord a second time, letting their children leave and try their luck under far-off, uncertain and increasingly hostile skies. They are often willing to sell what little they have for this, even though they know they may never see them again. Today there are thousands of these women waiting, in vain, for news of those who have left, who have perished at sea or in the desert. This experience, which is new and cruel for Africa, has barely been explored. Most of the time these mothers can't locate Europe on a map, but they hope that it will be able to provide their children with a job and an income. It is for these courageous and dignified women that I often weep as I write.

My life and my struggle have no object outside these realities that I endure and which inhabit me. I know there is no way out except through a reflection on the globalized world and solidarity with other citizens who – under other skies – observe the same things we do in Africa. In other terms, my roots are in Mali and in Africa, and my anger comes from what I know, see and feel in and about these places. My allies, however, are all over the world, among the men and women of good faith who know that the headlong race for growth in a world of limited resources can only result in hunger, suffering and war.

I cherish the ambition to revive the social and political conscience as well as the enthusiasm and hope that were ours in the 1960s. I was 13 in 1960, when Mali and other African countries gained their independence. At the time, we believed a new age had come, one in which we were going to enjoy the freedom to think, choose, produce and live by and for ourselves. The night we celebrated my country's independence will remain with me forever. It was the first time I stayed up all night. I heard the griots singing about a Mali that – in the 14th century – was dynamic, alive and invigorating. We needed this past to galvanize our efforts and allow us to hope for a better tomorrow. This return to our roots was all the more necessary because the colonists made us feel we were nothing and that our newly independent countries had no future. Remembering our glorious past, we told ourselves that if we were capable of organizing and living with dignity before colonization, there was no reason to despair of ourselves and the future. My adolescence, which was a particular period of self-searching, unfolded – as was true for the young people of my generation in the newly independent countries – in a context of two cultures. In post-colonial states, in addition to being a personal searching, this was a political quest, one for a national destiny in an interdependent world.

In short, we dreamed of a new Africa in a new world, after having come through the colonial era, even though we had not suffered as much as our elders from most of the humiliations associated with this domination. I personally still remember the realities of colonial schooling, in particular my primary school – Maginot – where the 'native' children and the children of mixed race were on one side and the colonists' children on the other. There were no physical walls between us, but the classes were separated, and in the playground there was no question of our mixing or playing together. We would see them arrive in the morning with their drinking gourds filled with red and green sugar water, while we had to be content with water from the tap. We envied them, of course, but that was all. Nevertheless, this surely confirmed my commitment to a better life, where all children have the same rights in an international environment that does not subjugate one part of humankind for the sole benefit of the other.

That is, in sum, where I am coming from. I am all the more at ease in the alterglobalization struggle because my concern and my need to live differently is not only a personal project but one that extends to my whole family and country.

Translated by Nora Scott

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