

Jean-Dominique Pénel

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Abdoulaye Mamani, another *Strange destiny*

On the evening of the 14th July 2004, in the gardens of Hotel Kairaba in Banjul (The Gambia), the weather was fine. One could smell the sea air. It was during a colloquium on oral literature that I met Antoinette Tidjani Alou. She spoke to me of Niger that she had come from the day before; she told me about a special issue she was editing on Nigérien literature for a South African journal and suggested that I write an article on Abdoulaye Mamani, "as my heart led me", without worrying about academic or explanatory analysis, just letting my memories and feelings flow. How could I turn down such an offer when I had a debt of gratitude toward Mamani, a debt I had never managed to repay in full? And here I was being offered the opportunity to speak about him twelve years after leaving Niger. How could I refuse?

When I arrived in Niamey in 1982, I came from the Central African Republic, an Africa where both nature and people are exuberant. I had just spent fourteen years there. The transition, on landing in Niger, was difficult, for I no longer recognised anything I knew, anything that had become my horizon. The landscape overwhelmed one by its immense size and aridity. And the people especially seemed reserved, distant. Moreover, the austerity of the regime of President Kountché increased the habitual reticence of Nigériens towards foreigners. As time went by, I got used to my new professional environment, the Faculty of Arts of the University of Niamey, which seemed to me to be far better equipped than the impoverished University of Bangui, where I had spent several years. But what worried and demoralised me was the absence of any real communication with Nigériens – I mean a relation-

ship that is not just one of surface politeness, where it is proper to keep one's distance. I felt I was too much on the edge or fringe of the Nigérien community with whom I co-existed, without any real exchange, while I wanted at least to understand the people and perhaps even to share something with them. I admit that I was discouraged for a while; even wondered if I could ever manage to break out of this isolation. Fortunately two men showed me that I had been wrong to sink into this kind of pessimism and resignation: Jean Rouch and Abdoulaye Mamani.

When I first met Jean Rouch, I knew nothing about him or his work, but I was immediately struck by the quality of his contacts with Nigériens and by the trust they showed him in return. I was amazed to see such and such a Nigérien, who I thought was somewhat haughty and distant, laughing and conversing happily with him. Jean Rouch had acquired, since first setting foot in that country in 1941, a passion and unshakable affection for Niger and Nigériens – that they returned – and that he continued to enjoy for more than sixty years.¹ His death in 2004 in a motor accident (exactly like that of Abdoulaye Mamani eleven years earlier in 1993) would even ensure that his laughter and humour would continue to echo among the dunes and spirits of Niger.

It is common knowledge that Jean Rouch's literary and cinematographic works are characterised by his ability to listen to others and to let them speak for themselves as far as possible. My meeting with Rouch therefore forced me to take a new look at myself. But the fact remained that he was a compatriot, so there was still something lacking in this exchange: a Nigérien initiative of some kind that would open up for me the door to this country and its inhabitants. Finally, this Nigérien initiative happened, thanks to Abdoulaye Mamani. What a surprise it was, indeed, when he came to see me one day at my house, in the Yantala neighbourhood, quite simply and spontaneously, without any formal invitation or protocol.

I must admit that the visits that Mamani² paid me, when he used to come from Zinder where he lived, were crucial: they changed forever my understanding of relationships with Nigériens and they enabled me to get to know a man with an amazing destiny. It is really thanks to him that I was introduced into the literary society of Niger and that I was able to form ties gradually with several writers. And above all I met, in his person, a surprising destiny.

From the start Mamani astonished me by his vast circle of acquaintances: because of his political career as deputy and chief councillor of the AOF (*L'Afrique Occidentale Française* – French West Africa, the fe-

deration of colonies, 1956-1960), because of the defeat of Sawaba, the left-wing political party, in the referendum of 1958 and the consequences this had for its supporters, because of his long exile for fourteen years (1960-1974) after independence which took him to Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, Modibo Keita's Mali, and the Algeria of Ben Bella and Boumédiène. Mamani had visited many parts of the globe and met many people – writers, politicians, exiles... His exile and the people he had met gave him a great open-mindedness that set him apart and differentiated him from many of his fellow writers in Niger.

Through this experience, and then through his imprisonment he had acquired an attitude of resistance to obstacles that assailed him, with the result that, whatever blows fate dealt him, he withstood them or tried to do so. In any event, he never let himself be crushed by events, no matter how disagreeable they were.

It will not be forgotten that after 1958, when the Governor had dismissed Djibo Bakary and his government, Mamani, a Sawaba deputy, was a candidate in the elections in Zinder, where he succeeded in ousting Diori Hamani, placing the latter in an awkward situation. To rescue the future first President of the Republic of an independent Niger, the authorities had to annul the election that had just taken place, and Mamani thought it pointless to stand again, since the dice would be loaded against him. This did not, however, discourage him and he pursued his action within his party. This first example is typical of Mamani's attitude.

The need to flee first of all his own country in 1960, and then the first two countries that offered him asylum (Ghana, then Mali), gave him a kind of calm stubbornness that misfortune could not shake. His imprisonment, in 1976, on Niger's border with Libya, two years after his return to the country in 1974, could have disheartened him and demoralised him permanently, but this was not the case, for he began to write *Sarraounia* as soon as he was freed.³ President Kountché, who had had him imprisoned, decided to give the name "Sarraounia" to a school in Dosso and agreed to assist Med Hondo, the Mauritanian film director, when he wanted to make a movie based on the novel of Mamani. Set-back: after Med Hondo arrived to shoot the movie in Niger, Kountché succumbed to political pressure at the last moment and expelled him and his whole team. Thomas Sankara, the Burkinabé president, came to the director's rescue and the movie was made in the Moré language (and not in Zarma and Haoussa) in Burkina Faso. Med Hondo won the Yenenga Stallion, the grand prize of the annual Pan African Film and

Television Festival (Fespaco) in Ouagagougou. Setback: the movie was not shown in French cinemas and the director went bankrupt. Mamani subsequently launched out in a very different direction when he founded a museum in Zinder, an enterprise that took up a lot of his time and energy.

Another example: in 1989, Inoussa Ousseïni, Director of Culture, created with the authorities the "Boubou Hama" prize, worth one million CFA francs, intended to reward a person of culture.⁴ A jury, presided over by André Salifou, was created. I was a member of this jury (the only non-Nigérien). From the outset of our discussions, it was apparent that the jury was going to award the prize to Mamani. Setback: furious at this choice, one member of the jury, with scant regard for discretion and respect for the choice of the majority, published an article criticising the decision that had not yet been announced. Consequently, the jury was obliged to change direction and awarded the prize, posthumously, to Ibrahim Issa. Two years later, in 1991, the prize was awarded to Kélétigui Mariko. Two years afterwards, in 1993, the prize was finally given to Mamani (I had left Niger and, for this reason, was no longer a member of the jury, but I was overjoyed that Mamani would at last be recognised). Final setback: on his way to Niamey to receive his prize, Mamani died in a motor accident.

However, it must be said that on several occasions in my own work, I had the disconcerting experience of doing something for Mamani that did not turn out as it should have done. Thus, as a result of the visits that Mamani paid me, I decided to make a tape recording. Mamani accepted the idea and during one of his trips to Niamey, I recorded an interview. It was due to this that I realised I should pursue this work and I therefore had the idea of meeting other writers and literary people, whether they wrote in French or in a language of Niger. This is why I can claim that, if it had not been for Mamani's visits, it is scarcely probable that the three volumes of *Rencontres (Encounters)* would have seen the light of day, for it was his visits that inspired this project and made it seem possible. The first volume appeared with five interviews: those of Mamani, Kélétigui Mariko, Yazi Dogo and Hawad, produced by myself, and Idé Oumarou, produced by Amadou Mailélé. I added, to complete the book, a small study on the poetic writing of Ibrahim Issa. A setback for me: when I gave Mamani, whom I had not seen while composing the work, a copy of the book, he read the interview I had devoted to him and he found that parts of the text were badly expressed. It is true that I had kept corrections to a minimum, taking too much care

to respect the oral aspect, and that numerous typing errors had crept into the text; this really made me ashamed, all the more so because no other author had cause for complaint – and this also was the case for the ten authors of the second volume and the eleven of the third volume. In short, the only author of whom I had proved unworthy was precisely the one thanks to whom *Rencontres* had been born!

Another example of an embarrassing situation: Mamani had entrusted me with a copy of his collected poems *Eboniques* (*Eboniness*), which I found very beautiful. I thought a poetic montage should be created to introduce this work to the public. As the Ivorian actor Sidiki-Bakaba had come to the Franco-Nigérien Cultural Centre to present a course, I showed him the text and, once he had read it, he was easily convinced of the interest of the project. He therefore agreed to do a reading before the cameras in the dunes on the other side of the river. For the shoot, he hired a truck from Nigelec equipped to plant electric poles, but the truck got stuck in the sand after a while and finally the whole project was abandoned. Later I decided to take the matter up again. I recorded the poem on magnetic tape and asked a Nigérien musician, Mamane Sani, to compose music to follow the movements of the poem. Once the music was composed, I requested a young Nigérien dancer from the Mazari dance group to create choreography based on the music, which she did. All that remained was to film the whole: the dance with the music of Mamane Sani, accompanied by the recording of the poem. Everything was scheduled to take place shortly before my final departure from Niger, but the cameraman did not arrive.

Another example. With the film director Jean-Pierre Kaba, I put together and edited a video of 52 minutes on the actress Zalika Souley – which was presented at Fespaco in Burkina Faso. In the aftermath of this, I suggested we do similar documentaries on Nigérien personalities. I thought first of all of Mamani. An interview of about an hour and a half was videotaped, but the film was never edited!

When, while on holiday in France in July/August 1993, I learnt of the accidental death of Mamani, I immediately decided to publish part of his poetic works (his collected poems *Poémérides*, followed by previously unpublished or unknown texts I had collected) with a preface and notes. The book appeared in November 1993, published by L'Harmattan, but the cover, edged in brown, is not very attractive and the text of the poem "Ebony" (88-101) is placed too high, leaving blank spaces that are much too wide beneath. In short, once more, the end result did not live up to expectations. (In passing, it can be noted that

when one looks at the cover of *Sarraounia* in the edition published by ACCT in 1989, one is surprised to see a witch with hooked claws, which has nothing to do with the young rebel queen of the novel, proof that the illustrator either did not read the book or did not understand it.)

This is therefore a characteristic of Mamani's life: this kind of misfortune that dogged his actions or his work and that diminished accordingly the renown that he should have enjoyed and that hopefully will triumph in the end.

Another surprising aspect of Mamani was his relationship with his literary work towards which he seemed to adopt a certain detachment. This creates great problems for the researcher, particularly when trying to do an inventory of Mamani's literary and written work (he also wrote many political texts). As far as the literary domain is concerned, the only published texts that I have seen are, on the one hand, the works and texts *Poémérides* (Pierre Jean Oswald, 1972), *Sarraounia* (L'Harmattan, 1980 and ACCT, 1989), "Une nuit au Ténéré" ("A night in Ténéré", in *Paris-Dakar et autres nouvelles*, Editions Souffle, 1987) and, although I have not been able to get a copy, *Le Balai* (*The broom*), which was given an award and probably published by ACCT and RFI in 1973. On the other hand, poems that I found in various journals, without being able to say whether the list was exhaustive, and that I reproduced in my edition of his *Oeuvres poétiques* (*Collected poems*, L'Harmattan, 1993).

As for the other texts, Mamani lent me a copy of *Eboniques*, with his illustrations⁶ – but it was not a book, although he claimed that the text had been published. I was able to photocopy it and return it to him. Mamani gave me, moreover, a dummy of *Anthologie de combat* (*An anthology of war*) but I was never able to find out exactly whether this text had been published or not because the author's information remained too evasive and imprecise. In the interview published in *Rencontres*, Mamani mentions a piece called "La ballade du mauvais larron" ("The ballad of the bad thief") and texts for children, but I never saw any copy of these. Similarly, during his long stay in Algeria, Mamani certainly produced a lot for the Algerian Cultural Services, his employer, but no one has ever thought of trying to find any trace of this. Mamani himself never attempted to compile a register of these works, confining himself to asserting that they were the property of his employer. Inoussa Ousseïni, for his part, assured me that Mamani's family possessed unpublished manuscripts. It would be advisable therefore to gather together all texts, published and unpublished, so as to end this vague and ambiguous situation, at least on the literary level, and give this

work its true dimension. It would then be possible to undertake studies on both his work and his place in Nigérien literature. But nothing like that has yet been implemented.

The wandering life of Mamani and the disappearance of his archives gave him a kind of detachment with regard to his literary work, which is obviously very unsatisfactory for a literary critic. The same can be said about the way he recounted his life: I questioned him several times on the same topics and often he would add new information at every interview. It was not a case of contradictory, but rather of complementary information. Mamani was indeed a reserved and discreet man who did not easily reveal himself or did not disclose everything all at once (might not this also have been an effect of exile?). His biography has moreover not been established and the indications he gave me in his interview are not sufficient to explain fully the man and his work.

The object of this article is not to study Mamani's literary work, but to give some information on the author. Nevertheless, one cannot avoid speaking of Mamani's novel and its meaning. Although it is *fiction*, it is obvious that, for the Nigérien people, *Sarraounia* plays a significant role, and Mamani displayed a considerable stroke of genius in creating a novelistic text that has assumed, in the eyes of countless Nigérien readers, the value of an *historical text*. What is more, to have suggested to Nigériens that the roots of their identity could be found in an animist woman was a veritable *tour de force*, which seemed completely impossible. Mamani managed to achieve this by emphasising his heroine's ability to *resist in adversity and even in spite of certain failure*. For the young queen cannot stop the Voulet-Chanoine column, however, she has done everything she could in accordance with her ideals and her final message carries hope for the future. This is certainly what evokes a response in Nigérien readers. Now, in some ways, Mamani was also one who knew how to resist and who, in spite of apparent failures (failure in an election, failure of the Sawaba, failure of a film, etc.), could persist and continue to produce, no matter what the obstacles were. "Let us shatter resignation" he wrote in his poem "Espoir" (Hope, in *Eboniques, Œuvres poétiques*, 82) – a watchword that sustained his life and his struggle. Now, in the face of the obvious adversity that never ceased to confront him, his literary work is precisely his triumph, regardless of his action as a militant; and this is the reason why it must be made known in its entirety (something that has not yet been achieved, far from it) and analysed.

The above should demonstrate the admiration I had and still have for this man who opened up for me the door to Nigérien authors and their works.

Translated by Jill Daugherty.

Le texte original en français est disponible sur www.letterkunde.up.ac.za

Notes

1. The duration of Jean Rouch's stay was, moreover, a decisive element; one that should give food for thought to those champions of official French cooperation who consider that "short stay" missions or limited visits – which are becoming more and more limited – are sufficient to solve human problems, whereas mutual and reciprocal confidence can only be acquired with time.
2. The author's name is Abdoulaye Mamani, but like the Senegalese Ousmane Sembène who writes his name either in the French *administrative* manner, surname first, [Sembène Ousmane], or in its normal form, one frequently hears or sees Mamani Abdoulaye. I confess that I always called him "Mamani" and have referred to him, without realising it, as Mamani Abdoulaye.
3. As this was partly the case, it seems, for the writer Ibrahim Issa who shared his imprisonment.
4. In 1989 the ruling fixed CFA-French franc exchange rate was 1 CFA = 0.02 FRF; the FRF- US dollar-South African Rand average exchange rate was 5.89 FRF = 1 USD = 2.45 ZAR [eds.].
5. Published by Editions du Ténére in Niamey: Volume 1 (1990, 256 pages; the interview with Mamani is on pages 51-92); volume 2 (1992, 215 pages) and volume 3 (1993, 253 pages).
6. I was unable to reproduce them in my edition of his *Œuvres poétiques*, because the photocopies I had made of the original text were too poor.