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The Uniqueness of Ousmane Sembène's Cinema

by Françoise Pfaff
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The author of two documentary and nine fiction films made over a period of twenty-five years, Ousmane Sembène is presently one of Africa's leading writers as well as the continent's best-known film director. His seminal films, by their very nature, content, and style, have left an indelible mark on the history of African filmmaking. Before launching his career as a writer and filmmaker, Sembène had worked as a mason, carpenter, mechanic, dock worker, union organizer, and had also served as a sharpshooter in the French colonial army during the Second World War.

Many critics agree that the major characteristic of Sembène's career as a writer and a filmmaker is his socio-political commitment. And here we have to remember that it was precisely his concern to reach out to the largely non-literate African masses, his empathy with Senegal's common people, which led him to embrace a film career. Ousmane Sembène, who came in contact with Soviet socialist realism while studying film in Moscow, does not make films to entertain his compatriots, but rather to raise their awareness as to the past and present realities of their society. He once stated in an interview:

What interests me is exposing the problems confronting my people. I consider the cinema to be a means for political action. Nevertheless I don't want to make "poster films." Revolutionary films are another thing. Moreover, I am not so naïve as to think that I could change Senegalese reality with a single film. But I think that if there were a whole group of us making films with that same orientation, we could alter reality a little bit.¹⁹

The originality of Ousmane Sembène as a filmmaker lies in his having managed successfully to adapt film, a primarily Western medium, to the needs, pace, and rhythm of African culture. And indeed, Sembène has found within his own culture the essence and strategies which allow him to express himself and to reach out effectively to both literate and non-literate Senegalese viewers. He has done so by way of their pre-literate tradition embodied in the timeless West African tradition of the griot with whom Sembène frequently identifies. In 1978, in the course of an interview, Sembène told me:

The African filmmaker is like the griot who is similar to the European medieval minstrel: a man of learning and common sense who is the

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historian, the raconteur, the living memory and the conscience of his people. The filmmaker must live within his society and say what goes wrong within his society. Why does the filmmaker have such a role? Because like many other artists, he is maybe more sensitive than other people. Artists know the magic of words, sounds, and colors and they use these elements to illustrate what others think and feel. The filmmaker must not live secluded in an ivory tower; he has a definite social function to fulfill.²⁰

Sembène's adherence to the African oral tradition has greatly influenced his cinematic output, which is frequently adapted from his written works. It is as a griot—and within a moralistic and didactic framework—that Sembène tackles with ease a multiplicity of topics, many of which are related to his own life experiences. It is as an attentive and concerned griot that Sembène interprets the socio-historical and cultural heritage of his community. His depictions are equally forceful whether he narrates the frustrating day of a Dakar cart-man ("Borom Sarret," 1963), or the tragic fate of a Senegalese maid in France who commits suicide ("Black Girl," 1966). Moreover, the filmmaker's familiarity with both the rural and urban settings of his country²¹ allows him to describe with great insight and feeling the story of incest which actually took place in a Senegalese village in colonial times ("Niaye," 1964), as well as the fate of a young unemployed youth in Dakar ("Taaw," 1970). Further, Sembène's knowledge of the conflicts and contradictions found within a developing nation also inspired him to write and film "Mandabi" (1968), whose plot illustrates the tribulations and bitterness of a non-literate middle-aged man confronted with the complexities of modern bureaucracy. For the Senegalese director, it appears that art should neither hide nor embellish reality. Therefore, Sembène does not avoid sensitive issues such as polygamy, nepotism, and corruption, described in both "Mandabi" and "Xala." "Xala," made in 1975, is a biting satire about the economic impotence of Senegal's post-colonial elite. His most recent work, "Gelwaar" (1992), denounces foreign aid, religious intolerance, and bureaucratic red tape in a contemporary Senegalese setting.

Besides chronicling life in a contemporary setting, the traditional African griot is also a historian who reconstructs the legendary deeds of past heroes to whom he attributes contemporary moral significance. As such, Sembène incorporates in his thematic scope important events in African history which have often been forgotten or neglected in the Western historical canon. His very first film "L'Empire Sonhrai" (1963), which has never been distributed internationally, describes the historical importance of the city of Timbuktu and the Songhai resistance to French colonialism. Furthermore, Sembène's unshakable faith in the teachings of history and his progressive belief that African women have a major role to play in the evolution of society are strongly presented in "Emitai" (1971). This motion picture depicts the rebellion of a village, spearheaded by the women who collectively protest France's increasing demands for recruits and rice from its overseas colonies in the early 1940s. A subsequent work, "Ceddo" (1976), scrutinizes in an allegorical style the various forces (traditional rule, Islam and European mercantilism) which were present in Senegal at the time of the slave trade. Through this study of political and religious expansion, the audience comes

to question the authoritative structures which permitted (and in some instances invited) foreign powers to penetrate the African continent. "Ceddo" was prohibited from being publicly screened for eight years in Senegal, a fact which attests to the film's disquieting content and to Sembène's unflinching integrity and courage as he unveils political and historical truths, uncomfortable to those in power. This is especially noteworthy considering the fact that his earlier films "Xala" and "Emitai" had already been censored before they could be released in Senegal.

Sembène's recent film, "Camp de Thiaroye" (1989), which received the highest award at the Venice Film Festival, was co-directed with the Senegalese filmmaker Thierno Faty Sow. Here, the former artillery soldier excavates and re-evaluates once more events which took place during the Second World War: the odious killing by the French army of African infantrymen who had rebelled against unfair treatment after having fought alongside the French troops in Europe. Since 1982, the director has been actively working on "Samori," a high-budget historical epic, envisioned as both a film and a television series. This project focuses on Samori Touré, a famous nineteenth-century leader of the resistance against French colonial imperialism in West Africa.

Sembène not only defines himself as a griot, he also includes this character in a number of his cinematic works. The griot is shown performing various functions as the actor/narrator of "Niaye" and the cart driver's family griot in "Borom Sarret." In "Xala," griots are also part of a celebration following the "Senegalization" of the Chamber of Commerce and the wedding festivities of the protagonist, El Hadji. In "Ceddo," Fara, a griot, follows the princess and her captor, and one can imagine that it is through him as well as through the griot-filmmaker that their story has been transmitted to us. "Ceddo" also included Jaraaf, a court griot who praises the merits of noblemen and serves as an intermediary between the king and his subjects, thus informing us of the protocol followed in the courts of ancient West African kingdoms.

A number of Sembène's characters can be associated with those found in traditional African storytelling. Many African oral stories contain the king and the princess, legendary forebears known to all. These characters are featured in Sembène's films as well. The trickster, for instance, usually a dishonest individual who personifies antisocial traits, appears as the thief or the corrupted civil servant or a member of an elite in "Borom Sarret," "Mandabi," and "Xala." The beggars and physically deformed people who are often part of African tales are present in such films as "Borom Sarret" and "Xala." In "Xala," the jealous co-wife Oumi and the naïve peasant, who gets robbed as he comes to town, are stock characters of West African folklore. The tree which figures in countless African tales and which symbolizes knowledge, life, death, and rebirth or the link between heaven and earth is omnipresent in "Emitai." Most of Sembène's characters are types reflecting collective ideas and attitudes. In oral African narratives, these types respond to typical situations, and so does the protagonist of "Borom Sarret," who has no name and is remembered through his trade and the problems he is unable to overcome. The heroine of "Black Girl" has universal facets: she is the victimized maid rather than Diouanna. "Mandabi's" principal character is the non-

literate traditionalist rather than Ibrahima Dieng. "Xala's" El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye is perceived as the unscrupulous impotent businessman, and "Ceddo's" female protagonist remains as the princess in the minds of film viewers.

Thematic similarities can also be drawn from a comparison between Sembène's films and African tales. Male impotence, which constitutes the basis of "Xala," is in itself a subject which is often included in the storyteller's repertoire. "Xala's" theme of punishment of greed, selfishness, vanity, and waste is likewise highly popular in African folktales, and so are topics of the lowly rebelling against the powerful. Moreover, Sembène's motion pictures derive from African dilemma tales, the outcome of which is debated and in a way decided by the spectators. With the open-endedness of most of his plots, Sembène trusts the viewer's imagination to prolong his films. This explains his frequent use of freeze-frames, which in a way indicates that the plot goes beyond the actual ending of the motion picture. In such films as "Borom Sarret," "Mandabi," and "Ceddo," he leaves his spectators with a choice between several alternatives as the films end, and the didactic value of such endings is found in the discussion they may trigger after the film screenings. It is interesting to note here that Sembène has stated many times that his films should fulfill the function of a night school for their viewers.

Structurally, the clear linear progression usually found in Sembène's films can also be compared to that of the griot's story (one only notices flashbacks and flash-forwards in "Black Girl" and "Ceddo"). "Mandabi" and "Xala" have the freshness and the atmosphere of tales and parables, while "Emitai" and "Ceddo" reflect the solemn tone of some of Africa's oral epics. Sembène's use of African languages, songs, palavers, and proverbs confer on his works the same local flavor which can be found in African storytelling. In fact, "Mandabi" was the first West African full-length fiction film ever shot entirely in an African language, a practice which has since been adopted by a number of African filmmakers anxious to underscore the linguistic authenticity of their settings.

Finally, like African tales, Sembène's didactic works are initiatory journeys which cause a new awareness and a basic change in the existential world view of both the protagonist and the viewer. We remember, for instance, in "Mandabi," how Ibrahima Dieng arrives at a new practical wisdom which may, in the future, enable him to cope with his changing milieu. We also recall how "Ceddo" conveys to many spectators new knowledge concerning the Islamic penetration into Senegal. In Ousmane Sembène's disenchanting fables, which denounce and challenge social and political injustice, the social consciousness of his main characters emerges from an acute self-consciousness brought about by the juxtaposition of opposites in the context within which they evolve: the old versus the new, good versus evil, the weak versus the powerful, or poverty versus wealth. Such binary oppositions are found in myths and tales to the extent that one might rightly wonder if the conflicting elements of Sembène's films are not more related to African oral storytelling rather than solely, as many critics have pointed out, to the Marxist components of his ideology.

In spite of using metaphoric tale-like elements with a universal significance, Sembène's cinema is also strongly characterized by its realistic re-creations, and the

naturalistic, quasi-documentary facets of its representations. As he writes the plot for a film, Sembène (who is the single author of all of his scripts except that of "Camp de Thiaroye") draws his inspiration from historical facts, as is the case in "Ceddo" and "Emitai," or from current events. "Niaye" illustrates "a case of incest which actually took place and the young girl had to leave her village."²² "Black Girl" emerged from the suicide of a black maid which was reported in *Nice-Matin*, a French newspaper shown in the film. As for "Xala," the filmmaker notes that "according to some people the *xala* or spell of impotence does exist."²³

Anxious to reflect the various facets of Senegalese reality, Sembène's filming techniques and editing change according to what is represented. "Xala," which takes place in an urban environment, has a quicker pace than "Emitai," which portrays village life styles. And a lot of his motion pictures (e. g. "Niaye," "Ceddo," "Emitai") are shot outdoors in medium or long shots to illustrate the collective, communal aspect of traditional Senegalese life, in which a person is always in close contact with nature. Sembène's use of languages also adds naturalness and a forceful meaning to his films, as can be observed in "Xala" and "Mandabi." In both films, the use of French by the urban elite and of Wolof by the masses stresses the social gap existing between the two groups, while the use of pidgin French by African soldiers in both "Emitai" and "Camp de Thiaroye" reflects their alienation as they stand on the edge of two cultures. Likewise, to remain as close as possible to reality, Sembène has elected to use in his films a majority of non-professional actors, preferably coming from the same socio-cultural background as the characters they are made to interpret. Finally, such people as Claire Andrade-Watkins could indeed talk about the care Sembène brings to his historical re-creation. She researched for long months in the United States to find the exact label of the can of corned beef that will be used by soldiers in Sembène's forthcoming motion picture "Samori." I have myself seen in Sembène's Dakar office proof of the elaborate preparations and archival research linked to "Samori": maps, reconstructions of Samori's military camps, and drawings of his soldiers' attire. The late filmmaker and film historian Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, a long-time friend of Sembène, who participated in the making of a number of his films as production manager, used to stress the precision Sembène brings to both his research and his scripts. Vieyra once stated: "Sembène's background as a writer helps him to research and prepare his films with great accuracy. All of his films are interesting because they deal with a great variety of themes proper to Senegalese life."²⁴

Not only does Sembène write and direct his films, he adds another personal touch by performing in them as well. In "Black Girl," he plays the role of school master, a character on the edge of tradition and modernity, able to record and to teach the events he has witnessed. He plays the role of the "public letter writer" in "Mandabi," which could be interpreted on a symbolic as well as on a literal level since Sembène is a socially inclined writer, a "public" writer as well as a filmmaker, who records the aspirations and preoccupations of his compatriots. Then, having served in the French colonial army, he is one of "Emitai's" African soldiers. One could also draw a parallel between Sembène's determination and spirit of resistance and his appearance as a *ceddo* [rebel] in his film

“Ceddo.” Yet, in his unique way of dismantling the appealing theories of critics, Sembène rejects such assumptions by stressing:

I kind of like playing in my films, but I do not play roles that are purposely interrelated throughout my works or connected to my personality or my own experience. . . . Pragmatically, my playing in my films encourages the non-professional actors because at the beginning, people in Senegal used to identify actors with the griots, who are people of low caste. In “Ceddo,” I was asking people who had been taking care of their hair for years to shave their heads. So I decided to become a *ceddo* myself and to have my head shaved to show solidarity with the actors.²⁵

I also asked Sembène whether his appearances in his films could be compared to the way Hitchcock features himself in his own motion pictures, to which Sembène abruptly and vividly stated: “It is not Hitchcock’s way; it is Sembène’s way.”

Many other elements characterize Sembène as a filmmaker and contribute to the uniqueness of his cinema. However, I’d like to conclude my presentation by commenting on his use of comedy and satire, two elements which are omnipresent in the form and content of his films.

Everyone familiar with Sembène’s films remembers the truculence of “Xala’s” wedding sequence, and recalls the farcical scene in which El Hadji, applying his marabout’s prescription against impotence, crawls half naked towards his new wife. Furthermore, a dance scene in which the tiny president of the Chamber of Commerce disappears in the arms and bosom of El Hadji’s second wife is hilarious. So is a sequence in which El Hadji’s Mercedes-Benz automobile, a product of German engineering genius, has to be pushed by the Senegalese policemen who have come to confiscate it because none of them is able to drive it. Just as striking is the irony used by Sembène in the dinner scene in “Black Girl” where he denounces and mocks the French *petite bourgeoisie* talking about all the advantages that French technical advisers receive from their government’s aid program to Senegal (with the benevolence of then-President Senghor).

Sembène’s use of verbal irony is highly effective in “Camp de Thiaroye” and in “Emitaï,” where the soldiers’ use of broken French is historically precise, but also effective as a comical device. In “Emitaï,” two African soldiers criticize French institutions and question the logic of a system in which Pétain, a seven-star marshal can be replaced by De Gaulle, a lower-ranked brigadier general. The mocking rifleman is Sembène who gives us an unforgettable example of his talents as an actor. Indeed, Sembène’s use of satire is unique and expresses the filmmaker’s ironic world view and skepticism. For him, life is a series of ambiguities, paradoxes, and incoherences best denounced through biting sarcasm. For the Senegalese director, comedy has a definite function. Commenting on the caricature style of “Xala,” he points out:

Yes, it makes people laugh but it also makes them think. For us, laughter is a social phenomenon: people like to talk and laugh. At the movies,

they remember better what has made them laugh than what has made them cry. And there is a lot of discussion taking place as people leave the movie theater.²⁶

Ousmane Sembène is one of the pioneers who have sown the seeds of sub-Saharan African cinema. He is its best known representative because of the quality, consistency and personal vision found in his films. Some of the characteristics I have just discussed can indeed be found in the works of other African filmmakers, who may have been influenced by Sembène although they may not readily acknowledge it. Yet, it is his combination of such characteristics which constitutes the uniqueness of Sembène's creativity as filmmaker. His works are landmarks and classics of African cinema to the extent that he has even created "genres" in African filmmaking. In the years to come, no one will discuss African film comedy without mentioning Sembène's film "Xala," and few people will be able to discuss stories of resistance in African cinema without citing "Emitai" and "Camp de Thiaroye," while the African epic genre on the screen will invariably call to mind "Ceddo."

Of course, Sembène is not the only African director worthy of attention. He is, nevertheless, the one who has accomplished the most, and he has been the most influential participant in the definition of both African film aesthetics and ethics. A socially committed writer, a provocative politically-oriented griot filmmaker, a social activist and critic, Sembène is frequently called the father of sub-Saharan African cinema. His films are primarily intended for African audiences for whom they serve as a tool for progress through self-examination. But for the non-African viewers, Sembène's films are invaluable reflectors of Africa's history, traditions, and changing societies, thus bringing about a new awareness of foreign thought, customs, and aesthetics.