UNESCO Series on Women in African History

Aoua Keïta

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
The UNESCO Series on Women in African History is produced by the Communication and Information Sector of UNESCO. This publication has received additional support from the Culture Sector, and the Social and Human Sciences Sector.

UNESCO specialist responsible for the project: Sasha Rubel
Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud

Published in 2017 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

© UNESCO 2017

This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Translation from French (original) to English: Obioma Ofoego
Illustration of the cover page: Massiré Tounkara
Graphic design: Muyang Li
Sira and the student movement in Mali

Illustrations: Massiré Tounkara
Script and text: Ophélie Rillon

Foreword

The following comic strip is a story inspired by the figure of Aoua Keita and the student movement in Mali (1977-1980). The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research on those elements. They do not claim to be an exact representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles, or clothing of the period.
Bamako, in November 1979. The school year begins. For several years, the contestation flared up against the reforms introduced by the regime of Moussa Traoré. In 1977, an entrance examination in higher education was introduced, followed in 1979, by an entrance examination in the public service. Both measures provoked a broad social movement of pupils and students. Taking advantage of the summer holidays and the return of students to their regions, the National Union of Students and Pupils of Mali (in French: Union Nationale des Etudiants et des Éleves du Mali, UNEEM) established a platform of demands disseminated by its supporters across the country. The objective was to prepare a broad strike movement for the back-to-school period of 1979.
The students had then created a metaphor to describe the situation in Bamako, which was the protest headquarters: «The hill of power was facing the hill of knowledge and both were separated by the valley of ignorance.» According to this image, the hill Koulouba (headquarters of the Presidential Palace) opposed the hill Badala (where there were several schools), separated both by the Niger River and the valley were located residential areas.
SCHOOLS ARE ON STRIKE FOR TEN DAYS. IN BADALABOUGOU HIGH SCHOOL, SIRA AND HER CLASSMATES ARE PREPARING THE BIG PROTEST PLANNED FOR MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 1979. SIRA BELONGS TO THE FEW GIRLS WHO FOLLOW A COURSE IN THIS MIXED SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THE CAPITAL.
That's another revolution to lead my dear. Do you really think a boy will listen to us and accept to be led by a woman?

There is no more paint...

...and it's not their rhetoric that will bring us more! They talk and talk again. But what about us and our opinion that counts so much?

That's another revolution to lead my dear. Do you really think a boy will listen to us and accept to be led by a woman?
We shall proceed to the vote for the renewal of the strike committee. Who among the deserving comrades would like to candidate?

I candidate for the post of Secretary of Information!

Ladji! Perfect, you have the experience for this position. Let’s now move on to the next item...
They slowly begin to understand that girls have something to say and can assume responsibility. Don’t worry Sira, we will fight!

Not only that: now she goes to meetings of the Executive Board of the UNEEM.

Easy, it’s a girls’ high school.

Don’t worry, it will be for next time. See Rokia for example, she has been elected Secretary General of her high school.

I am as capable as Ladji!

They slowly begin to understand that girls have something to say and can assume responsibility. Don’t worry Sira, we will fight!
We will have to:
It is not the boys that will carry our claims. If today they speak better than us it is because we let them speak!
Sira, President!
Vote for Sira, President of UNEEM!

You make me ashamed! I already told you not to hang with these rogues who are in politics instead of studying!

We send you to school and it should serve a purpose at least!

Ouch!!!!

Removal of the curriculum
I heard she's going to school and I wanted to congratulate you. Girls' education is a long battle which I contribute to in my small way and I am happy to see that it has benefited the younger generations.

Your daughter seems to be hard headed and I don't think beating her up will change anything.

You know, when I was a child, my own mother was opposed to my school enrolment, thinking it was reserved for the boys. She was afraid of what would happen to a literate girl.
Without the firm decision of my father, I would never have attended school and become a midwife. Later on, this job allowed me to make a living... and support my own mother when she was too tired to work. But I will not bother you any longer with my old memories...

I wish you a good evening. God bless you.
Mom, who is this lady?

It's Aoua Keita, the first female deputy from Mali, at the time of your grandparents, the struggle against colonization and the First Republic.

She has just returned to Mali and lives in the area at the foot of the bridge.

This old Aoua should mind her own business! She has been overtaken by time... These years of exile have completely cut her off from the realities of our country...
LATER IN THE EVENING...
THE NEXT MORNING
HELLO SIR! DO YOU KNOW WHERE I CAN FIND THE HOUSE OF AOUA KEITA?
Please, come in Sira! My name is Sira.

No need to thank me... What's your name again?

Good morning Madam. I wanted to thank you for yesterday...

Good morning my dear!

My name is Sira.

Please, come in Sira!
The boys refuse to give us responsibility. I have however proposed myself yesterday but they did not take me seriously.

...so you are preparing a big protest, right? In my time, girls were rare to commit. How the preparation is going?

We are almost ready... but, it is more difficult for us, girls.

Indeed, it is harder for us women....
When I proposed myself for the deputy position for Sikasso, I suffered a humiliation that will never be forgotten: on the election day of April 8th, in 1959, all my male fellow candidates had left to handle difficult areas. As a result, I had to monitor the voting in Koutiala and the suburbs. I visited many polling stations and operations ran smoothly, but around 11:30, when I arrived to Singne, a small village of 500 inhabitants, I was denied entry to the polling station.
You have to be not only bold, but also insolent to dare facing men and accepting a male’s position. But it is not your fault.

It is the fault of the crazy leaders of the RDA who flout the people of our country by making you their equal.

Get out of my village, bold woman!

If your men of RDA laugh at us, we will enforce them to respect us. I, Sergeant Major of the French Army, who fought the Germans, agreeing to be headed by a woman? Never.
And the women of the village did not intervene?

Quite the contrary: they rushed on me to give me a correction and it almost cost my life! The chief of the village was completely drunk. I got shoved and spat on and many more.

The chief of the village was completely drunk. I got shoved and spat on and many more.

And the women of the village did not intervene?
You see, this humiliation did not stop me from continuing to fight or being elected. It was a close call!

Get out of here woman with honeyed language! I laugh at you, your devil words and your RDA. Hold your tongue! If you keep talking to me, I will make you beat up by women.
Well I was not alone, we fought collectively to voice our concerns. Initially, I had to hold clandestine meetings of women in my maternity hospital to avoid triggering the anger of husbands that could not stand to see their wives involved in politics.

Auntie, how did you do to impose yourself? How did you manage to be respected and accepted as a deputy by the men of your party?
MY FRIENDS, THOUGH WE ARE FEW IN NUMBER TO HAVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE, IT IS OUR DUTY TO PARTICIPATE IN ELECTIONS IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, EACH ACCORDING TO OUR POSSIBILITIES, TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE VICTORY OF OUR PARTY.

AS A GRIOT, I WILL DIFFUSE THE WATCHWORDS DURING BAPTISMAL AND MARRIAGE CEREMONIES.

AS AN EDUCATOR, I WILL TEACH MY PUPILS ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF VOTING AND OUR PARTY.

AS A TRADER, I MAKE A DONATION OF 1000 FRANS TO THE PARTY TO HELP THE CAMPAIGN.

AS FOR ME, I'LL TAKE CARE OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE CARDS OF OUR PARTY WHEN I GO SELL PEANUTS FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE.
In 1956, with my friend teacher Aïssata Coulibaly, we created a union of women with two objectives: fight against colonization and defend the rights of female employees. We travelled the world to participate in international women conferences and discuss our common concerns.

Sisters! Today, we are here all together to defend the rights of women worldwide. All women, regardless of origin and skin color, are pursuing the same goal...
I see... alone, we cannot accomplish much... and did you win all your battles Auntie?

Not all. But we have to be patient and persistent, and never give up. On the eve of independence, we created a women's association which called for a transformation of marriage legislation. We wanted to include the prohibition of polygamy, marriage to be civil contract, the prohibition of early marriage and repudiation...
Gentlemen of the Republic of Mali. I am pleased that today the draft Family Code, claimed for years by the women of Mali, is submitted to vote.

In 1962, during the vote on the law at the Assembly, I was the only woman to sit as a deputy. I didn’t succeed in passing the ban on polygamy. Most male deputies were against it. And even among women, many of them asked us to renounce such a claim. They feared not being able to find a husband anymore.
I have no doubt that you, men of Mali, will take into account the concerns of your sisters, mothers, wives and daughters; of all those who have worked with you for the independence of our country.

The colonial administration had refused to defend women's rights,
After reflection, I realized that the time was not to monogamy in Mali. Some parts of the law were rejected, but the most important was that the legislation passed.

You know, even me, I married a polygamous man of my will later on! Maybe this fight will be handled by your generation.

Good morning Madam.

Sira, I am on my way to the next meeting. Are you coming?
This concerns us directly. Leave us a place at the podium to voice our claims!

To begin with, I asked the delegates to join us on the podium.

Comrades! We, girls, discussed between each other and we believe it is important that one of us sits on the committee of the school in order to make this instance representative...

There are girls in the office of the Union at the national level and it is absurd that this rule is not applied at the local level. Moreover, we are much more legitimate than you to defend the claim to stop the exclusion of unmarried mothers from schools.

Sira you learn fast! I thought about that night and I think you're right. Take my place of Secretary of Information and don't hesitate to ask me if you need a hand. I’ll be your assistant.
THE ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS MUST BE REMOVED! THE EXCLUSION OF UNMARRIED MOTHERS FROM SCHOOLS MUST STOP RIGHT NOW! INCREASE SCHOLARSHIPS! WE WILL FIGHT UNTIL THE TOTAL SATISFACTION OF OUR CLAIMS!

BADALABOUGOU HIGHSCHOOL ON STRIKE

WE WILL RESIST, WE WILL WIN!
AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF VIOLENT CLASHES WITH THE AUTHORITIES, THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IS REPPRESSED IN BLOOD. ABDOU KARIM CAMARA ASLO CALLED «CABRAL», A 25-YEAR OLD STUDENT IN PHILOSOPHY AND GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE UNEEM IS TORTURED TO DEATH ON MARCH 17, 1980. GIRLS AND BOYS ARE ARRESTED, IMPRISONED AND INCORPORATED BY FORCE INTO THE ARMY. SOME FEMALE STUDENTS ARE SUBJECT TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE. IN MAY 1980, AOUA KEITA DIES OF DISEASE.
Aoua Keita

Aoua Keita (1912-1980), a Malian midwife and anti-colonial activist, has received many distinctions. Born in Bamako, she won admission to the city’s first girls’ school in 1923. She went on to graduate in midwifery. A member of the African Democratic Rally (RDA), she was elected to Parliament in 1959, thereby becoming the first woman in French-speaking Africa to be elected to the national legislative assembly of her country.

Women in African History

By way of various artistic and pedagogical resources available online, this UNESCO project highlights a selection of historical female figures, from Africa and of African descent, who have distinguished themselves in the history of the continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women’s rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

The selection of women figures proposed in the framework of this project is not exhaustive and represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

For additional resources, please visit the web site www.unesco.org/womeninafrica