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Interview with Professor Omar Sougou on Oral Literature,
Teaching Philosophy, and the Future of African Scholarship in a
Rapidly Changing World

Cheikh Tidiane LO
Université Gaston Berger de Saint Louis (Sénégal)



Omar Sougou is a retired Professor of African Literature at Université Gaston Berger of Saint-Louis. The interview I held with him delves into the fascinating academic journey of a distinguished scholar in African literature.

Starting from his early education in the 1950s through to his remarkable career in academia, the interview explores the various stages of his development, including the challenges and motivations that fueled his success. Professor Sougou recounts his experiences at different educational institutions, his transition from student to Assistant Professor, and his rise to leadership roles within the university.

He shares insights into his contributions to the establishment of the English Department at Université Gaston Berger and his efforts to innovate teaching methods, particularly in African oral literature and gender studies. Throughout the conversation, Professor Sougou reflects on the evolving landscape of African literature, the importance of integrating oral traditions into modern pedagogy, and the future challenges facing African academia, particularly in the era of digitalization and artificial intelligence.

His reflections serve as a valuable resource for understanding the intersection of education, literature, and technology, while also offering advice to future generations of scholars to embrace new opportunities for growth and collaboration in the global academic community.

Cheikh Tidiane Lo: Hello dear Professor Sougou, it is a pleasure to hold this conversation with you.

Omar Sougou: My pleasure, Dr Lo.

CTLO: First off, I would like to ask you a question about your background, starting from your early schooling going forward to your PhD degree. What challenges did you face in your career as a student, and what really motivated you to achieve your goals?

OS: Thank you for your interest in my background and academic life. It's quite a lengthy journey back to early school days after retirement. Isn't it? But let's try. I started primary school in the late fifties. Later made it to high school, Lycée Blaise Diagne, Dakar, that I left for Université de Dakar in the early seventies. There I was placed at the Department of English since I couldn't make it to the school of Medicine because of my arts and letters background. Thus, I graduated in English with a major in African literature. Following the BA, I got an MA in English and African literature. I taught English in private High schools to supplement the half-scholarship I had, to make ends meet. I finally joined the national teacher training college, Ecole normale supérieure (ENS) now FASTEUF; at the end of the training, I was posted to high schools in Thiès and Dakar.

Few years later, arose the opportunity to do a postgraduate diploma in Linguistics and English Language Teaching at Moray House College of Education, Edinburgh, UK. I was to return there with a British Council scholarship, this time for an MLitt. in English as a Literary medium, that is Literary linguistics, at the University of Aberdeen. That degree was a kind of fulfilment of a cherished idea to study the workings of the English language in the literary text. There followed an admission to a PhD programme, a

chance to resume African literature. The University library held an impressive collection of African literature, and important sociological and anthropological resources. Should I need works that were not available, the library provided them through inter-library loan in short notice.

CTLO: What were the different academic and administrative positions you held in the service of the English Department, the College of Arts and Humanities, and the University at large? How did you manage to balance professional work and family life going forward?

OS: I joined the English Department of Université Gaston Berger (UGB) in October 1991 as Assistant Professor. Administration wise, over the years I held the positions of Head of English Department, of Deputy Dean for the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) for Research, Innovation and International Relations, Dean elect of the newly established School of Educational and Sport Sciences. Subsidiary appointments include Director of the UGB Centre for Teaching Excellence, Vice-President of UGB Senate, and Chair of the Academic and Innovation Commission.

Clearly, it was hard at times to balance teaching, research, administrative duties and family life. As you know, academic advancement requires publications for each of the major ranking stages: Assistant Professor, Associated Professor, and full Professor. So, one has to strike the right balance in order to achieve one's self-set goals and the institution's objectives. Of course, that needs sacrifice, sometimes, family life suffers from it, but fortunately, I could rely on my wife's and children's understanding. Mind you, it is not that easy. The long absences from home, late night work, the pressure both from academic and administrative sides, the need to abide dutifully by the rules and duty deadlines. It can be a burden to feel people's trust on one's shoulders.

CTLO: Professor Sougou, you are a specialist in African literature and one of the founding members of the English Department at the University of Saint-Louis in 1990s, can you tell us what it felt like teaching in those days

and how you succeeded in making your students enjoy the learning and research process?

OS: In 1991, I found a group of four full-time faculty, assisted by part time teachers. The HOD, Dr Abdoulaye Barry, together with Dr Mamadou Camara, Dr Moustapha Diop, and Dr Baydallaye Kane warmly welcomed me. They had already set up a curriculum; the idea was to avoid replicating UCAD at UGB. Teaching was both a pleasure and a challenge. Student intake was about fifty per department, and only the best ones managed to get through. The challenge consisted in designing relevant courses; and I prepared myself for that. I brought with me significant audio-visual materials and books in English. To African literature and civilization course were added “Commonwealth” studies, namely Caribbean and Asian literature and history of ideas; postcolonial studies, as it were. I suggested Stylistics. High school teacher training tremendously helped me in classroom handling. In addition, I made use of teaching aids such as films (documentary as well as feature ones). UGB provided all the necessary audio-visual aids and language laboratories. I was happy to see that student-centered approach was in use, with a good deal of group work. Students seemed to enjoy the courses I taught.

Still, securing the needed and relevant books was hard for them, as it was for digital materials. Now, the situation has greatly improved for students and teachers, it is a rule of thumbs that knowledge is available at a click. Both teaching and learning have become much easier, witness the numerous distance learning platforms and devices. As far as the extent to which students enjoyed learning and research, it is up to them to testify. Judging by the course evaluations I usually carried out at the close of each course, satisfaction is the trend.

CTLO: Throughout your career as a specialist of African literature, what were the prominent theoretical questions you grappled with?

OS: As with any literary practice, African literature, although fairly young compared to others, receives critical attention from various schools of thoughts. As a result, anybody dealing with it has to contend with theoretical

questions such as the nature and function of African literature, its development, hence the new trends. Marxism and literature, the language issue, women in African literature, have always been of interest to me, just as corollary questions like orature, historical imagination, the place of literature in the global concert.

CTLO: What writers drew the focus and interest of the academic world in African literature in your opinion, and how did you bring those trendy debates in class?

OS: In the early days of African literature writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Nurridin Farah, and Alex Laguma, to name a few, caught critical attention. They were on university reading lists in the mid-twentieth century, and continue to be so in the twenty-first century. Ascending female writers joined from the late seventies, namely, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Micere Mugo, and Laretta Ngocobo, for instance. Of course, young generations have come up and are increasingly winning literary acclaim, among whom, Ben Okri, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and more.

Along the years, focus and interest have shifted. Beyond African endeavours within the continent to developing its literature through conferences and journals like *Transition/Chindaba*, *Drum Magazine*, *Présence africaine*, *African Literature Today*, and many other periodicals that followed, African studies flourished in the eighties in America and, US universities opened to African Scholars, specializing in all realms of African studies, including the literature coming from the continent. There seemed to be a need to understand Africa that benefitted African literary Scholarship. Thus, academics could enjoy the research opportunities given them in African studies programs and learned societies such as African Studies Association (ASA) and African literature Association (ALA). Sundry books on African literature by African scholars came out of American universities in the same way as specialized journals like *Research in African Literatures*, and *African Studies Review* to some extent.

CTLO: I imagine there were particular authors and literary critics that personally affected your research, some of whom you probably met up in person during conferences and symposia? Can you tell us more about that?

Definitely, among them Chinua Achebe was the one whose *Things Fall Apart* I discovered in our library, while I was completing Junior High, at that time. It was like an epiphany. That was the first full length and non-abridged novel in English that I read from cover to cover. Before that, I would read books from the Ladder edition series, and similar ones, which published simplified and abridged versions of American and British literature classics. I borrowed them from the American Cultural Centre of Dakar. There I met a host of writers, among whom John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, Charles Dickens, and others.

Coming back to African literature, Achebe really clinched it. Reading *TFA* plunged me in a cultural environment I was familiar with, and that experience was similar to reading Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir*. These two books offered me keys to African literature. More exposure and acquaintance with other African writers occurred at university. Meeting Alex Laguma was a further eye-opener, because of his Marxist approach to society, especially to Apartheid, that was in line with the ideological persuasion of the youth of our times. My M.A. thesis was on his works. At the time, the late seventies there was not much on African literature, in terms of critical theory. We made do with what was available, some of which were by non-Africans. But the novelists themselves were essayists, and their reflective writings helped in the critical debate. I could refer you to an article of mine for more information on the matter.

Regarding writers and critic, I met, one can mention Ngugi wa Thiong'O, at the lecture he gave at Stirling University, Scotland, march 1990; Ama Ata Aidoo, Micere Mugo, Gabriel Okara, Ben Okri, and critics like Abiola Irele, Carole Boyce Davies and more, at the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) SILVER Jubilee Conference, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK, 1989. At the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS) held at Aachen (Germany) and Liège (Belgium), 1988 I got acquainted with Geoffrey

Davis, Albert Gérard, Chantal Zabus, Anne Adams Graves, Edward Kamau Braithwaite, University of West Indies, Adrian Roscoe (author of *Mother is Gold: A Study of West African Literature*, 1971)

Pr Harold Scheubb at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, shared his works on oral literature with me. Aliko Songolo and Nellie Mckay welcomed me as well and we discussed issues in their specialties. We welcomed Molaru Ogundipe at Gaston University for a lecture.

Being a visiting fellow of the Centre of African Studies, University of Cambridge, UK, September 2005- March 2006, gave me the opportunity to meet there Vincent Y. Mudimbe, Paul Gilroy, Tejumola Olaniyan, and Mamadou Diouf, and a number of African fellows.

CTLO: Going through your publication, especially, your commendable monograph, *Writing across cultures: Gender politics and difference in the fiction of Buchi Emecheta*, released in 2002, I realize that you raised compelling questions about gender and women's condition in African literature. Could you describe the context in which you wrote that book and what particularly led you into that debate on gender through Buchi Emecheta's writing?

People ask me a similar question sometimes. My interest in women dates back to my undergraduate days when student militancy was at its peak in the wake of the late sixties (1968). The seventies were marked by global interest in women's liberation with events such as the UN designating 1975 the International Women's Year. Women are a significant part of the overall liberation process, in Marxist terms. I wanted to explore what was called 'the woman question' in literature, African, specially. I intended to write my M.A. thesis on women in African literature but finally opted for Apartheid in Alex Laguma's fiction.

This is without knowing that, ten years ahead, I was to reunite with my initial project, that is, women in African literature. Having won a PhD grant after an MLitt at Aberdeen, I could work on Buchi Emecheta on the prompt of my supervisor, who specialized in women's literature. It was a happy reunion for

me, a dream fulfilled. The book you mention is actually my PhD dissertation published. Oddly enough, it perhaps caused me to be nominated “The Woman of the Year” by some international biographers (smile).

Way back in 1986, Emecheta, was an acclaimed Nigerian emigrant writer in Britain whose fiction I broadly tackled from a Marxist perspective backed by gender informed analysis. Mind you, an early critic of African literature, Adrian Roscoe, I met at Aachen (Germany) and Liège (Belgium) in June 1988, said to me, “writing on women, you can’t be right, just like a European writing about African literature.” Nevertheless, driven by interest and militancy I carried out my project, albeit from an outsider’s point of view, taking part in the debate you refer to. The task required sustained research. In this respect, I had been selected as a Fulbright New Century Scholar in 2004, the program theme was “Toward Equality: The Global Empowerment of Women”.

CTLO: Later in your career, as a professor of African literature, you have developed novel courses in African oral literature running since 2007. What was your motivation in initiating those courses in the curriculum? Did you achieve your goals?

Having taken your oral literature classes, I recall the in-classroom oral performances by invited artists and griots as well as the animated discussions we held on orality as a key feature of African communities through authors like Isidore Okpewho, Harold Scheub, Ruth Finnegan, Chinweizu Ibekwe, with his pan-African leanings, and so on. Also, class talks included how orality is refracted by literacy and the new technologies, based on scholars like Walter J. Ong, or simply adopted and adapted in African written literature. At the end of day, pure orality appears chimerical because of hybridized modes of expression where orality, literacy, and gradually, digitalization, are forced to coexist, coalesce, enriching mutually. Right?

OS: You have pinned down the issue and the methodology of oral literature classes. Definitely, pure orature, as it were, is not tenable. This does not mean that orality is no longer, it survives in specific cultural areas, bearing its traditional features in its different components, from which writers draw to

reinforce their artistry. As you may recall, the focus was on interface, that is, the recognition of verbal art, *per se*, and its inscription in the written text (the script).

Regarding your question about my motivation to initiate the oral literature course, it results from interest in oral literature triggered by Pr Lilyan Kesteloot's course at Université de Dakar. In addition, I was keen on folktales, myths and legends, and kept bearing them in mind. Hence, when the Department here wanted to broaden the range of courses in the *LMD* framework, I suggested oral literature because there is plenty of works available in English. Of course, there existed a similar course in the French Department, and for some time we tried to link the two, but realities prevented us to achieve it. After a year of teaching it, course evaluation by students showed strong appreciation of the course at BA and MA levels, a sign of success that urged us to carry on. There followed a couple of PhDs in the interface orality and written literature. You, yourself, are one of the success stories, as you succeeded in getting a PhD in the oral literature at the Folklore Department of Indiana University. Finally, intermediality is likely to be a fruitful research approach to examine the interconnections of orality, literacy and digitalization.

CTLO: In your view point, what are the future challenges as far as teaching and research in African oral literatures are concerned, or aspects that need further exploration-- all against the backdrop of the ever-poignant AI (Artificial Intelligence)?

OS: As discussed in class, technology helps a great deal in verbal art collection, treatment, and preservation, from the tape-recorder to the digital camera, and now the smart phone. With respect to what is happening now in the digital sphere, specifically with the advent and the tremendous growth of AI, orature can gain a lot, just as scholarly production in other areas of knowledge: science, literature and critical theory. Yet AI might endanger personal reflection, I mean critical thinking and creativity, acumen might be stunned or dampened, as it were. A learned society, the Modern Language Association (MLA) is handling the matter by a number of initiatives addressing the issue through webinars. They focus on AI and classroom

practice, language, writing, the pedagogic opportunities and threats like plagiarism, and more, related to how to adapt to this extremely fast evolving information technology like ChatGPT. There is now a notable interest in AI use in the broader economic and social domain in this country, education should not be caught unaware in this fast-moving phenomenon.

CTLO: Methodologically, how did you teach oral literature, knowing that it was quite new for the students? And how did the latter receive and appreciate the new subject across time, as they moved along in their academic careers?

OS: You roughly described the methodology used in class in the comment above. I'll just add that the course induced two graduate students to complete PhD dissertations inspired by the oral literature course. You, too, embarked on a PhD in oral literature and folklore.

CTLO: It has been a couple of years since you retired. Standing away from the classrooms and academic forums, how do you see Senegalese and African academy's strengths and weaknesses today? Do you envision any inhibitive or exploitative threats to, or opportunities in terms of partnership and collaboration for, the African-grown scholarship vis-à-vis global academia?

OS: It has been quite a while since I retired, and a lot of water has gone under the bridge. Being out of the classroom does not mean remaining idle. One is keeping busy, writing and translating, yet away from the academic forums physically but connected via the world wide web and social media, although sparingly.

About Senegalese and African academics, talking about Senegalese colleagues specially, most of them are dedicated and eager to do and give their best. They enjoy better opportunities than some of us did, when we were active: research has become much easier and yields tremendous results, thanks to increasingly better access to online libraries, open access resources, with minimum movement. Knowledge has become more than ever available, and a click.

Financially speaking, they enjoy relative ease, owing to salary increase following the rank rescheduling implemented few years ago. This asset

should enable academics to improve their publication records and teaching, thereby the quality of their work. If on the contrary, they tend to think there is no more incentive to seek career advancement, as the salary is good, doom may befall the trade. There lies the risk to avoid, which is a real concern.

Furthermore, there exist numerous opportunities for partnership to improve academic achievements by way of university linkage, both at intra-national and international levels. In this respect, The CAMES (*Conseil africain et malgache pour l'enseignement supérieur*) can serve as a matrix for rich partnership engaging all its members in fruitful exchanges likely to carry forward their academic development. The AAU (Association of African Universities) is another important channel to enliven and use efficiently. Of course, the global environment offers numerous avenues for collaboration that are usable to meet higher education requirements. We do have valuable and deserving academics at home and abroad who are fit to stand up to any challenge in their areas. It is just a matter of will.

CTLO: How did *SAFARA* and *LARAC* come into existence in the English Department?

As a rising department with young colleagues and students in need of a conducive academic environment, it was necessary to offer them more research assets. Therefore, the English Department launched a Journal named *SAFARA, Journal of Languages, Literature and Culture* in collaboration with Nigerian visiting professors who were part of the Nigerian Technical Aid Corps (TAC) in 2001, a programme spearheaded by Dr A. Barry. The Nigerian Embassy funded the first three numbers, then the College of Arts and Social Sciences took over. *SAFARA* is still alive and well. We hope that our younger colleagues will see to its thriving

The next step was to help create a space for our colleagues and students to share their productions, a Research Group in Arts and Culture (GERAC) was set up in 2005 with *SAFARA* as its research outlet. The group became *Laboratoire de Recherche en Art et Culture* (LARAC) to fit in the overall university Graduate School policy. This entity has contributed to the

production of numerous dissertations in African, American, and British literatures and civilizations. It is a legacy to preserve and develop.

CTLO: Any final thought?

OS: As part of the old guard, I continue to urge my younger colleagues to get out of the beaten track, and venture into the richly growing literatures in Africa, to study new writers and recent trends; and why not break new theoretical grounds? The present-day generation has to take full advantage of the sweeping changes in Artificial Intelligence developments, and fare better in the global academia; hence, they will help make their universities world-class ones. The ball is in your/their court. Do make the best of the technological breakthroughs.

CTLO: Thanks for your precious time, Professor