

**Leadership for the Real Work and the Challenges of 'Alter-streaming':
Maria Diarra and the Institute for Popular Education, Kati, Mali**

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The story of Maria Keita Diarra, Director of the Institute for Popular Education in Mali, is a case narrative that I have been developing as one window to understanding leadership for social justice (LSJ). I am interested in the variety, variability, and complexity of the leadership experience, its origins, and its effects, and particularly in how women across the globe imagine and create leadership for social justice out of their life experiences.

Born in Ségou, Mali, Maria Diarra worked for nine years for AFSC and AED, national NGOs in Mali focused on women's economic activities. She became disillusioned by the conflict between local control and externally-driven agendas to the extent that she left "development work" and, in 1993, founded an organization called the Institute for Popular Education (IEP), to take on the work of transforming Malian life through education. Maria founded IEP to work on "alternatives," to break out of the work that she had come to see as not representing "the truth in development." She worked with colleagues to craft IEP based on notions of popular education, culture-based education, maternal language literacy as a human right, and transgenerational educational systems for self-determined development.

She was named an Ashoka fellow in that year, for her "new idea" that was the work of IEP, to "[reinvent] adult basic education as a means not only to 'transfer skills' but also to affirm indigenous knowledge and the oral tradition."ⁱ But since that time, the work of IEP has gone far beyond adult basic education. According to the Funders Network on Trade and Globalization, "IEP designs, develops, implements and evaluates alternative education programs and methodologies which promote critical awareness and analysis leading to individual and collective action for change. ... Programs promote women's and youth leadership training, development of inquiry-based curriculum for community schools in national languages, jobs creation in the community education sector and social mobilization in support of the transformative and systemic reform of education in Mali."ⁱⁱ

The main current activity of IEP is its work on the Malian national education reform. In 1999, the Government of Mali passed a law instituting a new form of formal education, to include life skills curriculum, first years of schooling in 11 national languages which are mother tongues to most of the

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population, and active learning pedagogies. As IEP had been, since 1993, working on and with such an approach in its adult and community-based education, and then in its own community-based school, it was in a position to influence the success of the education reform and has been working hard on that for the last ten years.

The work of IEP has become a model for others, and Maria frequently talks about it at venues such as CIES, international NGOs in Washington, DC, and Clinton Global Initiative conferences. But I don't think Maria would identify any of this as the critical aspect of what she does, although disseminating ideas, learning from others, and networking are very important to what she has been able to do. What she does is about people in Mali. Maria put it this way when I interviewed her.

... we think that there was excellence in Africa and that we lost it in the course of history because of things that happened to us. So the goal of my work is really to revindicate, to reclaim, to reconquer that excellence so that our lives are better.... having enough to eat, being free to say what you think about life, having rights, being at ease to have a good journey on earth. It's in relation to all that that we oriented ourselves toward education, to reconquer that excellence.

In other places I tell Maria's story more fully. Here I'd like to mention just a few of the notable components of her approach before viewing her experience in relation to elements of the leadership for social justice model Aqeel Tirmizi (2005) has developed.

First, she is willing to speak and act when others may not be. From her perspective, this results partly from a family—and particularly her grandmothers'—history of rebelling against the strictures of the French Catholic Church during the colonial era. "I don't just accept the things that happen to me. I instruct myself at each instance, and I think, 'what should I do about that?'" Her family's history embodies a strong claim on Malian—and in particular Bamanan (her ethnicity)—culture. She operates in sync with her culture, and much of her acceptance by communities is because of this strong identity that remains in spite of her western schooling. The very idea of resistance is key to the work she does.

Some of Maria's collaborators recognize a double edge to her strong rebellious character. Supporters who work closely with her and love her sometimes use words such as combative, stubborn, difficult, audacious, to describe her. A Ministry of Education official who has supported her work says that Maria "can say things out loud that even men won't say." "Maria's not that patient to see how things are evolving.... She's in a hurry."

Maria's forthrightness and impatience may be difficult, but her initiative has had important results. While critical of her bold style, the Ministry of Education official at the same time credits IEP with having "rendered visible" the very possibility of children learning and studying in their maternal language and succeeding in the formal education system. "IEP is way ahead of the Ministry in educating

young people to have a future.” Further, Maria may need her *rebelle* characteristics to stand up and make change in the face of the great obstacles to changing the systems she is trying to dismantle. One supporter insists there are so many challenges to changing the French colonial educational system in Mali, “the amplitude of challenges” requires her to be stubborn.

Second, she has created “a space for alternatives.” Maria seems to follow an internal directive that equates the choice that’s difficult *and different* with the one that’s effective toward real change. “... Often I say that if it’s a difficult decision, that means you’re on the right path, because if it’s easy to make a certain choice, then that means that choice is not changing anything. ... you go in the difficult direction in order to correct a little bit what’s wrong in the other structures.”

Maria’s contribution with this strategy goes far beyond the immediate impact on children’s or even broader community-based education. Cheikh Oumar, an IEP co-founder says, “She has dared to create a space where people can move.” Beyond its actual programs, he feels IEP has become a space for all sorts of alternative ideas and actions, in education, social organization, and institutions.

But this strategy comes with its concomitant challenges. Now that Malian national education policy has started to turn in the direction promoted by IEP, especially in terms of maternal language education, IEP has sought ways to support that policy in order to speed up the implementation before the reform fails or simply peters out, as other reform efforts have done in Mali in the past. But they face many challenges with this. It’s not always easy for a “rebel” outsider, even one with an achievement reputation, having rejected the mainstream system and struggling on alternative funding, to solidify its foothold once the tide starts to turn.

Maria’s story also helps put flesh on the frame of the Leadership for Social Justice model. First, her way of seeing her work adds nuance to the model’s continuum of social (direct) to conceptual (indirect) leadership. Maria is a direct (social) leader in that she has an organization and “leads” or co-leads that organization, *but she measures her success on a conceptual level*. She is looking for a long-term fundamental transformation of Malian people’s *thinking* about what education is and what good education for Malian people looks like.

Success depends on whether the ideology, the vision that you have, is shared by all the people. ...how the Malian people perceive education that has otherwise stayed with the classic system, that does nothing but reduce the human potential to determine [their own] development. That would be success. Even if people have not learned to read and write, and haven’t developed competencies, if the perception of the Malian population changes in relation to what education is, a good education, that’s already a success for us.

What does this mean for understanding the scope of leadership? A social leader may in fact be working at both conceptual and social levels in that both need to be accomplished for the desired social change to occur. This may be especially true if the kind of change desired is long-term.

In addition, Maria faced a dilemma when she pursued studies outside of Mali. A part of her might have wished to study more. Would she have become more of a global conceptual leader had she done so? She chose instead a direct role out of her sense that she was urgently needed in Mali, given what she had been able to learn and the tools she had gained during her studies. An important part of Maria's work is 'interpreting' concepts/learning in multiple directions, from local people to a larger global frame ("*théorie de la base*"), from concepts/tools she has learned to local people, between fellow collaborators who come from different perspectives, and from herself to others and from others to herself/her own thinking. How Maria 'interprets' as a social leader highlights again the ways conceptual leadership intertwines with the social leader's role.

Maria's experience also fills out the picture of Aqeel's notion (2005, p. 4) that "perceiving or considering individuals at the top as leaders for this domain of work is problematic." Maria uses the term, *co-visionnaires*, to refer to everyone who is part of the movement to create education for self-determination in Mali, from community people to co-founders of IEP to international allies and funders. The term communicates an approach to change that is not only inherently and deeply collective but also equalizes the various co-actors in change in a way that *both* privileges the grassroots to lead *and* recognizes the unique and important roles to be played in the movement by each co-actor in the *co-visionnaire* circle.

This way of conceiving the collectivity of leadership may be especially important given the weight attributed to the "vision and strategy" component of "social justice leadership behaviors and strategies" (Tirmizi, 2005, p. 9). Where does "vision" come from in social justice leadership? Mainstream leadership models often place it within the functions and skills of an individual. We need to take care not to attribute vision to individual "leaders" while decrying that social justice leadership is an individual phenomenon. It's difficult to get away from the individualistic thinking that pervades the word and the concept of "leader." Maria and IEP give an illustration of what co-visioning looks like and how it can operate.

The definition of LSJ offers a component called "influencing others."ⁱⁱⁱ I love this definition but want to deconstruct this idea of "influencing others." Maria does that (influences others), but also part of what she does so well is *be effectively influenced*. What does this mean? Her acknowledgement of the importance of seeking out broad knowledge speaks to her trans-boundary approach as a learning

leader. "... this world can no longer be 'puritan', one can't be just African, one can't be just American. The mixture of visions can help. Because lots of examples that I have learned, I have learned from that other world. ... Without that contact, I wouldn't have." Moreover, she "creatively uses what she learns." As mentioned earlier, she chose a social leader role so she could directly apply her learning to benefit Mali. Those around her see her as an exceptionally open and effective learner, a person who "wants to change," "likes to share what she's learned," and one who "creatively reinvests" what she learns right away, and in a variety of ways. She is also able to learn from her fellow Malians in rural communities. She tells stories about how she has learned from Malians about what good development is. She attributes her learning in part to that fact that "I'm not afraid like other intellectuals about whether they're going to poison me or chase me out. And I've never been rejected." The ability to be open to influences from below and above, in a way that serve the social change vision, seems an important capacity of social justice leadership.

"Integrity" is also on the personal characteristics list (p. 9) in the LSJ model. People see in Maria an inexplicable sense of integrity which they name as "authenticity." She is doing "the real work." In Maria's story, I see the concept of integrity taking shape as an embodiment of beliefs, living and acting the vision in the daily operation of the organization or movement.^{iv} I also see the challenges embedded in this kind of integrity in several instances where beliefs come up against other structures and practices and can impede getting results. This is a dilemma inherent in making change. The "embodiment" is what makes the work "real" and the leadership "real" but it also poses challenges when working against the grain in the "real world." 'Alter-streaming' is about changing the mainstream to embrace the alternative; it is about change that brings alternatives into the mainstream. Understanding its challenges through stories and strategies such as Maria's can help changemakers see, articulate, and use what works best.

I'd like to offer a final theoretical thought, to be further explored as we develop our work on LSJ. A part of my work this year has been focused on reviewing literature about women and leadership, and considering notions of global feminism, feminist leadership, and feminist social change from all parts of the world. I have been struck by the marked absence in most treatments of leadership, even those of "social justice leaders," of a gendered lens, not to mention various global feminist lenses, even though many many many people involved in social justice movements are women and many barriers still exist, to leadership and to social justice, that are about gender. I am hoping that our future contribution to thinking about LSJ will not be guilty of such a gap. We need this lens, along with many others,^v to

understand the depth and variety of LSJ experiences and thus to come to an inclusive, divergent, and multi-faceted model that takes into account the complexities of life, change, and leadership.

References

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ⁱ Ashoka Foundation, "Maria Keita", 1993, <http://www.ashoka.org/fellow/2325>. Downloaded 21 July 2010.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.fntg.org/orgs/profile.php?op=view&orgid=74> Funders Network on Trade and Globalization, 2008. Downloaded 1 Mar 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ "a value-driven process concerned with and focused upon influencing others, often but not exclusively through developing direct relationships, to effect meaningful, positive change in communities, institutions, and society" (Tirmizi, 2005, p. 5).

^{iv} This is an aspect of authenticity explored and defined in much of the feminist leadership literature.

^v Janet Wirth-Cauchon (2010) illuminates the optical metaphor of 'diffraction' developed by feminist philosopher Donna Haraway as a way to understand the meaning and usefulness of 'situated knowledge.' On p. 21 she explains: "Partial vision also leaves open the possibility of connecting with others and other ways of seeing: '...it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (1991, p. 192)." She goes on to elaborate how "diffraction" differs from positivist, relativist, or standpoint theory stances. "Rather than a view from nowhere, the 'God-trick' of transcendence, Haraway further develops an optic metaphor to propose a situated knowledge practice of *diffraction*. Diffraction is a phenomenon in physics referring to the bending of light waves when encountering interference, thus producing a record of the waves and the interference patterns produced. In Haraway's words, 'This 'record' shows the history of their passage...So what you get is not a reflection; it's the record of a passage...' (2000, p. 103, 104). In taking up this metaphor, Haraway refigures vision not only as embodied and located, but as explicitly opposed to representation, to a mirroring reflection of the 'real.' Diffraction registers the 'difference patterns' and not 'reflection of the same displaced elsewhere' (1997, p. 16; 268). It thereby seeks to avoid the illusions of objectivity, by inserting the knower more visibly into the field of knowledge. Haraway has also characterized this as 'multiple literacy,' when different ways of reading or different discourses are brought together and diffracted through one another, to productive effect (2005, p. 149)" (pp. 22-23). All citations in Wirth-Cauchon's text are of works by Donna Haraway.