

Boubacar Sangaré, *Être étudiant au Mali: chroniques d'une vie d'étudiant, suivi du Crépuscule* (Bamako: La Sahélienne, 2016). pp. 124.

Madina Thiam

Sirafily Diango writes that “Bamako’s rugged terrain reflects class struggle.”¹ Geographically, Mali’s capital spreads along the banks of the Niger river, and is nested in hills. Two of these hills in particular, hold symbolic meaning in Mali’s social structure and political culture. Koulouba, nicknamed Power Heights, is where the presidential palace sits. Badalabougou, nicknamed Knowledge Heights, is where the city university’s main campus sits. The latter is the focus of Boubacar Sangaré’s 2016 book, *Être étudiant au Mali: chroniques d'une vie d'étudiant, suivi du Crépuscule*. The book is divided in two parts. The first one is a compilation of eighteen chronicles the author published between 2012 and 2014, through his own blog, as well as various Malian newspapers, while he was a student in the university’s Humanities and Modern Literature division.² Chapter after chapter, Sangaré’s candid narration, riddled with frustration and disillusionment, reveals the abysmal state of higher education in Mali. The autobiographical, snapshots-like nature of each text allows the reader to experience—as if directly—various aspects of everyday life as a young Malian male student in Bamako. *Le Crépuscule*, a smaller collection of four fictional short stories, follows the university chronicles. Though Part I and Part II of the book may initially appear topically unrelated, they complement each other.

Corruption happening at the university runs as the main thread connecting Sangaré’s testimonies. He supports his claim that “it is now common knowledge that the world of higher education is a leader in the field of corruption”³ with a number of examples and anecdotes. For instance, in 2013, a group of eight students from the division of Sciences and Technology were inexplicably granted admission into the following grade level, prior to taking the required exam. They had allegedly paid for admission.⁴ In the chapter entitled “Of Corruption and Good Students,” Sangaré argues that the practice of students paying professors or administrators to move on to the next grade level is so deeply entrenched that some students have resorted to saving money throughout the year, at times depriving themselves of food and

comfort, in order to make sure they will be able to “arrange” their passage into the next grade.⁵ Sangaré provides numerous other examples to illustrate how commonplace lobbying, string-pulling, and corruption have become at the university.

Who is at fault, and should be called out? Sangaré’s sharp criticism is not merely directed towards the administration and professors. He is equally as acerbic towards his fellow students, many of whom, according to him, accommodate this corrupt educational system through a variety of reactions ranging from apathy to compliance to active participation. In particular, Sangaré takes aim at the powerful AEEM: *Association des élèves et étudiants du Mali* [Association of Malian Pupils and Students]. Historically, AEEM used to be at the forefront of struggles for social equality and democratic change in Mali.⁶ Today however, as Sangaré argues, the AEEM no longer stands as a social organization committed to the rights of students. Rather, obtention of a leadership position in the organization has become a means of securing economic and political power, both on and outside campus. Sangaré provides several examples of AEEM’s involvement in corruption schemes. For instance, students wanting a smooth and successful registration process into law school, in addition to paying their fees, should make sure to give money to their local AEEM committee as well.⁷ Here, Sangaré’s testimony lends credence to the main argument in Ousmane Zoromé Samassékou’s 2015 documentary “Les Héritiers de la Colline [The Hill’s Heirs].” As Samassékou suggests in his film, despite AEEM’s history and heritage, holding a leadership position inside AEEM today has become a leverage tool towards obtaining positions within Mali’s government and public administration –in other words, the organization has become a bridge between Knowledge Heights and Power Heights.

Upon reading *Être étudiant au Mali* it becomes plain that all along, for Sangaré, this was not quite merely a book about higher education. It was a cathartic exercise in voicing his anguish over a puzzle that affects countless young Malians: “living in a country that has long given up on loving you.”⁸ Although this preoccupation runs through –albeit implicitly– all the student life chronicles, it is best understood when turning to Part II of the book, *Le Crépuscule* [The Dusk], a collection of short stories. There, Sangaré moves in and out of the confines of university campuses to explore

several issues around Malian youth in general, including: gender, education, customs, or rural life. The story of Assanatou, a female rapper in Bamako who decides to pursue her art despite her family's opposition, is particularly compelling.

The main shortcoming in Sangaré's book resides in his discussion of sexual misconduct in the university. Sexual relations between male professors and female students in exchange for higher grades, is a pervasive practice happening in schools throughout Mali. It is so entrenched that it has earned an infamous nickname: "NST [STGs]", which stands for "*Notes Sexuellement Transmissibles* [Sexually Transmitted Grades]." *Être étudiant au Mali* brings up several instances of proven or alleged encounters of this nature, which involve criticism of both professors and students' ethics, in line with Sangaré's broader take on student apathy and complacency in the face of their dysfunctional educational system. This critique is unfair however, as it obscures the reality of sexual harassment and assault. Even in the case of students claiming to willingly engage in such behavior, a culture of sexual relations in a context of great economic, social, and power disparity between students and professors, renders female students a lot more vulnerable to harassment and assault, and makes questionable the very concept of wilful relationship. Of course, Sangaré does not dismiss sexual harassment and assault. But the instances in which he discusses STGs, which seem to put professors and students on equal footing, leave the reader wanting for a more nuanced assessment.

Despite this shortcoming, Sangaré's book is a well-written, riveting testimony on universities in Mali. Beyond, it is a meditation on Malian youth in general, which will be of interest to African youth grappling with similar issues in other countries. Translations of Sangaré's book into other African languages, or English, would be a welcome step towards helping readers throughout the continent learn more about Mali through one of the country's most dynamic and engaged young writers.

Notes

¹ Boubacar Sangaré, *Être étudiant au Mali: chroniques d'une vie d'étudiant, suivi du Crépuscule* (Bamako: La Sahélienne, 2016), 36. All translations from French to English are my own.

² Ibid., 7.

³ Ibid., 19.

⁴ Drissa Kantao, "Faculté de médecine : La corruption, l'inégalité et le clientélisme ont-ils été érigés en règles ?"; *Le Flambeau*, October 10, 2013. <http://news.abamako.com/h/29262.html>

⁵ Sangaré, *Être étudiant au Mali*, 20.

⁶ One of the organization's most iconic leaders, Abdoul Karim Camara –better known as Cabral, the nickname he had adopted after the Guinea-Bissau revolutionary– famously died at the hands of State police in 1991, as he was being questioned and tortured for his role in the popular social movement that eventually triggered the fall of then-president Moussa Traoré.

⁷ Sangaré, *Être étudiant au Mali*, 52.

⁸ Ibid., 28.