

To Europe by Pirogue

Alina Timofte on Abasse Ndione

Abasse Ndione has spent the past twenty-five years writing his novels sat upright on the bed he shares with his wife, his notebook perched on his lap, with neither desk nor computer, and only Bic pens for company. As the self-taught writer says in one interview: "Black is for writing, red is for editing, and blue for the final version." Born in 1946 in a fishing village near Dakar in Senegal, Ndione worked as a qualified nurse at Dakar's Hôpital le Dantec before entering early retirement. Since the early 1980s, he has devoted himself entirely to literature.

Ndione soon made a name for himself as an excellent observer of Senegalese society—above all its youth culture—revealing himself as a talented raconteur whose main interest lies in shunning established taboos. His prose fiction is rooted in two linguistic cultures, a feature common to Senegalese letters. He imagines his works in Wolof, Senegal's primary language, before transferring them into French, meaning that every text in its final configuration is a (self-)translation.

It took eight years for his first novel *La vie en spirale* to be accepted for publication by Dakar publisher Nouvelles éditions africaines, its subject having previously been deemed too provocative. In the end, it was published in two parts, in 1984 and 1988 respectively. Ten years later, the novel was accepted into Éditions Gallimard's *Série Noire* in France. The novel revolves around a topic that was largely taboo in Senegalese society in those days: the consumption and trade of "yamba" (marihuana) by unemployed youths, police officers, and white people. Not only did the book emerge as one of the most successful works of African literature published in the twentieth century, but it soon became an integral part of curricula throughout Senegalese high schools and universities.

Ndione's second novel, *Ramata* (Gallimard 2000), too, constitutes an implicit attempt to inspire, and then to maintain, a reflection on life in Senegal. Ndione masterfully weaves motifs and themes around the titular protagonist into a realistic portrait of Senegalese society. Blind faith in spiritual leaders, petty criminality, corruption, sexuality, revenge, and murder make up the ingredients of one of the best African works of crime fiction.

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Ndione's latest novel, *Mbéké Mi: À l'assaut des vagues de l'Atlantique* (Gallimard 2008), is similarly timely. It is a moving and admonishing piece—and the first work of literature to deal with illegal immigration to Spain from an African perspective.

The new year wasn't even eight hours old when the first African refugee boat of the year 2006 steered toward the Spanish island of Gran Canaria. Dozens of boats with forty to eighty passengers each were to follow over the course of the next month, and over the next few years, the Canaries became a major destination for

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many migrants and refugees. The luckier among them made it through the raging waves and to their destination. For the many who stayed behind, this was a clear sign that making the journey from Senegal to the Canary Islands in a pirogue—a type of boat mostly unfit for the open sea—was within “the realm of the possible.” What resulted from this? “And thus, the gates had opened for the unprecedented immigration of thousands of young Africans who escaped their countries in search of a better future in Europe even in times of peace.”

The motto which Ndione uses to preface his book stems from Senegal’s former Secretary of Culture, Penda Mbow, and gives voice to the criticism Ndione levels at his own country: “The massive immigration of adolescents from Senegal is proof of the failure of politics. In fact, it is the single greatest failure of this country.”

The year 2006 marked the end of the last Fisheries Agreement between the European Union and Senegal. Local fishermen and various organizations rallied for the renewal of the Agreement for several reasons: firstly, overfishing came at the expense of local communities who required fish for sustenance; secondly, Senegal sold her scarce resources all too cheaply; and thirdly, compensation payments went into state accounts and from there into private pockets. In 2012, reports emerged of corrupt Senegalese ministers who sold fishing rights to Russian and Chinese megatrawlers so as to bankroll their election campaigns.

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Ndione’s novel begins with a realistic portrayal of a crisis: the poor peanut harvest and the shortage of fish as a direct result of industrial fishing sends many of the farmers in four villages in the Senegalese hinterland into ever direr poverty. Over forty villagers, including men, youths, and one woman, some of whom have never even seen the sea or a pirogue, set out to escape this destitute situation.

In an interview with Senegalese newspaper *Le Soleil*, Ndione claims that the book is based on the testimonies of three young men who made the journey themselves. The language he chooses to describe the preparations, the launch, and finally, the hazardous journey to the coveted “El Dorado that is Europe” is both simple and effective in the sense of urgency that it conveys.

His protagonists, meanwhile, are introduced in quasi-cinematographic style chapter by chapter along with their dreams, big and small. The price tag on the trip to Europe is 600 euros, then there is one week to think things over, by the end of which European relatives will have to transfer the money. Before the boat takes off at midnight, prayers will be said, lucky charms will be arranged according to the marabout’s instructions, life vests—supposed harbingers of catastrophe—are to be removed, passports burnt. Getting to know each other slowly over the course of a long passage, the passengers are gripped by the euphoria of a new beginning: “In spirit at least they had made it to Europe.” But on the eighth night, on the brink of reaching their destination, the stormy ocean vanquishes their small boat. Faith and self-restraint—the predominant values of their Senegalese villages—are thrown overboard in this state of exception. In their place, there is fear, hunger, thirst, chill, and sickness.

Within narrow confines, Ndione’s novel maps out the struggle for life and survival experienced by Senegalese youths. It renders

tangible their lack of perspective—that which they share with people from all over the globe: those who flee Vietnam for Malaysia, from Cuba to Haiti to the US, from Africa across the Atlantic and the Mediterranean to Europe, from North Korea across the Japanese Sea to South Korea, from Sri Lanka to Australia. All of these are the exodus routes chosen by the so-called “boat people.”

If it is not just mastery of poetics but also relevance that makes for truly great literature, then this small book has achieved as much. Ndione challenges his reader to think for herself, to come to her own conclusions, featuring images that remain suspended in our imagination with no pathos or ornamentation. Ndione’s work is essential—and not just for European readers. ✦

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