

Transcript

Emmanuel Kattan, Host: This is “Vis à Vis”, a new podcast series brought to you by the Alliance Program at Columbia University. “Vis a Vis” features conversations that challenge our understanding of key global, economic and social issues by casting them in a transatlantic perspective. I’m Emmanuel Kattan. I head the Alliance Program, a partnership between Columbia University and 3 French universities: Sciences Po, Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne and École Polytechnique. Every episode, I sit down face to face – or as we say in French, “Vis a Vis” – with some of the most insightful thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

(Theme music out)

Kattan: While French and American societies struggle against racism, intolerance and discrimination take different forms on each side of the Atlantic. The French republican tradition emphasizes *laïcité*, or secularism, colorblindness, and a strict separation between the private space and the public space. In the United States, community-based identities and beliefs are not necessarily relegated to the private sphere. Racial, religious, or cultural forms of belonging are perceived as having a legitimate place in the public debate. How do these differences affect the reality of racism in France and the United States? What impact do they have on efforts to tackle racism? To discuss these issues, we have the privilege of welcoming Maboula Soumahoro, one of the leading transatlantic thinkers on race, racism, and the African diaspora. Maboula Soumahoro is a French writer and scholar. She is an associate professor at the University of Tours and president and co-founder of the Black History Month Association in France, dedicated to celebrating Black history and cultures. A specialist in the field of Africana Studies, Maboula Soumahoro has conducted research and taught in several universities and prisons in the United States and France. She is the author of *Le Triangle et l’Hexagone, réflexions sur une identité noire*, published by La Découverte in 2021, and translated in English by Kaiama Glover as *Black Is the Journey, Africana the Name*. Maboula Soumahoro is currently a visiting professor at Bennington College, and is also a visiting scholar at Columbia University. Maboula Soumahoro, welcome to Vis a Vis.

Maboula Soumahoro: Thank you, Emmanuel. Thank you for having me.

Kattan: It’s a pleasure to welcome you. And let me start with a question that has to do with your biography. So, you were born in Paris of parents who migrated from Ivory Coast in the 1960s. In your book *Black is the Journey, Africana the Name*, you explain in a beautiful turn of phrase that your mother tongue is French, but your mother’s tongue is Dioula, a language that you do not speak fluently, I believe. How did the experience of not speaking your mother’s tongue shape your experience of the world? And on the other hand, would you say that you feel at home in the French language, in your mother tongue? Or do you feel, also, a sense of exile speaking French?

Soumahoro: Thank you for this first question. I think this is a difficult question. I don't think at a younger age I was aware of the fact that not speaking my mother's tongue, how it impacted my own experience. So, I grew up speaking French. I was always surrounded by the Dioula language that was spoken at home and also outside of the home. And it was something that I was familiar with, that Dioula language, but something that seemed to not belong to me. Meanwhile, I was being educated in France and in French. It was the language that I used on a daily basis. So it's really much later that I came to realize and reflect on the fact that I did not speak, that I did not share, the same language as my mother who could, I mean, who can, also speak French, right? It's really when I perhaps went away from France that these questions started to arise and that I realized the, you know, a sense of grief or loss or you know, something that was missing.

Kattan: Right, right. You say interesting things, also, about the English language, because you're of course, as a scholar, you, you are a specialist in Africa diaspora, but also in English literature. And I was struck by a sentence also in *Black is the Journey* where you write that "in English" — and I quote: "In English, I am free. I can express myself unfettered. I can reinvent myself." End of quote. And I was wondering, what is it really about English language or about you, your own experience of English language that makes you feel freer, perhaps, than, than when you speak French?

Soumahoro: I think that the main idea is, is precisely that I do not own the English language, and that the English language does not owe anything to me. So English is, to begin with, not French and Dioula. It's not the country I was born in and I grew up in, feeling, you know, perhaps ambivalent about the country itself. It's not the country of my parents, which will forever remain, you know, the sort of mythologic home, or you know, some phantomatic place. English is my personal choice. It's me selecting, choosing, picking that language, acquiring it, studying it, and then, you know, appropriating it. And this leads to this feeling of freedom and to this possibility of reinvention. This is when I become an individual.

Kattan: Right. And it's interesting, because biography is really also at the core of your own academic journey. And this is really very apparent in the use of the, of the "I" pronoun, of the first person, in your own research. The tradition, of course, that's inherited from the Enlightenment tends to put rationality and objectivity at the heart of what social sciences are supposed to do. As a historian or a sociologist, you're supposed, really, to remain distant from your object. In your book, you really question this assumption and you ask, and I quote, "What is the relationship between lived experience and the production of ideas?" End of quote. And that seems to me to be a really fundamental question: Why is it important for a scholar like yourself to say "I"? To basically speak in the first person?

Soumahoro: I think that the use on my part of the pronoun "I" has come at a very particular moment. It came after, you know, a classic training in scholarly research, in trying to practice the alleged objectivity, rationality, and, you know, the normal tools that are used in in, you know, in research in general, and simply coming to the conclusion that it simply did not fit in what I was interested in. That it was one thing to, you know, study history, study cultures, study sociology, or religions, even, let's say from a safe distance, but when you inhabit, when you embody, when

you are yourself the object, your object of study, is that distance, and is that objectivity possible? And I'm not saying that objectivity does not matter. I'm just saying that in light of the history that I'm interested in — that is to say, the African diaspora — has objectivity ever existed to begin with? The ways, for instance, the original dispersal, or the creation of this African diaspora, based on the transatlantic slave trade — what was objectivity about? How do you write history on the basis of which sources, and the missing sources are the sources coming from the enslaved? These archives are simply not accessible. So what do you do? And if you happen to be a product of that particular history, how do you fit in this methodology? Perhaps your lived experiences can inform and can enrich this type of research. And why not, right? Do you have a particular perspective that does not erase the other perspectives, but that might contribute to enlarging, right, the field? And I think that those experiences should not be muted.

Kattan: Right, right. And do you think that that perhaps also opens the possibility for, you know, broader audiences also, to be welcomed into these kinds of scholarly enterprises, but that at the same time reflect a personal point of view? That there, there may be new generations, also of, of individuals, and maybe even beyond the world of academia, that, you know, can actually be attracted to this kind of scholarship, led through, you know, the first person — with an explicit first person — actually leading that, that scholarship enterprise?

Soumahoro: I think that we all know that — I hope we all know — that academia is, is an ivory tower. We all know that academia is able to produce, you know, very precious and important knowledge. And one of the questions that I have in mind is, what is the use of that knowledge if it remains limited to the confines of academia? So if other people are more comfortable with different styles, different approaches, yes, so, you know, so be it. And I welcome you know, larger numbers having access to things that can remain very confidential within academic circles, right? So it's simply, perhaps a matter of genre, of style, but I don't think that it changes anything to the depth, the possibility of importance of the findings. It doesn't devalue the knowledge that is being produced. Maybe it does, or it seeks, to make it more accessible. But it also plays on the balance, or tries to strike a balance, between, you know, the macro and the micro, between the global and, you know, the individual or the personal. Because I think that both aspects matter. That it's one thing to talk about, you know, historical events, statistics, abstract notions, but those abstract notions in the particular field that I'm interested in, in Africana Studies, these notions have a real, material impact in people's lives and experiences.

Kattan: And perhaps also, you know, there is something of an illusion that even, you know, a scholarly book that doesn't use the pronoun "I" is really objective, and that the "I" is not present. It's not because it is not said that it is not present.

Soumahoro: I couldn't agree more.

Kattan: One of the great strengths of your book is specifically the fact that you are straddling both sides of the Atlantic and that you provide in this book, also, an analysis and an understanding of how racism plays out in French and American society. And I was wondering how you would characterize this difference? I know it's, it's, it's fairly complex, but focusing, for example, on the idea of, of colorblindness, which structures a great deal of debates and even

policies in France. Do you think that colorblindness, to focus on this specifically, do you think that it makes it easier or harder to combat racism?

Soumahoro: In my view, in the French, you know, contemporary French context, this idea, this ideal, this mythology around colorblindness does make it more difficult to combat racism. It's very difficult to evaluate, to assess, to be clear about racism if we are caught up in the belief of colorblindness. But I must begin by saying that colorblindness in the republican context is a really novel abstract. Colorblindness is stated in the first article of the Fifth Republic. And the Fifth Republic dates back to 1958. This insistence on colorblindness really begins in 1958. That is to say on the eve of all the independencies of the territories that were part of the French empire. And what I'm trying to say is that France has not always been colorblind. And France has not always proclaimed her- herself to be colorblind. And so, if the story begins in 1958, I am interested in what took place prior to 1958 and that contributed to the world as we know it from 1958 on. And what is particularly happening in hexagonal France as a consequence of that, you know, preceding history. And that preceding history was nothing, was, was not colorblind, the least. Nothing. So this is something that we have to come to terms with. Colorblindness is a great idea. It's a great idea. It's just that it has never been practiced.

Kattan: Right. And I'm wondering whether the same would apply to the idea of universalism. In your book, you also explain that, in your view, universalism is situated. By universalism, broadly speaking, we're talking about universal rights and freedom, equality, solidarity, the founding principles of the French Republic. If universalism is indeed, you know, shaped by Western male dominated societies — does it necessarily mean that we should give up on the idea, on the aspiration to universalism altogether? Or does it mean that universalism has to be somehow reinvented to better reflect the the diverse values that make up our complex and multicultural societies?

Soumahoro: So, in my view, it's really not about the rejection of universalism. I don't even know if universalism has to be reinvented. Perhaps it has to be redefined. But most importantly, it has to become real. My issue is for people to cling to the theory and the discourse around universalism, with not, without paying any attention to the enforcement of that universalism. That is my take on the question. I have nothing against universalism. And I do understand that these are principles and ideals that need to be, you know, to become reality, right? But we need to be willing to make that reality happen. It cannot be only proclamations. Just because we say we are a universalist country doesn't make the country, doesn't make the nation, a universalist nation. It takes actions.

Kattan: There is an interesting way in which Columbia philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne separates and distinguishes between two forms of universality. And I'm wondering whether I could get your take on this, because what, what Professor Diagne shows is that there should be a difference between a vertical form of universality, which essentially, imposes ideas from the top down or behaviors from the top down, and a horizontal form of universality, which is the result of an kind of equal dialogue among a diversity of cultural groups and individuals. In other words, you know, horizontal universality recognizes that every individual in a society has the right to basically contribute to building common values and creating a sense of shared purpose.

And perhaps, this really chimes in with what you were saying regarding universality as a, as a goal, as a common goal that needs to be reached, instead of being conceived, on the contrary, as something that is vertical, that is already established.

Soumahoro: Yes, I definitely think that Souleymane Bachir Diagne's, you know, conception or, you know, vision of a, some form of horizontal universality is, you know, does matter. And does make sense. And does call for the recognition of the diversity, right? I don't understand the, you know, the clinging to some type of homogeneity that simply has never existed in the history of the French Republic, simply because France was a colonial power. So if France had an empire, that empire was composed of a multitude of, you know, groups, populations, communities, religions, whatever it is. And the country managed for, you know, centuries, the diversity of the populations within the colonial empire. France was able to count who was a citizen and who was a native. France was able to collect statistics of the Muslims of the empire, or the Jews of all the empires. France was able to make distinctions between the various ethnic groups in Polynesia. So it's not a country that has traditionally had a practice of colorblindness. This idea is very novel, in my view. So this idea of horizontal universality offers, maybe or has the capacity to offer, you know, more equality, egalitarian representation, equal legitimacy. Equal acceptance, maybe. And more reflective of the reality of the people and the communities that make up the French nation and the French Republic today.

Kattan: And as someone who has the advantage of having taught and researched in universities, both in France and the United States, I'm curious to know whether you feel that these, these differences that we've just been discussing are also reflected in university life and on university campuses. And concretely speaking, do you take account of these differences when you teach? Do you teach differently when you're in front of an American group of students or a French group of students?

Soumahoro: Oh, yes, I have to teach differently, because the settings, the context are totally different. I can say that I have much more freedom in the U.S. context. And not to say that the U.S. is a better place. It's just, I think it has to do with, with history and structure. So when it comes to the U.S., there has been a recognition for diversity — not to say that it has been easy — but I want to insist on the fact that there have been mobilizations by different groups from the very establishment of the United States of America that have fought to make sure that their representation and inclusion was accepted by the nation. In the French context it is — things are different, because of course, those minority groups have traditionally found themselves outside of the hexagonal space of France. So I think that the major difference between the United States and France is geography. When it comes to France, there is this dichotomy that has prevailed for so long between hexagonal France and the rest of the territories that are called "overseas territories" or "departments," right? Which raises the question of the inclusion, the legitimacy, the visibility, and the audibility of those minority groups. So people have mobilized, but there have not been that many, I would say, victories yet. Even the place of minorities within French academia is, it's simply not at the level of what is going on in the U.S. So I can do, let's say, more things in the United States, simply because within academia, you can find the entire world. I'm talking to you, Emmanuel, today, and you said that you were born in Montreal, in Canada. We have colleagues coming from all over the world. And they are, they

can be welcomed and included in the teaching staff of these, these institutions. The structure in France is very different. Therefore sometimes you can find yourself restricted in access to, you know, a particular knowledge.

Kattan: I'm wondering whether this, this geographical difference that you're mentioning isn't also reflected in the way in which history is being remembered between France and the United States. In France, one of the things that strikes me is that the remembrance of slavery and the slave trade and its presence in, let's say, French collective imagination has come at a fairly late stage. If we think about it, slavery was abolished twice in France. First, after the revolution. And then was reinstated by Napoleon in 1802. Then abolished again, definitely this time, in 1848. But more than a century has passed since then. And while France, you know, started coming to terms with other, you know, dark stains in its history, it wasn't until the early 2000s that the history of slavery came to prominence in French collective memory. And one of the triggers for that was, of course, the, the Taubira law of 2001, which recognized slavery as a crime against humanity. So I'm, I'm just wondering: What took so long?

Soumahoro: I think it took a long time. But it also took a long time in the United States, even though, even beyond the geographic, the different situation that I've just described, right? So now since 2001, you know, the Taubira law has recognized slavery as a crime against humanity. The United States of America have not. Right? So it's not that clear for both places. But the Taubira Law of 2001 comes after a huge mobilization, a huge demonstration that took place in 1998 in Paris. A demonstration that was commemorating the 150th anniversary of the second abolition of slavery. And that demonstration was able to gather this large number of people because of the, you know, decade-long mobilization of people coming from the, what we call the "overseas departments" or "territories." The memory of the slave trade within the overseas departments and territories has existed for a long time. And there have been commemorations. The commemorations were not national. They were all local, with every territory having their own, you know, particular dates.

Kattan: Martinique and Guadeloupe —

Soumahoro: Martinique and Guadeloupe and Guyana and Réunion Island and all the things, different dates. What happens in 1998 with the 150th anniversary of that second abolition that ultimately led to the passing of the 2001 Taubira law, is that now it has come, let's say to the capital. Now it has become a national debate. The question that could follow up would be, could be: what has happened since the passing of that law? And what has been the commitment of, you know, the French nation in light of that alleged recognition? Right? So the Taubira law, for instance, led to the establishment of the National Committee for the History and the Memory of of Slavery and the Slave Trade. There has been the establishment of an academic institution called CIRESC in France. So it's the international center for the research on the slave trade and slavery. So there have been a few things that have come out, but not so much. I mean, not enough. Not — there has been this annual commemoration of the history of the slave trade and slavery on May 10. Sometimes presidents attend. Sometimes they do not. Yeah, it's been 22 years now. So I think so much more needs to be done. Right? There has been a change in what

is being taught in primary schools and in secondary schools. So, the activism and mobilization do continue. But there's, it's a long, a long road.

Kattan: I think it's a, it's a long, it's a long process. And it's true that there is indeed a contrast between the interest that such issues is gathering in university circles and what is happening, actually, in you know, at school level and high school level. This has been a fascinating conversation, Maboula Soumahoro. Thank you so much for your enlightening remarks. And may I remind our listeners that your book *Le Triangle et l'Hexagone, réflexions sur une identité noire*, was translated in English by Kaiama Glover as *Black Is the Journey, Africana the Name* and published by Polity. Maboula Soumahoro, thank you so much.

Soumahoro: Thank you so much, Emmanuel.

(Theme music in)

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