

## The Afro-Caribbean Link: the Urgency of History and Collective Memory in Maryse Condé's *Ségou*

FRANCIS UNIMNA ANGREY

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### ABSTRACT

The French Caribbean society is an amalgam and a mosaic of racial groups and peoples that originated from Europe, Asia, Africa and, of course, from some other parts of the world. It is, therefore, normal that such racial groups find it extremely difficult to integrate and act as one people who have the same destiny. This is made worse by the fact that even the blacks, who constitute the most deprived set of people in the Caribbean Islands, can hardly come together to fight a common cause simply because they lack a collective memory about their past. Many intellectuals, writers, philosophers, poets such as Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Léonard Sainville, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, Maryse Condé from these Islands have been trying, in their various ways, to reconstruct the African past of their people as a means of making them chart a new course in their effort to develop their Islands economically, socially, politically and culturally. Maryse Condé is one writer who feels that this can be made possible by making the people know about Africa. Through such knowledge, they would be able to develop a collective memory and, thus, be better placed to solve problems of anguish and alienation that confront them in their society. This paper tries to capture this state of affairs in Maryse Condé's numerous works. But to be more precise it restricts itself to *Ségou*, her historical novel *par excellence*.

**Key words:** Caribbean society, amalgam, racial groups, history, collective memory.

The French Caribbean islands such as Haiti, Martinique and Guadeloupe are an amalgam and a mosaic of racial groups that came from Europe, Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. In the existing relationships between the various diasporic and migratory groups, the blacks, whose ancestors are Africans, are the most disadvantaged. They are the least literate and, thus, the most deprived set of people in their islands.

In the economic sphere, the blacks have little or no control over lands that should rightly belong to them. They seek to eke out a precarious livelihood in arid and infertile pieces of land grudgingly ceded to them by white land owners commonly referred to as the "Békés". Under such conditions, inequalities abound in the French Caribbean society which Ormerod (1985) calls a plantation society.

Of course, the existing inequalities in this society make it such that the black society lives steeped in hunger and starvation, in despair and dereliction, in alcohol and drugs, in ignorance due to illiteracy, in the constant dream of Africa, an Africa that is itself in the throes of political dictatorship, internecine tribal and civil wars. Therefore, Africa which the black Caribbean man conceives of is one of a paradise that is lost. He seeks an identity legitimacy through a misplaced dream of Africa that, rather than solves his problem of a cultural bastard, exacerbates his anguish in his adopted social and cultural milieu in the West

Indies.

It is this much that Bukoye Arowolo demonstrates in her article where she shows that Condé's heroines, Véronica and Marie-Hélène, in *Hérémakhonon* and *Une saison à Rihata*, her first two novels, make the mistake of coming to Africa physically to seek cultural redemption and social relevance. Unfortunately, their stay in Africa becomes a catastrophic experience for both heroines as Arowolo explains:

Condé's heroines conceive of a chimeric, paradisiac and mythic Africa. They have a romantic and extravagant image of the continent and their expectations are very high. They look up to the African woman as the saviour of the black woman but their dream of Africa is however different from reality. Africa aggravates rather than solves their problems of alienation. (224).

Even Véronica, the heroine of *Hérémakhonon*, sees her sojourn in Africa as a waste since she cannot fulfil her strongest desire of finding her ancestor whom she came to Africa to seek in the first place. She is disappointed; in place of her "ancestors" she finds sanguinary dictators who kill even school children. She finds her way back to France a bitter and an unfulfilled woman. She now feels that she has made a regrettable mistake.

This mistake, this tragic mistake which I could not help committing, being what I am. I made a mistake, a mistake about my ancestors, that is all. I sought my salvation where I should not have done so. Among assassins (312).

Maryse Condé, like many other Caribbean writers of the human condition in the Caribbean islands such as Joseph Zobel, Edouard Glissant, Xavier Orville, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Bertène Juminer, tends to believe that the problems of anguish and alienation suffered by the black Caribbeans do not necessarily have their solutions in the African continent. She exhorts them to seek solutions to their problems from socio-cultural realities in their new world. Condé does not, however, advocate an obliteration of the African continent from the minds of her Caribbean compatriots. She rather believes that Africa should remain fresh in their minds as it should serve as a reminder that it will continue to be their ancestral home. She even urges them to know about Africa by understanding its history and by getting themselves entrenched in it. It is by so doing that they could create for themselves a collective memory, which has been lacking in the islands, for their survival in the harshness and hostility of their new environment. This, she tends to show in her writings.

*Ségou*, her third novel published in two tomes in 1984 and in 1985, is considered her bestseller because it is, in the eyes of many literary critics, an important dosage of history, of memory and of imagination. It is a novel in which the writer has successfully brought together reality, novelistic creativity, and imagination to constitute a useful search for identity. To Antoine Darnal, Bernard Magnier and Nataf, who view Condé's novel as one important historical novel, Condé has been able to fuse knowledge and imagination, erudition and creativity.

If Maryse Condé's two novels possess all the ingredients that make for popular success, they are nonetheless the happy result of a subtle dosage of knowledge and imagination, of erudition and creativity; fiction mixing with reality to give us two books in which historical precision never negatively affects the novelistic development of the plot (120).

What Darnal and his companions are saying is that *Ségou*, which we are trying to analyse in this paper, is primarily a historical novel. It is a novel based on the history of the Bambara empire whose headquarters was the city of *Ségou* Condé catches the mood of the decline of the once flourishing empire owing to the penetration into the *Ségou* society of Islam, an all-conquering religion. This new

religion causes fear and confusion in the entire empire.

Most affected by this new phenomenon is Dousika Traoré's family. The consequences are grave because the entire Traoré family gets dislocated, broken and its members scattered all around the world. Maryse Condé thus shows the fall of the Bambara empire of *Ségou* through the various experiences that members of the family have. For this, *Ségou* is a historical novel par excellence.

The need for the study of historical novels and its importance for the people of the Afro-Caribbean world cannot be overemphasised. According to many literary critics, such a study allows Africans and Caribbeans or West Indians to identify with African heroes of the past and to prepare a better future for black people all over the world. That is why Mario de Andrade, whom Jacques Chevrier quotes in his seminal work, *Littérature Nègre*, has to say that "in the struggle they lead to build their future, African peoples need to recognise themselves in the heroes of the past" (105).

Maryse Condé's novel, *Ségou*, is one of the many negro-African novels such as Djibril Tamsir Niane's *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*, Nazi Boni's *Crépuscule des temps anciens*, Jean Malonga's *La légende de M'pfoumou ma Mazona*, Paul Hazoumé's *Doguicimi*, which have become famous literary works in the study of negro-African literature of French expression.

The presentation of these novels to the reading public is not gratuitous and factitious. It enables us to better apprehend the African continent and, especially, it helps the West Indians to better understand and appreciate the past of their African ancestors. According to Jacques Chevrier,

It is also the opportunity to show at the same time the originality and the richness of ancient African civilisations founded on the values of honour, of courage and of solidarity, and their will to resist foreign invasion and servitude (106).

Léonard Sainville, a Caribbean writer and critic, posits that historical novels constitute "a lesson of patriotism and négritude" and by extension of "antillanité". Thus, Condé gets inspired by certain historical happenings and events which she has decided to poetise according to the workings of her creative imagination. She gets inspired by the true story of the Bambara empire of *Ségou* to write the novel, which constitutes a reconstitution of the history of this empire from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of it.

In this work, what captures our interest are less the cause, and consequences of the fall of the Bambara empire of *Ségou* than the effects that the narrative perspicaciousness of the writer creates in us. It is our feeling that though history dominates in Condé's novel it is first and foremost a work of art, a literary work. We consider it a work of imagination and

memory that has come out of Condé's fecund and fertile memory.

We have already underscored the fact that *Ségou* is an important novel in the study of negro-African literature because it enables Africans and West Indians to know their African past which they were not opportuned to know very well especially that which was being churned out by biased Eurocentric historians. Through the study of such novels they are able to better appreciate the psychological impulses of their African ancestors who are presented in Eurocentric history books as caricatural archetypes who had no culture or no civilisation prior to the advent of the colonialists.

This is even more true as until recently in schools in Francophone Africa and in the French West Indies, students were taught that they were descendants of the "Gaulois" that is of the French citizens of old. With such wrong notions given to the black youths, they are unable to know the authentic history of their people. Under such harrowing intellectual conditions they cannot forge a future for themselves.

But works like *Ségou* enable the black Africans and the West Indians to know that Africans are also human beings who have had a glorious past, as proclaimed by David Diop in his poem "Afrique, mon Afrique", who have had worries, who have known hatred, love, disappointments in their relationships with themselves and with the external world.

In the novelistic form, Maryse Condé, who claims a Bambara ancestry, tells not only the story of her people as she read it but also as to what information she has been able to gather about them. Thus, she tells us about what she thinks she knows about these people. It is, therefore, with some nostalgia and affection that she talks about the crises and contradictions, the wickedness and the goodness, the weaknesses and the strengths, the truths and the lies of a people that have good and bad qualities just like any other people, whatever the colour of their skin.

The preponderance of *Ségou* in all of Condé's works is no longer in doubt. The novel is first and foremost based on human nature and on human experiences. It is a novel about greatness; it is also a novel about the decadence and the fall of an African family; this fall marks the tragedy of an African people. It is also the story of a traditional world that lives steeped in fetish traditions and customs.

This world, overwhelmed, confronts a world that is fast changing. The decadence of these Bambara people is due to their confrontation with Islam and with the French imperialistic penetration. This is the explanation that Condé offers as she talks about her novel in Françoise Pfaff's work, *Entretiens avec Maryse Condé*.

It is the history of a family in three or four

generations from the time the Bambara empire was stable until it fell in the hands of the French and became a part of the Sudan. It illustrates the greatness and the decadence of an African people symbolised by one particular family (73).

With a sense of justice and equity Condé tells the story of her people just as she knows it. She does not seek to unduly please the African audience or to glorify the African past. She writes her novel to tell us about the many complexities of her African people and about all the sentiments and emotions that animate them. Condé says that she has no intention to hide anything ugly or to glamourise the Africans of the past. She avers that her novel is a pot pourri of all the things that happened to Africans, especially to the Bambaras.

A bit of everything. The beauty, the greatness, the defeats, the weaknesses. I did not want to say that everything was beautiful and perfect in Africa. I described what I thought I had seen and understood about Africa: the good, the bad, the best and the worst. *Ségou* is not a dogmatic novel that shows only one side of things, it is a novel that seeks to show Africa in all its complexity (74).

Condé tends to show that a writer that seeks to talk about African realities should not be carried away by the literary philosophy of "doudouisme" that seeks to show only the good side of the continent and to complain about its rape and despoliation. To her, Africa must be presented in her crude reality. African novelists such as Chinua Achebe, in *Things fall apart and Arrow of God*; Cheikh Hamidou Kane, in *L'aventure ambiguë*, present African facts in disconcerting realism. This, many critics feel, is not a caricature of the African world. It is a means of helping the African people to forge their identity as Condé is wont to explain.

I rather belong to the school of thought of the Nigerian professor, Onwuka Dike who used to say that the African past had to be accepted with all that it had, the human sacrifices and the rest. That is how a people can forge an identity (24).

Maryse Condé's *Ségou*, a literary masterpiece, has known a huge success all over the world. To that extent, it has been translated into at least twelve languages among which are English, German, Polish, Italian, Swedish, Portuguese and Spanish. This demonstrates the international verve that the novel enjoys. *Ségou* constitutes a brilliant and precise reconstitution of the history of the Bambara kingdom of *Ségou*.

The novelist does not a priori want to make herself a historian by embarking on the writing of her historical novel.

She is a literary figure of world acclaim before anything else. That is why she chooses to tell her story by making use of certain unforgettable figures whose actions and reactions contribute either to the greatness or to the decline of the entire kingdom. Most of such characters come from Dousika Traoré's family.

Dousika Traoré, head of his family, is not an ordinary personage in the Ségou kingdom. He is a noble member of the King's court and inner caucus. His voice is well heard throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom. As a member of the royal council he is also an intimate friend and a special adviser to the Mansa, the king. Thus, in the social hierarchy of Ségou Dousika is one of the pillars and one of the guardians of the Bambara culture:

Dousika was a noble, a *yéréwolo*, member of the royal council, intimate friend of the Mansa, father of about ten legitimate children, reigning as *fa*, that is as patriarch over five families, his first, and thereafter over that of his younger brothers who lived around him (10).

This description shows that Dousika carries a lot of responsibilities on his frail shoulders. In spite of all, he is able to discharge such responsibilities as a man of means in his traditional society. He is a man of high standing who commands respect from his five wives, his children and the entire society.

The Traoré family, just like the Ségou society which it symbolises, leads a peaceful and serene life. The rhythm of quotidian life remains the same for the people. The daily activities carried out by the people are the same on a daily basis. It is farm work, talks held under trees, worship of Bambara gods as the Bambara people are proselytes. Unfortunately, the serenity of the Kingdom begins to change as the society begins to have some foreign influences gradually creep in and transform the entire way of life of the people of Ségou.

In this transformation, least expected by the people, the Dousika family is one that is most affected. First, Dousika Traoré is destituted from his position of a noble in the king's court and the royal council. This leads to his premature death which no one is in a position to explain. All people can say is that he committed an unpardonable sin against his people. Dousika's anguish as a humiliated man emanates from the fact that he does not seem to explain the reason for his destitution. Condé explains the depth of this anguish thus:

Dousika Traoré is very anguished because he does not know what sin he has committed. Finally, his anguish comes from the fact that he does not very

well know what he has done; consequently, he does not know what to repair, he cannot make adequate sacrifices to the gods whose anger he must have caused (79).

The humiliating punishment meted out to Dousika is also extended to his entire family but in various ways. Even the gods of the land contribute to the fall of this family as their verdict is that Tiékoro, eldest son of Dousika, should embrace islam, the new religion that has taken roots in the kingdom. The oracle Koumaré tells Nya, Tiékoro's mother and Dousika's senior wife, that the gods have taken a decision that is irrevocable.

Tiékoro, Koumaré has just told me. You will go to Timbuktu. The ancestors have opened the way for you (56).

The Mansa is helpless in the ambiguous position of his kingdom. He knows that the coming of islam, a new religion and a new way of life, signifies the death of his kingdom. He finds himself obligated to accept the new religion in spite of his aversion for it. He cannot fight to repel islam; all the neighbouring kingdoms and empires are getting rapidly islamised. Thus, the kingdom of Ségou cannot fight alone against the monster of islam.

Monzon hesitated because, he was conscious of it, the kingdom of Ségou was everyday assuming the position of a small island, surrounded by countries gained to islam. But the new faith did not have only disadvantages (59).

In spite of his tergiversations, Monzon feels that islam may in future become a unifying factor for all the countries. He is obliged to make a "cornelian choice" that will enable his country or his kingdom to find itself a place in the new comity of nations that is being founded in the new world guided by islam. The people of Ségou find themselves in the position of the Diallobé people in Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë* who feel that their survival in the emerging world is dependent upon their acceptance of the new school, as the influential *La Grande Royale* explains to them:

Only the new comers know it. We must ask them; we must go to them to learn the art of winning without being right. The new school is the new means of fighting us which the new comers are using. (45).

Ezeulu, the main character in Achebe's *Arrow of God* also knows that the knowledge of the white man is power. He knows that the world in which they live is fast changing. It is a world that makes it mandatory for the populace to learn to

read and write. That is why he chooses to send his son, Oduche, to the western school to learn amidst condemnation and criticism from his people who decide to ostracise him and his family. In the same vein, the people of Ségou have no other choice than to accept islam and make it their future religion.

It is for your good that I accept this offer. Islam will win. It is winning already. Soon, the world will belong only to those who can write and have the knowledge from books. Our people, despite all their human qualities, will be considered ignorant and unrefined (106).

Although the entire Ségou empire has been invaded by islam the family of Dousika Traoré is seen as being responsible for the changes taking place. It is so because his children embrace islam or christianity to the peril of their own tradition. The Ségou people now feel that the many negative happenings in the family are well deserved. They blame Tiékoro for bringing sorrow to the family and, thus, to the empire by joining islam just as the Umuaro people in Achebe's *Arrow of God* blame Oduche's action of imprisoning the sacred python in a box for all their misfortunes.

What terrible destiny could that of the Traorés be! What crimes had they committed? Those who were present, and who in various ways hated Tiékoro, could not help thinking that it was his conversion that had brought the curse onto the family (97).

The fate of the Bambara kingdom cannot be divorced from the islamic war, the jihad, that the Fulanis are waging against other neighbouring kingdoms and empires that are still living steeped in animistic practices. In the novel, the Fulani kingdom of Macina is leading the war against the animist and fetish Bambara empire, which finds itself caught up in what Hubert Deschamps chooses to call "the Fulani revolution of Macina" (95). Better armed and better organised militarily, the Fulanis succeed in subduing the Bambara kingdom which becomes part of the new theocratic regime put in place by the victorious Fulanis.

Henceforth, the Fulanis are everywhere. They kill, they maim, they destroy and pillage. They convert non-muslims to the faith by force in what is known as jihad. They invade all the towns of the Ségou kingdom that remain helpless in the face of such sudden brutalisation.

Yes, the Fulanis have invaded our towns, they set them on fire. They kill our women and our children. islam! You know it now, they allow themselves to be converted into islam. Well, they

think it their mission to convert us all through iron and fire. Jihad, they call it jihad (285).

In the whole scenario, which happens against the backdrop of the odious slave trade and French obnoxious imperialism, the Bambara kingdom of Ségou is the loser. In the novel, we are made to see how Ségou citizens are shipped as slaves to Jamaica, Brazil and the West Indies from slave ports like Saint-Louis and Gorée.

But in this odious trade of the blacks, Maryse Condé does not want to lay blame solely on the white people. She tends to say that the blacks also contributed to their misery by shamelessly engaging in the selling of their fellow citizens. To that extent, the novelist tends to show that there exists a close link between the Africans and the West Indians, descendants of African slaves. In the Caribbean society, polarised owing to its heterogeneous nature, the blacks feel inferior because of their history. Although they form the majority population, they are the most deprived being good only for the farms where they are exploited. Mireille Rosello presents the society thus:

...the West Indians are all descendants of slaves, or descendants of masters, that is descendants of racial and economic groups that had interest either to bring about a radical change, or to forcefully maintain a status quo favourable to a minority (7).

Maryse Condé does not seek to discourage her fellow Caribbean citizens by telling the story of Ségou the way she has done it in her novel. On the contrary she tells the story to create a sense of history in her people. Such sense of history could be of immense help to them as it can make it possible for them to forge a sense of collective memory. The advantage of such a move is that the West Indians, rather than feel low and ashamed of their past, could feel proud of their inheritance and work in concert to safeguard same.

It can also awaken in them the sense of unity that seems to lack in them and among them. More than this, it makes palpable the fact that Africa and the West Indies are one as they complement each other. In the words of Ojo-Ade, Africa should serve as a source of their spiritual and psychological force and the West Indies as their real nation which should serve as the physical space in which they must endeavour to realise all their dreams. This way, they will cease to be cultural orphans or bastards and economic vagabonds in perpetual search of a socio-economic anchor. That is the *raison d'être* of Condé's Ségou.

This paper has attempted to highlight the urgency of history and collective memory as seen by Maryse Condé in her famous novel, Ségou. The paper has shown that these two things are necessary ingredients for the black West Indians as a

whole and for the French speaking Caribbeans in particular to forge a common bond that could ensure their untrammelled growth and development in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of their lives. As Condé seems to point out, which the paper has tried to show, the black West Indians should feel proud of their African past and inheritance and see it as a means of moving their adopted home forward.

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