

Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow: Humanist



Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow passed away at the age of 103, leaving behind a legacy defined by his desire for a just and equitable world. He will be remembered for his commitments to knowledge and multilateralism, and to diplomacy as both a condition of freedom and a necessary instrument of a better future. First as Minister of Education in Senegal and then as Director-General of UNESCO, M'Bow championed causes and laid agendas for the twentieth century. These included the necessity for human connection through access to the means of information and related technologies; the relatability of the universal to the collective human heritage; and the restitution to Africa of its history and its recognition as an essential component of the human trajectory. Underneath it all, M'Bow had an unwavering attachment to a humanistic ethos of solicitousness, engagement, inclusion and respect for the other.

Today, the term 'visionary leadership' is often overused. However, few twentieth-century figures em-

body it as fully as A-M M'Bow. His life followed an extraordinary trajectory, shaped by an early understanding that he was part of something far greater than himself. He came of age in an era when idealism was not the object of

scorn it often is today. The world had emerged from two successive world wars, instigated by those who professed to possess the

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means for human salvation. These so-called saviors were subjugating vast colonial populations, all while proclaiming themselves champions of freedom. The two world wars revealed the irony of the pretence that the world contained knowing masters and unknowing subjects. To extricate themselves from the associated dilemmas, individuals, peoples, and both established and emerging states – especially those who had long wielded power pledged themselves to a new world order: one that aspired to universality, justice, and equity.

For some former 'masters of the world', this professed commitment was often an exercise in cynicism,

designed to maintain their ascendancy over others in new guises. But for the likes of M'Bow, the new world offered new possibilities to be defended, protected and nurtured. His lifelong mission became to ensure that the voices, knowledge and contributions of marginalised and developing nations were recognised, preserved and allowed to flourish on the global stage. This was grounded in the belief that human potential and creativity are universally distributed and no single nation or group holds a monopoly on knowledge. His ethos was deeply humanistic.

A Prolific Career

Many wonder how a figure like M'Bow could emerge in the context of colonial and postcolonial Africa. What informed his encyclopedic knowledge, his worldliness and his incisive understanding of historical stakes? M'Bow was not only a scholar and teacher but also a civil servant, a war veteran and a trainee pilot. He fought in World War II in France and North Africa and served in the French air force, where he was involved with the Free French Forces.

M'Bow was a political actor who was active in anticolonial movements and in the postcolonial history of Senegal. He held several positions in Senegal, including serving twice as minister of education. He also served as President of the Pan-African Archaeological

Association from 1967 to 1971. M'bow was the founder of the famous Federation of African Students in France, which was very active in the anticolonial struggle. M'Bow was the last standing pillar of the triumvirate that co-founded the PRA (Parti du regroupement africain), which included his lifelong companions Abdoulaye Ly and Assane Seck. He resisted political intoxication and cooptation and he did not succumb to the allure of power.

M'Bow's last public engagement was to chair the Assises nationales du Sénégal – Senegal's national dialogue – as well as the Commission on the reform of Senegal's institutions. In 2008, at the age of eighty-seven, he agreed to preside over the initiative led by the Siggil Senegal Front, which for nearly a year brought together the main parties in opposition to President Abdoulaye Wade's government and dozens of various organisations across the whole country. M'Bow commanded the moral authority and the wisdom to mediate a strained process that was meant to generate propositions for an alternative and inclusive model of governance. He did not live to see the fulfillment of the Consensus Charter he managed to spearhead by bringing together politicians, civil society and people of good will from all walks of life.

The UNESCO Years (1953–1987): Challenging the Global Order

M'Bow's tenure as Director-General of UNESCO (1974–1987) stands out as one of the most transformative in the organisation's history. He was the first Black and African person to lead a United Nations agency, and during his time M'Bow shook the established

order by challenging Eurocentric dominance in knowledge and cultural exchange on behalf of the Global South. His advocacy for the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) aimed to counter the dominance of Western media and communication systems and ensure a more equitable global flow of information. This initiative exemplified his broader effort to redefine global knowledge production, emphasising cultural diversity and inclusivity.¹

M'Bow advocated for reform in educational systems worldwide, ensuring that curricula reflected the global diversity of human experience. He spearheaded efforts to reconstruct and systematise African histories and cultural contributions and to free them from the colonial library, the anthropological account and racist gaze. The General History of Africa (GHA) project is a testament to this mission – comprising eight volumes that reflect Africa's rich and complex history. In the 1960s, 90 per cent of the history that was taught in Western universities was disproportionately centred on five countries – Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States. African history was reduced to accounts about European activities in Africa, the trials and triumphs of explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators in the 'civilising mission'. The General History of Africa project helped uncover masterpieces and artifacts of creative genius that reflect millennia of rich history across significant polities such as Kush, Aksum, Mali, Songhai, Great Zimbabwe and the Kingdom of Kongo, as well as lesser-known political formations. M'Bow recognised a fundamental truth: knowledge is a means to emancipation.

His last will included the establishment of a Foundation of Endogenous Knowledges. Throughout his life, he tirelessly advocated for Africans and people of the Global South to reclaim and rely on their history and their own narratives. M'Bow's insights and vision remain foundational principles guiding the work of institutions like CODESRIA, shaping both their methodology and ethical framework.

The Fight for Equity

Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow's vision extended beyond cultural representation to a broader fight for equitable access to technology and knowledge. His stance on the transfer of technology was clear: it was not about aid or assistance but about *equitable access* to the tools that shape and transform societies. He recognised early on that whoever controlled technology controlled the future and he sought to ensure that the Global South was not left behind in this race:

Technology is not the privilege of a few nations, nor should it be a tool of domination. It must be shared equitably, so that all peoples can partake in the shaping of their futures.²

It is important to note that the 1970s was a time when Henry Kissinger was busy commissioning reports aimed at reducing African populations and controlling the continent's resources. M'Bow identified the deeper risks posed by unchecked technological expansion – its potential to undermine the spiritual and cultural values that form the bedrock of societies. He was wary of Western monopoly over technology and its use as a tool to reinforce existing power structures. His advocacy was about

not just technical knowledge but ensuring that technology could be used to enhance human dignity, rather than erode it.

M'Bow believed that the histories and contributions of non-Western nations, particularly Africa, had been systematically suppressed. His call for the repatriation of cultural artifacts looted during colonialism was groundbreaking. In a historic speech in 1978,³ he argued that these objects were not just art but essential elements of identity and historical consciousness for the nations from which they were taken:

The restitution of cultural property to the countries from which it was taken is not simply a matter of restoring material objects; it is about returning history and identity to peoples who have been deprived of their past.

M'Bow's Political Thought

How did M'Bow perceive the challenges that Africa faced in the wake of colonisation? What he shared in common with other prominent figures of the time, such as Cheikh Anta Diop and Kwame Nkrumah, was the belief that there was something fundamental that connected all of us in our diversity.

The intellectual traditions of Africa are rich and diverse, deeply rooted in the philosophies of interconnectedness, humanism and balance. These are not simply ideas from the past but powerful frameworks for addressing today's challenges of development, governance and peace.⁴

These intellectuals understood that the postcolonial era necessitated a re-evaluation of African identity, that they emphasised the continent's rich history and cultural her-

itage while rejecting the lingering stereotypes imposed by colonial narratives. Their vision for Africa encompassed the idea of unity amidst diversity, advocating for a collective identity that celebrated the myriad cultures and traditions of the continent. Both M'Bow and Diop critiqued the neocolonial structures that continued to impede Africa's progress; they insisted on the need for autonomy, economic self-sufficiency and educational empowerment. They envisioned an Africa that could reclaim its agency, fostering a sense of solidarity and collaboration among its nations to build a prosperous future free from external domination.

M'Bow broke a significant taboo at a time when Africans still operated within a configuration of time that was devolved, despite having been 'admitted' into institutions and spaces of multilateral governance following independence. Across the imperial space, the utterance of an African could only be seen as subversive, as the very assumption of reciprocity itself was suspended. M'Bow's critique was profound; he illuminated the ongoing continuities in the extraction of cultural and physical resources from Africa and the Global South. He argued that colonialism not only facilitated the extraction of labour but also enabled the appropriation of cultural and immaterial resources, thereby perpetuating narratives of European and Western civilisational superiority. This extraction is evident in the archives, artifacts and cultural heritage that remain withheld in European knowledge and cultural institutions.

Few have lived a life as long, as exhilarating and as impactful as M'bow's, encompassing significant historical events. He possessed an insatiable thirst for knowledge,

heightened by his early exposure to Sufi intellectual traditions and the belief that African history was a treasure trove waiting to be explored. M'Bow's commitment to uncovering and sharing this wealth of knowledge shaped his profound contributions to the world, making him a pivotal figure in the discourse surrounding African multi-dimensional heritage.

According to his son-in-law, Amadou Kane, one of M'Bow's last wishes was for his mortuary prayer to be held at the Umarian Mosque in Dakar, where he was baptised in 1921. If this was not possible, he wanted his body at least to be taken past it. M'Bow's connection to Sufi traditions ran deep, rooted in his family history. He was the intellectual heir to a rich tapestry of thought, spanning centuries and continents, linking Africa to the Arab world, Europe, Asia and the Americas, with influences ranging from Cheikh Ahmed Tidjani to Umar Tal, from Ibn Rushd to Montesquieu. His upbringing instilled in him deeply held values, shaped by education and culture.

M'Bow's stance was unequivocal: culture was neither a luxury nor mere entertainment and Africans had never existed outside of the world or in a 'world-outside' (*Außenwelt*, in the Schmittian sense). His critique of the imbalanced framework of access to information and technology – and thus to knowledge – raised deeper questions about a universalism predicated on a hierarchy of cultures and civilisations. He believed that the human ability to create and think is evenly distributed, hence the importance of equitable access for all. For M'Bow, the realisation of the universal ideal required cultural exchange, which could be

achieved only by rebalancing access to knowledge and information. Yet Africa was being denied its rightful contribution to this endeavour. Consequently, African actors keenly understood the nature of the impetus driving them to challenge their social conditions by reshaping the terms of engagement with the West.

M'Bow engaged with the global discourse on technology, notably in UN debates on technology transfer. He was in support of strengthening the work and mission of UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to defending the trade interests of the developing world. He was critical of a system that concentrated technological control in the hands of a few and allowed them to engineer life and shape meaning for everybody. His concerns centred on questions that remain relevant today: Who controls technology? What would the world order look like if Africa were excluded?

The idea that the contribution of African intellectuals like M'Bow have been marginalised or invisibilised stems largely from how we have often thought about the nature of knowledge coming out of Africa. The lack of engagement with such contributions speaks to a broader issue of limiting perspectives on African thought. M'Bow grew up and was educated at the intersection of diverse cultures and intellectual traditions at the dawn of the world that was coming out of the colonial script. His intellectual breadth demonstrates the creativity and adaptability with which Africans have always responded to the challenges of their time. In short, M'Bow was an intellectual in the fullest sense of the word.

With the passing of M'Bow, we have lost one of the most influential thinkers and political actors of the twentieth century. His immense intellectual curiosity, aspirational spirit and deep humanism are reflected in his [prolific body of work](#).⁵

By intervening in global debates at a time when African voices were often excluded, thinkers like M'Bow asserted a principle of intellectual parity. For the very presence of African thought in the public domain was seen as inherently disruptive. M'Bow's unwavering commitment and integrity allowed him to challenge and reverse entrenched structures of oppression, revealing possibilities that had long been obscured.

In summary, M'Bow's intellectual contributions were profoundly shaped by his multilayered identity – as a Senegalese, an African, a Muslim and a global citizen. His insatiable curiosity and moral resilience guided his involvement in global governance and African politics. He stood firm in his principles, unyielding in the face of challenges. M'Bow was, indeed, the bow that was never bent.

A-M M'Bow was a living legend. We have lost a reassuring figure who bridged the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet, as he transitions to the realm of ancestorhood, we are enriched by his legacy of wisdom, courage and moral fortitude. At a time when Africa seems to have lost sovereign initiative and geopolitical vision, when every major actor but Africa itself seems to have a vision for the continent, may his memory guide us back to self-determination, unity and a renewed sense of purpose.

Notes

1. See the MacBride Report, a popular name for 'Many Voices, One World: Towards a New More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order', commissioned by UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372754>
2. Speech on Technology and Global Development, 1982.
3. A-M M'Bow, 1978, 'A Plea For The Return Of An Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage To Those Who Created It: An Appeal by Mr. Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO', in [The UNESCO Courier: a window open on the world, XXXI, 7, p. 4-5, illus.](#)
4. UNESCO General Conference, 1974.
5. A sample of his writings:
 - 1974, 'Enquête préliminaire sur le village de Gaya, et les villages de Sénoudébou et Demba-kane, 1955–1956', L'UNESCO et l'avenir. Paris : UNESCO.
 - 1976, *Le monde en devenir (réflexions sur le nouvel ordre économique international)*, Paris : UNESCO.
 - 1977, *L'UNESCO et la solidarité des nations—L'esprit de Nairobi*. Paris : UNESCO.
 - 1979, *L'UNESCO et la solidarité des nations—De la concertation au consensus*. Paris : UNESCO.
 - 1981, *L'UNESCO et la solidarité des nations—Entreprendre l'avenir*. Paris : UNESCO.
 - 1982, *Le Temps des Peuples*, Paris : Editions Laffont Paris.
 - 1982, *Aux Sources du Futur*. Paris : UNESCO.
 - 1984, *Choisir L'Espoir*, Paris : UNESCO.
 - 1986, *L'UNESCO: universalité et coopération internationale*. Paris : UNESCO.