

Contribution to an Analysis of the Daily Life of African Women

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To speak of women in Africa is to take a number of symbolic relationships governing individuals' lives into consideration. It is a fact that societies today are characterized by the massive presence of the phenomenon of urbanization. The women I am concerned with here are those who inhabit an urban environment or exist in relationship to one, since the city, real or imaginary, forms an integral part of the space in which women, whatever their origins, live and move.

To speak of African women and their everyday lives is to show that the real cannot be understood without relating it to the imagination underpinning it. It is at this level that the "women's share"¹ can still hold surprises for us as the indispensable complement to the exercise of power held by men. It may be wondered whether they possess a form of power, and if they do, in what sense. What interests me here is not the economic or political role as such; I wish to show that the societies in which we live remain governed symbolically by "the mother" or the "sister," instead of and in place of the "absent father." They have for a long time been presented as societies led by "fathers" or providential guides: it is only in a "family" however that you find a "father" and a "mother." Can it be said that African states are organized like a family? What happens openly and in public is explained by the omnipresence, the cohesion or the dislocation of the three cornerstones of the "household": the father, the mother, and the child.

Women's Share

Anyone thinking about woman (or women) cannot gloss over the fact that the object of their enquiry is an empirical one. Woman is not first and foremost an idea: she is a concrete, living, moving object who possesses a body, occupies a certain place in a dwelling, in a family, and in a given society. There are also images that are closely associated with her, with her body and with her mind. These images relate either to the traditional functions of wife and mother given her by society,² or to the specific qualities of submission, obedience, and duty of silence attributed to her by the prevailing ideology. What I call here the women's share is the conjunction of the attributes according to which it is tempting to say that in the African city one is born a woman, becomes a woman, and remains a woman whatever one's social rank, educational level, or office held.

What constitutes the point of departure of this division is the difference between the sexes. The girl possesses this body, the boy that. But the shift is made from the biological difference of the sexes to the idea that male and female are universal. Nature is sexed, all things are sexed. The myths then intervene to explain the origin of the sexualization of the world. *Dieu d'eau* by Marcel Griaule³ contains one of those creation myths which at the same time explains the origins of the practice of circumcision and excision. On closer examination most of these myths refer to the notion of a primitive androgyny among humankind. The question that arises is this: how are we to explain the presence of two principles, male and female, in the world? From this recognition of duality things get traced back to a lost unity, it being felt that, in those mythical and cyclical times which preceded the profane and chaotic epoch we live in, humanity was one and perfect. Once the world broke up, evil and want were introduced by accident. Man and woman strove tirelessly to reach each other but were never able to find themselves as one. The myth of the androgyne in Plato's *Symposium* is well known, telling as it does of the origin of love which two human beings can feel for each other because each of them seeks the half from which (s)he has been separated.

So in the beginning was the all-perfect-one, then duality was introduced into the world. But what was peculiar about this dual-

ity was the fact that one of the parts of the "two" found itself marginalized. It was weaker than the other, less enlightened, less mobile, more silent. So it can be said that to the recognition of the biological differentiation of the sexes was added the representation of the two sexes present as unequal parts with unequal values: the one was visible and in front, the other invisible and behind or below. If this division is unequal, there is an inferior part and a superior part. The female of the species is said to be "the weaker sex" and the male the "strong one." That is how one becomes a woman in the mind of others, of a whole society, in the collective memory in which are preserved traces of what we have not lived, of ideas circulating from the dawn of time. And if one is not careful one ends up believing it, because the founding texts, the myths, the stories, the words of everyday all declare that the woman possesses a share which she holds together with other women. A common lot is bestowed on her at birth, one which all women bear as a destiny.

There are many expressions in African languages designating the female genitalia as "below" or "under the body." Viewed from another angle a whole metaphysic of spatial positions corresponds to this representation, a series of oppositions that accounts for the division of the world in two: the high, the forward, and the right belonging in preference to the male sex which is also visible and strong. The low, the backward, and the left belong in preference to the female sex which is also weak and hidden. Thus, the male member is not simply an organ, a natural part of the body, it becomes a value governing the world, practicing discrimination from itself, a norm. It thus sets itself up as a phallus, a principle of discrimination.

In Africa everything leads to the conclusion that the woman's share occupies a certain space and has a certain value in opposition to the space and value of the other sex, the male. From birth girl and boy have their place and share reserved in the universe, for society is an integral part of a larger entity that embraces the sky and the earth as well as all living creatures, plants and animals, that inhabit the universe. Throughout their existence they will endeavor to actualize and fructify that share of life. Rites of passage, in some cases excision (for the girl), circumcision (for the boy), in the

regions where they are practiced, constitute important stages on the path toward the realization of femininity and of masculinity.

For, if one is born girl or boy, one has the potentiality to actualize what at the outset is given as a destiny. One fulfills one's destiny through the body and through the mind. As far as the body of the girl is concerned, what is expected of it is that it be capable of functioning, at a given moment, as a woman's body.

Two essential elements characterize this functioning: on the one hand menstrual blood and on the other maternity. That is why menstrual blood, considered as impure and unproductive, is surrounded by taboos.⁵ Sometimes the woman who is having a period must distance herself as much as possible from the rest of the family. This ancestral practice constantly haunts the collective memory.

But, paradoxically, the presence of menstrual blood is the obvious outward sign of the fact that such a given body, a girl's body, is becoming, naturally, that of a woman; and, before all else, a woman's body is an instrument to bear children. Under such circumstances femininity corresponds to the ability to bear and raise children. It is therefore understandable why, in cities as well as in villages, many couples separate because of infertility. Sterility is looked upon as a flaw,⁶ a mutilation of the female body: it is the inability of the body to give birth.⁷ What matters in the union of man and woman is that the woman be capable of giving birth; infertility is never an issue for men but a problem for women: "That seemed to him at once idiotic and shameful. An apparently normal man going to see a doctor ... to tell him 'I can't manage to have children,' what a ridiculous reversal of roles. Who'd ever seen anything like it?"⁸ And it is not uncommon to see a woman after giving birth to a child bearing the title: "the mother of ..." What that means in all honesty is that the child gives birth to the woman who thus fulfills her destiny as a woman in giving life; it is through the child's life that she too earns her right to exist, that she becomes respectable and respected. If that child is a boy, popular imagery decrees that her halo grow in dignity. And contemporary literature does not fail to exploit this theme: according to Aminata Sow Fall, "the child is the sun of the household."⁹

One can see how difficult it is, in these conditions, to convey messages in favor of contraception and birth control. The child

remains a gift from God. It is a woman's primary richness, the light around which she organizes her woman's life. Even if she lives in poverty, the arrival of a child will, she believes, be a source of happiness.

Sometimes women (the majority) do not have the financial means to provide for their children's needs; they rely on "family solidarity." But in the city the cohesion of the family is no longer what it was: the setting is different, space is restricted, and time itself, far from being infinite, is at a premium. Circumstances and realities, therefore, rather than speeches or public awareness campaigns run by non-governmental organizations, are what lead women to confront new situations and weigh the relativity or the precariousness of their situation as mothers. Their experience is based on the way the child – or natural resource – can be a burden and the cause of other worries (such as juvenile delinquency) which were not allowed for in the "women's share." So they learn, as they go along, that what the collective memory and received ideas teach them about their condition as women changes over time.

The women's share relates not only to the place given them both in the real world and in its representations, but also to the idea people have of the functioning of the woman's body which, from every point of view, is different from the man's body. In Africa the daily life of women, whatever their milieu or social rank, is still dependent upon considerations involving this natural "destiny," reinforced as the latter is by the dominant ideology. For this life remains governed by ancestral beliefs and is influenced by a world vision or an order that, despite losing momentum in the face of social change, is still operative in the collective consciousness. Fortunately, precarious and difficult situations (such as insalubrious accommodation and exhausting and poorly paid work) lead most women to "draw upon their own strengths." This expression remains extremely ambiguous. The strengths they can have recourse to in order to survive in the city do not fall like manna from heaven. The omnipresent religions are found to be of little use when it comes to solving concrete problems. The most they can do is help people wait stoically for better days.

These strengths are not merely physical; the body is involved too. Mind and imagination do the rest.

Indeed, education and instruction, which bring with them the knowledge of other cultures and the opening on to other horizons, do not seem able to overcome the conventional idea of woman as wife, as dutiful and silent mother, and as keeper of hearth and home. That is why one is tempted to say that in Africa, in the imagination of women themselves as well as of men, a woman is a woman: her life must be able to conform to a few received ideas whose origin is lost in the mists of time. Fortunately woman learns quickly, as I have stressed. In the African city, she puts into practice survival strategies that enable her to resist, enable her to discover that she is not that "share" attributed to her by all the myths and all the religions in the world, that she can be someone else, that she can above all transform, from within, the traditional roles of wife and mother and lead the world. She becomes conscious of the fact that she has at her disposal weapons that are none other than those already in her possession: body and mind.

When the Body Makes the Woman

The question one could ask is this: what is a woman? What is she like? Is she a consumer object as is generally thought?¹⁰ The woman is a human being endowed with a particular body and intelligence. She is obviously neither an animal nor a thing. She possesses a body that belongs to her by rights, even in the worst situations. This body remains her private citadel and it is there precisely that she prepares all the struggles she has to wage against life's harshness.

If initially the woman's body is viewed as a "machine" to make children, it appears, from another angle, like a danger permanently threatening man's moral and psychological integrity. For femininity is not characterized only by maternity. There is firstly the appearance of this body "at the bottom" of which there is a sexual organ to "hide," to veil. The girl's entire education revolves around awareness of the body: the way she should sit, with legs preferably placed against each other or held close together, and the way she should see and observe the opposite sex with whom she must keep a respectable distance; indeed, the girl is taught to

"look with downcast eyes."¹¹ For opening her eyes would be a sign of flagrant insubordination, perhaps the prelude to possible speech, whereas she is also taught to keep silent so as to limit her natural propensity to open her mouth about anything and everything. But in keeping her eyes down, the girl sees first her own body, and learns to look after it. Besides, is the notion of bodily cleanliness not inculcated in her from her earliest years? She leans to "wash" herself, to adorn herself. Does the desire to look good not spring primarily from of a heightened awareness of the body's existence? The woman who cares about being well turned out gives herself pleasure so as to be able to play better with the other who is not always there, who is frequently "absent" because he inhabits the public arena or adopts as his life's guiding principle the "hunt" or conquest of new territories or new women. She learns for herself that the body can be a major asset especially in a world where the woman is considered, too, as an object of barter.

With the passage of time woman's eyes have been opened to the world, to economic realities, and to the other body, that of the man. She has therefore become aware that in a world dominated by the economics of the market-place she remains a mighty force. Her femininity manifests itself through the effect produced by her own body on the other body which she sees or divines even when her eyes are lowered. This fascination that she exercises through the appearance of her body is called charm, grace, or seduction. She has probably got nothing to do with it. But by becoming aware of the fact that everything in this world is an assemblage of power relationships, she learns to play with her body. This game can take many forms. One of them might be prostitution or the antithesis of the procreative function. But let us first examine the basis of the games played by the body, whatever form they may happen to take.

When Clothes Make the Woman

For what is at stake in what I call here the play of the body is clothing and gratuitousness.

Where clothing is concerned, it is as much real as imaginary,¹² and in all the cultures of the world women know it. Here a partic-

ular stress is laid both on the quality of the garment worn and on the manner of wearing it.¹³ The garment is a language that speaks of itself and is understood by the initiated. But in a particular society this language evolves rapidly. That is why, in African cities, fashion is a system of signs involving the new technologies of communication: in African capitals dress shows and fashion and textile fairs constitute a big attraction for high society. Such gatherings are an integral part of the functioning of a system in which everything can be bought, sold, and exchanged. The presentation of clothing is merely an excuse for festivities during which dress does not yet speak the language of this or that particular body, since it is merely a model worn by a top model; such festivities are often repeated, and act as the focus for business networking and for making new deals.

But women in the underprivileged social classes and in the middle classes do not need fashion to be well dressed. Every day they conduct a dialogue with any piece of textile to hand, cloth or *pagne*, a veil not merely to conceal the body's nakedness, not to hide it, but rather to show it off, to display its curves, its forms, its angles, and to draw attention to the parts that need emphasizing. They know – survival instinct? – that a woman's body is not truly a body unless it is dressed and adorned, and here jewelry plays a far from not negligible role. If dress is a language, the clothed body is another language again. The one and the other meet with a view to creating the imaginary textile which can be called clothing and which is a source of wonder and fascination for the woman who thinks about it and who makes the idea a reality by wearing the real garment on her body.

Mamy Watta or on Seduction

The myth of Mamy Watta and all the other siren myths may perhaps point us in the direction of a better understanding of what is at stake here. Is Mamy Watta (or goddess of the waters, or whatever other name she is given in various parts of Africa and elsewhere) not the woman who is not woman? Her body, indeed, has nothing in common with a real woman's. In southern Ivory Coast

she is represented as a very beautiful woman with long hair; she has a woman's body down to the waist, but what is "beneath" does not exist, the lower half belonging to something different in kind, a fish for instance. Mamy Watta swims and flies amidst the waves and man sets off in chase of her without ever being able to capture her. But he remains prisoner of appearances insofar as his gaze tirelessly pursues a woman's body that is shown to be illusory. He does not know that this body is merely the effect of light shimmering on the water's surface, so he can follow his own fantasies until he drowns (or succumbs to perdition).¹⁴

This game of tireless pursuit rests on the principle of gratuitousness insofar as nothing is won or given in advance and nothing is certain at the point of arrival. And because capture is impossible, the game can continue; it shows us how seduction functions in a pure state, and thus indicates to us in what sense we can analyse amorous desire. On both sides fascination and fear go hand-in-hand: the fear of being captured, the fear of falling into a trap. In this sense the woman remains on her guard and gives nothing, that nothing of which the man desires possession in spite of everything.¹⁵ For this game is subject to certain tacitly accepted rules, starting with the very first: never to fall into the trap of what is at stake: seduction. The seductress seduces, the game comes to an end or is transformed into other kinds of relationships dominated by possession on the one hand and by submission on the other. This game becomes a relationship of unequal forces in which the woman starts in a losing position.

In a general way, and whatever the prejudiced may say about it, it so happens that African women are fighters. A glance at the way they earn their living and that of their family is enough to convince one of that.¹⁶ Numerous studies in economic anthropology have stressed this aspect. For my part I seek first of all to understand how this system of struggle-for-life, going through the subversion of old myths as I believe it does, gets established. One is inclined to say that in Mamie Benz,¹⁷ a shopkeeper who pulls the strings of an entire economy in certain African countries in the Gulf of Guinea, is concealed at first a Mamy Watta who has become a real body, with curves accumulated through the passage of time. But how is the change brought about? Two lines of inquiry suggest themselves:

- on the one hand, a growing awareness of the fact that, thanks to her femininity, the woman can profit from the market economy system in which as an object of exchange she remains a player who cannot be ignored, knowing as she does that she is a real woman around whom centers a nexus of power relationships which she tries to understand and turn to her advantage;
- on the other hand, from a political point of view, femininity becomes an indispensable pole of reflection which enables us to understand that domestic relationships are transposed to the general level of the city and the state; states governed in this way become states without a "Father" in defiance of the political discourse at the heart of which the Father is omnipresent.

Thus in the shadow of politics the figure of the mother (both mythical and real, possessing a body that must obviously be clothed) reappears.

The Woman, Sex, and Money

Women have understood that this game can be played in innumerable different ways; aware of the fact that femininity is a major asset, their concern is to exploit it as much as possible, sometimes in contempt of the prevailing morality. This point of view can be backed up by some pages of contemporary literature. Here, the body becomes what it hides and veils, in particular this nothing around which the rules of propriety cluster and matrimonial, economic, and political alliances are made. The woman, because she has a clear awareness of her own body and of the fact that her share (her destiny as a woman) remains unequal in relation to what is the man's due, seeks to "repair" the wrong done her. She scoffs at the ancestral idea according to which the woman is a chattel circulating from family to family, an item of property possessed and used to increase one's wealth, one's inheritance, one's dignity as a man, and one's respectability. In this quest for reparation, so that justice may be done, she uses her body understood as

sex, as object of fascination, and as a trap for the unwary. It is here precisely that sex and money meet. Florent Couao-Zotti,¹⁸ a Benin writer, shows how the woman, called prostitute, pulls the strings in a game involving sex, money, and politics. Nono sells her body. One day she kills with her bare hands, without really wishing to, a client who asks her for more than she can give of her body; he is none other than a "people's deputy." Another of Nono's clients, a famous younger man nicknamed Dendjer, who has a promising future before him since he is pursuing a career as world boxing champion, becomes an accomplice to this murder by helping Nono get rid of the body. But a third client arrives, another politician, who pays well; he distributes a few banknotes and offers the future champion a deal: give up his world title in exchange for Nono with whom he has fallen in love. This example from a work of fiction shows that in Africa, between men and women, sex is not just a matter of the pursuit of pleasure, it governs social relations and is at the center of markets. And the woman, prostitute or not, pulls the strings in this game. Sometimes economic and political interests influence this game, but does not the last word belong to the woman who gives or sells the most intimate part of herself? Another fictional character could be cited, Chaidana,¹⁹ the girl with the poisoned champagne, who kills in a cold and calculating manner all the male politicians that get caught up in her net. It is the only effective method she has of avenging the cruel death of her father, murdered by a politician.

If money and sex often meet in Africa, is it not because both serve symbolically as currency? And from the point of view of the man (male), if to possess a woman is to increase his honor, his material and immaterial goods, to have a lot of money plays exactly the same role. But is what can be bought with money purchasable with a woman? That is the question. For the woman, even caged like an animal, remains free in her body and her mind. This woman's body has always frightened men and all society because of that intimate part which is difficult to hold captive. Everything leads to the conclusion that women's fate is to remain close to their lords and owners, to the "masters of the house."²⁰ The mutilations of the woman's genitalia (excision, infibulation),²¹ underpinned in certain countries of Africa and Asia by religious

beliefs, show that the collective memory desires strongly to reduce the woman and her body to what they must be: a sexual organ reserved for the exclusive use of the man who is capable of possessing it by buying or earning it. For the woman's sex is a prize and the man must show himself worthy, morally²² and economically, to aspire to it.²³ That helps us understand why male impotence is regarded as the worst fate that can befall a man. This evil, it is believed, strikes wherever man dominates the woman, turns her into his private property for his personal enjoyment and for the greatness of his name.

Fortunately there is another image of woman also haunting men's imagination: that of the mother.

The Mother or the Woman-Refuge

Of all the images of the woman that can be listed, those relating to the mother are the strongest: this is the female representation to which every society remains attached. Popular songs, fiction, poetry, film, and the plastic arts never stop idealizing this image. Folk wisdom would have it that a man having to choose in a Corneille-type situation between his wife and his mother will always choose the latter for, it is said, one only has one mother whereas there are innumerable women to marry or possess, so in an emergency one could risk losing the one who is present in order to save the life of the only irreplaceable woman: the mother.

If the mother is revered, if her image is protected, it is because she is not a woman like the others. She is not a body but a spirit. At once real – since she gives life – and imaginary since representations of her are continually being created, the mother very quickly becomes a shadow, or a soul. The spirit I am speaking of can be considered as the life of this soul at once discreet and spiritual, sensitive and wise. For the mother is a woman full of wisdom: is it not with her that the child learns to take his first steps in life?

The fine novel by Emmanuel Dongala, *Le Feu des origines*,²⁴ is from a certain point of view a hymn to the mother, showing as it does that the mother governs the world, instead of and in place of the "absent father." It is true that the setting of the opening pages

of the novel is idyllic: everything takes place in nature, the birth of him who will later become "hero," and the first physical and spiritual contacts with nature and the world. From that instant the seal is set on the pact between mother and child: the child does not forget his birthplace, he does not forget his mother, and she protects him, brings him into the world both literally and figuratively. She entreats the favors of all the other creatures in the universe: "She showed her gratitude to all those beings who, among those who were still there and those who had already left, had heard the cry heralding the presence in the long circle of life of the new little creature."²⁵ This protective attitude could last a lifetime, so one is inclined to say, as I have stressed, that the man behaves as a "master and owner" of the woman. She, on the contrary, insists he show respect and pay heed to what she says as if he were a little boy and imagined for a moment that she was his mother, because to represent a woman as mother is to accept the idea that the mother is above all "protectress." That is why the image of the mother is associated also with the image of the hearth, of protecting and invigorating fire, of beneficial shade, of mother earth, or of the spring beside which the traveler, wearied by his conquests around the world, comes to rest. Authentic elements like fire and water meet around the mother who is not merely a fugitive figure but an indispensable one of astonishing complexity. Often in polygamous households the first wife plays the role of mother, of haven in which the man rediscovers spiritual serenity after spending a good part of his life in pursuit of the pleasures of the flesh. Her body might at a pinch continue to be an object of fascination: either side could harbor the odd fantasy about the fusion of one body with another, but the fusion would constitute a transgression and so, because of the fundamental taboo against incest, would never take place. The mother could symbolically devour the child or the adult he is destined to become. She could "castrate" him as psychoanalysts would say: only the presence of a father at that moment in the family drama could save the child, the mother and the community in which the drama took place, but is there a "father" in most households in the African cities in which difficulties of every kind upset the old order? The figure of the Father has been tarnished for decades; does anyone believe

any more in the goodness of the Father, in his image, or even simply in his presence? He exists of course, but where is he? That precisely is where we could transpose this family drama on to the scale of a whole society, of the nation-state itself.

Politics and Family History

At the level of the analysis of power relationships, in politics, the representation of the mother as a figure not to be ignored can be transposed. The political history of Africa since the beginning of this century presents us with irreplaceable figures: male figures. Some are looked upon as Founding Fathers, as Enlightened Guides, or as Fathers of the Nation, and constitute a favorite theme of fiction.²⁶ Today, with one or two exceptions, the line of Founding Fathers of African states is on the verge of extinction, and we are left with that of the Sons, of the Successors, or of those who, unknown until recently, enter politics because they believe that democratic states should be well run. But with the arrival of the new generation of leaders²⁷ the political landscape, in the majority of African states, has changed. The one-party regimes in which family dramas could be played out at leisure are a thing of the past. The figure of the father has broken into several pieces. Numerous political parties exist in every country. But in this situation of great upheavals, what has happened to the role of the "mothers"?

The novelists hammer home this idea borrowed from African traditions: a leader presents himself to his people through his genealogy. He is of this line and no other. He presents his letters of nobility to the Nation by stating his identity. A head of state, the politician and intellectual Léopold Sedar Senghor, has researched his, as can be seen from his essays. Others have remained more discreet about their origins the better to be able to cast themselves in the role of Founding Father, the mythical first link in the chain of the political history of a given country. In this quest for identity engaged in by politicians a woman has rarely been given a prominent role. No female ancestor is mentioned, and yet there is no lack of examples of warrior women or female politicians: Abla Pokou of the Ivory Coast (who came from Ghana in the eighteenth

century), Princess Yennenga (of Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso), Sarraounia of Niger, Béatrice of the Congo, and so on. Just because mythical or real women have not often been put center stage as “mothers” does not mean that they do not play (today still) a leading role. But the absence of women as “founding mothers” in politics is easily explained.

Generally speaking, colonization has reinforced the idea of the marginalization of women in politics as in social life. The encounter between Africa and the West has given rise, in the imagination of Africans, to an accentuation of discrimination against women. At first it was only boys who went to school, girls staying at home to help around the house or work in the fields. From one day to the next, rights that women enjoyed, particularly in matrilineal societies, were called into question.²⁹ With the new values conveyed by colonization men have always had the lion’s share compared to women, for example through the introduction of a (written) civil code indicating that the man is the head of the family, that the wife must take her husband’s name.

But the mothers are still there. Their face changes over time. From the old to the new they live in the shadows or act openly in their own name.

They are first and foremost influential women who do not need to get involved in the hurly-burly of politics; as mothers or sisters do they not have the necessary wisdom to deal the cards on the political poker table? They advise, they protect, they are the guardians of the body and soul of the ruling male politician. Recent Ivory Coast history demonstrates that this has often been the case.³⁰

This country, like many others, presents itself to the world under the mythical figure of the Founding Father. But without the protecting Mother (or Sister) the politician is a man facing alone the multitude he must govern.³¹ But the Mother, as we have seen, is above all soul and spirit of wisdom; she is not naked body. That is all part and parcel of the beliefs which still have currency at the end of the millennium. And the women of the people (without being the real mothers or sisters of heads of state) do not fail to exploit such beliefs. Thus during the social unrest in the Ivory Coast in the 1990s when the women took naked to the streets, it

was considered by public opinion to be a malediction of the first order, for the women knew that fundamentally the nation-state always functions as a family and that they are therefore symbolically the sisters or mothers of those in government. Consequently taking their clothes off in front of everybody in broad daylight constituted a language stating clearly that a pact had been broken. Politics no longer enjoyed the support and protection of the women-mothers: their public nudity was the blatant sign of this. From then on, until reparation was made, the world lay in ruins: the Father no longer existed if the Mother unveiled the hidden face of her body in the street. The child (the multitude) could then kill the Father and give himself the right to speak. It was the end of one story and the start of another. Thus political life in Africa changes as this century comes to an end. In the episodes that follow, if there is no longer a "mother" or "sister" in the shadows close to the male politician, there is always a woman, his wife, who appears openly as "mother."

In most African countries (the scope of this investigation can easily be extended) the wives of heads of state create non-governmental organizations, or more precisely "foundations," with the avowed aim of bringing aid to the most destitute, of protecting children suffering from malnutrition, women and the very poor. Is that not an effective way of perpetuating the idea according to which the woman who lives in the shadow of a leader, an outstanding man, is above all protectress? Here she becomes truly generous toward the whole family. The people no longer need to go up to the mother; it is the mother who comes down openly to announce in front of the television cameras her lifesaving mission and to carry it out. It might be wondered, though, whether the new mothers, the wives of heads of state, despite their generosity and the publicity they generate around their name, are already women of influence or revered mothers, for the multitude needs time to acknowledge the authority of the new "mothers" and to raise them to the rank of indispensable figures.

So the daily life of women in Africa is governed by a complex web of social relationships of a family type, even in politics. But in the city the family is no longer what it was and economic rather than human relationships oblige women to rely on their own

strengths.³² They have only their body, their mind, and their imagination to overcome the difficulties they have to face just in order to stay alive.

A minority of women have however developed a different strategy for survival: they are those who have taken the gamble of asserting themselves through public speaking in the political arena and in the professions, and above all through creation: they no longer simply procreate, they create too. At this level the functions that constitute their daily lot (wife and mother for example, and the representations made of them, such as women-bodies, women-goods, and mothers) no longer resist analysis. To make speeches, to take up the pen or the brush, is to bring oneself into the world and to be capable of accompanying others on the difficult pathways of the coming century. This role falls to African women too, provided that their women's share of speech is not forgotten. It is their duty to seize it in the face of growing economic difficulties and in the teeth of the rising tide of armed struggle and conflicts of all kinds. Ancestral beliefs, prejudices, and myths occupy an important place in the imagination of women themselves as well as of men, constituting a brake on the spirit of initiative and an obstacle to creativity and consistent decision-making. To engage in activism and speech-making in Africa today is to have a clear awareness of this perilous path.

Translated from the French by John Fletcher

Notes

Author's note: The educational system operating in the Ivory Coast has not made it possible for me and many others to be able to write in one or more of the languages of the country. I trust the reader will excuse the fact – for which I take full responsibility – that the summary in the local language is missing.

1. The Swiss-French woman novelist Amélie Plume, who describes women's daily life so well in all her books, writes: "You realize, Raoul, that women who represent more than 50 percent of the world population do 66 percent of the work, earn 10 percent of the income and own 1 percent of the property on the planet! Raoul, did you hear? Do you find that's still too much?," *Hélas nos chéris sont nos ennemis* (Geneva: Zoé, 1995), p. 13. (Editorial note: See too the *Rapport mondial sur le développement humain*, PNUD 1995, Paris: Economica, 1995).
2. The fact is that the woman herself in Africa, whatever her educational level, believes in the rightness of this division. It is as if the way people think had been tailored to this effect.
3. See "Seconde journée: la première parole et la jupe de fibres" (Paris: Fayard, 1966), p. 23f.
4. Plato, *Symposium*, 189df.
5. This concept is explored in the film by the Malian director Adama Drabo, *Tafé Fanga* ("The Power of the Pagne"), 1996, a film screened in the competition at the FESPACO, Ouagadougou, February 1997, which shows how menstruating women withdraw and live in a hut set aside for them at the edge of the village.
6. Aminata Sow Fall, *Le Jujubier du patriarce* (Dakar: Khoudia, 1993), p. 39: "In their village, when a couple had no child, it was because the woman was abnormal, because she bore a curse within herself."
7. In the daily life of African women the child is a treasure, as is shown by the names given at birth. Here the name can act in a negative or positive way on the life of the person named. This harks back to the Platonic problem of the rightness of names. A name always carries with it – or so it is believed – a whole metaphysical and cosmic charge which puts him who bears it in contact with what he must most closely resemble. Moreover the purpose of other names is simply to keep alive the child born into a family that has already lost many others, for example "The Traveler" or "The Leaver" (meaning "could he tarry with us awhile?") or the "Trash Heap" ("perhaps he is bringing us happiness; at least he is there even if no one wants him"). A study of the names could be interesting, but is not my present concern; it should be noted that most African writers play on the meaning of the names they give their fictional characters.
8. Aminata Sow Fall, p. 38.
9. *Ibid.*
10. The Congolese novelist Sony Labou Tansi (1947-1995) has familiarized us with terms that give clear expression to this attitude. The woman is "meat." But some perhaps escape the common lot; they become women of bronze, Estina Bronzarios; see *Les Sept Solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).
11. Anne Laure Folly, a Togolese director, shows, by letting women express themselves freely in her film *Femmes aux yeux ouverts* (documentary, 1993) that African women have for centuries "kept their eyes lowered." Today they at

last dare raise their eyes to see the world for themselves. The title of the film by Fanta Régina Nacro, from Burkina Faso, speaks volumes too in this regard: *Puk nini* ("Open Yours Eyes"), short, 1995. This film recounts the meeting around the same man of a model wife and a courtesan experienced in the secrets of seduction.

12. As Roland Barthes shows in *Système de la mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).
13. Here it would be tempting to write a whole chapter on the pagne, that highly prized object which is in itself a whole set of signs, an entire discourse. In certain regions, such as that of the Baoulés in Côte d'Ivoire, proverbs were woven on the pagnes. Today in the cities each pagne has a name. They are strictly speaking texts which record a country's history, the fantasies and the daily life of a given society.
14. In southwest Côte d'Ivoire, Mamy Watta appears among the characters of the mural paintings. This myth of the seductive woman continues to inspire artists. Véronique Tadjou, the Ivorian woman novelist and poet, has written a version of it for children: *Mamy Watta and the monster* (Abidjan: Les Nouvelles Éditions Ivoiriennes, 1993); the film-maker Burkinabé Gaston Kaboré, in *Buud Yam* (Stallion of the Yennenga), FESPACO, Ouagadougou, 1997, recounts, in one episode of the film, the meeting of the hero at one point during his initiatory journey with a water-nymph.
15. And there is surely no need to remind the reader that the pursuit of this nothing is not exclusive to Africa; the terms may change but the problem remains essentially the same. As Amélie Plume says with her novelist's gusto: "Some men, nice men at that, have claimed that we have nothing between our legs and that they have something. That's odd seeing how taken they are with this nothing [...]. But beware, it is not just a matter of pure wonderment. Our nothing that they are so taken with, alas, they also fear it, despise it, hate it ...," *Hélas nos chéris sont nos ennemis*, p. 85.
16. See Claudine Vidal, "Guerre des sexes à Abidjan. Masculin, Féminin, CFA," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, XVII, 1 (no. 65), 1978, p. 125. She is fed and housed less and less well if the number of children increases without the father's income going up. A period of unemployment, the illness of a child, or the older ones starting school, and the situation becomes critical; solidarity within the extended family can no longer see her through the worst. The woman has to make a financial contribution by working outside the home: "she shares the misfortune."
17. Much could be said about the "Mamies Benz," the name given in certain countries of the Gulf of Guinea to prosperous shopkeepers. They have a real economic power which can influence the politics of a country. Physically a Mamie Benz is a stout woman who dresses accordingly, wearing preferably a "two-pagnes" which envelops the whole of the lower half of her body down to her ankles.
18. See the novel *Notre pain de chaque nuit* (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 1998).
19. See the novel by Sony Labou Tansi, *La Vie et demie* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).
20. Certain everyday expressions, such as *Sotigui* in Dioula, a word some wives use to designate their husbands, reflect this vision of things: "master of the house."
21. So one can understand the fight against excision engaged in by women, NGOs (like ENDA-Tiers Monde in Senegal, AIDF in Côte d'Ivoire), and by certain governments (like that of Burkina Faso) against excision. Controversy

- has raged around this problem ever since 1978, the year in which there appeared the book by the Senegalese woman writer Awa Thiam, *La Parole aux négresses*, with a preface by Benoîte Groult (Paris: Denoël Gonthier).
22. Even if, in this domain, nothing can be more relative than considerations of a moral nature.
 23. *Tilai* ("Questions of Honor"), 1990, a feature film by Idrissa Ouédraogo (Burkina Faso), shows that in Africa (as elsewhere) no man touches with impunity the woman or girl betrothed to another; it is a question of honor, to be avenged in blood.
 24. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987).
 25. E. Dongala, p. 11.
 26. In the Ivory Coast Bernard Dadié and Ahmadou Kourouma, in the Congo Sony Labou Tansi and Emmanuel Dongala (not to mention more) have created worlds dominated by the massive presence of the "Fathers."
 27. As can readily be demonstrated, power is frequently seized by violence in a bloodbath. Repeated coups d'état are an integral part of history. The successors can also be military men.
 28. In certain countries like the Ivory Coast the Catholic church has however played a leading role in the education of girls.
 29. Does the man accept that the woman can have the same educational level as himself? To make access to knowledge freely available is to open the door, it is believed, to female domination. This domination is not that of the mother as protective spirit but of the woman considered as a body and as an object of exchange, of play, and of consumption.
 30. Each of the sisters of President Houphouët-Boigny, first president of Côte d'Ivoire, is called "Mamie," followed by the usual first name.
 31. The mother or national mum as Sony Labou Tansi puts it in *L'État honteux* (Paris: Seuil, 1981): "We led him from National Mum's village to the capital where he had never been before, never in his life," p. 7; "We all cheered when he called his mother Cook of the Nation. 'National Hotelière, Mr President,' said Carvano. 'Oh, why?' 'It's more beautiful, Mr President,' p. 12.
 32. But the question remains: how can fairer and more human relationships be re-established in the African city?