

# Underground politics in Senegal: a posthumous interview with Eugénie Rokhaya Aw

Tuesday 10 October 2023, by [AW Eugénie Rokhaya](#), [BOBIN Florian](#), [SYLLA Maky Madiba](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2023).

**Eugénie Rokhaya Aw, imprisoned under the regime of Léopold Sédar Senghor, was an active Senegalese left-wing activist who fought clandestinely for the country's democratisation in the 1970s. More than a year after her passing in July 2022, her testimony sheds light on the struggles of several generations who fought imperialism beyond official African independences.**

"For a very long time, we didn't speak; we kept quiet, perhaps out of modesty, not to disturb others, because, despite everything, we had a suffering that we continued to carry with us. Everything is still alive, buried, but memory resurfaces by speaking and hearing others speak." On the opening day of a [conference](#) on the 1960s-1970s African revolutionary lefts held in Dakar in 2019, Eugénie Rokhaya Aw recounted her memories of [underground politics](#) imposed by Senegal's party-state under President [Léopold Sédar Senghor](#). A year later, she agreed to welcome us to her home in Dakar for a filmed interview as part of our documentary in-the-making *Revolutionary Senegal*.

Born in Paris in 1952 to a mother from Martinique and a father from Senegal, Eugénie Rokhaya Aw took part in the development of the student movement at the University of Dakar in the early 1970s, in the wake of [May 1968](#). Senegalese students returning from France, such as Landing Savané and [Omar Blondin Diop](#), contributed to the growth of Maoist ideas. In 1974, the anti-imperialist front *And Jëf* ("To Act Together" in Wolof) launched the newspaper *Xare Bi* ("The Struggle" in Wolof). At the same time, as a young journalist, Aw sought to document the living conditions of women workers whom she taught to read and write.

During the 1980s, Eugénie Rokhaya Aw intensified her pan-Africanist and internationalist commitment, attending the 1980 World Conference on Women held in Copenhagen; covering several armed conflicts on the African continent; meeting President [Thomas Sankara](#) for an interview about women in the Burkinabè revolution; and getting involved in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. Following her thesis in Quebec on the voices of Rwandan women after the Tutsi genocide, she returned to Senegal in the early 2000s to teach at the University of Dakar's School of Journalism, before becoming its director from 2005 to 2011.

Eugénie Rokhaya Aw sadly passed away on 3 July 2022.

**Florian Bobin and Maky Madiba Sylla: You enrolled at the University of Dakar in Fall 1971, on a campus still strongly marked by the May 68 student mobilisation. How did your activism take shape?**

**Eugénie Rokhaya Aw:** At university, I started to study medicine, but that didn't work out, so I switched to philosophy. It was a big break. That's where everything Marxist-Leninist, of all stripes,

came together. And that's how I got hooked on this idea of reversing perspective, that it was possible to change the state, radically transform society. I disagreed with discipline. I disagreed with authority. And I made it known. It caused a lot of trouble in the classrooms I was in. My difference - being African, Western and Caribbean - means I can do things others won't. For example, there's a strike at the university and the police shut everything down. But we have to take leaflets in: I'm the one who brings them in. And we have to inform the students that we're on strike. I'm the one who's going to get the message across because I look like the good little Westerner walking around. I was given texts to read. And gradually, I was integrated into cells. Then into groups. That's how I joined the movement.

### **The movement?**

We were part of the Maoist movement and knew all about the *Little Red Book*. Because Mao Tse-tung's thought was precisely about the peasantry, showing the link between the rural and urban worlds [1]. At the same time, we had local thinking: the whole movement that went out into the countryside, met and lived with peasants; literacy of workers in factories; cultural work through theatre, song, and poetry; uncovering of our forgotten heroes like [Lamine Senghor](#); the popular movement, especially in sport; the efforts with youths who had been expelled from school, whom we tried to present independently at the baccalaureate.

**At the time, only the ruling party - the Senegalese Progressive Union (Union Progressiste Sénégalaise), which was known as the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste) after 1976 - was allowed to exist, so opposition parties had to go underground. How did you organise yourselves?**

There were different levels within *And Jéf*, and you could move from one to another. This meant that you had a particular cell made up of a correspondent, and you had no connection with other cells. There was an extremely high degree of compartmentalisation between the groups. Then, when you got to a higher level, you discovered the links that can exist between cells. Clandestinity meant that you worked and had an everyday life during the day; and at night you had another life. We didn't sleep much. It meant being careful about what you said. It also meant living in relative isolation. And even if you had a family, everything was geared towards the movement. We didn't have weekends. When I had my salary, a third of it went to the movement, to give a minimum income to those we called "professional revolutionaries" who were established in the countryside and fully dedicated to the cause but no longer had an income [2]. So, we devoted our whole lives to the cause.

**A number of activists used their positions as civil servants within the body responsible for controlling the peanut trade to sound out peasants' plight and thus expand the movement...**

I took advantage of being a journalist for the national daily to choose the subjects I wanted to cover. One day, I suggested to my editor-in-chief that I do a story on women workers in the fish processing factories in the port of Dakar. I was hired and the bosses were very proud to have 'someone like me' working with the women. We used the 'mass line', which meant that when we went somewhere, we lived people's lives.

I saw the women's conditions: subhuman conditions where you had to ask permission to go to the toilet, and you weren't allowed to go more than a certain number of times. There were gullies with water, and the fish's blood was dripping down - your feet were soaked... all the time: most pregnant women didn't carry their pregnancies to term. The worst thing was that these women had worked in these factories, sometimes for several years, but were rehired every day as day labourers. They had no rights. So, I did all the work I had to do and wrote my article.

## **How did the factory's management react?**

Thanks to the person who supervised me because the article was so shocking that the bosses came to the paper and said: "She has to make a denial". I replied: "I refuse, never will I deny [the article]". The person who edited my article then called me: "Eugénie, look at what you've written and at what I've corrected. No one can say you're talking about this factory, but everyone knows it's this factory you're talking about". After that, [we were] allowed to go back and see these women, who walked to work without any means of transport. What I find extraordinary about these women is that at no time do I remember any of them saying to me: "You're telling us tales".

## **Meanwhile, you pursued your activism underground...**

We knew everything, everything, everything about what was happening with torture in Vietnam—every single detail. We recited "Dimbokro Poulo Condor" [chorus of David Diop's poem "The Agony of Chains"]. We had booklets with all kinds of experiences. We experienced repression by proxy. We put ourselves in the shoes of Vietnamese fighters who had resisted terrible, inhuman things, and we became those Vietnamese resistance fighters. But it's something else when you're personally confronted with such violence.

## **It wasn't long before repression hit the movement. In 1975 the police intercepted your underground newspaper Xare Bi. What happened?**

One night they came to my house. I like to say 'they' because, for me, they're indeterminate people. They took my husband away. The chief asked me for a glass of water; I gave him one and broke it in front of him. They left. The following day they came back for me, took me to an annex of the Interior Ministry, took me upstairs and threatened me. They showed me my husband, whom I didn't recognise: his head had doubled in size, and his fingernails were covered in blood. The threat was: "Speak or else...". And yet I had to resist. I could see his suffering but couldn't show that I was affected because I knew they were waiting for that. I told them: "You can do whatever you want to me, but I'm warning you: I'm pregnant. If anything happens to me, you'll be responsible". Finally, I was taken to the central police station, to the top floor, where they tortured the comrades. Many of the officers there had fought in the wars in Indochina and Algeria.

[In prison] one day I wasn't feeling well and asked to go to the hospital for some tests. I was taken there, but I still wasn't feeling well when I returned. I was given an anti-haemorrhagic injection... I can still feel the sting. And in the evening, plop! I lost everything. I had to lie down on the mattress to avoid getting all bloody... I could vaguely hear screams, but I was bleeding to death. You don't fully understand the logic of the state, which can be murderous. When I miscarried, I felt I was on my way out. Thanks to my comrades who were in prison and the ordinary prisoners who rebelled in the room where I was, I was taken out, bleeding. It seems that when Senghor heard what had happened to me, he said: "Just make sure she doesn't die". That's when I realised they had killed Omar Blondin Diop.

## **How did you recover from prison?**

The moment I told myself that we're really in a macho world was after prison when we had no income: the men coming out of prison received 10,000 CFA francs, and I received 5,000. So, I was half a militant! And then, at the same time, it was like in traditional parties, you had the 'women's movement'. Today I would have said: "No, women need to be integrated into the movement in general; we don't need a women's movement unless there are particular issues that we as women need to address". Of course, there were also forms of [sexual] predation: [the attitude was] if we could have you, we'd have you... But we're not independent of the social relations that our society

produces.

Something else I noticed, more in the popular movement: our friends very often came from the same ethnic or class background as us. And I'll never forget that the person who made the tea was from an inferior cast. That struck me. I don't know if any of my comrades saw him that way. They saw him as a comrade like themselves who liked to make tea, which was probably true. But there was something there: this reproduction of society, of social rules, which was a bit disturbing in a movement that claimed to be revolutionary.

**In our research, few women are willing to talk about their experiences in underground politics. How do you explain this?**

There's a lot of reserve. There was a lot of suffering. It's also difficult for men – there are a lot of things in our society that make people reluctant to talk – but a man is more likely to speak than a woman. We're supposed to be in the private domestic sphere. Women are stigmatised more than men. You're told: "No, no, no, it's not your job to do things like that, to go into a cell and come back at midnight, 1 am, 2 am, or sometimes not all night. There's a problem. You must have a husband and children". There's this whole social structure that makes it very complicated to speak.

When I see these women today, the way they dress, they are immobile. There's too much suffering that we don't want to talk about, that we're afraid to talk about, that we haven't dealt with. Militancy tore families apart. And yet, traditionally, we're supposed to be the link. Sometimes the children block the writing of this story because they have suffered from the involvement themselves. And as soon as we try to talk about it, there's an immediate outcry.

**Alongside your activism, you began a career in journalism in 1970. How did you combine the two?**

I was the only woman journalist when I started writing for the national daily *Dakar-Matin*, renamed *Le Soleil*. But it was also amazing to arrive at the state newspaper and to have such a high level of supervision. I worked on issues that interested me: the status of women. And subverted them. When we talk about women's issues, we'll give you topics like the housewife's shopping basket, nutrition, the wives of presidents visiting Senegal...

Subversion is about making all these issues political. For example, I'd take revolutionary countries, learn about the struggles of women in the FLN [National Liberation Front, Algeria], the ANC [African National Congress, South Africa], SWAPO [South West Africa People's Organisation, Namibia], ZANU [Zimbabwe African National Union, Zimbabwe], and then put their stories in the newspaper. Nutrition? I wrote about how we could recover and improve our traditional dishes. I wasn't fired from *Le Soleil* because of the articles I wrote but because of my political problems.

**After your dismissal from *Le Soleil* in 1976, you quickly bounced back to *Afrique Nouvelle*, a West African Catholic newspaper. What topics did you cover then?**

At one point, I specialized in African conflicts. I went underground to Eritrea, to the Second Congress of Workers and Women. I also worked with Eritrean communities from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front in Nairobi, even though we weren't in the same political tradition. Mind you, it was a total failure in Eritrea. I've been everywhere on the field: Congo-Brazzaville, Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of Congo], Rwanda. I also interviewed [Thomas Sankara](#) for two hours on the question of women. Sankara was a special breed. He understood everything, and he was into action. It all happened at his place. He got me a little stool, set up the recorder and looked to see if I was all right. It was a true reflection that we've not seen to this day. Everywhere I went, I tried to

concretely see the extraordinary suffering of our population, all for the sake of political manipulation. In fact, I did my doctoral thesis on the genocide in Rwanda and women's voices ...

I was also very involved in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. I was fortunate to work with the All Africa Conference of Churches, whose president was Desmond Tutu. So obviously, these were people directly involved in the struggle. I had the opportunity to work with community radio stations and negotiate with African states. During the embargo, we brought young Black South Africans into our countries to work with them on their underground anti-apartheid projects, like in Benin in 1992. We could see their fear. Because they didn't have visas, their passports were taken away. A Black South African without a passport risked being arrested at any moment. We also had the opportunity to meet extraordinary people like Coretta King, [Black American civil rights activist and Martin Luther King's wife], and Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first Black mayor.

### **Back to Senegal, what stands out in your years of struggle?**

We tried to contribute as much as we could, but there were also many things we thought we'd solved. In my time, I felt much freer, even under repression. We were politically repressed, but at the same time, afterwards, we had a relatively free voice. Today I'm scrutinised for everything: the clothes I wear, if I drink a glass of wine, if I take certain positions. Us women used to have a relatively free voice, an ability to move in public spaces. Now we're losing that more and more.

There was a time when we were so in tune with the Chinese theses of the "Three Worlds Theory" that I asked myself: "Can we think for ourselves?" [3]. I know it caused quite a stir. But for me, it was perhaps this turning point that we couldn't systematise. The movement was full of elements, initiatives and innovations that could have been systematised. Maybe we weren't able to capitalise on it. We let ourselves be absorbed by repression and political changeover [4].

The 2000 political changeover was highly damaging to the movement. It's a matter we should have discussed. Perhaps it was a mistake to dissolve all the movement's structures; we should have kept some of them. The problem is that when you stay in the opposition for too long and have political ambitions, you quickly become a politician like all the others. The exercise of political power is a perilous task... But now, some of us have to exercise it. So, what do we do?

Read Eugénie Rokhaya Aw's interview in French here: [in full](#) (*Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique*) and a [shortened version](#) (*Afrique XXI*)

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### **Eugénie Rokhaya Aw**

**Florian Bobin** is a Dakar-based researcher in history who studies liberation struggles and state violence in 1960s-1970s Senegal, author of a forthcoming biography of revolutionary philosopher Omar Blondin Diop.

**Maky Madiba Sylla** is a Senegalese artist and filmmaker, co-director of the documentary *El Maestro Laba Sosseh* (Linkering Productions, 2021).

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] Maoism found a favourable echo in Senegal in the second half of the 1960s with the short-lived Senegalese Communist Part (PCS), founded in 1965 by former militants of the disbanded African Independence Party (PAI). But it was not until the 1970s that the movement began to take shape underground, around *And Jëf*.

[2] *And Jëf* activists (an average of thirty at a time) who were responsible for expanding the movement by setting up new cells among peasants, workers and trade unionists: formally unpaid, they benefited from the contributions of salaried comrades for their daily living.

[3] A theory developed by the Chinese leader Mao Zedong in 1974, which presented a tripartite division of the world: the first world was that of the superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union); the second world was that of the intermediate powers (Europe, Canada, Japan); and the third world included all the other countries of Asia (including China), Africa and Latin America, as the main force opposing the hegemonism of the first world, supported by the second. This theory was challenged by the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha, who was not aligned with either the Soviet Union or China, and for whom the opposition between “revolutionary” and “reactionary” countries remained the fundamental demarcation. This led to a “pro-Albanian current”, to which some Senegalese Maoist activists belonged, causing a split within *And Jëf*.

[4] After forty years of rule by the Socialist Party (PS), formerly the Senegalese Progressive Union (UPS), the 2000 presidential elections marked the first political changeover in Senegal. Abdoulaye Wade, leader of the liberal Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS), defeated the incumbent president, Abdou Diouf (successor of Senghor in 1981) and came to power thanks to a broad opposition coalition that included the historical leaders of the underground left from the 1970s: Landing Savané for *And Jëf*; Abdoulaye Bathily for the Democratic League (LD); Amath Dansokho for the Independent Labour Party (PIT).