

The Socio-Cultural and Economic Dimensions of Islam in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

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Abstract

Using Senegal as a prototype, this paper examines the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of Islam in postcolonial African societies as treated in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. A literary and cultural reading of the epistolary text demonstrates that the introduction of this religion into sub-Saharan Africa engendered new customs and legitimized some pre-islamic traditions. Islam is presented as the motor of the society, which has significantly shaped the lives of the people and has impacted education, culture, religious beliefs, economy, and the civil society. I opine that post-Islamic sub-Saharan African socio-cultural and economic difficulties are not caused by religion per se but by the attitudes of believers who use religion as a means to an end. In the conclusion, I call on fellow Africans to liberate themselves from social vices and economic hardship by not using religion as an excuse to abuse or exploit fellow human beings.

Religion is a universal feature of human society, which prepares individuals and groups for creative participation in the re-shaping of society. According to AlHabshi and Agil (1994: ix), "it has now become a universally-accepted notion that a society requires the influence of some form of religious and moral values in the process of development." It is thus not surprising that religion is a fundamental component of sub-Saharan African societies. The people's indigenous systems of worship coexist with foreign religions such as Islam and Christianity, and together, they influence and reinforce African traditional values. One fundamental factor that contributed to the rapid spread of Islam in the region was the attitude of Africans to the religion. They easily identified with this religion that favored complementarity with indigenous religious practices, unlike Christianity, which required radical break with African traditional social and religious customs, such as magic, divination and polygamy (Boahen 1990: 221). The introduction of Islam engendered new customs² and legitimized some pre-islamic traditions³, bringing about a mutually beneficial relationship between Islam and African traditional religions. This alliance gave birth to "African Islam", which is today the motor of the socio-cultural life of sub-Saharan Africans: more and more people turn to Islam for the resolution of a wide range of spiritual, material and health problems, sometimes at the expense of hard work and practical actions. Writing about the influence of Islam upon African social life, Trimingham (1968: 94) notes that "Islam provide[s] a spiritual basis for life in a new dimension." In studying the practice of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to note that many of the performances are not specifically Islamic. Though Islam is an uncompromisingly monotheistic religion, it incorporates and is often dominated by local customs and traditions some of which are anathema to the religion. These local influences are noticeable in most of the socio-cultural and economic aspects examined in this paper, including the *iddat*⁴ or seclusion of widows, burial rites, the judicial tradition of *mirassé*⁵, and the inheritance system.

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² These include festivals and special occasions such as 'Idul Fitr', observed at the end of the month of Ramadan, and 'Idul Adha', which marks the end of the Hajj or the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

³ Such pre-islamic traditions include female circumcision, polygamy, patriarchy, rites of passage, communalism, among many others.

⁴ The *iddat* is the waiting period before another marriage can be contracted. It lasts three menstrual periods and is meant to verify pregnancy (or otherwise) before the woman may marry again. This is important for determining matters pertaining to paternity and inheritance, and originally had nothing to do with mourning. Where modified, this practice may emerge from local customs.

⁵ This is a religious and judicial tradition during which the deceased's private life and moral conduct are revealed and judged. This practice has no basis in the Koran.

The influences of Islam are evident in many sub-Saharan African societies some of which even established Islamic theocratic confederacies and Muslim dynasties. Islamic icons are visible in architecture⁶, urbanization, education, culture, economy and the civil society. Undoubtedly, Islam is a dominant force that significantly shapes the character of contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa. This justifies the preeminence of Islamic themes and colors in African literary works such as Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. *So Long a Letter* is the autobiographical journal of Ramatoulaye, a narrator whose experiences as a devout Muslim woman, wife and mother illuminate the broader realities of life in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ramatoulaye, newly widowed, writes a letter to her childhood friend and confidant Aïssatou, to break the news of the death of her husband Modou, and to recount his funeral. Ramatoulaye writes her diary in a state of despair and isolation in conformity with the Islamic custom of seclusion called *iddat*. The narration translates into unique articulations of the socio-cultural and economic realities of contemporary sub-Saharan African societies, using Senegal⁷ as a miniature. The setting of the novel is mostly Wolof, an ethnic group that has experienced tremendous Islamic influences, which have given birth to a Wolof-Islamic identity. Notwithstanding regional variations in the practice of Islam, the socio-cultural values of the people are predominantly Islamic: everything is done in accordance with the laws of the Holy Koran, which is the basic compass for acceptable living. Believers faithfully obey the tenets of Islam, namely, allegiance to Allah, ritual prayers, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage to Mecca, and observance of Islamic rites and festivals.

Accordingly, in the novel, the characters⁸ devotion to Islam reverberates in all situations. At all times, they commit their ways into the hands of Allah to whom they attribute each blessing. For instance, Ramatoulaye is quick to thank God for every provision, and her thoughts have a religious flavor: "I thank God for my eyes which daily embrace heaven and earth. If today moral fatigue makes my limbs stiff, tomorrow it will leave my body" (*SLL* 12). While trying to encourage her niece to embrace the career of midwife, aunty Nabou emphasizes the benefits of fostering the cause of Allah: "[Y]ou will earn your living and you will acquire grace for your entry into paradise by helping at the birth of new followers of Mohammed, the prophet" (*SLL* 29-30). At the opening of the narration, Ramatoulaye uses the same tone in praying for forgiveness and peaceful rest for her late husband: "'May God forgive him... 'May he regret his earthly stay in his heavenly bliss ...'" (*SLL* 4-5). As a devout Muslim, Ramatoulaye never misses any of the five daily prayers imploring God for enduring mercies and abundant blessings; she spends her days praying and meditating. Aunty Nabou is another example of devout Muslim who fervently intones religious verses (*SLL* 28). And for the benefit of forgetful, busy and lukewarm believers, there is always a reminder, a call to worship: the persuasive invitation of the muezzin to prayer (*SLL* 62). No matter the situation, everything has to be stopped to enable people observe prayers. Even in adversity and distress, Wolof Muslims still trust Allah. Despite Ramatoulaye's matrimonial and financial hardships, she demonstrates absolute faith in Allah and the comforting words of the Koran (*SLL* 5). Her response to advice by friends and folks to bewitch the young wife, Binetou, or at least bring Modou back home is: "No, I would not give in to the pressure. My mind and my faith rejected supernatural power" (*SLL* 49). Another testimony to Ramatoulaye's grit to have a close walk with Allah regardless of circumstances is the fact that she is so engrossed in her prayers that she does not attend to her child, Malick, who was injured in a motorcycle accident (*SLL* 79). Most importantly, Wolof Muslims strictly obey the religious customs⁹ associated with rites of passage, particularly funerals which are considered as extremely significant communal events, and in which Trimmingham (1968: 73) opines, "[i]slamization is more obvious [...] than any other sphere." Thus, the observance of the last rites of a male dignitary and devout Muslim like Modou is in strict compliance with Islamic customs: [The family] must take incense, eau-de-cologne, and cotton wool to the hospital for the washing of the dead one. The seven metres of white muslin, the only clothing Islam allows for the dead, are carefully placed in a new basket. The *Zem-Zem*, the miracle water from the holy places of Islam religiously kept by each family, is not forgotten. (*SLL* 3)

⁶ This is visible in the construction of mosques such as the beautiful Medinatou-Minaouara mosque in Dakar (*SLL* 27).

⁷ Senegal has a population of approximately eleven million, 89 per cent of which is Muslim (UNFPA July 2004 estimates). The data is relevant to the discussion because as Cham (1991: 163) opines, "[i]n few other places in the creative traditions of sub-Saharan Africa is the factor of Islam more prominent and influential than in Senegal." Herzberger-Fofana (2000: 145) concurs that "Aujourd'hui, la religion islamique est perçue comme élément inhérent à la nation sénégalaise. Elle en est le substrat et le moteur qui se confond avec l'histoire du pays."

⁸ Most of the characters answer Islamic names: Aïssatou, Daouda, Ibrahim, Ramatoulaye, Seynabou, Tamsir, Thiam, etc.

⁹ Islam prescribes only the most basic practices: the dead must be washed, wrapped in a shroud and buried. The detailed rituals of Wolof burials are matters of social practices some elements of which may have traveled from Arabia to Africa.

African cultures expect all survivors to participate in all the ceremonies. Consequently, at the news of Modou's death, relatives, friends, and strangers from Dakar and its environs attend the funerals. There are uninterrupted processions of wailing and tearful sympathizers coming to express their condolences, and assist in all ways possible. What is particularly evident in this literary depiction is the spirit of communal life among the Wolof Muslims: people not only attend but also contribute to funeral expenses. For instance, at the funerals of Modou, relatives and friends donate money and gifts generously. This attitude contributes significantly to the internal dynamism of the community. However, the author explicitly points out some of the less community-oriented aspects that include ostentatious mourning rituals that turn into commercial deals and competitions. Some people attend funerals for what they can gain in the way of food, drinks or money. Others strive to be the highest donors and conspicuously display their contributions, which are carefully recorded because they are actually debts to be repaid in similar circumstances (*SLL* 6). The hypocrisy and materialism also reveal the perception of some Africans who prefer to spend money organizing expensive funeral ceremonies and celebrating death than helping save the sick by buying the life-saving prescription or paying for hospitalization (*SLL* 6). A closely related behavior is the exploitation by sympathizers who take advantage of the circumstance to make money. Bâ's novel describes how praise-singers, for instance, expect to be reimbursed in cash for their lavish eulogies: Afterwards comes the procession of old relatives, old acquaintances, griots, goldsmiths, and laobés with their honeyed language. The 'goodbyes' following one after the other at an infernal rate are irritating because they are neither simple nor free: they require, depending on the person leaving, sometimes a coin, sometimes a banknote. (*SLL* 7)

Instead of remembering the deceased and praying for the repose of the soul, some participants are there to show off. Women use the occasion to socialize, renew friendships and gossip with loud voices and strident laughter. In the end, the solemnity is absent (*SLL* 6). This irreverence underscores the irrelevance of these institutionalized ceremonies and the sincerity of the mourners (*SLL* 8). Similarly, providing huge amounts of food and drinks to entertain people, and spending so much money and time on protracted funerals was acceptable in traditional Africa. However, in modern economies, these resources can be spent on more productive activities. Among the most important customs associated with Wolof-Islamic funerals is the *iddat* or ritual of sitting in. The widow must remain in seclusion for four months and ten days after the death. The entire mourning period is spent in meditation while she dresses in rags, takes off all her jewelry and must do nothing to make herself look attractive. In addition, Ramatoulaye has to endure the irritating presence of Binetou, her co-wife, who is placed in the former's house for the funeral in accordance with Islamic tradition. Both widows are literally imprisoned and their strained relationship is further aggravated by the joint confinement. This forced seclusion, which Irlam (1998: 82) classifies as "a visible manifestation of the widespread "social constraints" that hem women in and circumscribe their prospects in a male-dominated society," translates into a period of deprivation and mental torture. Though Ramatoulaye claims she is not bothered by the seclusion, yet, she acknowledges its adverse effects towards the end of the narration:

[M]y seclusion has withered me. Worries have given me wrinkles; my fat has melted away. I often tap against bone where before there was rounded flesh. (*SLL* 72) It should, however, be noted that learned and emancipated women, particularly in urban areas, reject the conservative custom of seclusion of widows in Islamic societies. Another interesting feature of Wolof-Islamic funeral customs, which is underlined in the text, is the investigative practice called *mirasse*. A family meeting is held where, in accordance with the Koran, Modou's life is related and thus exposed to the others. The ceremony allows Ramatoulaye to measure the extent of Modou's betrayal (*SLL* 9). Though the *mirasse* helps survivors to appreciate the need to live an honest life, those directly affected by the misdeeds of the dead may suffer more anguish from the revelations. A related funeral rite during which the widow hands over the couple's possessions to her family-in-law introduces us to the materialism of the society. This dreadful ritual, more Wolof than Islamic and which Ramatoulaye and Binetou experience (*SLL* 4), is carried out if the widow has had the reputation of being unfaithful or inhospitable. She has to give up the property she owns with her husband to her family-in-law. To prevent that bitter experience, wives usually strive to please their in-laws, very often to their own detriment. As in the vast majority of societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Senegalese-Islamic communities, the surviving brothers customarily inherit the deceased's property, including his widows, children, houses, and other possessions¹⁰.

¹⁰ This system of automatic inheritance is abhorrent to Islam. This is precisely the custom Islam challenged and tried to abrogate over 1400 years ago. Islam recommends that provisions be made for the widow to carry on with her life with no hardship.

This tradition turns women into property to be passed from hand to hand. However, with the inheritance comes huge responsibilities for the beneficiary, including providing a living for the deceased's dependents and taking over all his material and financial obligations. This explains why on the fortieth day after Modou's death, his older brother Tamsir expects to inherit Ramatoulaye to add to his collection of wives: Tamsir speaks with great assurance [...] 'When you have "come out" (of mourning), I shall marry you. You suit me as a wife, and further, you will continue to live here, just as if Modou were not dead. Usually it is the younger brother who inherits his elder brother's wife. In this case, it is the opposite. You are my good luck. I shall marry you. (SLL 57) Inheriting material property is to some extent understandable because there is need for someone to oversee the physical estate of the deceased. When it comes to the human components of the legacy, particularly the widow, the woman should have the final say about who will be her new husband if she desires to remarry. Thus, Tamsir's proposal infuriates Ramatoulaye because she knows the abuses and snares of polygamy from her previous experience. She therefore does not hesitate to rebuff Tamsir and reject his offer (SLL 58). Islam, as practiced in many sub-Saharan African societies, encourages the oppression of women in the sense that polygamy that it permits, creates a social inequality and reinforces the subordination of women. The matrimonial relationship between Modou and Ramatoulaye supports this view. Ramatoulaye's experience reveals that it is based on injustice and is meant to satisfy men's greed and selfishness. Men like Modou often use Islam as an excuse for taking more than one woman, claiming that the religion allows it as long as they are able to cope materially and emotionally. Defending Modou, the Imam notes: "[t]here is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side.' [...] God intended for him [Modou] to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it" (SLL 36-37). However, Ramatoulaye's experience shows that polygamy results in divided attention, lack of love, and sorrows for all parties involved. Ramatoulaye accepts the polygamous arrangement in the name of Islam but confesses that it is a disastrous situation:

I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamous life. I was left with empty hands. [...] He never came again; his newfound happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us. (SLL 46) (translation modified) Hence, Ramsay (1999: 72) rightly observes: "[e]vents as they unfold also incriminate the polygamous social structures that facilitate and legitimize such ego-aggrandizement at the expense of women's undeserved unhappiness." Modou's death leads Ramatoulaye to reflect on the irresponsibility of some African men (SLL 52). They wrongly interpret Islamic precepts to satisfy ephemeral pleasure, and in the end, they betray and even abandon their wives and children like worn-out clothes, as Modou treats Ramatoulaye and their twelve children. She becomes both the mother and the father; she is the bread-winner for the family and the house-keeper. Clearly, Modou's attitude and actions prove that polygamy has adverse effects on families. He not only gets heavily indebted but he literally loses his mind and sense of care and responsibility towards his first family. If Islam approves of polygamy, it certainly does not condone the maltreatment of one's family. Commenting on Mariama Bâ's critique of polygamy, Walker (1996: 263) states that "what Ramatoulaye seems to long for is to see the laws that govern polygamy evolve so as not to be out of sync with, or even in opposition to, gender equality by taking into account the changing economic, political, and cultural forces of post-independence Africa." Bâ also examines the relationship between religious affiliations and the number of children a family has. It is common practice among Wolof Muslims to have many children. A case in point is Ramatoulaye who at 50 already has twelve children. This definitely has adverse effect on the health of the mother, and on the quality of care given to the children. Jacqueline's doctor makes a remark that falls within this reasoning: "you had your babies too soon after each other; the body loses its vital juices, which haven't had the time to be replaced" (SLL 45). Yet, Jacqueline's husband, Samba Diack is an irresponsible father who does not care for the children.

Modou's polygamous status which Islam permits, is an expensive venture. Because of his desire to optimally please and impress his second wife, Binetou, Modou indulges in ostentatious living, squandering funds, either owned or borrowed, in order to satisfy the whims and caprices of his new wife and mother-in-law (SLL 49). Following the death of Modou, many of his unjustified debts and irresponsible expenses are revealed: Acknowledgement of debts? A pile of them [...] [T]he elegant SICAP villa [...] and its chic content were acquired by a bank loan [...] Four millions francs borrowed with ease because of his privileged position, which had enabled him to pay for Lady Mother-in-Law and her husband to visit Mecca to acquire the titles of *Alhaja* and *Alhaji*; which equally enabled Binetou to exchange her Alfa Romeos at the slightest dent. (SLL 9-10) While Modou squanders funds providing an extravagant lifestyle for Binetou, and while he abuses his privileges to pay his new in-laws' way to Mecca to obtain the coveted Islamic titles of *Alhaja* and *Alhaji*, his first family goes through hardship particularly because Ramatoulaye does not have all that is required to cater for her twelve children.

Another socio-economic dimension of religion in many African societies is the huge investment in building expensive churches, mosques and other icons of religion in countries where the most basic social amenities are quasi-existent. A typical example is the gigantic Basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro¹¹, the largest and tallest place of worship in Africa. Another example is the beautiful Medinatou-Minaouara mosque built to the glory of Islam (SLL 27). While there is money to build expensive religious edifices, there is never money to provide basic urban and rural infrastructure, educational, medical and recreational facilities (SLL 18, 80). The author also exposes some hallmarks of post-independence Africa: nepotism, neocolonialism, corruption and embezzlement, inability to exert justice, lack of maintenance culture, and the total absence of accountability (SLL 25). In the world described by Bâ, new leaders such as Modou live in excessive opulence lavishing money on second-wives, in-laws, expensive houses and automobiles while the masses live in penury. Since Islam sets out to be an integral part of the social fabric of the receiving African societies, it incorporates a tremendous amount of African indigenous deities and spirits. There is therefore no clear-cut separation between African traditional religious beliefs and Islamic practices in these societies. What we have is a closely knitted syncretism of African traditional religion and Islam in one indivisible faith. The two blend into some kind of dualism of the indigenous and the foreign. The most devout Muslims concurrently consult traditional diviners and the Imam; they do not hesitate to seek help from the herbalists and *marabouts* for issues such as barrenness, material adversity, and revenge.

Indeed, religious syncretism is common place in this Wolof Muslim culture where people use all available spiritual resources in an attempt to solve their numerous problems: they rely very much on the mercy of Allah and on mystical forces; they try the Holy Koran, *marabouts*, fetish-priests, and sacrifices. Thus, relatives and friends advise Ramatoulaye to seek the help of charlatans to avenge against Binetou and bring Modou back to the fold (SLL 48). Even though aunty Nabou is a devout Muslim, she pays obeisance to the invisible spirits; she makes offerings in the river to protect herself from the evil eye, while at the same time attracting divine benevolence (SLL 28). Similarly, though Farmata the *griot* woman claims to be a fervent Muslim as depicted by some of her ways of life (SLL 69), she puts her trust in charlatans and her cowries (SLL 80), “always trying to see into the future with her cowries” (SLL 65). In fact, many of the situations have to do more with Wolof and African traditions than with Islamic practices. As Trimmingham (1968: 85) notes, “[t]he life of integrated Islamic communities is a mosaic of Islamic and indigenous elements in complex combinations.” The idea of religious syncretism is succinctly illustrated as we see Ramatoulaye, her friend Aissatou and others using all possible resources, namely modern medicine, Koranic prayers, native medicine, fetishes and sacrifices, to rescue the dying Jacqueline (SLL 43). The assumption is that none of these resources is sufficient in itself; they work in complementarity. However, in many cases, religion fails to solve the spiritual and physical problems of believers. Cham (1991: 179-180) notes that “Religion is [sometimes] powerless in the face of practical problems [of life]. [I]ncessant invocation of the mercy and protection of Allah and the ‘*grands marabouts*’ fails to shield [...] or provide relief from [...] miserable condition.” This is true in the case of Ramatoulaye who is not vindicated and her condition does not become any better despite her devotion to Allah. There seems to be no deliverance.

An unfortunate situation in this multi-religious environment is that, believers of Islam tend to look down upon and alienate non-Muslims in an attempt to exalt their religious faith. This attitude often causes conflicts between Muslims and Christians. It is religious fanaticism that leads to xenophobia among Africans as shown by the experience of Jacqueline, a Black Protestant from Ivory Coast married to a Senegalese Muslim but classified in Senegal as an outsider and an infidel by her in-laws because she refuses to adopt Islam and goes to church every Sunday (SLL 42). Religious intolerance makes Jacqueline’s marriage unhappy and results in her serious nervous breakdown. Her experience provides a quintessential illustration of the negative effects of religious bigotry. We also see aunty Nabou calling Catholics bad names: ‘*gourmettes*’ (SLL 27) to mean that the Catholics go to church, more for food than for worship. Ideally, all parties should demonstrate more tolerance. Regardless of religious affiliations, Africans should see themselves first as brothers and sisters before any other considerations.

¹¹ The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro, also known as Basilique de Notre Dame de la Paix de Yamoussoukro, is the largest and tallest place of worship in Africa. Situated in Yamoussoukro, a town of 100,000 inhabitants, the basilica has a total surface of 322,920 sq.ft and was constructed for a cost of USD \$300 million. The Guinness Book of Records lists it as the largest church in the world, having surpassed the previous record holder, St. Peter’s Basilica of Rome.

The Islamic faces represented in *So Long a Letter* offer unique articulations of the socio-cultural and economic realities of Senegalese society. Bâ effectively uses the epistolary form to criticize certain oppressive practices and traditions. She examines the issues at hand on a very personal basis, and thus goes into great depth to bring out her innermost feelings thanks to Ramatoulaye's letter. Ramatoulaye therefore serves as a voice and interpreter for the author's critique of Senegalese socio-cultural and economic realities of Islam. Since *So Long a Letter* is a discourse that moves from the intimate to the community and from the community to the nation and beyond, the experiences and revelations of the protagonists transcend their local communities. The narrative presents Islam as the motor of the socio-cultural and economic life of Senegalese people. This highly educative narrative portrays Wolof-Islamic practices sometimes with reverence and respect, sometimes with satire and ridicule. An analysis of Islamic practices in this region reveals that the problem is not with the religion per se but with the believers who use religion as a means to an end: men abuse their numerous wives; *marabouts*, praise-singers, and beggars take advantage of religion to exploit others. Bâ's articulations of identities through the faces of Islam do not, however, provide concrete solutions to all the issues raised. She postulates but she is unable to resolve the complexities involved. Nevertheless, in revealing Senegalese realities, the text points in the direction of a few possible solutions to prevailing problems. The revelation provided by this literary treatment calls for action, and it behooves Africans to liberate themselves from social vices and economic hardship. A starting point is for people not to use religion as an excuse to abuse fellow human beings. They must also eliminate unproductive institutionalized ceremonies.

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