Interview - Amy Niang

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Dr Amy Niang is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of the Witwatersrand and Visiting Professor at the University of Sao Paulo. She is a political scientist with interests in three broad areas, namely, the history of state formation and related ideas of sovereignty, statehood, community, and order, Africa's International Relations, and the Geopolitics of the Sahel. Her work has been published in Alternatives; Politics; African Studies; African Economic History, Journal of Ritual Studies; Afrique contemporaine and in many edited collections. She is the author of *The Postcolonial African State in Transition: Stateness and Modes of Sovereignty* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in your field?

We are caught up in the turmoil of changes that potentially have radical implications for how we can exist, and co-exist, in this world. Our world is being challenged on various fronts by the steady advance of a relentless market that is invading every recess of social life, unprecedented levels of inequality, disdain for the poor and the disenfranchised and their problems, increasingly vocal currents of anti-intellectualism, and an assault on values of decency, not to name the effects of environmental degradation and climate change. None of this is foreign to the question of *what* the international is and what the international community should be about. There is something particular to IR scholarship, that is a high tolerance for a disconnect between 'real life' experiences and disciplinary accounts. Even if one accepts that theorizing comes with a certain amount of violence on 'real life' for abstraction to achieve a degree of generalizability, this tolerance becomes bothersome as one grapples with the meaning of one's work for/in the real world.

So to answer your question, I think exciting debates are those being raised by scholars who force us to constantly rethink what *International Relations* is, what 'the international' is. That there is no agreement as to the *object of knowledge* of our discipline or how different traditions of thought should inform the discipline is a healthy thing. Every historiography is liable of myopia and erasures, particularly where knowledge on/from the 'fringe' is concerned. The carefully curated foundational stories of IR often seem to be impermeable to critique, dismissals, elaborations, and many (false) departures. I think this often has to do with the way in which disciplinary narrative structures impose a methodological logic that locks us in different versions of the same debate. There are exceptions of course. I think of the work of Robert Vitalis and particularly his *White World Order, Black Power Politics*, whose novelty has been to uncover a history that had meticulously been hidden.

Robert Vitalis, Robbie Shilliam and many others argue that the very epistemic conditions of theorizing the international were and remain colonized by notions of race and civilization. The international is the site of intervention of institutions, actors, events and phenomena and the site of deployment of structures and processes that map out very elastic boundaries. But these processes and actors are non-equivalent. In this configuration, agency is presumed to be a value that exists necessarily in scarce proportions. But agency for many is merely the node of the relationality that allows the exertion of will and power *onto* others.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have often been told that I should perhaps be in an anthropology or history department because that's where my work would fit best. There is an unavoidable struggle, for people like me working with non-western traditions, between trying to make one's work relevant to a specific discipline and not to take too many liberties with the accounts and worldviews one is trying to make legible and available to others. Beyond the question of discipline-policing, we have to understand and accept that people can only speak from a specific perspective. Everything one says or does and everything one commits to depends on one's perspective, one's location, one's sense of reality, what James Baldwin calls one's "system of reality".

Since my school days, I have been fascinated by the work of Burkinabé scholar Joseph Ki-Zerbo, who was an important contributor to UNESCO's General History of Africa. Ki-Zerbo wrote thoughtfully about African history and the transformations wrought over many centuries by migration and displacement, trade and matrimonial exchanges, the encounter with Europe. He also reflected and wrote extensively on the use of oral history as historical source and the status of knowledge that is always provisional because subject to different interpretations. He is the one who inspired me to study the Mossi states system and the precolonial African state more generally. Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *L'Etrange destin de Wangirn* as well as his *Oui, mon commandant!* are examples of how oral traditions enabled historical actors to confront the colonial discursive order and how their subsequent erosion coincided with the relative achievement of the colonial project.

In my book, *The Postcolonial African State in Transition*, I discuss the concept of *the Naam* as both political theory and a theory of the subject among the Mossi. I also discuss the Mandé moral philosophy of *kolosi* that teaches the individual *to look to see*, *to listen to hear* and realize themselves as fully fledged human beings by deciphering clues "out there" in the world (see Henrike Florusbosch's dissertation on *The Powers of Observation*). My aim is in fact to develop these kinds of concepts and perspectives in different African traditions in relation to IR debates on community and interdependence, state power and authority, norms and subjecthood and other perennial topics. This kind of work obviously requires real engagement with hermeneutical and semiotic methodologies and needs to be retrieved through a work of deconstruction and of decoding of signs, moral codes, symbols and symbolic relations, metaphors and connections as they shape and are produced by structures and historical junctures.

One of your main research interests is how Africa as an idea and a place has featured in the history of the international. Can you explain how the international and our idea of Africa shape and are being shaped by one another?

Despite being seen as a minor actor with seemingly limited agency in the history and practice of international relations and a limited source of knowledge for the discipline of International Relations, Africa has never been absent in intellectual deliberations that frame key global questions, methodological experimentations, strategies of analysis, and the normative orientation of institutions of global governance. To me, the question of African agency is not some variable to restate in every piece of work. That it needs to be addressed explicitly is in my sense a problem with the scholarship on Africa generally speaking. Nonetheless, the experience of a fractured postcolonial order and the burden of 'assignation' provide the impulse for a reappropriation of our past on terms that reflect our distinct perspectives. If emerging ideas have partially displaced old orthodoxies, there is also a recycling of some of the same old ideas into attempts to reassert a western vision of the world. So what we see as gains in the advancement of scholarship should never be taken for granted. The work of decolonizing the academy is undermined by incomplete political decolonization in parts of formerly colonized territories. But it is also undermined by the lack of decolonization in the Western world. This goes for both scholarship and postcolonial politics in the West.

In the constitution of the humanities, Africa was a point of anchoring for comparisons and analogies for thinking culture and civilization. But Africa is the place where crimes were perpetrated, and which changed the course of global history (slavery and colonization). This history is not about the past. It is about understanding change, how change occurs, but also how change is steered. How heterogeneous processes have ended up giving birth to a distinct outcome. Hope resides in the knowledge that what has been done can be undone. From a conceptual perspective, it is a place from which to think productively about the constitution of subjects, not only from a legal perspective and the international law of treaties perspective, but there are many other questions posed in relation to imperialism, racial capitalism, disciplining practices which are not just abstract equations but very much questions

that regulate our everyday life. In fact, we would have a very incomplete understanding of the world without Africa and Africans as key actors in global history.

In your article 'The imperative of African perspectives on International Relations', you suggest that IR is a "product of global history" that can be displaced and deconstructed by revisiting so-called truths and truisms from a Global South perspective. Can you briefly explain your argument?

To speak from the non-West does not have to be always an act of recrimination or lament. Spivak's work and particularly her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is important for setting the record straight, to jettison widely held views on people and places the West had once held under sway. However, there aren't that many different ways to say that the world belongs to all of us. Africa is a great place from which to think about the fragility, the contradictions, if not the instability of the concepts that shape, organize, and direct our thinking.

I think it's important to remember the role that emancipatory movements in the global south have historically played in putting on the map intellectual traditions that had been neglected. But there is a danger in speaking about the non-western world, the global south, the peripheries of IR, the margins of intellectual production as if thought in these places could only be conjectural to the mainstream, the conventional, the hegemonic and not fundamentally crucial to the very making of the mainstream. What I'm trying to say is that perhaps we are running a risk of overusing these words. And there is always the danger of shoehorning anachronisms into historical (dis)continuities. At a time when it has become fashionable to theorize from 'the Global South' it may be tempting to join growing communities of new particularisms. However, to underscore the ambiguities of a critique doesn't mean that we have to abandon critique altogether, but rather to be aware of the pitfalls of occupying or being made to occupy a narrow place and to lose the revitalizing effects of location-as-perspective.

In your book *The Postcolonial African State in Transition*, you pose the fundamental question of what the postcolonial state actually is. How did you answer this question?

We tend to reflect about the state from the functions and properties that emanate from it. This 'state thinking' itself is a formidable disciplining mechanism that imposes a rationality and attachment to stateness as given, static and irreversible. Political history in the Voltaic region of the end of 16th to the mid-19th century provides a context for thinking about how the relationship between sovereignty, stateness and legitimacy works through different permutations on the basis of context. The context in question was one of great diversity, of mobility practices, a constant work of fitting material and cultural forms to the ecological context and not the other way around. Rituals played an important role in mediating this relationship for those that were responsible for the well-being of people, namely kings and rulers who had to derive the capacity but also the legitimacy to perform their mission from earth custodians responsible for the preservation of morality and social order. I examine political rationality in societies around the centralized kingdoms of Mamprugu, Ouagadougou and Yatenga as they applied similar principles of rule with different results in so far as a division of labor was concerned between 'political work' and 'ritual work'. This led me to conclude that centralization itself was never the most important aspect of political formation among Voltaic societies.

The book asks a question that is different from questions often asked about the African state, namely what was/is the African state built against? I develop the notion of the *state in transition* as the condition of both the precolonial and postcolonial African state. Two arguments are developed in relation to this. The first one is that the state was always a transient phenomenon that pushed against internal 'others'. Secondly, and as a consequence, state dysfunction in postcolonial Africa is the outcome of disarticulation of the mechanisms that gave constitutional and normative form to cultural values and practices and which constituted a crucial aspect of political legitimation. In fact, the state was never the sole guardian of political authority for it derived its legitimacy from the very people over which it purported to rule. The state was neither the sole guardian of moral order nor the prime mover of social action.

In a recent chapter on 'Rehistoricizing the Sovereignty Principle', you argue that the sovereignty principle seems to be "both the resultant and the instigator of its own legitimizing process". Why do we take sovereignty as pregiven, and how can we make visible the discontinuities that have historically

shaped the norm?

Sovereignty is one concept that has always baffled me. Although it is a practice that is deeply rooted in different peoples' understandings of how they relate to their physical environment, between them and other people and the work of elaborating social structures that are adequate to society's complexity, this is not always made evident in the discipline's dominant theories. The idea of sovereignty as something indissociable from state power is deeply engrained in the Westphalian tradition. Whilst it seems necessary and perhaps inevitable to confront the Westphalian regime and its critiques as a starting point for examining sovereignty in various contexts, one can demonstrate the historicity of the state form and of stateness without falling into a repetitive mode. The making of 'the international' was constituted on an original disconnect that manifests itself through the reaffirmation of the value of the sovereignty principle.

The sovereignty framework became a framework for the incorporation of difference in colonial and imperial codes. The second related aspect is that such historicity requires that we revisit the modalities of 'transfer' of a European state form in African contexts. The concurrency between state building in Europe and empire building outside of Europe produced different forms of modern sovereignty, constitutive for some, derivative for others. The multilateral regime, successor to formal empire, operates upon a world that was only partially decolonized and badly decolonized. Think about the tremendous power of institutions whose operations almost totally escape the capacity of African actors to change the current regimes even when they occupy decision-making posts. We cannot overestimate the power of these institutions to encroach upon substantive sovereignty but also how Africans can define for themselves how to exist in this world. From things as fundamental as public healthcare, public education and a system of suitable, healthy food supply. The IMF, the World Bank and the WTO put together have more power over these questions than any African state.

In most of IR discourse, a Westphalian understanding of sovereignty still is the predominant one. In your paper on 'Stateness and Borderness in Mediation', you argue that territoriality, space, and government have been engaged with differently in Africa. What meaning has the term 'sovereignty' in the postcolonial African context?

Attempts to force people with different life forms/styles in the postcolonial state—which is essentially an enclosure designed to better control, better tax, better repress people—have often failed if they have not led to insurgencies and anti-state dissent. The condition of provisionality of sovereignty in these settings is barely concealed by states' systematic resort to violence and occupation. The history of Mali and its nomadic communities is something I have been interested in my work. Among Tuareg communities for instance, an *imaginary of space* is constituted by the variety of places and possibilities spawned by nomadism as ideology, culture, life-form and aspiration. This spatial framework responds to a strategy of both cultural fulfillment and political expansion at the intersection of seasonal mobility, trade, dynamics of relations among different sub-groups etc. On the other hand, former herders among Fulani communities have become herders without herds, refugees dependent upon aid and wandering, aimless urban dwellers. The transformation of their territorial universe and regimes of solidarity has left many searching for alternative outlets. As exclusive 'owner' of the land under a postcolonial land regime, the state can permit individuals to share in the possibility of some form of access to land through the issuance of titles and concessions. It is already clear that mechanisms that enable individual appropriation of land come into conflict with the principle of collective ownership of land. All of this to say that entire communities are being rendered structurally irrelevant in a postcolonial state regime. Their capacity to organize order has dissipated in places where they are no longer able to regulate conflicts over access to space-resources.

Increased mobility globally through exchange and interactions, and a sense of increased borderlessness goes hand in hand with trends to securitize processes and spaces, partly motivated by a demand to surveil 'loose' populations. This should inspire a new understanding of the conditions of order under a politics of containment, but also on sovereign politics (and not just stateness and sovereignty). The Sahel became a new frontier in the War on Terror in the mid 2000s. Initiatives such as the TransSaharan Partnership, Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane have served as means of intrusion into Sahelian socio-political configuration through an expansion of states' repressive capacities. As is often the case, the region is now caught in intractable cycles of violence that have hardened ethnic

and religious differences.

The Central African Republic (CAR) has witnessed a breakdown of state control since the conflict between the Séléka coalition, the anti-Balaka and the government resurged in 2013, which resulted in the justice system being unable to deliver. Do you think the existence of state control is a necessary prerequisite for justice in the CAR or are there alternatives to statehood?

When I visited CAR, I heard many stories of how longtime neighbors turned into enemies in a fortnight because of the public discourse of hate and rumors about violence and massacres associated with specific communities. Violence against a specific community inevitably leads to a cycle of retaliations and flight. Communities across CAR's very diverse regions have lived alongside each other, they have intermarried and exchanged in many ways. The various permutations and logics of relationships between different groups, close or distant from each other, are lost in the dominant perspective of violence. It is reasonable to imagine that political organizations in a savannah and forest contexts have to respond to different kinds of imperatives. The dislocation of decentralized structures and the dismantling of precolonial forms and logics of governance turned CAR into a land of predation for all kinds of entrepreneurs. Religion, ethnicity, nationality all become fodder in the fabrication of hate, hostility and mistrust. Scholars of the African politics are often quick to apply an identity-politics framework to cast the conflict in a familiar mold. Once however we accept that the spatial-temporal coordinates of the state or political organizations generally speaking diverge according to physical and cultural contexts, then this temptation itself has to be subjected to more scrutiny.

One has to think about physical environment to understand why and how the state question as posed by a number of scholars is almost aberrant. For someone coming from the West African savannah, I'm amazed at the rare natural beauty, the sumptuous landscape and staggering physical and cultural diversity of the Central African Republic. Its unique variety of butterflies, probably one of the world's most diverse samples is worth a trip. CAR is also endowed with a variety of minerals such as diamond and gold and many natural resources. There is a striking contrast between this natural beauty and the state of dislocation of formal structures, also many contradictions between the political traditions of the various groups and the particulars promoted by state actors as representative of the ethical commitments of wider society.

Despite bearing all the markers of dysfunction, the question whether CAR is a failed state or not is not always the most relevant question. CAR is a country of forests and mountains and rivers ad some of its communities have lived autonomous lives from the state for a long time. But almost all came in contact with the state, whether colonial or postcolonial, on a violent mode. The state in the sense of a centralized institution governing from Bangui does not necessarily make sense for CAR. Political governance itself needs to be reinvented if the cycle of exploitation and violence is to be broken.

In an article, you have compared the approach of the Global North towards African artefacts and art stolen during the Nazi regime and found that there were significant differences. Can you explain how the approaches differ and why?

In 2017, the French President made a declaration in response to requests by Benin and many African civil society organizations and activists to the effect that France was going to restitute illicitly acquired African artefacts. In French media and public debates, the story is being presented as a story of a benevolent gesture from the French President yet the debate on restitution goes back to the 1970s.

I use this debate on restitution and reparation to think more broadly about political economy, inequality, redistribution, international law and arbitrary practices in the global governance system. The looting of Africa's wealth has been one of the most damaging crimes perpetrated against Africans, often with the complicity of African governors. This looting goes from the acquisition of valuable natural resources for a pittance to tax evasion widely practiced by western corporations. In fact, the very tolerance and 'legality' of tax heavens is a troubling aspect of an arbitrary legal governance. As long as multinationals and rich individuals are allowed to stash 'legal' profits, the proceeds of corruption or dirty money, discussions about regulating the extractive economy do not amount to much. Africa loses

over $50 billion a year to illicit flows according to the UN and this is likely a very conservative figure.

To go back to your question about the artefacts, if you want to understand the acute relevance of this question, you only need to follow the latest polemic (if you can call a negationist discourse polemic) in France. In a recent very popular TV program in France, a known commentator compared the experience of Jews and slaves to say that, unlike Jews, who were murdered, enslaved Africans were treated well, kept in good health so that they could be resold at a good price. Such comparisons are as useless as they are dangerous. But they are often used to discredit the experience of people who have been at the receiving end of violence from Europe.

So the prevalent mindset in France and Europe more generally is that Jews were victims of monstrous and unconscionable crimes and therefore have a legitimate right to claim for compensation. On the other hand, a revisionist fever has gripped a number of public commentators. This kind of revisionism is linked to many questions, notably the rise of the Right in Europe, its hostility towards the presence of Black people in Europe and the discourse to delegitimize the constitutional and historical rights of Afro-Europeans in particular. The anti-black, supremacist and negationist ideology is thriving in these moments of assault on the history of Africa. The permissiveness that enables this kind of comment equally justifies Europe's refusal to entertain the question of reparations where Africans are concerned. The relationship between historical consciousness and public discourse is marked in a legitimizing attitude of a hierarchy of crimes and human worth. In France, there was tremendous resistance in the public debates leading to the adoption of the Taubira Law in 2001. The law recognizes that Transatlantic Slavery is a crime against humanity.

What I explain in the article is that the looting of African artefacts is part of an extractivist model that has been, and continues to be, the basis of Europe's relations with Africa. A great number of young Senegalese who brave death to cross the Mediterranean come from fishing villages where fishing is no longer a sustainable activity because large shipping boats from Europe and now China have depleted the fish and left them not only jobless but unable to cultivate or transfer the knowledge, the techniques and the vibrant cultures associated with artisanal fishing. Extractivism is a damaging system that no amount of development aid or corporate social responsibility will offset. It is a model that erodes the postcolonial African state's capacity to perform its basic prerogatives. For its extraverted elites are busy selling off the commons and servicing foreign interests.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

This may sound strange but when I started studying IR, I was seduced by a certain aloofness that characterizes many discussions, but one which I have come to find increasingly problematic, the fact that one can endlessly hover over questions without really confronting them. The dominant 'stories' to me are as 'authoritative' as they are vague because of an ambition of universality that just cannot be fulfilled. This vagueness conforms to an understanding of the world we've tolerated long enough to have forgotten why it is not right. Because they operate at a very general level, treatises on international morality, international community, cosmopolitanism and interdependence, elaborated and reworked across generations of political theorists, ethicists, and legal scholars, can continuously sustain a promise of universality while being firmly grounded in an understanding of the western subject as *the* universal subject.

My maternal grandfather lived to be 112 years and he lived through the whole 20th century. He was a man of knowledge and uncommon memory, an important social actor of his time and a captivating storyteller. I think of the freedom he exercised in telling stories in a way at once capacious and empowering, a way that is unavailable to us two generations after him. There was beauty and subtlety in how he mixed art and wit. My mother has inherited some of this in her way of speaking and thinking about the world. She has a language that is very vivid and imaginative. She speaks in riddles and proverbs and analogies and aphorisms. One needs to be conversant with the cultural contexts and the linguistic codes of Wolof in order to make sense of the intellectual stock that energizes her worldview. I'm saying all of this to stress the importance of non-canonical knowledge as a source of understanding of *our* world, of the art of language and the importance of using our own words and not words used by others on our behalf to tell our story. For only knowledge of self is emancipatory.

Obviously, it is a great pity for us, Africans in particular, that we have lost/have been losing or have been deprived so much of the richness of oral traditions. Without knowledge coming from us to help us better exist in the world we are disarmed, we are vulnerable, we are deprived of the capacity to become the subjects we are meant to be and we risk falling into the trap of disputing and contesting, sometimes acrimoniously, the amount of accumulated nonsense constantly heaped upon the peoples and societies of Africa. To try and see the world from the specificity of African history and contexts—despite many methodological constraints—gives me increasingly a defined sense of purpose as a scholar.

IR students are often taught synthesized versions of debates—and by this I mean sustained discussions over generations and across currents and competing views—that have taken place or are taking place in various disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. So it is important to develop, early on, strategies to detect the limits of these shortcuts and not limit yourself to reading IR only literature. It's good to be a trans/interdisciplinary scholar. In fact, it is necessary to be undisciplined. That's the first thing. The second thing is that if you think the questions that dominate IR debates are alienatingly removed from 'real' life questions, that is the existential, spiritual, moral and ethical questions that animate peoples and communities, you are most probably right. The questions you ask will expand your curiosity and push the boundaries and possibilities of enquiry.