



## Culture as a Stressor and Resource in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

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### Abstract

This study grouped the cultural practices in *So Long a Letter* into five categories including marriage customs, funeral and widowhood rites, widow inheritance and remarriage, communal culture and sisterhood, and motherhood and parenting. The theoretical framework was based on Antonovsky's health promotion theory of salutogenesis and on the six paths he outlined on culture's role in the Salutogenetic Model of Health (SMH). Cultural practices identified as complex, hostile, or inherently stressful were categorised as stressors, while traditions viewed as Generalised Resistant Resources (GRRs), or adaptable and stable and that helped one build a strong Sense of Coherence (SOC), or provided a perception of well-being were considered resources. The classification of a cultural habit as a stressor or resource or both varied with characters and circumstances. The analysis revealed that culture was more of a resource than a stressor in the novel. Additionally, although Ramatoulaye often complained about some practices and desired modernisation, she generally adapted and remained successfully integrated in the culture. Existing scholarship mostly depicts culture as oppressive to women in postcolonial African literature. This study makes a significant contribution by shifting the discourse to a more nuanced view of culture as both a resource and a stressor.

## 1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye and her friend, Aissatou, face enormous strain from religious and cultural constraints. Areas of existing scholarship dissect these protagonists' abilities to navigate the sociocultural pressures imposed by Islamic principles and cultural norms for self-determination and female empowerment. Culture, though, is more than just a restraining force for women in the novel. The examination of culture as a stressor or resource will be guided by this definition by Stuart Hall quoted by Prabhu (2003):

It defines 'culture' as *both* the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they 'handle' and respond to conditions of existence; *and* as the lived traditions and practices through which those 'understandings' are expressed and in which they are embodied (Hall 1986: 39, emphases in original) (p. 242).

Bâ depicts culture as a structural framework for Senegalese society. Only, it accommodates patriarchal privileges, excesses, and expectations and relegates women to subaltern and stereotypical roles, which most tolerate for socioeconomic security for themselves and their children. Culture is also sometimes misused for personal gain. It is abused in the performance of funeral rites for Modou and exploited by Auntie Nabou to settle scores with Aissatou.

Contrarily, culture is the pillar which upholds unity at Modou's funeral; and the predominant cultural practice of polygamy is a lifeline for Binetou and young Nabou.

Resistance to and the evolution of culture are recurrent themes in the novel, with the latter perceived in the transition from the generation of Ramatoulaye's parents to that of her offspring. Ramatoulaye questions male hegemony and wrestles with her desire for innovation in her role as co-wife and mother. At the extremes are Aunt Nabou, who enforces the tradition that people marry within their caste by pressuring her son Mawdo to get a second wife of their aristocratic lineage, and Aissatou, who embraces modernity by divorcing Mawdo and relocating abroad with her children. Culture thus appears as a hindrance for some and a tool for others, and this view varies with circumstances.

To analyse culture as an asset and a liability in the novel, this study utilises the health promotion theory of salutogenesis developed by Aaron Antonovsky who, in seeking to answer the question about the origin of health, identified the role of resources to cope with stressors and the development of a Sense of Coherence (SOC) (Mittelmark and Bauer, 2017). The SOC "develops, according to the salutogenic model, from infancy and the infant's experience of its sociocultural and historic context," (ibid, p. 9).

Benz et al. (2014) observe that although Antonovsky identified the importance of culture in developing a strong SOC, he never articulated his ideas in a specific work. In their overview of Antonovsky's scholarship on culture, they state that he approached the subject as a medical school professor, an immigrant to Israel, an anthropologist, and the originator of salutogenesis. They, however, limit their analysis to the theme of salutogenesis and discuss six paths and mechanisms that foreground culture's role in the Salutogenetic Model of Health (SMH).

The first path, life situation, highlights Antonovsky's view that although stressors are common across cultures, their distribution and perception vary considerably between cultures. Also, he focused more on culture as an inherent stressor than on cultural differences in exposure to and reaction to stressors.

Cultural stress embodies several terms, but relevant to this study is the notion of the complexity of culture; such cultures, characterised by many norms and rules, increase stress. Cultural complexity aside, Antonovsky also considered culture hostility and noted that people who are subject to arbitrariness and chance and are dominated by hostile powerful others experience constant stress, which is intensified by their powerlessness.

The third path, cultural assets/Generalised Resistance Resources (GRRs), views culture as a coping resource. Antonovsky had a keen interest in cultural stability as a GRR, a determinant in building a strong SOC, and a contributor to well-being. Benz et al. (2014) quote him: "Clearly, if one has a high intelligence, lots of money, or a clear ego identity or lives in a stable, integrated culture – to mention some GRRs – there will be consequences not only for the emergence of a strong SOC, and therefore health, but for other areas of well-being as well..." (p. 20).

Another GRR is cultural adaptability, which exists in three forms. The first form stems from Antonovsky's idea that "one's own role as a GRR in others' lives is a GRR for *oneself*," (ibid). The next form is "the ability to adapt to cultural norms, which is a source of strengthened SOC..." (ibid). Here, it is important to note that although "Antonovsky described a complex culture as a potential stressor, he also wrote that a complex culture offers many possibilities of choice and can thus be supportive for people who are flexible..." (ibid). The third form of cultural adaptability is "successful cultural *integration*, which has salubrious effects that are the opposite of the deleterious effects of cultural discrimination..." (ibid).

About the fourth path, life experiences and the SOC, Antonovsky wrote that a supportive culture equips individuals with the necessary life situations, resources, and experiences to view life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful, the three elements integral to the SOC. The fifth path, the SOC, is shaped in a culture but not culture-bound. In the context of *So Long a Letter* it is important to define the three terms intrinsic to the SOC: "*Comprehensibility* arises from a stable culture that sends consistent messages to people, *manageability* is created by a

culture that gives people the tools to live up to norms set by the culture, and *meaningfulness* is supported by a culture that values the role of people and gives them a place in the world..." (ibid).

The final path that highlights the role of culture in the SMH is movement towards and perception of well-being influenced by culture. Antonovsky believed that culture not only shapes health through the above-mentioned paths but that it also influences a person's perceived notion of health.

A suitable conclusion to this discussion on paths and mechanisms on the role of culture in the SMH is a quotation from Antonovsky on how culture, specifically cultural assets/GRRs, plays a key role in the SMH:

... a culture provides its members, group and individual, with ready answers, clear, stable, integrated; with keening for a death, an explanation for pain, a ceremony for crop failure, and a form for disposition and accession of leaders. At the other extreme, which at times becomes a reality for individuals and groups, there is only utter chaos; there are no answers. Ready answers provided by one's culture and its social structure are probably the most powerful GRR of all... (Benz et al., 2014, p. 20)

Mittelmark and Bauer (2017) present culture as contributing to developing stressors but also resistance resources, and they deplore the neglect of research in culture in salutogenesis. This study aims to address that gap.

## **2. Literature Review: Cultural Practices in So Long a Letter**

Cultural practices in *So Long a Letter* are numerous and diverse, and this study groups them into five themes for a more logical analysis. These include marriage customs (dowry payment, the extended family, and polygamy); funeral and widowhood rites; widow inheritance and pressure to quickly remarry; communal culture and sisterhood; and motherhood and parenting.

In *So Long a Letter*, culture is dynamic although the changes are limited to specific characters and situations. Some of these changes are influenced by exposure to Westernisation. According to Prabhu (2003), Bâ suggests "that tradition lives unquestioned as long as it is outside the influence of the coloniser," (p. 246) and backs this with Ramatoulaye's praise of their French teacher who aimed to "lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us," (p. 16). Another pointer to this is Ramatoulaye's comment in reference to parenting challenges: "Now our society is shaken to its very foundations, torn between the attraction of imported vices and the fierce resistance of old virtues," (p. 76).

Compared to hardline traditionalists like Aunty Nabou, Ramatoulaye entertains liberal philosophies, and she asserts this in the statement: "We all agreed that such dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the 'hard sweat' that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia, yet resolutely progressive," (p. 19). Cherekar (2025) sees in this declaration Ramatoulaye's anxiety for tradition but also a zeal for modernity. He evokes the balance between a tradition (which moulds them) and education necessary for the emerging African woman like Ramatoulaye.

This analysis will therefore encompass static and dynamic aspects of the cultural practices under consideration.

### **2.1 Marriage Customs: Dowry Payment, the Extended Family, and Polygamy**

Ramatoulaye picks Modou over her parents' choice of Daouda Dieng. She shuns the culture of dowry payment, and her parents oblige her but bear the pain of the unconventional wedding.

Ogede (2011) denounces her complaints about her in-laws, and Gueye (2012) highlights that “She embraces many aspects of French culture, including her adoption of the nuclear family, isolates herself from her culture and seems to have no relatives. She defines herself by her relationship to Modou, excluding other places where most Senegalese women find their worth such as in their roles as aunts, cousins, nieces, surrogate mothers, sisters, and much more,” (p. 7). Ramatoulaye appears to be successfully resisting traditional marriage and family customs until Modou takes a second wife. Ndiyah (2026) argues that, viewed from an African cultural perspective, Ramatoulaye could have brought some of her troubles on herself by disregarding her parents and traditional marriage customs.

Polygamy is sanctioned by culture and encouraged by Islam, though on condition that the man can provide for and treat the women equally. Religion enforces the pre-existing culture, since “polygamy was part of the African tradition before the advent of Islam... However, in colonial and postcolonial Africa, Islamic religion is one of the excuses for encouraging polygamy and marital disavowal by men,” (Ogundipe, 2011, p. 358). The Imam uses Islam to justify Modou’s second marriage, and Ramatoulaye accommodates polygamy because of Islamic conditioning. Hong (2013) observes that “Muslim convention is designed to keep Ramatoulaye within the confines of women’s role,” (p. 196). With polygamy so entrenched in Senegalese culture and Islam, Ramatoulaye should have envisaged the possibility of someday having a co-wife. Still, Modou’s second marriage rattles her, for he marries Binetou, her daughter’s friend, and he abandons her with twelve children. She accepts a co-wife as a religious obligation but lives in bitterness, and she later declines Daouda Dieng’s polygamous marriage proposal, stating that “You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change,” (pp. 71–72).

Modou’s marriage to Binetou is not simply polygamous but a forced marriage, since Binetou’s mother commodifies her daughter’s youth and schooling and trades these to Modou in exchange for social status and comfort and, “she firmly believed that the payments would continue, even after Modou’s death, out of the estate,” (p. 11).

Aunty Nabou’s adherence to the culture of caste prejudice prompts her to coerce her son to become polygamous by marrying young Nabou, her brother’s daughter: “Faced with this rigid mother moulded by the old morality, burning with the fierce ardour of antiquated laws, what could Mawdo Bâ do?” (p. 31). Aissatou divorces Mawdo, and she is rejected by society.

## **2.2 Funeral and Widowhood Rites**

In polygamy, Ramatoulaye is abandoned and becomes an independent woman bound to Modou. Widowhood fails to bring her complete independence, for she is subject to the dictates of her in-laws who carry on Modou’s authority, sometimes with more cynicism. Modou never brought Binetou to Ramatoulaye’s house, but his family obliges her to host Binetou at his death: “She has been installed in my house for the funeral, in accordance with tradition,” (p. 4). Still in the name of tradition, their in-laws enrich themselves at the expense of the needy widows. They offer the widows two hundred thousand francs for mourning clothes, but the “share of each widow must be doubled, as must the gifts of Modou’s grandchildren, represented by the offspring of all his male and female cousins. Thus our family-in-law take away with them a wad of notes, painstakingly topped, and leave us utterly destitute, we who will need material support,” (p. 8). Ramatoulaye is embittered by the abuse of the funeral rites and the transformation of funerals into places to showcase fashion, have free meals and even gossip. Such lamentations disrupt her prayers for God’s mercy. Cherekar (2025) notes that “While describing the third day’s funeral ceremony, Ramatoulaye resentfully remarks how modernisation has taught people to value materialisation over the inner feelings. In recalling Modou’s rise in social rank, she comments how the import of Western culture has a harmful impact on their native culture,” (p. 163).

Ramatoulaye also complains about the dehumanising widowhood rituals: "Alone, I live in a monotony broken only by purifying baths, the changing of mourning cloths every Monday and Friday," (p. 9). She then asserts her desire to respect even the challenging religious ritual of seclusion for four months and ten days: "I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail," (p. 9).

Ramatoulaye's biggest issue remains her in-laws, from whom she endures continuous objectification and subordination at Modou's funeral. She declares, "Our sisters-in-law give equal consideration to thirty years and five years of married life. With the same ease and the same words, they celebrate twelve maternities and three," (p. 4). Ramatoulaye further mentions that the widow who had failed to be endearing to her sisters-in-law is neglected and humiliated. Nevertheless, she accommodates them as she had during her marriage: "... we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom. I loved Modou. I compromised with his people," (p. 19).

Sarvan (1988) summarises Ramatoulaye's feeling, stating, "Even at the death of a husband, the widow is subjected to various observances and customs... A woman is abandoned or exchanged as if she were a commodity (41); married or single, she has little liberty: no 'decent' woman can go out, for example to the cinema, unescorted," (p. 456).

### **2.3 Widow Inheritance and Pressure to Remarry Quickly**

Another cultural practice in *So Long a Letter* is the inheritance of a widow by her brother-in-law. Shortly after the fortieth-day celebration of Modou's death, Ramatoulaye receives a visit from Modou's brother, Tamsir, who is accompanied by Mawdo and the Imam. Tamsir starts by subordinating her through his intrusion into and conquering of her private bedroom space. His move to respect the culture of wife inheritance and his condescending attitude portray the widow as nothing but an object to be claimed by right.

But because "Ramatoulaye is educated in both western and Koranic ways, she is able to tell Tamsir to his face the grim reality of his proposal to her," (Akano, 2014, p. 26). She cries out: "My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous," (p. 60). Her outburst is symbolic of breaking the silence women face in oppression (Wimberly, 2020).

Ramatoulaye then evokes the emotions of a woman concerning marriage: "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you," (p. 60). Jagne (2004) perceives her anger as pent-up bitterness against Modou which she is transferring to Tamsir and adds that "Tamsir wants to practice the custom of wife inheritance but cannot even afford to feed his own wives and numerous children. For a custom designed to financially and emotionally help a widowed woman, his request is unreasonable... He only sees Ramatoulaye as a 'milch cow' to exploit," (p. 10). This view is justified, considering Tamsir's dismissal of Binetou, who becomes homeless following the liquidation of Modou's bankrupt estate.

Soon after Ramatoulaye rejects Tamsir, the parliamentarian, Daouda Dieng, renews his marriage proposal, thirty years after his first attempt. She esteems him and acknowledges that he will be a good role model for her young children. However, she rejects him, stating, "I have no definable reason. Our currents are opposed," (p. 70). The *griot* woman thinks Ramatoulaye has made a grave mistake by turning down a resourceful man considered to be a godsend. She cries, "You have rejected the messenger sent to you by God to reward you for your sufferings. God will punish you for not having followed the path towards peace. You have refused greatness! You shall live in mud. I wish you another Modou to make you shed tears of blood," (p. 72).

## 2.4 Communal Culture and Sisterhood

Community life is a hallmark of African cultures, but gender stratification leaves men with more socioeconomic and cultural advantages as presented in *So Long a Letter*. Male dominance restricts women's abilities to fully exploit their potential. One way women overcome patriarchal subjugation is to bond among themselves, but this is not always prioritised by every woman.

“Sisterhood in the novel is not merely a bond of affection; it is a deeply rooted moral alliance through which women share their burdens, validate one another's pain, and create alternative spaces of empowerment in a society that often denies them autonomy,” (Lawali & Tontoh, 2026, p. 59). The researchers also highlight how women in the novel use sisterhood as a transformative space where they navigate the challenges of tradition, modernity, and individual freedom, and how solidarity can challenge oppressive systems while maintaining cultural identity.

A major threat to female bonding, or what this paper terms collective sisterhood, is women themselves, enablers of denigrating traditions against women. Akano (2014) asserts that “... women are the victim and prey on one hand while women as well are the instrument or implementer of the cultural prejudices against women,” (p. 25). In *So Long a Letter*, conflict arises between the conservatives defending the culture and progressives desiring more rights and independence. The victimisers are often women in senior positions, who accept their subordinate roles in the patriarchal society, and they feel superior since society portrays them as custodians of the culture and role models for other women. Some, though, use their positions to advocate for women. About the griot women, the go-between, like the one who proudly performs her role at Modou's funeral, Jagne (2004) observes: “This oral tradition in Senegal has been the major outlet for women's voices. The griot women — not controlled by society in ways other women are regarding speech — are given a licence by society to say whatever they want without censor [censure],” (p. 1).

Aunty Nabou, conversely, uses her influence to impose polygamy on her son, as does Binetou's mother on her daughter. The absence of female solidarity, sometimes sanctioned by the likes of the griots praising Aunty Nabou, promotes enmity among women and leads to discrimination and the exclusion of some. Another consequence is that “... cooperative, communal living is being replaced by competition, the traditional, ‘extended’ family by the nuclear family,” (Sarvan, 1988, p. 458). A lessening sense of belonging or alienation also prompts the search for role models outside the community. Ramatoulaye acknowledges her admiration for the French woman who, among other goals, desired to emancipate them: “... the path chosen for our training and our blossoming has not been at all fortuitous. It has accorded with the profound choices made by New Africa for the promotion of the black woman,” (p. 16).

Her strong bond with Aissatou aside, Ramatoulaye demonstrates her belief in collective sisterhood when she refuses to marry Daouda Dieng because she wants to avoid hurting his wife and family: “Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family,” (p. 71). She also tells him that she prefers her own female association where “there is neither rivalry nor schism, neither malice nor jostling for position; there are no posts to be shared, nor positions to be secured. The headship changes every year. Each of us has equal opportunity to advance her ideas. We are given tasks according to our abilities in our activities and organisations that work towards the progress of women,” (p. 78).

## 2.5 Motherhood and Parenting

The cultural pressure for a woman to have children is displayed by Aunty Nabou, who takes her desire to the extreme by disregarding Modou's four sons with Aissatou because she wants young Nabou to bear children of their aristocratic lineage: “The griots spoke of young Nabou's sons, exalting them: ‘Blood has returned to its source,’” (p. 31). Modou, Mawdo, and Jacqueline's husband are three fathers who detach themselves from their children and wives in

their quests for other women. Bâ therefore infers that culture pressurises a woman to have children but relegates the mother and her offspring once the interests of the men shift.

Single parenting and modernity are other concerns for Ramatoulaye. Having partly embraced modernity and living with some associated deceptions, she faces the challenge of giving her children the right balance. Towards the novel's end, she highlights the difficulties of single parenting: her teenage daughters smoking, their choice of clothes that include trousers, her unmarried daughter's pregnancy, among others. As a mother abandoned with twelve children, Ramatoulaye "... decides to abandon patriarchal values when raising her children," (Edson, 1993, p. 19).

Also predominant is the culture of fostering a child to be one's prop in old age, evident in Aunt Nabou's declaration: "I need a child beside me... to fill my heart. I want this child to be both my legs and my right arm. I am growing old. I will make of this child another me. Since the marriage of my children, the house has been empty," (p. 29). The culture of the extended family advocates for a child to be brought up by relatives with better prospects to invest in their future. Aunt Nabou raises young Nabou to become a midwife. Notwithstanding, depriving the girl child of education is a prevalent cultural practice as indicated by Ramatoulaye's advocacy to Daouda Dieng.

This literature review has examined the major cultural practices in *So Long a Letter*. The methodology employed to analyse their role as stressors or resources follows.

### **3. Methodology**

This methodology is developed from the six paths cited by Benz et al. (2014) on the role of culture in the SMH.

Culture will be considered a stressor if it: (i) appears as an inherent factor that triggers stress or creates a perception of ill-being; (ii) is complex with many norms and rules; and (iii) is hostile because powerless people are subject to arbitrariness and chance and dominated by powerful others.

Culture will be viewed as a resource if it: (i) offers stability through GRRs such as: the possession of goods and intelligence; the opportunity to be a GRR in the lives of others; an ability to adapt to hostile cultures; and provides ready answers to life situations, consistent messages, and opportunities for successful integration; (ii) is supportive and promotes life experiences that help one build a strong SOC; (iii) offers a perception of well-being.

The concepts of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness are incorporated in points (i) and (ii) under resources.

The researcher acknowledges that this methodology favours resources because of the range of GRRs. This imbalance could not be corrected because the analysis is grounded in Antonovsky's views on culture in the SMH as laid out in the theoretical framework.

### **4. Discussion**

The discussion on culture and its opposing effects in the lives of some characters is based on the five cultural practices examined in the literature review.

#### **4.1 Marriage Customs: Dowry Payment, the Extended Family, and Polygamy**

Ramatoulaye rejects the culture of dowry payment, which can be classified as a complex culture because she does not understand the rationale behind the rule to give money or property to the man she loves. She describes herself as being "free from frustrating taboos and capable now of discernment," (p. 16). She imposes her will on her choice of a partner and marriage ceremony and spends twenty-five years in a satisfying marriage until Modou embraces polygamy. Her worry about dowry payment is therefore a one-time stressor which she manages to her advantage.

Cultural obligations to her husband and family-in-law are at times stressors for Ramatoulaye. Ogede (2011) reads her complaints about the intrusion of her relatives-in-law in her marriage as a rebellion against extended families in traditional African cultures, but an alternative argument is the influence of the Western education she received. Moreover, grievances relating to relatives-in-law are common even in nuclear-family-oriented Western societies. So having been educated to “appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own,” (Bâ, p. 16) and aiming to be true to herself, Ramatoulaye adapts to the complex culture of accommodating in-laws by adopting aspects of individualism to limit the effects of this stressor.

Polygamy is a hostile culture for the female protagonists in *So Long a Letter* because powerful males take the decision in a custom sanctioned by tradition and religious institutions, and because men like Modou fail to respect the rules as Ramatoulaye observes: “I cried every day. From then on, my life changed. I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life. I was left with empty hands,” (p. 48). Furthermore, polygamy creates co-wife antagonism between Ramatoulaye and Binetou. Patriarchy is consequently a stressor for Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and other women like Jacqueline, whose interfaith marriage to a Muslim man becomes not polygamous but openly adulterous, resulting in her mental breakdown.

Ramatoulaye is not forced or coerced into the complex institution of polygamy, and her acceptance transcends a fear of once again going against tradition and risking dissociation from society. The compromise to stay in the marriage keeps her integrated in the community and gives broader meaning to her life and purpose as captured by Wimberly (2020):

“Flight, in *So Long a Letter*, is not a desirable response to oppression; while it may aid the individual in theory, in practice it is a form of desertion of the community and nation. Bâ suggests that true resistance requires the commitment to stay — in a troubled nation and perhaps more radically in a troubled marriage. Ramatoulaye chooses neither to divorce nor to emigrate,” (para.)

Hong (2013) is of a different opinion and sees Ramatoulaye’s inability to view life outside of her society as a driving force for inequality between men and women. Remaining in the community and as a married woman, Ramatoulaye is spared other stressors like society’s contempt for Aissatou, who chooses divorce as a means of female resistance to patriarchy. Polygamy, however, remains an inherent stressor for Ramatoulaye given that her questions about why Modou married Binetou persist even after his death.

Polygamy is initially a resource for Binetou, for it brings her stability through her socioeconomic advancement. Another GRR is her influence in raising her family’s societal status and cultural standing. But this stable culture turns hostile when Binetou becomes homeless after Modou’s death and Tamsir offers to inherit only Ramatoulaye as his wife. Ogunidipe (2011) aptly captures Binetou’s predicament:

... the reader should read Binetou as the most unfortunate victim of oppression in the novel as she becomes a widow at a very tender age. This is the extent of the damage into which the tradition of her society plunges her. She is a representation of a young Senegalese woman whose future and sense of innocence men continually corrupt in order to satisfy their moral laxity and chauvinism. Yet, in a supposedly feminist struggle to oppose this tradition, Mariama Bâ does not give voice or agency to Binetou as much as she gives to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. On the contrary, Bâ expects the reader to interpret Binetou’s character as rivalry, greed and indiscipline in the novel (p. 359).

Thanks to polygamy, Aunt Nabou reinforces the tradition of marrying within one’s caste. Mawdo’s second marriage is a resource for Aunt Nabou but a stressor for Aissatou. For young Nabou, polygamy is consistently a supportive culture providing her with meaningful

experiences which help her to build a strong SOC. The successful cultural integration grants her an overall feeling of acceptance and well-being.

Polygamy is not always a resource for men, exemplified by Modou's stressful life and sudden death from a heart attack. Although it is initially a stressor for Mawdo who is pressurised by his mother to marry young Nabou, it becomes a resource when he builds a family with her and settles into his new life.

Polygamy is a resource or stressor depending on the circumstances of the different characters, but it is generally a stressor for most women, especially in the long term.

#### **4.2 Funeral and Widowhood Rites**

The funeral rites are designed to remember and pray for the dead, offer them a dignified burial, comfort the bereaved, and provide ready answers to the purpose of life on earth and beyond. These honourable and supportive tasks are performed by the "seething crowd of human beings come from all parts of the country, where the radio has relayed the news," (Bâ, p. 3). Notwithstanding, Ramatoulaye's complaints about the crowd indicate that the entire setup is stressful. The presence of Binetou in her house, the indiscretions of her relatives-in-law, and required family meetings are other factors which make the funeral rites inherently stressful for Ramatoulaye.

The cultural rules and norms governing funerals and widowhood are complex to understand for a grieving widow. Funeral and widowhood rites are hostile to a widow whose in-laws move from being people once tolerated to lords deciding her fate and objectifying her. Akano (2014) reiterates that mothers-in-law in *So Long a Letter* "are cultural bigots who are normally and sentimentally jealous of their son's wives... Females in senior positions in families have a great deal of authority," (p. 25). Ramatoulaye makes no distinction between senior and junior sisters-in-law but portrays them as being empowered at their brother's funeral. Disrespect from younger ones heightens the hostility of such widowhood rituals. Ramatoulaye also decries the cajoling that obliges her to offer her property but, above all, the loss of her dignity at the hands of her in-laws.

The four months and ten days period is a religious constraint, but Ramatoulaye uses the time to find answers to life situations, thereby transforming it into a GRR. At the end of the seclusion, she views life as more comprehensible and meaningful. These give her a stronger SOC and improved well-being.

The funeral and widowhood rituals are mostly stressors, but Ramatoulaye shifts the focus from the humiliation to entertaining self-worth. Through resilience, she emerges stronger.

#### **4.3 Widow Inheritance and Pressure to Remarry Quickly**

The culture of widow inheritance is a complex one mainly because of the involvement of the emotion of love. It is not just about the mind but the heart. The need to navigate between survival and the desire for emotional comfort accentuates the complexity of this practice, and Ramatoulaye's response to Tamsir highlights her pain, thereby indicating stress. But what she, an employed widow with some adult children, views as a complex culture could be interpreted as a stable and supportive culture by a young and unemployed widow with dependent children, like Binetou. Sarvan (1988) writes: "Even at the death of a husband, the widow is subjected to various observances and customs (4), including the possibility that she will be inherited by one of her late husband's brothers. (The Koran urges men in general to marry widows; it was a man's obligation to marry his late brother's widow, thus affording her and her children protection and care)," (p. 456).

The difference in the approaches applied by Tamsir and Daouda Dieng are crucial, for the latter professes his enduring admiration for Ramatoulaye, and he seeks her consent. The fact that he acts out of his own free will (not obligated by some custom) and that he loves her are indicators which can turn around a negative situation. Hence, respect and consent can ease a

woman's acceptance of the culture of widow inheritance and/or quick remarriage, thereby transforming a stressor into a resource.

The *griot* woman's rage at Ramatoulaye's rejection of Daouda Dieng underscores her view that quick remarriage to a prosperous husband is a GRR without which the widow will be doomed to a stressful life.

The conditions under which a widow remarries are subjective, and the perception of this as a stressor or resource depends on the character's circumstances.

#### **4.4 Communal Culture and Sisterhood**

Sisterhood between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou is a GRR (Ndiyah, 2026). In contrast, collective sisterhood can be both a resource and a stressor.

Women are a minority group in *So Long a Letter*, and instances of cultural discrimination against them abound. Women are integrated into the culture, yet they are oppressed, first, by both tradition and Islam, mainly through polygamy which favours men and objectifies women, but also by other women. Lawali & Tontoh (2026) comment that "The novels illustrate how patriarchal systems encourage men to view women as objects for ego gratification rather than autonomous individuals," (p. 56), and they cite the example of Modou's replacement of Ramatoulaye with Binetou, her daughter's classmate.

One way women adapt to the hostile culture of discrimination, thus turning it into a resource, is by bonding among themselves. But even then, women like Aunty Nabou set up boundaries to exclude the likes of Aissatou, and this "... shows the problem involved in locating a female solidarity: as caste, age and 'bloodlines' become more important than being female," (Jagne, 2004, p. 11). Modou and Mawdo demonstrate individualism when they replace their first families. Such narcissism is another factor which pits women against each other and makes collective sisterhood a stressor.

Exclusion from the women folk, which is sometimes voluntary, pushes women to individualism. Binetou's individualism is a GRR for her but a stressor for Ramatoulaye who is abandoned. Also, it is implied that Ramatoulaye only partially embraced her sisters-in-law who envied her lifestyle and her mother-in-law who often visited at will and with her friends to show off her son's success. Ramatoulaye not only adapts to the presence of her female in-laws, but she expands her search for purpose. Her social role as a women's advocate is a GRR, and it strengthens her SOC for improved well-being.

A hallmark of interactions among women in the community is the pressure exerted on younger women by older ones. Binetou's mother pressurises her daughter into a marriage for which she sacrifices her education, while Aunty Nabou moulds young Nabou to become a wife for her son. Binetou is miserable in the marriage and ends up homeless at Modou's death; young Nabou lives a fulfilling life. The influence of older women thus produces a hostile outcome for Binetou but a stable one for young Nabou.

Overall, community living and collective sisterhood are stable cultures, for they give the women a common purpose and more meaningful lives, especially when they can manage the complex interactions.

#### **4.5 Motherhood and Parenting**

Aunty Nabou is both a biological and foster mother. Foster parenting enables one generation to meet the needs of another and vice versa. Young Nabou needs an education and Aunty Nabou needs company and a child to be her prop. The mutually beneficial arrangement is a resource for both women. The practice, however, could be viewed as hostile if Aunty Nabou never fulfilled her promise by deciding, say, to neglect the education of the girl child, or if Nabou became a nuisance to her aunt, and if they were required to remain together despite the disharmony.

Aunty Nabou's decision to raise her brother's daughter makes foster parenting a stable culture, but her hidden motive to destabilise Aissatou's family reveals a hostile side of the

culture. She is described by Edson (1993) as “a mother who is neither the stereotypical, traditional maternal figure nor the new, progressive mother,” (p. 20) but one who manipulates her son for vengeance: “It was ‘so as not to see his mother die of shame and chagrin’ that Mawdo agreed to go to the rendez-vous of the wedding night,” (Bâ, p. 31).

As a biological mother, Ramatoulaye is faced with different sets of complex parenting norms laid out by a traditional yet modernising society. She uses her discretion to amend them to suit her children’s needs, especially when her unmarried daughter gets pregnant. Ramatoulaye writes: “And also, one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One is a mother to shield when lightning streaks the night... One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end,” (p. 87). She consequently adapts to the otherwise complex “misfortune,” averts a stressor, and disregards the disapproval of the griot woman.

Ramatoulaye defies her parents and tradition at her marriage to Modou, while Mawdo submits to his mother’s complex scheme for him to have a second wife (after initially having his way by marrying Aissatou). This highlights the influence of upbringing in later life and indicates that traditions perceived as complex or hostile can be resisted with strong will, and those once considered hostile can be amended with bearable consequences.

## **5. Conclusion**

A predominant theme in *So Long a Letter* is polygamy, a cultural practice which represents different things for the female characters and influences widowhood, female solidarity, motherhood, and other subthemes in the novel. For Ramatoulaye polygamy is an undignified arrangement which she can cope with; for Aissatou, a betrayal prompting her to seek self-dependence; a lifeline for young Nabou and Binetou, although the latter ends up penniless; and for Aunt Nabou, a tool to exert her authority and manipulate others for her benefit. As each woman seeks a path ahead, antagonisms arise while some friendships are solidified. Polygamy is therefore a stable and supportive culture in some instances or for a while, but not for the protagonists Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, for whom it is a complex and hostile culture and an inherent stressor.

From the discussion it emerges that polygamy, funeral and widowhood rites, remarriage customs, collective sisterhood, and cultural restrictions on raising girls are mostly stressors for women. From other perspectives, polygamy, funeral rites, inheritance of widows, communal living and sisterhood, and parenting also act as resources, particularly when the characters adopt a broader approach to life and make conscious decisions to accept what they cannot immediately change.

Aissatou is the only character who renounces the culture. Apart from the two instances when Ramatoulaye openly rebels — against the custom of dowry payment and her rejection of her brother-in-law’s marriage proposal — she questions the status quo but generally adheres to its demands or adapts where necessary. She opens her doors and welcomes her rival into her house for the funeral of their husband, and she subjects herself to the shenanigans of her in-laws. Hence, while the culture is generally complex and hostile, she accepts it because it is stable and supportive, and she is successfully integrated in the culture.

Culture offers the characters steady and reliable guidance, provides ready answers to questions arising from their life situations, and such stable and supportive cultural norms build in them a strong SOC. Culture is therefore more of a resource than a stressor in *So Long a Letter*.

Further research on the topic could involve doing separate and more detailed studies on each of the six paths that underscore culture’s role in the SMH or analysing culture as a stressor or resource in male and female characters independently, and how culture shapes their mental well-being under the SMH. Other studies could also explore Antonovsky’s work on culture outside of salutogenesis.

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