OUSMANE SEMBÈNE:
Dialogues with Critics and Writers

edited by

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Preface

At the invitation of the Five College African Studies Council and with funds provided by Five Colleges, Inc., the great Senegalese filmmaker and novelist Ousmane Sembène came to the five campuses for the first two weeks of April 1990. The dialectic of Sembène’s own personal biography and the forms of his creative work framed a motif for a conference culminating his visit, appropriately titled “The Dialectics of Form and Content in the Works of Ousmane Sembène,” held at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst on April 14. We planned the conference to be the high point of his stay, where those students and faculty who had attended Sembène’s appearances and film screenings during the previous two weeks would have a chance to hear scholarly analyses of his work and to witness his dialogues with writers from Africa and the diaspora. Furthermore, the evening session of this one-day conference provided the opportunity to stage the North American premiere of Sembène’s 1989 film, “Camp de Thiaroye.”

The heart of this volume is based on that day’s presentations and dialogues. While the conference was the high point of Sembène’s residency, his entire visit came after a decade of organization and cooperation that gave rise to the Five College African Studies program. The program had begun in earnest in 1980 as a forum for faculty in the Five College area to share their interests in Africa. The guiding principles of our collaboration from the beginning were that it would be a collective enterprise, it would be multidisciplinary, and it would close the gulf between African Studies and African-American Studies. The Sembène visit and conference celebrated these principles.

The readiness of editor Ernest Allen to publish the Ousmane Sembène Conference in its entirety in Contributions in Black Studies underscores the recognition of similar, even common, experiences and cultural roots of Africans and those of the African diaspora. Making sense of these commonalities was the central theme of writers, critics, and questioners at the conference. For the generation after World War II, the interests, intellectual and political, of Africans and descendants of Africa in the diaspora, had been divided into distinct experiential and hermeneutic domains. On university campuses, African-American Studies had been legitimated within a context of the experience of African Americans in the Americas, while African Studies laid claim to the study of Africa itself emerging from colonial rule. This division of labor may have possessed a certain bureaucratic logic, but it had unfortunate cultural and political consequences. African-American Studies were divorced from African Studies; even the ethnic composition of those practicing in these two fields became noticeably distinct. Since the 1980s, however, we find in the academy a reconceptualization of African Studies and African-American Studies that has caught up with realities off-campus and affirmed a position W. E. B. Du Bois championed more than 75 years ago: the study of Africa and the African diaspora is a seamless whole.

It was Samba Gadjigo’s idea to bring his compatriot to the Five Colleges, and knowing Sembène’s general policy of refusing invitations to come to North America, Samba agreed to travel to Senegal to issue the invitation personally. What the rest of us took to be highly improbable—that Sembène would actually accept our invitation—
Samba serenely assumed to be a fait accompli. Reinhard Sander was able to coax Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whom he befriended during his days at the University of Bayreuth, to come to the conference, along with Earl Lovelace and Toni Cade Bambara. Reinhard, chair of the Five College African Studies Council at the time, presided over the details of Sembène’s visit. For Tom Cassirer and Ralph Faulkingham, the Sembène visit represented the culmination of a decade of work to organize the Africanists at each of the five campuses into a coherent and purposeful Five College African Studies program. Tom had been teaching Sembène’s films and novels in his French courses for some time, and he luxuriated in the repartee with Sembène. For Sembène’s visit, Ralph became the “exchequer,” soliciting dollars from many quarters, reining in Samba’s and Reinhard’s budgetary ambitions, and organizing the details of the conference itself.

When it came to putting together this volume, we assumed different and complementary writing and editing roles. The preface, acknowledgments, introductions to Parts I and II, biographical notes on contributors, and the filmography were written by Ralph Faulkingham. The four of us shared the task of editing the critics’ oral presentations into their final written form. Samba Gadjigo and Tom Cassirer went over the transcriptions and the original tapes of Sembène’s remarks in order to establish an accurate text, then Tom Cassirer translated this text into English. Ralph Faulkingham and Reinhard Sander edited the transcriptions of the other writers’ remarks, and Samba Gadjigo contributed both the annotated bibliography of Sembène’s works as well as the bibliography of critical reviews of Sembène’s writing and films. Finally, Ralph Faulkingham acted as the contact person with the editors at Contributions in Black Studies and at the University of Massachusetts Press. He also took on the job of integrating the disparate portions of the manuscript into a unified text. The final copy editing was our joint responsibility.

For the four of us, working together to bring Ousmane Sembène to the Five Colleges, organizing the Conference that this volume recounts, and finally editing the transcript of that day’s events have cemented our friendship. Sembène’s social and political critique of oppression—a critique intellectualized and written as well as practiced in everyday life—his humanity and abundant good humor, and his optimism—that out of struggle will come a new distinctly African way of economic, political, and cultural development—inspire us still.

On Sembène’s first evening in the United States, as we were driving him back to his dormitory room at Mount Holyoke College after dinner, he inquired: “Qu’est-ce que j’ai à dire aux étudiants? Je ne suis pas un académicien.” [What do I have to say to the students? I’m not an academic.] Perhaps his question was prompted by jet lag from his flight from Dakar or from anxiety as he anticipated his first extended stay in an American academic community. Yet his query set the tone for the entire visit, and against his own expectations, anticipated the extraordinary impact of his presence.

Rather than delivering lectures in the usual academic manner, Sembène engaged in a series of public conversations with audiences on all five campuses, usually prompted by students’ questions of him and his work. It was precisely the fact that Sembène was one of the most “unacademic” writers, not only in Africa, but in the entire
world, that accounted for his instant rapport with students, faculty, and eventually with a wider public of more than 500 people who attended the conference. His passion for acquiring knowledge, his insistence on flouting convention when it challenged principle, and his patient, often humorous, and thoughtful responses to questions endeared him to us all.

Part One of this volume represents the morning session of the conference, with the four essays by distinguished literary and film critics. At the conclusion of their presentations, Sembène provides his own response. And characteristically, he refers not to their discussion of him, but to the issues he develops in his work.

Part Two is based on the afternoon session, where Sembène and four other widely known writers—Toni Cade Bambara, Earl Lovelace, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and John Wideman—discuss their craft.

Part Three represents Sembène’s comments after a packed house of several hundred people watched his film “Camp de Thiaroye.” At the end of the afternoon session, Sembène told us he was going back to his apartment for a nap. We did not expect him to return in the evening to view his own film. But as the house lights went up at the closing of the film, Sembène and his interpreter Kango Laré-Lantone strode to the front of the auditorium to a standing ovation. His comments were unanticipated and spontaneous.

Part Four contains an interview that Sada Niang of the University of Victoria (British Columbia) conducted with Sembène on the occasion of his visit to Toronto in July 1992. Professor Niang, after correspondence and telephone calls with Samba Gadjigo, discussing possible topics for the interview, oriented his questions to complement the April 1990 conference.

Following the biographical notes on the conference participants, the Appendix contains brief annotations of Sembène’s written works and films as well as a select bibliography of critical works on Sembène.

Most of the text of this volume is in English; nonetheless, to preserve the character of Sembène’s voice, his remarks are represented as he spoke them, in French. Throughout the volume French text is italicized, and it is followed immediately by a translation in English.
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Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the generous support that we received from many individuals, as we hosted Sembène's visit to the Five College area, in organizing the Ousmane Sembène conference, and in bringing this volume to publication. In particular, we want to single out several individuals for their specific contributions. Alison Friedman, having just returned for her senior year at Smith College from a visit to Senegal, managed both Sembène's office at Mount Holyoke College and his daily schedule while he was here; she used her good judgment and organizational skills to ensure that Sembène’s visit was pleasant and productive for him and for the entire Five College community. Kango Laré-Lantone, completing a Ph.D. degree in economics at the University of Massachusetts, was pressed into service to interpret for Ousmane Sembène. Grateful for the opportunity to meet the author he had read while growing up in Togo, Kango worked tirelessly with skill and good humor, interpreting in both directions between French and English.

Catherine Portuges graciously agreed to moderate a panel at the conference after having highlighted Sembène’s visit with a long article in the journal Moving Images, which she edits. John Montague of New Yorker Films expedited the development of a 16mm version of Sembène’s film “Camp de Thiaroye” just in time for the conference. Deborah A. Salkaus of the University of Massachusetts Conference Services coordinated all the details of hosting the conference, while Sarah Faulkingham and Judy Kellogg took on the arduous task of transcribing the Conference proceedings, and did it admirably.

We had the luxury of the thoroughly professional and indefatigable support at the Five College Center from Jackie Pritzen, Carol Angus, Jean Stabell, and Gail Porter. E. Jefferson “Pat” Murphy as Five College Coordinator had prodded the Five College African Studies Council into existence a dozen years ago. His successor Conn Nugent had wisely chosen to fund the African Studies Council’s proposal to bring Ousmane Sembène here for an extended visit, and Lorna Peterson, who in turn succeeded Conn Nugent, gave us her sage advice and frequent encouragement. The Five College African Studies Council, Black Studies Executive Committee, and Film Studies Council lent further financial backing to our project.

At Amherst College, we enjoyed the support of the Department of Black Studies, the English Department Language and Literature Fund, and the Office of the Dean of the Faculty.

On the Hampshire College campus, the Office of the Dean of the Faculty and the Office of the Dean of Multicultural Affairs helped out, while at Mount Holyoke College, the Department of French arranged a seminar for Sembène, President Elizabeth Kennan hosted a reception at her home to honor Sembène, and the Office of the Dean of Faculty provided a suite of rooms for Sembène to live in for the duration of his visit.

At Smith College, the Sembène conference was supported by the Office of the Dean of the Faculty, while at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, we received...
grants from the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Fine Arts, the Department of Anthropology, the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, and the Office of International Programs.

Finally, we want to thank the many hundreds of students, faculty, and visitors who attended the screenings of Sembène’s films and his public discussions, as well as the conference itself. Their interest, engagement, and provocative questions were crucial to the success of Sembène’s visit and to his evident pleasure in being here.