



Source: M'Bow, November 1974, UNESCO,
photographer Dominique Roger

M'BOW, Amadou Mahtar

Senegalese politician and seventh Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 1974-1987

By **Roger A. Coate** · Version 23 November 2018

Was born 20 March 1921 in Dakar, French West Africa and died 24 September 2024 in Dakar, Senegal. He was the son of Fara N'Diaye M'Bow, farmer, and NGoné Casset. On 27 July 1951 he married Raymonde Sylvain, educator, with whom he had two daughters and one son.

Biography

M'Bow grew up in the small town of Louga in the northwest region of Senegal, which was then part of the colonial federation of French West Africa. As a young child, M'Bow received a typically African education for that time and learned farming and animal husbandry skills. His father, a prominent Muslim, did not speak French but insisted that his son attend a French-language school. In 1929, a time when the region suffered from famine, M'Bow began his French schooling at the colonial school in Louga. He passed his entrance exam for the Blanchot School, which allowed him to continue at the William Ponty School. Set up by the French colonial government to provide French West-African colonies with school teachers, several of the William Ponty School's graduates were to play roles in the country's later struggle for independence. M'Bow also attended Koranic school for three years. His father then made him attend a two-year commercial course in Dakar, related to the Dakar Chamber of Commerce. In 1938 M'Bow ranked first in a contest to work as a clerk for the colonial administration and he began his job at the mail office of the governor of the circumspection for Dakar and its surroundings. Against the background of the looming Second World War, he volunteered in

the French Air Force in February 1940. Between April and June he underwent training at the school for wireless operators in Saint-Malo, France. He would have liked to move on to London, but had to remain in France and was demobilized in October 1940. He returned to Dakar, where he worked for the governor again in a new service for business exchanges. In January 1943 M'Bow was called back to active duty and assigned to the Allied airbase in Thies, Senegal, from where he served as a specialist sergeant in North Africa from December 1943 to October 1945. While in the Air Force, his technical education continued. From January to May 1944 he attended the School of Air Force Specialists in Agadir, Morocco. In May 1944 he received his promotion and certification with the title Mechanic Superior Patent Aviation Electrician by the Commissioner of the Provisional Government of Free France, which was directed by General Charles de Gaulle in Algiers. M'Bow demobilized in December 1945 and went to Paris to continue his education. He passed his *baccalauréat* in 1947 and entered the University of Paris, known as the Sorbonne, where he graduated in 1951 with a *licence ès lettres* in geography. While at the Sorbonne he served as President of the African Students Association of Paris (1948-1951) and was cofounder, President and Secretary-General of the Black African Students Federation in France (1950-1951). While at the Sorbonne he met Raymonde Sylvain from Haiti, whom he married in 1951.

M'Bow's spouse traveled with him when he returned to Africa, where he first worked as a teacher at the College of Rosso in Mauritania, near the Senegalese border, from 1951 to 1953. In 1953 he began working with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) when the French colonial government selected him to lead the UNESCO-sponsored Department of Fundamental Education and its program for rural schooling. This was followed by four years of service as Chief of the Office of Basic Education in the Academy of the Senegal-Mauritania Inspection and head of basic education missions in Senegal. From 1957 to 1958 M'Bow served as Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport in the first Senegalese government, resulting from the Framework Law in the French Associated Territories (which prepared for Senegal's independence in 1960). M'Bow was active in Leopold Senghor's party but regarded Senghor, who tried to preserve the colonial federation of French West Africa rather than becoming a small state, as too moderate in his dealings with the French about independence and resigned. From 1958 to 1964 he taught at the Lycée Faidherbe in Saint-Louis in Senegal and from 1964 to 1966 at the École Normale Supérieure of Senegal, where he was in charge of training history and geography teachers and inspectors.

M'Bow's international political life began to gain momentum in 1966, when he was appointed as Chairman of Senegal's National Commission for UNESCO and headed the country's delegation to the 14th General Conference of UNESCO. At the Conference he was elected as a member of the UNESCO Executive Board for a four-year term. He served as chair of the Senegalese National Commission until 1968. At UNESCO he quickly rose as a leader and was instrumental in the formation of the African Chapter of the Group of 77 developing countries in Paris, with the first chairmanship going to Senegal, which then represented the African electoral group at UNESCO. M'Bow served as the Chapter's first President from 1969 to 1971. From 1968 to 1970 he also served as Chairman of the African Group at UNESCO. In July 1968 he led the Senegalese delegation to the UNESCO Conference on Education and Scientific and Technical Training in Relation to Development in Africa and was elected Vice President of the Conference. In 1968 he again led the Senegalese delegation to the 15th General Conference of UNESCO, where he chaired the Education Sub-Committee of the Programme Commission. From 1968 to 1970 he served as Chairman of the Executive Board's Programme and External Relations Commission. In this role M'Bow demonstrated his skills as a leader, carefully guiding discussions and debates after deep study. He was a consensus builder and all decisions proposed by the committee were taken unanimously. Meanwhile, his political ambitions at home bore fruit. In 1968, when Senghor was reelected as President, M'Bow was elected as a member of Senegal's National Assembly and became Minister of Education. He served in both roles until 1970. When he had to tighten the budget due to an economic recession, students mobbed the streets of Dakar in protest and Senghor moved M'Bow to the government post of Minister of Culture.

In November 1970 M'Bow became Assistant Director-General for education of UNESCO at the invitation of Director-General René Maheu and served in that position until 1974. When M'Bow took over the education sector it was emerging from a serious state of disarray. He moved quickly to raise staff morale and strengthen their cohesion. He set about clarifying job descriptions for each staff member and coordinating the actions of sector subunits with a view to strengthening international cooperation in the field of education. He promoted policies and programs to fight illiteracy, improve the planning and financing of education, advance educational methods in newly independent countries of Asia and Africa, promote the diffusion of education technology and improve cooperation in higher education with particular emphasis on understanding the equivalence of studies to encourage and facilitate the movement of students from one country to another. Although Maheu desired to run for another term in 1974, he found political support lacking. M'Bow had his own name put forward, but found Maheu opposing his candidacy. However, M'Bow had the support of both UNESCO's African Group and the Group of 77, while the United States (US) supported his candidacy 'as a tactic to gain support from the African bloc and from other third world countries who supported M'Bow, particularly some of the moderate Moslem states' (Kennedy 1989: 23).

Once in office as Director-General on 15 November 1974, M'Bow created a commission to study the reform of the Secretariat with a view to enhance effectiveness. He set about putting his own team in place by removing Maheu's staff. UNESCO had evolved a French cabinet-style of organizational management, which was heavily top-down, and Maheu's administration had greatly reinforced this structure. Although college-educated in Paris and trained in the French tradition, M'Bow did not possess or operate on a French administrative model, as he was extremely proud of his African heritage and traditions and viewed administrative issues through such a lens. Trust and personal loyalty were paramount to success and he proceeded to put in place a cadre of loyal followers. Blending the experience of having grown up under French colonial life with local African values and traditions, M'Bow was African at heart above all. He prioritized development and strengthening intellectual cooperation in the face of the enduring Cold War and emerging post-colonial countries of the Global South, providing organizational assistance to advance education systems that could meet development needs. While UNESCO is an agency mandated to respect and protect cultural values, diversity and heritage, he was its first executive head who came from Southern, that is African, culture and heritage. M'Bow was not fluent in English and had little understanding of American and British culture and politics, but did know about the US political tradition of racial segregation and racism against African Americans. This partial understanding of American political values and tradition would bring him into conflict with representatives from the US at UNESCO. On the other side, US political appointees during the years of the Richard Nixon administration did not properly understand the organization or M'Bow. M'Bow did not have substantial administrative experience, capability, or even managerial interest. However, he possessed substantial political acumen, prowess and capacity, attributes that became greatly distorted in Washington DC and by Western, especially American, media. Many US diplomats and experts working closely with UNESCO, such as Ambassador to UNESCO William Jones and long-serving State Department UNESCO experts Richard Nobbe and Raymond Wanner, comprehended that while M'Bow did not understand the US well, he was not anti-American. However, such individuals were forced into the background by ideologically charged political appointees and media accounts which drove interpretations of reality against the world body.

Following Maheu's lead, M'Bow grew the organization's programs and activities substantially by raking in huge sums of extra-budgetary funding over which the Executive Board could exercise only marginal authority. He proved to be an astute politician who quickly learned that controlling affairs at headquarters in Paris meant dealing directly with heads of government and ministries in member states. Thus, he traveled to national capitals incessantly. Administrative prowess aside, M'Bow understood international politics and power-dependence relationships, especially as related to UNESCO's largest contributor, the US. With UNESCO's largest program sector being education, the organization under M'Bow's stewardship moved forward aggressively in promoting educational

development. The organization took on a crucial leadership role in the UN System for developing effective methodologies for eradicating illiteracy. In this, and other areas of educational development, UNESCO occupied a unique niche among both bilateral and multilateral development agencies. Regarding relations with the US government, however, two issues were especially problematic: Zionism as a form of racism and a declaration on fundamental principles governing the use of mass media. As recalled by US Ambassador Jones, it was on the day M'Bow was elected in 1974 that the Israeli issue 'also blew up' in the General Conference. Jones mentions 'a period of hiatus' when Maheu had stopped functioning and before M'Bow had been made Director-General: 'The organization was leaderless, and it was at this particular moment in Paris, in the fall of 1974, that many of the anti-Israeli resolutions got through, which caused M'Bow great problems'. According to Jones, there was a failure of leadership of any type by both the US and UNESCO (Kennedy 1989: 24).

During this same period the Group of 77 in Paris began to push for a UNESCO-related New International Economic Order equivalent, a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). M'Bow supported the idea of NWICO, which was focused on the need to redress substantial imbalances in communications and information capabilities between developed and developing countries. The call for a NWICO also drew support from the Soviet bloc. At the same time the Soviet Union pushed for a declaration on communications, recognizing the right of states to license journalists and control communications. In the minds of US officials and most American and Western media groups the two were one, and UNESCO, the organization, not its member states, was accused of promoting such restrictive media policies. However, M'Bow's strategic interventions turned the problematic situation around. At UNESCO's General Conferences in 1974, 1976 and 1978 Sovietinitiated draft declarations on the media were defeated. M'Bow warned that the 1976 Soviet draft resolution was unconstitutional, thus leading to its demise (Sussman 1984: 9). Two years later, at the 1978 General Conference, when Soviet delegates again tried to get UNESCO to adopt a highly restrictive declaration on fundamental principles governing the use of mass media, M'Bow worked behind the scene to counter this approach. As a result, the mass media declaration adopted that year was a free-press-oriented statement, calling for freedom of opinion, expression and information, which were recognized as an integral part of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Sussman 1984: 2). The year before M'Bow had initiated a special blue-ribbon panel to examine and make recommendations regarding communications problems related to the impact of mass media and evolving communications technologies on human development. This International Commission for the Study of Communications Problems, the so-called MacBride Commission, named after its chairman, Irish international politician Sean MacBride, was given a three-year mandate. In October 1980 it released its report titled *Many Voices, One World*. In this context the 1980 General Conference of UNESCO approved the creation of the International Program for the Development of Communications (IPDC). The IPDC, supervised by a 35-member intergovernmental Board, focused on the technical aspects of building communications infrastructure in developing countries. At UNESCO's 22nd General Conference in 1983 decisions were made to create programs to study the watchdog role of the press, examine government censorship of media and to treat NWICO as merely 'an evolving process' and not a series of imposed regulations. Yet, despite this approach, the US press and conservative pundits and politicians tended to accuse UNESCO and M'Bow of proposing and supporting anti-free-press policies.

On 31 December 1984 the US government, under President Ronald Reagan, formally withdrew from UNESCO. Although substantial mythology, political cover-up and post-facto rationalization surrounded the US action, US withdrawal was precipitated by a heated encounter in mid-June 1983 between M'Bow and US Ambassador to UNESCO Jean Gerard. These two ultra-strong personalities failed to understand or respect one another: 'Offended by Gerard's insulting demeanor and not used to being talked down to, M'Bow at one point erupted and called the meeting to an end, stating "Madame, you may not address me as if I were an American Black!"' (Coate 1992: 92; also Wanner 2015: 45). After the incident was reported to the Department of State and the White House, the ambassador was invited to a meeting of the National Security Council in early August. Gerard

claimed that she, as US Ambassador, was the one defamed. With President Reagan presiding, the decision was taken to withdraw from UNESCO immediately. It was also decided that the government would not blame the Director-General, 'lest they make him into a martyr', and that the State Department 'would find substantive reasons to, if not explain, at least justify the government's decision' (Wanner 2015: 45). Following the US announcement of withdrawal in December 1983, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, against the advice of the majority of her cabinet, decided that her government would also leave UNESCO in support of US action. With the US and British withdrawals, UNESCO lost just over 30 per cent of its budget. M'Bow, working with the Executive Board, however, was able to keep the organization solvent and functioning at a substantially reduced level. In October 1987 M'Bow made a bid for an unprecedented third term (in 1980 he was unanimously reelected to a second term), but Senegal withdrew his name from consideration when it became clear that he would not be successful, paving the way for the election of Federico Mayor Zaragoza of Spain as UNESCO's eighth Director-General. M'Bow, who received the votes of 20 members of the Executive Board, mostly from African and Arab states, left on 14 November 1987 and Mayor began his term on 15 November.

M'Bow retired to Morocco, where he still resides. In retirement he has remained active in Senegalese political affairs, having served as president of the Moroccan-Senegalese Friendship Circle. He developed further in stature as an African intellectual and statesman, often referred to as the honorific 'Dean' by his fellow diplomats. While he resides in Morocco, his political home remains his native Senegal, where his political life took on renewed vitality in 2008. Between May 2008 and June 2009 he chaired the National Conference of Senegal's consultative process, comprised of political parties, religious leaders and civil society organizations, to analyze and evaluate Senegal's socio-political-cultural development and fight corruption. The National Conference stood in political opposition to the re-election of President Abdoulaye Wade and his party in 2012. In September 2012 the newly elected Senegalese President Macky Sall appointed M'Bow as Chairman of the National Commission for Reform of Institutions (CNRI) of the republic. President Sall had created the CNRI and mandated it to analyze and make recommendations about modernizing and improving the functioning of the country's political institutions in order to consolidate democracy and deepen the rule of law. However, consistent with his always-controversial manner, M'Bow and the CNRI exceeded their mandate. To President Sall's displeasure, an entirely new, 154-page draft constitution, which included controversial changes such as the creation of a constitutional court, presidential term limits and constraints on presidential authority to dissolve the National Assembly, was proposed. In a referendum on 20 March 2016 Senegalese voters overwhelmingly approved the new constitution.

In international relations M'Bow was a nationalist leader for Senegalese independence, the first black African to head UNESCO and one of the most controversial international organization executive heads. He was an intellectual, an educator and a person devoted to building a world respectful of diversity in the context of great change. Although he was not fluent in English or did not understand the American political system well, he did recognize the politics inherent in East-West relations. He also grasped the power-dependence intrinsic in relationships with major contributors to international organizations, especially the US. When US positions and interests were made clear, he saw to the best of his ability that they were accommodated. From his perspective, however, the Director-General served to represent all member states, not just Africa, the Group of 77, the Western Group or the US. Finally, despite political pragmatics, M'Bow always endeavored to take the moral high ground. To him, UNESCO was a means to an end: to create a world order based on justice, dignity for all, equity, respect for diversity and the preservation of culture heritage. During his time in office, he strove to bring greater cohesion to UNESCO's governance processes and bodies, bridging ideological divergences and differences of interests. He innovated the creation of the Negotiating and Drafting Group, with all regional groups represented, which was seized of any matter where significant differences existed. Nearly all substantive resolutions of the General Conference were thus approved by consensus. While a new Social Sciences Sector and a study and programming office were created, all other sectors were strengthened to meet the needs of member states in confronting evolving

challenges, such as environmental problems, threats to natural and cultural heritage preservation and the safeguarding of endangered species. His life's work has won M'Bow widespread acclaim and he has been awarded over 70 awards, medals and honorary degrees and citizenships from around the world.

March 2025: date of death added

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