

QUATRIEME  
NUMERO DE LA  
REVUE AFRICAINE  
DES LETTRES, DES  
SCIENCES



KURUKAN FUGA  
VOL : 2-N°5 MARS  
2023



KURUKAN FUGA

La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales



ISSN : 1987-1465

Website : <http://revue-kurukanfuga.net>

E-mail : [revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com](mailto:revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com)

VOL : 2-N°5 MARS 2023



Bamako, Mars 2023

# *KURUKAN FUGA*

La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales

ISSN : 1987-1465

E-mail : [revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com](mailto:revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com)

Website : <http://revue-kurukanfuga.net>

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## GENDER AND RELIGION IN MALIAN LITERATURE: A READING OF SEYDOU

### BADIAN'S *SOUS L'ORAGE* AND *NOCES SACRÉES*

**Dr. Alassane Sidibé**

*Lecturer at IUG-USSGB*

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#### Résumé

L'article aborde l'épineuse question du genre et de la religion dans une sélection d'œuvres de Seydou Badian. Le problème est que la littérature africaine masculine a tendance à ignorer le genre et que la question de la religion est généralement associée à la modernité et à la civilisation. La présente étude a été mise en œuvre dans le contexte théorique du postcolonialisme. Les résultats de l'étude ont indiqué que le genre n'est pas réellement un problème dans la culture africaine mais que c'est sa conception européenne qui constitue un problème pour les rôles complémentaires qui ont toujours existé dans les sociétés africaines, principalement dans les cultures mandingue et bamanane. De plus, ils ont montré que la conception de la religion par l'Occident a été associée à la modernité et à la civilisation privant l'Afrique précoloniale de toute présence de civilisation.

**Mots clés :** *Afrique, genre, modernité, religion, tiers espace d'énonciation.*

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#### Abstract

The paper tackles the thorny issue of gender and religion in selected works of Seydou Badian. The problem is that male African literature tends to ignore gender and the issue of religion is generally associated with modernity and civilization. The current study has been implemented within the theoretical context of postcolonialism. The findings of the study have indicated that gender is not actually a problem in the African culture but it is its European conception that constitutes a problem for the complementary roles that have always existed in African societies, chiefly in the Mandingo and Bamanan cultures. In addition, they have shown that the conception of religion by the West has been associated with modernity and civilization depriving precolonial Africa of any presence of civilization.

**Keywords:** *Africa, gender, modernity, religion, third Space of Enunciation.*

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**Cite This Article As :** Sidibe, A. (2023). Gender and religion in Malian literature: a reading of Seydou Badian's *sous l'orage* and *noces sacrées*. 2(5) (<https://revue-kurukanfuga.net/> Gender and religion in Malian literature: a reading of Seydou Badian's *sous l'orage* and *noces sacrées*.pdf

#### Introduction

Malian literature, like African literature, is the mirror of the Malian society. That is why, Malian writers like Seydou Badian writes about the everyday happening of the Malian people and Africans

in general. It is actually in this context that the issue of gender and religion in Seydou Badian's *Sous l'Orage* and *Noces Sacrées* is investigated. We have selected to investigate such a highly important issue for two main reasons. The first is related to the fact that male African writers tend to minimize the issue of gender equality in their works. As for the second one, the author intends to reveal through the selected works of Badian the way the issue of gender and religion matters in male African literature contrary to their female counterparts like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and the like.

In regard to the above, the objective of the paper to account for the issue of gender and religion and their ramifications in Seydou Badian's *Sous l'Orage* and *Noces Sacrées*. While doing so, the following research questions are formulated to guide the study: How is the issue of gender and religion tackled in the selected works of Badian? What is the didactic message that is conveyed by Badian in the two novels?

The primary data of this paper have been collected and interpreted within the theoretical context of postcolonialism, particularly the use of the Homi Bhabharian Third Space of Enunciation. To attain the objective of the study, the paper is divided into two parts. The first part tries to account for the differences between the traditional African woman and the modern woman. The second part deals with the issue religion.

### **1. Traditional Woman versus Modern Woman**

The theme of African traditional woman and modern woman is developed through two major female characters, Maman Tene and Kany. In this regard, Seydou Badian presents Maman Tene, a female character, as a true symbol of an obedient and respectful traditional African wife and mother. This means that she incarnates the values of women of traditional Africa. She is characterized as a flat and static character because of the easiness to understand her thought and actions which are in accordance with her traditional society. Despite her good behavior towards her husband, in return she does not benefit from it. She, even, is considered as responsible for the « bad deeds or misconduct » of her daughter. In fact, right from chapter one of the text, one could see the aggressive attitude of Benfa towards his wife on the issue related to their family. For instance, Benfa was domesticating a small monkey named Boubouny, which always consumed her milk and litter the plate with sand. The reaction of Benfa to what the monkey did, shows his aggressiveness towards his wife when he said: "C'est ta faute ... si tu prenais bien soin de tes affaires, le petit singe n'y toucherait pas » (p. 17-18). "It is your fault... If you took a proper care



of your affairs, the small monkey would not have tampered with it”, (p. 17-18). Here we see old Benfa accusing Maman Tene without any proof. But when the small monkey threw Benfa’s hat in the well, he cursed it.

In Malian traditional society as in many African countries, very often, women are responsible for everything that sounds not good. When there is a misconduct of children, women are responsible for it. Moreover, despite the efforts of Tene to convince her daughter Kany to marry Famagan, Benfa accuses her of being responsible for Kany’s refusal. So, when he overheard the reaction of his daughter, he shifted the blame on his wife Tene saying: “Tu la gâtes; c’est toi qui la soutiens dans ces projets de fille perdue. C’est même toi qui l’incite à désobéir... » (p. 75). (You spoil her; It is you that support in the projects of this lost daughter”. “It is even you that incite her to disobey...”) (p. 75). This attitude of old Benfa towards her wife Maman Tene can be understood as a kind of subjugation of woman and attests to the traditional views of women who are always the ones to blame if even they are guilty of what they are accused of. She could not reply her husband, instead she would be judged by the community and the traditions. She is voiceless because traditions require from her to follow such a path of silence and acceptance. This idea of woman’s inferiority has been inculcated in her mind. This is confirmed in the following words of Maman Tene when she engages herself in a dialogue with her daughter, Kany:

La plus noble aspiration d’une jeune fille est le foyer. Oui, le foyer, un mari et des enfants : c’est le plus grand bonheur. Tu as été à l’école, peu de tes camarades en savent autant que toi. Tu sais lire une lettre venant de n’importe quelle ville. Tu sais écrire à n’importe qui. C’est largement suffisant pour toi. (Badian,1972, p.71)

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The noblest ambition of a young girl is the household. Yes, the household, a husband and children: it is the greatest happiness. You have attended school. Few of your friends know more than you. You can read a letter coming from any town. You can write to anybody. It is widely enough for you.

In this excerpt, it is clearly revealed that in traditional Africa the most important position of woman is in the family where she takes care of the household and satisfies the needs of her husband and children. The way Kany reacts to answer her mother ironically shows that she accepts what her mother says but she deep inside her mind does not approve such a view. The mention of the



school, as a sign of modernity, also signifies that the heroine, Kany, is still in school but her people want her to drop out for marriage because of the importance given to marriage in the kind of Mandingo society in which she lives. From her ironical answer, it may be construed that Kany is probably no longer under the influence of her local culture but under the yoke of an alien civilization acquired through reading and writing as established by the Whiteman in his mission of “civilizing” other people and cultures. Above all these, the view of Kany’s mother elucidates the role that African mothers play in the socialization process of young girls.

The subjection of African women, as traditions and customs require in circumstances of marriage, is also reflected in the reaction of Sibiri, especially, when he announces the marriage of Kany to his other brothers. Among his brother, Birama proposes to ask the opinion of Kany if she is for or against marrying the person that her people chose for her but Sibiri categorically rejects such a view because girls traditionally do not decide about whom to marry. When his suggestion is rejected, Birama who is against this marriage refuses the kola nuts that Sibiri gives him. Below is Sibiri’s reaction to Birama:

Je te savais insolent Birama, je viens de découvrir que tu es fou. Il faut que tu sois fou pour me dire ce que je viens d’entendre. Que vient faire le point de vue de Kany dans cette affaire ? C’est nous qui décidons, comme il est d’usage. C’est à Kany à suivre. (Badian ,1972, p.53)

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I knew you are insolent, Birama. I have just realized that you are mad. You should be mad to tell me what I have just heard. Do we need Kany’s point of view in this matter? We have to decide, as usual and Kany has to accept.

The rude discussion between Sibiri and his brother Birama shows that the young generation has another perception of Woman. Birama supports that Kany is not an object and she should not be given to the old Famagan as an «object for sale ». The attitude of Birama shows that there is another view of the African woman which contrasts that of Sibiri. The new view is associated with the consequence of the school. It is because of the above remark, Seydou Badian, in the *Sous L’Orage*, explains that in the first years of colonization nobody accepted to send his children to school. Like Chiefs’ sons, Africans were forced by the new masters to send their children to the new house of alienating the African from his roots. But despite the resistance of many, in the end, they accepted to send their children to schools because it was promoted as the step to modernity and civilization, power and respect. It is revealed in the text that they accepted it without really thinking about its

consequences on their children and cultural values. This is actually exemplified through Old Benfa who represents and embodies pure African culture in this novel; he voluntarily sent his daughter Kany to school. He was even very proud about her success at school:

Le père Benfa aimait bien Kany. Il parlait de son savoir à tous les vieux du quartier. Il leur disait comment elle savait manier l'écriture du Blanc et avec quelle facilité elle savait lire les lettres d'où qu'elles viennent(...) Mais le père Benfa n'aimait pas voir sa fille en compagnie de garçons qui fréquentaient l'école (Badian, 1972, p.21)

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Old Benfa liked Kany so much. He talked about her knowledge to all the elders of the neighborhood. He explained to them how she could handle the white's writing and with what easiness she could read letters coming from elsewhere (...) But Benfa did not like to see his daughter with boys who attended school.

However, it should be noted that there is a contrast in the attitude of Benfa because on one hand he shows his pride about Kany's performance at school, but on the other he disapproves her company with boys who attend school. Here stands one of the paradoxes that colonialism creates in the personality of a character like Old Benfa because he could see that the school that he is praising is actually a colonial institution established as one of the most efficient and effective colonial tools to shape the minds of African people unconsciously. Besides this, Old Benfa does not realize that when his once obedient daughter, Kany, refuses his proposal to marry an old man named Famagan, she does it because she acquires a new concept of marriage at school and how a woman should be respected and given the rights that she deserves. This reality is evidenced in the speech of Old Benfa when talking to Maman Tene, his wife:

Oui, oui ! Tu l'écoutes, tu la soutiens. C'est même toi qui l'incite à désobéir. D'ailleurs j'ai compris ! C'est parce qu'elle reste auprès de toi qu'elle a un tel esprit. Je vais les envoyer dès demain, elle et Birama, au village, chez mon frère Djigui. (Badian, 1972, p.75)

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Yes, yes ! you listen to her, you support her. It is even you who encourages her to disobey. Anyway I understand. It is because she stays close to you that she has such a mind. I will send them, her and Birama, to the village, to my brother Djigui tomorrow.

Seydou Badian shows how school through colonialism has contributed to engender a set of new views about the status and roles of African women as advocated by the younger generation in the *Sous L'Orage*. Once again, it is noticed that the mother is always the one who is blamed for the deeds of her daughters because it is the way that society has been constructed, where women are in charge of the proper education of children, especially, the female. In the same novel, Seydou Badian also depicts how the established school of the Whiteman has greatly transformed the African to blindly reject and be ashamed of his culture. This kind of attitude is seen in the character Sidi, who epitomizes the alienated African who promotes the culture of the Whiteman at the expense of his own African culture. He becomes hostile to his social values because of what he was taught at school:

Il faut absolument flanquer toutes ces mœurs par-dessus bord. Oui ! Cette situation que nous faisons à la femme nous mettra éternellement en état d'infériorité à l'égard des autres peuples. Oui ! Flanquons toutes ces coutumes en l'air ; libérons la femme si nous tenons à vivre. Ces coutumes font notre faiblesse. (Badian,1972 p. 59-60).

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We should give up all these customs. Yes! This situation of woman will put us in a state of inferiority towards other people. Yes! Let us reject all these customs; Let us free woman if we want to live longer. These customs are our weaknesses.

The school thus is an excellent tool to control and change one's mind. Thus, all the young men who attend school perceive women differently. Seydou Badian presents two images of the African woman in the novel. The first one is the traditional type of woman who is obedient, respectful and passive. This kind of African women is embodied by Maman Téné in the story. The second type of African woman is a modern one who attends the school of the Whiteman and is no more ready to accept the ways of her tradition. She, therefore, becomes more responsible for her choices and decisions. Besides this, she refuses to follow men's decisions as an animal. This second depiction of woman in the text is represented by Kany, the protagonist of the story, who defies the authority of her father because of her love for another man who is not the choice of her parents. Thus, Kany

symbolizes modernity. She contrasts her mother, Maman Tene, who is portrayed as a traditional model of African woman. This means that she incarnates the idea of tradition in the text. This can be observed in the text as Kany rebels against her mother, especially when her mother gives her the information that she is going to marry Famagan. Kany reacts that: “Je ne peux pas être la femme de Famagan. Faites de moi ce que vous voulez. Je préfère mourir.” (I cannot marry Famagan. Do whatever you like against me; I would rather like dying than marrying him.).

## **2. Religion as Modernity**

In *Noces Sacrées*, the conflict between tradition and modernity is mostly reflected in the contrast between African traditional religion and Christianity. Seydou Badian uses a very easy language to present us the clash between both religions. However, it must be understood that African traditional religion is generally associated with what can be called fetishism or animism. Animism should be understood as the belief in different spirits which inhabit the natural world such as rivers, snakes, woods, mountains and many other natural elements. These are worshipped as divinities depending on the cultural context in which people are interested. This kind of religion is one of the major themes interrogated by Seydou Badian in his *Noces Sacrées*, especially in his critique of colonialism and its corollary of modernity. However, it should be noted that animism represents an early form of religion in Africa even though the term has sometimes been used loosely to refer to the religious beliefs of native populations in Africa and other countries of the Third World before the introduction of Christianity in these geo-cultural places.

The connotation of animism has so much been associated with paganism and savagery that many African traditionalists prefer to use the term African traditional religion or Africana to challenge the tribal evil practices that Europeans, on their divine mission of civilizing the heart of darkness in reference to Africa, associated local religions with. Since this study is interested in understanding how Seydou Badian depicts the issue of tradition and modernity in his works, it is, therefore, of paramount importance to see the way in which Christianity and African traditional religion are described in *Noces Sacrées* within the framework of a postcolonial perspective. This entails deconstructing the hegemonic ideologies of a center of totality epitomizing the West in relation to Christianity as the only modern religion.

In Seydou Badian's *Noces Sacrées*, it is shown that before the advent of colonization in Mali, people were worshipping and respecting ancestral values and beliefs. But when the White man came with the Bible, a lot of changes happened in the ways of lives of many Mandingo people by

virtue of modernity and civilization. This indicates that people had their own religion, and divinities, presented in this novel as “masks”. They believed in them because they in return resolved many of their problems. People lived peacefully, worshipped their deities and made offerings. Nobody had the right to trespass and defy the authority of the divinities because they are sacred. Besides this, their secrets should not be disclosed to non- initiated people or foreigners; if anyone tried to reveal the secrets and the taboos related to local divinities, the person in question may die or just disappear without any trace:

Ce cahier a coûté la vie à un homme, un vieux fonctionnaire colonial qui s’était pris de passion pour l’univers secret des Bambara. J’avoue qu’il a été un peu plus loin que vous. Il a cherché à se faire admettre par les élus du sommet. Après sept ans de démarches, il a fini par gagner. Mais, en dépit des mises en garde, il n’a pu résister à la tentation de vouloir révéler ce qu’il a appris. Il a péri. (Badian, 1997, p.25)

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These notes have the cause of the death of a man, a former colonial civil servant. He had a passion for the secret world of Bamanan people. After many attempts he succeeded to integrate among the privileged members of the community. Despite the multiple warnings, he could not prevent himself from revealing what he had learned there. He has been killed.

This excerpt implies that the former colonial civil servant dies because of his carelessness. He actually believes that the sacred Bamanan religion that he embraced could not have any impact on him. The copybook, here, refers to the education of this former colonial civil servant in the colonial school and it is because of this that he tries to disclose the secrets that he was initiated into. The fact is that in Bamanan culture, it is totally forbidden to reveal the secrets of a given traditional religion like the N’Tomo in *Noces Sacrées*. This belief is generally conveyed through the following Bamanan saying: “Don komo la bèn yèn, nga, bo komola tè yèn”. (You can enter the Komo, but you cannot leave it). This means that if you become a member of a secret society like that of the N’Tomo, you can never leave it. If you violate the code, the reward is sudden death. Besides this, it is salient to discover that the copybook also symbolizes the presence of the white man and his culture. In the colonial school the old man was taught to write and doubt whatever is not from the colonizer. His mind is framed by such a way of seeing the other and his culture. As the story of *Noces Sacrées* progresses, it is also expounded that the old man abruptly dies because he tries to reveal some Bamanan secrets by writing them down in a copybook. It should be noted that not

everybody is allowed to be in touch with their impenetrable world of local divinities. If by any chance you become a member, you should be very discreet. Although these practices are not widespread in Mali today as it used to be before the advent of Islam and Christianity, local divinities continue to have an important place in Bamanan culture and Seydou Badian wants to show the importance that traditional religion had had in African societies. In closely scrutinizing *Noces Sacrées*, it can be construed that it is engaged in a kind of writing back by showing how African societies were organized culturally and religiously.

In Seydou Badian's *Noces Sacrées*, the novelist clearly delineates that African people used to live in harmony with their divinities, like the N'Tomo which is the protagonist of the story, many centuries before the colonial penetration. It is the colonial penetration which brings a tremendous change in the lives of Africans in general and this change is not always a positive one for the African cultural and religious identity. In *Noces Sacrées*, Seydou Badian approaches the issue of religion with lots of philosophy. First of all, people can notice that this Malian novelist tries to describe the difficult cohabitation between the two religions and they are presented in a contrastive duality. In this dynamics, the reader may detect in the novel that the Whiteman considers as atheists and savages all those who do not practice Christianity. This attitude of the Whiteman is defined as a kind of aggression against Africans because he denigrates any of their ways of worshipping which is not Christianity. The Whiteman's religion is also associated with the idea of the noble savage which means that local Bamanan people who embrace Christianity are considered as backward and those like Fotigui are seen as primitive. In this regard, the reader may understand the novelist's concern with explaining the colonial process of subjugating and dominating Africans with the Bible.

In Bamanan society, the divinity, Komo, is worshipped by everybody because of its evident power among the Bamanan people. Although many become Christians and Muslims, some still remain in their original religion as pinpointed in the novel. In addition, even those who convert to the new religion so as to be considered among the civilized people, continue the practice of worshipping their divinities. Through this novel, Seydou Badian successfully shows that nobody can deliberately destroy one's culture for the sole benefit of his own culture and materialistic interests under the cover of faith. Christianization is seen as one of the efficient ways used by the colonizer to reach his aim.

As the story unfolds, the reader may also notice that the conquest of the Whiteman has not always been easy everywhere, especially in his civilizing mission. In most cases, the colonizer obtains the support of some local chiefs and intermediaries to facilitate his domination of the natives. These intermediaries more or less speak the language of the master and are influential in their areas. Seydou Badian evokes the use of language by the colonizer during colonialism to impose his supremacy. He, however, through *Noces Sacrées*, advocates a third-space of harmonious cohabitation between Christianity and African traditional religion as well as Islam in order to avoid probable conflict between people because of the division of people on the basis of religion.

In this opposition between the two religions, Seydou Badian shows how Africans accept to live with Christianity, but the priest is against that collaboration. Although people accept to become Christians, nobody, however, is allowed to break the taboos of the African religion. Fotigui, the messenger of Komo (a Bamanan divinity) who often has a chat with Father Dufrane advocates a kind of consensus. “Fotigui n’était pas opposé à la pénétration du christianisme dans son fief, à la condition que les futurs chrétiens demeurent sous la loi du Komo ». (Badian, 1977, p.58) (Fotigui was not against Christianity in his area, but the future Christians should remain under the law of Komo). But Father Dufrane who wants by all means to Christianize many people very often does not share this view. He points out :

“ Pour nous il n’y a pas de partage possible. Dieu a créé l’homme dans l’amour, il lui a tout donné, pourquoi faut il qu’en retour l’homme place des idoles sur le même pied d’égalité que son seigneur ?” (Badian, 1997, P.61)

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For us, it is not possible to adopt both religions. God has created man in love. He gives him everything. Why should he worship idols like God?

From the foregoing, it can be admitted that the conflict between tradition and modernity as developed through African traditional religion and Christianity is a major concern of this work. Seydou Badian, via this dualistic presentation of African tradition religion and Christianity, wants to demonstrate that beyond his economic and political domination of African peoples, the Whiteman also strives to gain spiritual domination.



In the same manner of presenting the issue of tradition and modernity in *Noces Sacrées*, Seydou Badian opposes modern medicine and the African way of healing people. He shows how people were traditionally cured and healed in Africa before modern medicine and the incapacity of modern medicine to cure certain unknown and mysterious diseases that the former can cure as in the case of Besnier. This man falls sick because he steals the local divinity, N'Tomo, which looks like a mask and it is known that foreigners are not allowed to touch or come closer but Besnier steals it and brings it in France. When in France his troubles start with nightmares and hallucinations; he visits all the best polyclinics of Europe, but modern medicine could not give him satisfaction. His troubles persist. Then, his manager advises him to give back the N'Tomo to Africans and ask traditional healers to cure his disease. When he does this, he health and the story ends on a good note. As an illustration, the priest, Dufrane, confesses the efficiency of African healing practices:

Un jour que je me plaignais de mes articulations, un de nos fidèles se proposa de me conduire auprès de son père. Je me suis laissé faire, ce ne fut pas loin.

Avec ces graines dans ta poche, ton mal disparaîtra, mais gare à toi si tu les perds. Tu dois les garder à jamais, tu ne dois plus t'en séparer, sinon, tu connaîtras le feu dans tes os. (Badian, 1997, pp.52-53).

- « Et c'est ainsi : tant que je les ai, aucun problème. Mais une minute sans elle...oh... » (Badian, 1997, p.53)
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One of my believers once took me to his father when I was suffering from rheumatism. His father gave some grains to be put in my pocket. "As long as I bear these grains in my pocket I won't have any troubles. But one minute without them...oh..."

It should be pointed out here that the knowledge of the African people is deep. Before colonization, Africa had many sicknesses and if they had no knowledge about them then, how did they heal people? The choice of the priest to confess the values of the efficacy of African traditional medicine is really symbolic because white people generally see all the knowledge of Africans as useless and primitive. But, Seydou Badian here is doing a kind of writing back to deconstruct the negative views of Europeans about Africans. This confession of the priest is actually a way of telling the reader that medicine existed in African centuries before the invasion of Africa by white colonialists. Besides this, it is also revealed in the text that in many African countries, when Europeans arrive, they are very often interested in local plants. They seek their use and bring them to Europe to make

modern medicines. These medicines are sold at higher prices to the same African people. The attitude of the priest is a proof that Africa has its values even though the Europeans do not recognize it and this is what this novelist tries to rectify.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, we can retain that Seydou Badian is a giant of Malian literature and defender of the African culture and identity. Based on the foregoing, the study has shown that the issue of gender is not actually something new in male African literature, mainly in the works of Seydou Badian. The reader may come to understand that the traditional woman is obedient, open-minded, and conscious of social responsibility to maintain good family and social ties. She is the converse of the modern woman who is individualistic and a rebel ignoring the importance of maintaining strong family and social links. As for religions, it appears in our analysis that Badian tries to explicate through the *Noces Sacrées* that precolonial Africa was religious. Precolonial Africans had their own religion which is not that different from Christianity and Islam. In other words, religion had always existed in Africa and it is not with the arrival of the French colonizer that religion came to Africa.

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