

# Space and Human Agency in the Making of the Story of Gershom through a Senegalese Christian Lens

ALIOU C. NIANG

aniang@uts.columbia.edu

Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY 10027

---

As a teacher of the New Testament in the United States, I find that the Senegalese, West African context that shaped my formative years has become more probing to me than ever before. Like our first Senegalese president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, who spoke of how his “childhood kingdom” affected his poetics of negritude, I try to engage my own poetics in conversation with biblical voices to the extent possible. I share much in common with Kenneth Ngwa, especially when it comes to French colonization and its lasting effects on our countries. *My childhood kingdom*, like that of many Africans, had and still has its share of problems, including family feuds, intergroup skirmishes, diseases, and a protracted war for independence that severely affected my family. Diola ethnographers trace the causes of this war back to the colonial period.<sup>1</sup>

I concur with Ngwa that a meeting held in Berlin (1884–1885) led to the occupation of the African continent. Senegalese people awoke to this “strange dawn,”<sup>2</sup> as French colonists, proud of their constructed Celtic/Gaulic identity as a legitimate mandate for exercising France’s civilizing mission, arrived in Senegal. Over time they created four *communes*, “towns/cities,” a “France Overseas” (Saint Louis, Dakar, Gorée and Rufisque, 1887–1960), to frenchify Senegalese people. This assimilation experiment was exercised under the aegis of “France’s civilizing

<sup>1</sup>Jean-Claude Marut, *Le conflit de la Casamance: Ce que disent les armes* (Paris: Karthala, 2010); Paul Diédhiou, *L'identité joola en question: La bataille idéologique du MFDC pour l'indépendance*, Hommes et sociétés (Paris: Karthala, 2011); Mohamed Lamine Manga, *La Casamance dans l'histoire contemporaine du Sénégal* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012). The war broke out in 1982 and the cease-fire introduced in 2004 was often interrupted by nagging flare-ups culminating in independence advocates suing the Senegalese government in 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1962), 48.

mission” ironically called the *peace of France*.<sup>3</sup> The cities, similar to ancient Greek gymnasias, became religious, economic, political, and assimilation centers, and since 1914 the inhabitants received French citizenship and political representation in metropolitan France. Protectorate dwellers, on the other hand, had to earn their citizenship by excelling in French education. In that vein, education and the granting of citizenship rights wooed the populace to French ways but also generated contempt as the frenchified of the towns (*originaires*) believed they were more civilized than and superior to their country cousins.<sup>4</sup> Most of the *originaires* had European ancestry. Because they were privileged politically and economically, they understandably tended to “accept European culture and Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> Catholic missionaries introduced French ways to “Africans alongside catholic teachings” to secure French dominance in Senegal. As a result, “christianization and civilization were practically mixed”<sup>6</sup> and the colonizers argued that “to civilize is to Christianize.”<sup>7</sup> This was a terrifying message that turned the biblical message into a colonizing tool.<sup>8</sup>

Lacking political power, most protectorate dwellers and those leaders who refused to collaborate with French colonial officials, resorted to various oppositional tactics ranging from violent confrontations to daring defiance.<sup>9</sup> Many Diola, objectified as uncivilized, living in the most fertile southern region of Senegal called

<sup>3</sup>See Aliou Cissé Niang, “Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation in Geographical Settings: The Case of Senegal,” in *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 319–29.

<sup>4</sup>See Ousmane Sembène, *The Last of the Empire: A Senegalese Novel*, trans. Adrian Adams (London: Heinemann, 1981), 134–35.

<sup>5</sup>G. Wesley Johnson, *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900–1920* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971), 19–37.

<sup>6</sup>Geneviève Lecuir-Némo, “Mission et colonisation: Saint Joseph de Cluny. La première congrégation de femmes au Sénégal de 1819 à 1904” (thesis, Université de Paris, 1985), 171.

<sup>7</sup>Geneviève Lecuir-Némo, *Anne-Marie Javouhey: Fondatrice de la congrégation des sœurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny, 1779–1851*, *Mémoire d'églises* (Paris: Karthala, 2007), 78. To the handful of missionaries who then believed in African inculturation, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a divine liberative event not to be confused with the colonizing *peace of France*.

<sup>8</sup>Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review, 1972), 33. Césaire finds the colonial equations ironic because instead of creating civilization, the brutal savagery of colonialism led to the decivilization of the colonists. See also Musa Dube, “Towards a Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 13: “For me to read the Bible as an African woman and from my experience ... is to be inevitably involved with the historical events of imperialism. Indeed, to read the Bible as an African is to take a perilous journey, a sinister journey, that spins one back to connect with dangerous memories of slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and neo-colonialism. To read the Bible as an African is to relive the painful equation of Christianity with civilization, paganism with savagery.”

<sup>9</sup>Niang, “Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation,” 323, 323 n. 93.

the Lower Casamance,<sup>10</sup> fought the then-prevailing French system of occupation to preserve their socioreligious memory, culture, and rice-farming practices.<sup>11</sup> Colonial administrators forced Diola elders to sign treaties, which were ignored as soon as colonial officials retreated to their civilized spaces such as Gorée and Saint Louis. This went on from the onset of the occupation until the 1920s, when Diola were considered to have been somewhat pacified. This brings me to Ngwa's "The Making of Gershom's Story."

### Contested Geographies

Space matters. Ngwa's argument, as I mentioned earlier, is an intriguing innovative take on a story often missed by readers. If the story is read at all, the violence that undergirds and directs this narrative's "interregional and intergenerational identity, as well as its ethics and cultural values" (p. 855) are often sanitized and its pervasive terror spiritualized or cheapened to an extent that Gershom is simply reduced to a son of Moses circumcised by his mother Zipporah. Exodus 2, as Ngwa sees it, is nothing short of a "postwar narrative" whose multivalent meanings he purposed to uncover through a "Cameroonian postwar" hermeneutical lens informed by trauma and inspired by a resilient and innovative drive to survive in assigned spaces. In the end, what Ngwa offers is a Cameroonian hermeneutics arising from trauma-shaped experiences and complex identity construction empowered by a resilient and yet delicate will to live hospitably.

Building on Ngwa's argument, I would like to address the role of geography/space and human agency (as exercised by women) in the story. Frantz Fanon reminds us that colonialism forces the colonized to question their own existence and identity, a self-interrogation arising from a sense of alertness and uncertainty as to whether they transgressed colonial space. This leads to life on the edge for the colonized, who feel they are "always presumed guilty ... overpowered but not tamed ... treated as an inferior but ... not convinced of their inferiority."<sup>12</sup> Sociologists have long insisted that humans create realities<sup>13</sup> that help them define, assert,

<sup>10</sup>Aliou C. Niang, "Seeing and Hearing Jesus Christ Crucified in Galatians 3:1 under Watchful Imperial Eyes," in *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch*, ed. Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 176 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012).

<sup>11</sup>Paolo Palmeri, *Living with the Diola of the Mof Evvi: The Account of an Anthropological Research in Sénégal*, *Collana di antropologia* 24 (Padua: CLEUP, 2009), 79; Philippe Méguelle, *Chefferie coloniale et égalitarisme diola: Les difficultés de la politique indigène de la France en Basse-Casamance (Sénégal), 1828–1923*, *Études africaines* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012), 64–75.

<sup>12</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 53, 250.

<sup>13</sup>Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 4; see also 3–28.

and delineate their group from others—a process of self-definition in which they are likely to describe themselves as “superior” to those they consider “inferior.”<sup>14</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, in Senegal, West Africa, the French created such realities in towns they built where they presented their civilization as superior to and normative for Senegalese people. This led to the division of Senegal into two: the four towns symbolizing civilized Senegal and the protectorate uncivilized.

bell hooks learned from her experiences in her small Kentucky hometown that the oppressive liminal space she lived in was in fact a two-dimensional world—a center as well as a margin, a site of struggle and creativity and therefore of “radical openness and possibility.”<sup>15</sup> This insight, shaped by traumatic marginalization, allowed her to reimagine her liminal space into a livable world with endless possibilities for meaningful life. I find her negotiation of space operative for unlocking the significance of space in the making of Gershom’s story. The margin is a contested space where marginalized groups can “achieve an identity which is nurtured and nourished by their own goals and aspirations.”<sup>16</sup>

According to the narrator of Genesis, the Hebrews settled in Goshen (Gen 40:10, 28–34), the most fertile region of the empire. As the story unfolds in Exod 1:7–22, one soon realizes that Goshen, once a place of hospitality, has become a feared colony, part of and yet “outside” of Egypt as a constructed liminal space, “a main body made up of both margin and center.”<sup>17</sup> Hebrew bodies have now become contested spaces under a new Egyptian dynasty determined to halt their multiplication and still expand her economy and food supply (Exod 1:7–11) on their backs—a dire situation readily met with a daring, responsible participatory human agency.

### *Human Agency*

Human agency matters. Ngwa traces dynamic shifts in the making of Gershom’s story and highlights the pervasive acts of midwives, Moses’s mother, Miriam, Zipporah, and Pharaoh’s daughter (p. 859) in spite of the dynasty’s determination to exterminate the Hebrews (Exod 2:8–10) and obliterate ancestral memory and ultimately God’s creation (Exod 1:8–10).<sup>18</sup> Forced labor aimed at breaking the spirit and wasting away bodies of adult Israelites at the hands of ruthless

<sup>14</sup>Henry Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 254–67.

<sup>15</sup>bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990), 145–55.

<sup>16</sup>R. S. Sugirtharajah, “From Orientalist to Post-Colonial: Notes on Reading Practices,” *AsJT* 10 (1996): 24.

<sup>17</sup>bell hooks, *Yearning*, 149.

<sup>18</sup>Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus : Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *NIB* 1:694.

taskmasters and a mass generational infanticide by Pharaoh's enlisted midwives and all Egyptians to ensure a genocide failed to materialize and so did his command to drown Hebrew boys (Exod 1:10–22). Here intriguing tensions between human agencies emerge: life negating (Pharaoh and taskmasters) and life affirming (midwives).

Pharaoh's rationale for killing the Israelites is symbolic of that destructive human hand of which Joseph de Maistre spoke; as a human being, Pharaoh "kills to attack" and "to defend himself."<sup>19</sup> His obvious plan is to enslave and domesticate the Hebrews so they would not *ālâ*, "ascend or depart" (Exod 1:10), but rather stay and continue to feed empire.<sup>20</sup> The midwives' silence speaks; their fear is a wisdom that directs their survey of the dire situation and decision to exercise an alternative to Pharaoh's command to destroy life—a radical embrace of life-giving acts. Whether they were Hebrews or Egyptians is a moot point; the mixed women sided with the "Hebrews"—a name, Walter Brueggemann insists, that stands not for liberated Israelites but for a liminal, landless, oppressed,<sup>21</sup> and *objectified other*. Their radical defiance of Pharaoh's command, the acts of Moses's mother, Miriam's negotiating power, and the wise and just actions of Pharaoh's daughter<sup>22</sup> speak to the responsible role of human agency. As Musa Dube observes, "the struggle for independence is pioneered by women: midwives, mothers, sisters, and daughters defy the king's instruction to annihilate Israelite children (Ex. 1:15–2:22). Thus, they sustain the survival of Israel, leading to the survival of Moses, who later joins their long struggle against Pharaoh's imperial oppression."<sup>23</sup> Divine and human agency is not without its problems, as Dube shows, when imperialistic ideology is reinscribed, a point that is clearly illustrated in Joseph (Gen 45:5–7, 48:3–4) and God (Exod 3:17). The text holds an unresolved tension portraying God who frees from bondage but also sponsors the occupation of others, and human agents who, under overwhelming trauma, managed to preserve life and later turned colonists.<sup>24</sup> This unresolved tension is a universal human dilemma that does not negate the human will to protect and preserve life, especially in times of crises, as we shall see from a Senegalese Diola example.

The persistent will to live amid trauma was exercised also by women during and after the French occupation of Diola people in Senegal, West Africa. They, too,

<sup>19</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg, ou entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la providence*, 2 vols. (Paris: Pélagaud, 1854), 2:28–29 (my translation). As a man of his time (1753–1821), he critiques his own French empire.

<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann, "Book of Exodus," 694–95.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 166; Brueggemann, "Book of Exodus," 694–95.

<sup>22</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974), 12–18.

<sup>23</sup> Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 74.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–83.

were at the forefront of the struggles for liberation amid crushing colonial displacement. As French colonial officials moved to confiscate their rice to feed empire, some brave Diola women living in the protectorate nonviolently withstood colonial officials. At times, they stood up against colonial intimidation at gunpoint, to preserve the cultural memories and future of their communities.<sup>25</sup> The most famous of them was Aline Sitoé Diatta, whose poems enshrine the trauma inflicted on Diola people by French colonists. Her songs spoke life and hospitality to those crippled by traumatic experiences of terrors, intimidation, and violence wrought by the French occupation.<sup>26</sup> It is from this liminal space that she struggled, along with her followers, to shape a gracious and hospitable communion—a diverse unity of people. Through her poems, Diatta inspired her followers to nonviolently resist the French imperial occupation.<sup>27</sup>

Look, the French are coming!  
 ... What have we done to them?  
 Why do they come to maltreat us?  
 To exhaust us?  
 But we can say that it is the Good God who has led them to us  
 For no reason but to maltreat us! (Poem 20)

... But everyone stays  
 To make a deal between the Europeans and the Africans,  
 For the Europeans have come to snatch the land out of our hands,  
 Yet they live like everybody else  
 And are on this earth only by the will of God. (Poem 27)

... For I regret to see the Europeans killing people with their long guns.  
 A day will come when God will inflict a harsh punishment on them  
 For what they do is not right  
 And God does not like wrongdoers. (Poem 35)

Poem 27 reminds me of Gerald O. West's argument, citing Mofokeng's dictum, about colonialists' shrewd use of the Bible to wrest the land from Africans.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup>David Uru Lyam, "The Silent Revolutionaries: Ousmane Sembene's Emitai, Xala and Ceddo," *AStRev* 29 (1986): 79–87; Harold Weaver, "Filmmakers Have a Great Responsibility to Our People," in *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews*, ed. Annett Busch and Max Annas, *Conversations with Filmmakers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

<sup>26</sup>Marilyn Robinson Waldman and Robert Baum, "Innovation as Renovation: 'The Prophet' as an Agent of Change," in *Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change*, RS 31 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), 248–53, 263–75.

<sup>27</sup>Jean Girard, *Genèse du pouvoir charismatique en basse Casamance (Sénégal)* (Dakar, SN: IFAN, 1969), 347–56; Robert M. Baum, "Alinesitoué: A Diola Woman Prophet in West Africa," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 179–95.

<sup>28</sup>Gerald O. West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible in Africa*:

Strikingly, Diatta tempered her prophetic critique of French occupation with the belief that Europeans live like everyone else and owe their existence on earth to the will of God. Poem 4 encapsulates the inclusive character of her community of persons who share a common identity; they are children of *Ala Emit*, “God.”

Let us sing, to give us courage with joy  
 For God invites all persons who live in this world ...  
 The wind that rages carries our voices into the distance,  
 And attracts the strangers who surround us.  
 ... take a cooking pot and prepare  
 A meal for the strangers  
 ... cook the food for strangers. (Poem 4)

The idea of songs carried by the wind<sup>29</sup> inspiring strangers to join her community led Dominique Darbon to suggest that Diatta’s “religious, cultural, social, economic, and political” message is not just egalitarian; its emphasis on “neighborly love, mutual help, solidarity and charity” took on the form of communal meals and hospitality to the stranger.<sup>30</sup> This community and identity construction strongly echoes the Greco-Roman slogan in a Pauline voice (Gal 3:26–29). Members of Diatta’s community share a common identity as children of God under the watchful eyes of Imperial France. That is France’s worst nightmare. As is often the case with empire’s efforts to silence those who envision an alternative world, Diatta was detained and exiled to her death in Mali, but her prophetic message has remained with most Diola people to this day.

### Conclusion

Ngwa goads the African hermeneut to see Exod 2 as “a postwar story, infused with multiple consciousnesses and varied memories—conjunctive, disjunctive, and adjunctive—all of which produces Gershom, the narrative trope and communal embodiment that transforms the traumas of alienation to hope of survival and integration” (p. 875). Of course, this is a delicate and daunting invitation to navigate the variegated negotiations of space and dénouements of human agency not only in Exod 2 but throughout the entire exodus story with its unresolved tensions. The daring wisdom to be learned and exercised from contested spaces and responsible

*Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 30.

<sup>29</sup>“Wind or breath” in this case conjures up the idea of divine agency, especially when one considers Gen 1:2b, Ps 103:4, and John 3:8, which use the term *πνεῦμα* (רוח in the MT). The word *wind* in Diola belongs to a broad semantic field. In its present use by the prophet Aline Sitoé Diatta, it can be translated as the spirit of *Al Emit*, “God.”

<sup>30</sup>Dominique Darbon, “La voix de la Casamanace ... Une parole Diola,” *Politique Africaine* 14 (January 1985): 131–32.

participatory human agencies is found in the resilient human hope for life. How, then, might a colonized person of the Senegalese four towns, proud of his/her new status as a French citizen, relate anew to a country cousin, a Diola brother or sister instead of saying: "I was civilized before you were?"<sup>31</sup> "The Making of Gershom," in my understanding of Ngwa's conclusive thrust, invites a communion of diverse people to foster a future-oriented vision that would undergird timeless, responsible and healthy reverence for and preservation of life. It could be, as Juliana Claassens (in this Forum) observes, that an intentional mutuality may be the lasting hope for Africa. Of course, the story under discussion begins there.

<sup>31</sup> Sembène, *Last of Empire*, 134.