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XALA/THE CURSE (1974)
 123 min.

Directed by Ousmane Sembene
 Written and based on the novel by Ousmane Sembene
 Produced by Paulin Vieyra
 Original Music by Samba Diabara Samb
 Cinematography by Georges Caristan, Orlando L. López, Seydina D. Saye and Farba Seck

Thierno Leye....Hadj Aboucader Beye
 Seune Samb....Adja Assatu, Beye's wife
 Makhouredia Gueye....Minister Kebe
 Myriam Niang....Rama
 Iliamane Sagna....Modu

OUSMANE SEMBENE (1 January 1923, Ziguenchor, Casamance, Senegal) has directed 13 films: *Moolaadé* (2004), *Faat Kiné* (2000), *Guelwaar* (1992), *Camp de Thiaroye* (1987), *Ceddo/Outsiders* (1977), *Xala/Impotence/The Curse* (1975), *Emitai/God of Thunder/Hemental* (1971), *Tauw* (1970), *Mandabi/Le Mandat/The Money Order* (1968), *Borom sarret/The Cart Driver* (1966), *La Noire/Black Girl* (1966), *Niaye* (1964) and *L'Empire sonhrai* (1963).

from World Film Directors, V. I. Ed. John Wakeman, H.W. Wilson Co., NY, 1988 entry by Miriam Rosen

Senegalese director, scenarist, and producer, born in the coastal town of Ziguenchor in the Casamance region of southern Senegal, where his father had migrated from Dakar to work as a fisherman. After his parents divorced, Sembene was sent briefly to one uncle in Dakar and then to another, Abdu Rahman Diop, in Marsassoum, closer to Ziguenchor. The entire family was religious, and Sembene had studied in a Quran school for seven years, but Diop in particular was a devout Muslim who exerted a great influence on his young nephew. "As erudite in Arabic as in French," according to Sembene, Diop had been the town's first school-teacher until he lost his post in a dispute with a French colonial administrator. Reduced to manual labor, he continued to write on "the social aspect of life and the idea of God."

Following Diop's death in 1935, Sembene who was studying at the local École de Ceramique, remained in Marsassoum for a year and then returned to Dakar to prepare for a diploma that would allow him to enter the colonial administration. When a fight with the school director ended that plan of action, Sembene took up a succession of trades as an apprentice mechanic, plumber, and bricklayer.

"When I lived in Dakar," Sembene recalls, "there was little else but the movies for entertainment, so my friends and I sat through so many, so often, that we didn't even have to look at the screen. We memorized the pictures of George Raft, Charlie Chaplin, and Shirley Temple." However, the film that had the most significant effect on him was not a Hollywood product but

Olympia, Leni Riefenstahl's documentary on the 1936 Munich Olympics. Intended as a fascistic celebration of Aryan prowess, it nevertheless enshrined the triumphs of the great black athlete Jesse Owens. "For the first time," he explains, "a black honored us by beating the whites....It became *the* film for the young people of my generation."

In his later teens Sembene spent much of his free time with the musicians and griots (storytellers) who performed in one of the popular quarters of Dakar. In 1940, experiencing what he called a "crisis of mysticism," he returned to Islam as well. Two years later, when he was nineteen, General DeGaulle visited Dakar and Sembene conceived "a great admiration of him." He joined the Senegalese sharpshooters and spent the next four years with the Free French Army in Africa, Germany, and France. This experience gave him a painfully heightened awareness of the French colonial enterprise: because his father was born in Dakar, one of the French townships in Senegal, Sembene had inherited French citizenship, but he soon discovered the extent of the barriers between the French of Africa and those of Europe.

Upon his discharge (without the usual good conduct certificate), he returned to Senegal and became involved in the Dakar-Niger Railroad strike that mobilized nearly all of French West Africa in 1947-1948. Soon after, he decided to return to France in order to improve his command of the French language. Dressing himself in a fancy suit, he slipped onto a passenger ship and took a free ride to Marseille, where he had worked as a docker during his military service. After three months in a Citroën factory in Paris, he returned to Marseille and entered a

training program in a foundry, but he had to give this up when his eyesight began to fail.

Sembene then went back to the docks, where he became active in the CGT (General Confederation of Workers) and, as he later commented, "since I talk a lot, I was elected delegate from my shipyard." In 1950 he joined the French Communist Party, and he remained a member until Senegal became independent in 1960. During this period, he also began to paint and wrote some poetry in French that was published in *Action politique*.

Reading the works of other black writers, particularly Claude McKay's accounts of the French waterfront around 1930, Sembene came to realize that "the black experience" depicted in literature was largely that of non-Africans; even Africa itself, considered as a literary subject, seemed likely to be preempted by American and West Indian black writers in search of their roots. Thus stimulated, Sembene began working on his first novel, *Le Docker Noir* (*The Black Docker*). This semi-autobiographical portrait of life on the Marseille docks and the effort to organize black workers there was published in 1956, and was followed the next year by *O Pays, mon beau peuple!* (*O My Country, My Beautiful People!*), the story of a young Senegalese's futile attempt to change his society after he returns from abroad with a European wife.

During the 1950s Sembene traveled widely throughout Europe, in 1957 he visited the Soviet Union, and in 1958, China and Vietnam. A back injury forced him to give up dock work, but with the publication in 1960 of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (translated as *God's Bits of Wood*), an epic account of the 1947-1948 railroad strike, he gained recognition as a major African novelist of the post-négritude generation and began writing full time.

Moving between Africa and French intellectual circles in Paris, Sembene published a number of works during the first half of the 1960s, including *Voltaïque* (1962, translated as *Tribal Scars*), a short story collection; *Référendum*, the first part of a trilogy called *L'Harmattan* (*The Storm*, 1962), and two novellas, *Véhi-Ciosane ou Blanche-Genèse, suivie du Mandat* (1965, translated as *The Money Order, with White Genesis*). All of these works were written in French—as he told a conference in 1965, "I could have written in Wolof, but then who would have read it?"

His first success with *God's Bits of Wood* coincided with the beginning of decolonization in Africa, and a 1960 return visit convinced Sembene that it was the right time to reestablish connections with his own culture. But the visit also made him realize that the main audience for the African writer was still in Europe, for literature did not have much impact in Africa outside of the universities. It was essentially this split between language and life that brought Sembene to filmmaking: the interaction of image, word, and sound, he felt, would make film accessible to African audiences in ways that literature could never be. In Leopoldville in particular, he later recalled, "I was witness to incredible events and wanted a new medium to express what I felt."

Returning to Paris in 1961, Sembene sought advice from the venerable French film historian Georges Sadoul, who sent him to the documentarist Jean Rouch, who in turn introduced him to the director Louis Daquin. Urged by Daquin not to enter filmmaking without formal training, Sembene then applied for scholarships to attend film schools in the US, USSR, Canada, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. A positive response from the Soviet Union brought him to Moscow for a year to study at

the state film school with Mark Donskoi and then to work at the Gorki Film Studio with Sergei Gerasimov.

Returning to Africa in 1963 with a 35mm camera, the forty-year-old novice undertook a documentary on the Songhay empire for the government of Mali. This film was never released, but his next effort, a short feature on one grim day in the life of a young Dakar cart driver, promptly received the prize for a first work at the Tours International Festival, where it was premiered in 1963. *Borom Sarret* ("cart owner" in Wolof), begins like the driver's day, with the Muslim call to prayer. Completing the first of his daily rituals, the nameless driver, leaving nothing to chance next dons protective amulets and then, taking leave of his wife and child, goes out with his cart and horse in search of their livelihood. By noon, he is asking, "Who knows what they will eat, who knows?" Yet the few pennies he's earned from taking a pregnant woman to the hospital and delivering a load of bricks soon find their way into the hands of a well-fed street-corner griot, the traditional storyteller whose musical evocation of a glorious past has lightened, for a few moments at least, the indignities of the present.

He makes no charge for his next passenger, the corpse of a tiny baby whose father walks solemnly behind the cart. When they are denied entry to the cemetery for lack of the proper papers, the driver deposits his human package on the ground and leaves. Soon he is driving a wealthy man in a Western business suit to the Plateau—the European quarter of the city which is off-limits to horse-drawn carts. Not only is the driver soon stopped by the police, not only does his passenger run off without paying, not only does he receive a ticket, but his cart is confiscated. When he comes home with nothing at all, his wife deposits the baby in his arms and walks out the door telling him, with bitter determination, "I assure you we'll eat tonight."

Sembene himself wrote the script for *Borom Sarret* after spending a month with the Dakar cart drivers to learn about their lives and their problems. Abdoulaye Ly, who played the main role, was himself a cart driver, and with the exception of the policeman, Sembene assembled his entire cast from nonprofessionals, a practice he has followed ever since. "Professional actors," he told an interviewer some years later, "are simply not convincing as laborers, as ordinary human beings. Of course, if a story seems right, I might consider using professional actors one day. They do make wonderful gangsters and dead kings."

Equipped with his own camera and two thousand meters of film from the Ministry of Education, Sembene shot *Borom Sarret* with Christian Lacoste, a European cameraman living in Dakar. Because there were no lab facilities locally, all postproduction work was done in France, with a two-to-three-week wait for even the first rushes. The entire cost of the film was twenty thousand Senegalese francs (at that time, about four thousand dollars).

In spite of the material limitations—if not because of the challenges they posed—*Borom Sarret* combines simple means and complex observations to make a concisely powerful social statement. While compressing "a day in the life" into no more than nineteen minutes, it not only conveys the condition of Senegal's urban poor but situates their experience in the large social panoramas of post-independence Africa. Each vignette is meticulously selected and designed to fill in a particular social dimension—the driver's relationship with his wife, his child, his fellow poor; the weight of birth and death; the importance of cultural and spiritual identity; and in retrospect perhaps most

striking of all (given that *Borom Sarret* was made only one year after Senegal's independence), the disappointing nature of the postcolonial state, with its cemetery guards and city policemen who unthinkingly assume the repressive roles of their colonial predecessors. Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, himself a pioneer Senegalese filmmaker and critic, has justly called *Borom Sarret* "one of the most accomplished shorts of the African cinema."

In terms of Sembene's own development, the film established from the outset his basic social concerns and his insistence on linking the personal and the political. With a very different setting and mode of presentation, this continuity can be traced in his next film, *Niaye* (1965), a thirty-five minute adaptation of his story "*Véhi-Ciosane*." As with *Borom Sarret* and the rest of his films, Sembene wrote the script himself. It deals with a tale of scandal told by a shoemaker-griot in a village in the Niaye coastal region. When the chief's younger daughter is discovered to be pregnant, a migrant worker is accused, and the girl is married off to save the family honor. In fact, as everyone knows, she is pregnant by her own incestuous father. Jeered at by the villagers, the chief's wife kills herself in shame. The girl's brother, traumatized by colonial service in the French army, and egged on by a relative who covets the throne, murders his father. The village installs its new chief and expels the daughter and child so the episode can be forgotten. The European administrator who comes to collect the taxes praises the new ruler for his good governance but the griot leaves, sickened by so much hypocrisy.

Niaye was shot in November 1964 in the Niaye village of Keur Haly Sarrata, where Sembene recruited most of the cast. Like *Borom Sarret*, *Niaye* was a coproduction of Sembene's own company, Films Domirev (Wolof for "children of the country") and Actualités Françaises in Paris. Premiered at the Tours Festival in 1965, it received an award at Locarno the same year but was never distributed commercially, and Sembene wound up taking the film into the countryside himself with a projector. In Senegal there was some objection to the portrayal of incest, which was held to be unrepresentative, but even sympathetic critics, such as Paul Vieyra and Guy Hennebelle, suggest that Sembene's first adaptation from literature to film was less than successful. For Vieyra in particular, the film failed to go beyond illustrating the content of the short story, and the student critique of village society took on a "pamphleteering" tone.

Whatever his difficulties with *Niaye*, Sembene soon undertook another adaptation, this time based on a story from *Volaique*. Conceived as another short feature (and licensed as such by the French coproducers) *La Noire de...* (Black Girl, 1966) turned into a full-length work that is now regarded as the first major film of the African cinema.

The story was inspired by a 1958 news item in *Nice-Matin*—the indifferent report of a "black girl" who committed suicide while working as a servant in the south of France.

...As Sembene told Françoise Pfaff in a 1978 interview, "This black woman is someone who has been transplanted from her original environment. She no longer has a name. Before, she was not even aware of the fact that she was "black," with all the possible connotations associated with this word. She used to function adequately in her own surroundings. But once she left her country she lost her identity as Diouana. She became somebody's black maid. She became an object belonging to a white family—their trophy."...

After the French premiere in March 1966, *Black Girl* was screened in Dakar in April and was named the best African

film at the first Dakar Festival of Negro Arts held that summer; it also received the Jean Vigo prize (for the seventy-minute part-color version), the Silver Antelope, and the Tanit d'Or at Carthage (Tunisia). Nonetheless, French objections to the film's unsparring attack on neocolonialism and what Sembene calls the "new slave trade" of African workers in Europe created problems with distribution. Sembene himself took the film to various towns in Senegal early in 1967, but it did not reach the rest of Africa until much later....A full decade later, when the film was shown during a Senegalese retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the critic Udayan Gupta hailed *Black Girl* as "one of the first major anticolonial documents of Africa."

In the wake of his success, Sembene was invited to sit on the juries of the 1967 Cannes and Moscow film festivals. In October of that year he married and brought his seven-year-old son Alain, who was born in Marseille, to live with him and his wife, N'Deye. In 1968 he received an advance of 30 million francs (then about \$60,000), from the French Ministry of Culture for a French-Senegalese coproduction based on his novella *The Money Order*. Commenting on his sudden change of circumstances, Sembene told Guy Hennebelle, "Of course it's a contradiction, but it's a minor one.... Obviously this arrangement is not feasible for the long term; the development of the African cinema cannot depend on the good will of French circles. But in the present state of things, I'm ready to join up with the devil knowing that I won't renounce any of my political convictions."

Mandabi/Le Mandat (The Money Order, 1968) was his first comedy, his first film in color, and his first film in Wolof, the language spoken by most of the Senegalese people....As in *Borom Sarret* and *Black Girl*, an anecdotal experience in the life of an ordinary person provides the starting point for a wide-ranging critique of the society at large....

Both versions [Wolof and French] of *The Money Order* were shot in five weeks early in 1968, and the film was completed that July (following postproduction delays caused by the May uprisings in Paris). According to Sembene, the lead actor, Mamadou Gueye, was "discovered" working at a desk job at an airline company. Sembene makes a cameo appearance as the public scribe—a role he has taken on in real life to help out those who are unable to read or write. Working from a French scenario (Wolof was not a written language at that time) he spent a month rehearsing with the cast before the shooting began. As it turned out, separate dialogues and gestures evolved for the Wolof version to accommodate cultural differences embedded in the two languages. Sembene himself found the tone of the French version artificial and much preferred the Wolof....It was the first Senegalese film to be distributed commercially in Senegal....In a 1973 interview, Sembene recalled how audiences responded to the film: "People discussed *Mandabi* in the post office or in the market and decided they were not going to pay out their money, like the person in my movie. They reported those trying to victimize them, which led to many arrests/ But when they denounced the crooks, they would say it was not the person but the government which was corrupt. And they would say they were going to change the country...."

The Senegalese government was somewhat less enthusiastic: according to Sembene there was an attempt to cut at least one part (Ibrahim's observation that honesty is a sin in the country), and the very popular theme song was banned from the government radio....

Emitai (the name of the Diola god of thunder) is loosely based on a historical incident involving the anticolonial heroine

An Sitoë. According to Sembene, he was drawn to her story because it took place among the Diola, one of Senegal's minority tribes, and he wanted to break away from the mainstream Wolof culture of Dakar. Finding the real An Sitoë too mystical for his taste, he decided to drop her from the story but remained in the Diola region of southern Senegal where he had grown up. After studying the Diola language for two years and developing a loose scenario, he went with cameraman George Caristan and a minimal crew to the village of Dimbering....

From some five hours of rushes, Sembene fashioned a film of 110 minutes in which the villagers themselves play a collective leading role. As he told Guy Hennebelle in a 1976 interview, his overriding goal was to make *Emitai* a "school of history"—to recreate and thus perpetuate the African tradition of resistance. Acknowledging that some of the Diolas were disconcerted by the liberties that he took with their elaborate rituals, he recalled, "I explained that where I was concerned, I had a particular agreement with the fetish-gods, who gave me special authorization to proceed in that manner."

Interwoven with the primary theme of anticolonial struggle are two social issues with equal contemporary relevance—the situation of women and the role of religion. As Hennebelle has noted, these themes are thrown into relief by tight structural parallels: the women confront the French soldiers while the men consult the gods, until at the very end of the film, the men are gunned down by the soldiers and the women are left to bury them before the gods. Even so, the message that emerges from these juxtapositions is considerably more subtle than simple exaltation and denunciation. Unequivocal in his condemnation of the colonial order, Sembene nevertheless avoids any romanticization of traditional society: "In *Emitai*," he stresses. "I wasn't content with making a film that glorified the resistance. I also attempted to show the limits of our culture. We cannot continue to live like our ancestors."

As the ending of the film suggests, religion remains an unresolved issue. An atheist himself, Sembene clearly associates traditional religious practices with passivity: "In my film," he states, "I indicate that it's for men and women to decide their destinies, not for the gods." But at the same time, he acknowledges the weight of the traditional religious culture: as he remarked in a 1971 interview: "I have never seen them [the spirit gods], but I respect them....They are importantly part of our cultural heritage, just as Christianity is an important part of yours. We must understand our traditions before we can hope to understand ourselves."

Discussing *Emitai* just after it was released, Sembene observed that it was "a film that exalts a popular culture, a very important program today in black Africa, where the ruling classes are made up for the most part of what I call the 'deformed children' of Imperialism, cultural bastards. These are Frenchmen or Englishmen with black skins." Then he added, "I'd like to make a film on those people, that bourgeoisie, but it's dangerous." In fact "that bourgeoisie" became the subject of Sembene's next feature, *Xala*, which was completed in 1974 and released the following year.

While *Xala* was in preparation, Sembene traveled to the 1972 Munich Olympics with his cameraman Georges Caristan to participate in what was to be the official Olympics film, a composite of individual segments by ten internationally known filmmakers. That film, produced by David Wolper, ultimately became *Visions of Eight*, without Sembene, who made his own one-hour documentary covering African participation in the

gamed (including an interview with Jess Owens) as well as the Black September raid on the Israeli team. The same year Sembene founded the Wolof monthly magazine *Kaddu* in an effort to make Wolof the cultural language of Senegal. This issue of language and cultural identity emerges as one of the main themes in *Xala* (in which *Kaddu* is displayed and promoted).

Adapted from a short novel that Sembene published (in French) in 1974, *Xala* is a satirical comedy about the misadventures of one of the new African elite whose postindependence fortunes are marred and then wrecked by the curse of *xala*—impotence. From the very beginning of the film, Sembene's assessment of the neocolonial bourgeoisie is translated into shocking visual metaphors: no sooner is the French ruling order overturned (quite literally with the pulling down of their public monuments) than it is replaced by the African equivalent—a conclave of business-suited Africans and their white "advisors" who bring them suitcases stuffed with money. As Howard Schissel points out (*Guardian* February 4, 1980), the protagonist's sexual impotence is "a transparent metaphor for the economic, social, and political ineptness of the Senegalese elite."

Like Ibrahima Dieng in *The Money Order*, El Hadji Abdoukadr Beye is a man in his fifties living in Dakar with two wives. But unlike Dieng, a victim of the neocolonial order, El Hadji is clearly one of its beneficiaries. He is a wealthy French-speaking importer of European luxury goods, who not only rides a white Mercedes, but has his chauffeur wash the car in imported mineral water.

After he is appointed to the Chamber of Commerce, El Hadji decides to take a third wife, to celebrate both his new status and his unimpaired virility. But following his garish garden-party wedding to a girl the age of his daughter, El Hadji discovers his affliction. The president's personal marabout is unable to cure him; a second has some success, but meanwhile. El Hadji is spending a fortune and letting his business fall apart as well; when his check to the marabout bounces, the cure is rescinded. His second wife moves out; the third is taken home by her mother; El Hadji is expelled from the Chamber of Commerce and replaced by a streetcorner hustler. In the end, the broken bourgeois is confronted by Dakar's army of the poor, whom he had earlier tried to hustle off the streets. One of these, it appears, is responsible for placing the *xala* on him—a man whom he had ruined years before. The only cure is to submit to the will of these beggars and cripples, whose humiliating revenge closes the film.

Commenting on the sexual imagery invoked by the *xala*, Sembene explained to the critic Tahar Cheriaa in 1974 that "My film is neither pornographic nor erotic. This sexual aspect is only a pretext for reflection on the contemporary Senegalese society and the problematic of its liberation." As such, he considered it his most difficult film to date, because of the contradictions it embodied. Stressing that *Xala* was to raise the issues, not to solve them, he told Cheriaa, "My problem is to show the people the conditions in which they live, to make them feel why and how their own living conditions are precisely the same, and to lead them, if possible,...to feel, to understand, to discover, perhaps, deep inside themselves, that they—they and no one else—have the real and sure possibility of changing the conditions of that life, of improving them."

While Sembene has consistently taken such a stand, rejecting what he calls the "cinema of placards," *Xala* departs somewhat from his earlier attempts to create new forms of

political expression in his shift from realism to allegory and symbolism. The women characters are especially rich in this respect. Among El Hadji's three wives, the traditional dress, comportment, and expectations of the matriarchal Awa (Eve), Wife 1, are thrown into tragi-comic contrast with the ridiculously westernized ways of Wife 2 and again with the youthful nonidentity of the last bride, a victim of El Hadji's mid-life crisis of conspicuous consumption. Alongside these three characters, who mark the stages of El Hadji's past (and that of wider African society), the fourth woman in the film, his daughter Rama, offers the positive alternative for the future. She rides a moped but wears traditional Senegalese clothing, studies at the university but insists on conversing with her French-speaking father in Wolof. "Xala takes place in a period of transition," Sembene has explained. "This young girl is like a step forward in a society which must find a synthesis."

Unlike his earlier films, *Xala* was coproduced with the Senegalese national film company (an arrangement that Sembene later described as a "fiasco"). Even so, before *Xala* was released, it met with nearly a dozen cuts at the hands of government censors. Sembene himself distributed leaflets listing the cuts, and the film went on to break attendance records in Senegal. It was not only featured in commercial theatres of the cities and the traveling cinema of the interior, but shown free at youth centers, high schools, and other public gathering places. According to Sembene, once again audiences were quick to appreciate the story's contemporary relevance: "I assure you, when the film opened in Dakar, no one drove around in a Mercedes any more; in the first three months after the opening, Mercedes owners showed up on foot. Otherwise there were always people shouting 'Opportunist! You have the *xala*, you thief!'"

During 1975 *Xala* also made the rounds of film festivals, including New York, Moscow, San Francisco, Rotterdam and Philadelphia. Perhaps because of the comic format and a faster pace (if not a certain relief at seeing Sembene's target shift from colonialism to neocolonialism), critical responses were uniformly enthusiastic, from *Variety* ("strongest pic to date") and the *New York Times* ("an instructive delight") to *Revue du cinéma* ("a luminous film that's a must to see"). Patrick Gibbs called it "the best-looking African film I have seen, and in its satire quite the most sophisticated." But as Noureddin Ghali pointed out in *Cinéma*, the real international context of the film was neither New York nor Paris. Citing its impact on audiences at the 1976 Bombay Film Festival, he wrote, "*Xala* reflects, like a mirror, a faithful image not only of an African country, but also of the Third World."

The critical probing of internal political and cultural dynamics is intensified in Sembene's next film *Ceddo* (1977). It compresses two or more centuries of African history into the events of a few days in a village that is, as James Leahy wrote in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (January 1982), "an exemplary microcosm of African...society in the throes of crucial transition, brought about by external pressures and internal greed, ambition and dissension. The "external pressures" are represented by three symbolic foreigners: a European trader, a Catholic priest, and an Arab Muslim, the Imam. The *Ceddo* of the title are the "outsiders" or "resisters" who remain faithful to the traditional religion after their king has converted to Islam. . .

In March 1977 the government of Senegal. Where ninety percent of the population is Muslim, banned *Ceddo*, ostensibly because of objection to the way the title was spelled.

In a three-page open letter to "all Senegalese and the President of the Republic," Sembene rejected the government's contention that "Geddo" should be spelled with one *d* (an incorrect European transcription he claims) and vowed that he would not concede, regardless of the economic pressure the ban imposed. "I did not make the picture to please the government," he later declared, "but to help African people to think about themselves—not to cry about themselves but to think about themselves."

Although *Ceddo* remained banned in Senegal, it was released for international distribution after Sembene agreed to attach a disclaimer to the effect that it was "a fictitious reconstruction of a historical nature."

...Roy Armes makes the point that *Ceddo* is certainly "the freest of Sembene's films from literary forms and influences and the film most clearly patterned as an interplay of image and music." In Sembene's view, of course, this mastery of visual language is crucial to the development of African cinema as a medium of social change. "The cinema seems almost to have been created with us in mind, at our particular stage of development," he observed in a 1982 interview. "We are at present making a transition from words to pictures and from pictures to sound....The transition from words to pictures enables people to see themselves—the cinema reflects their image. This is something literature could not do."

Ironically enough, though, "the father of the African cinema," as Sembene is justifiably called, has retained a personal preference for literature. For him, the written word permits a depth of analysis that he finds lacking in film. Indeed, it is often pointed out that in adapting his published works into film, Sembene has omitted various characters and limited the development of others in order to streamline the narrative. "But if I'm lucky," he explains, "maybe I could sell ten thousand copies of one of my novels, but I reached millions of people with *Xala*." Nonetheless (and although his career is often presented as a linear evolution from novelist to filmmaker), he has continued to write....

In her 1984 study of *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene*, Françoise Pfaff characterizes the filmmaker as "a griot of modern times," and as she points out, Sembene himself has frequently drawn the same parallel between the traditional African storyteller and the modern filmmaker. "I want to be the pulse of my people," he once declared, "and express their dreams and preoccupations as well as my political ideal."

...As a growing African cinema demonstrates, Sembene was not exaggerating when he remarked in 1978, "In ten years you will see filmmakers all over Africa producing honest documents that will help people live far better lives. We will make you laugh, we will make you cry. And together we will question, discuss and learn."

from Ousmane Sembene Dialogues with Critics and Writers. Edited by Samba Gadjigo, Ralph Faulkingham, Thomas Cassirer & Reinhard Sander. U Mass Press, Amherst 1993

Sembene 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 part of a celebration following the

“Senegalization” of the Chamber of Commerce and the wedding festivities of the protagonist, El Hadji. ...

A number of Sembene characters can be associated with those found in traditional African storytelling. ...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.”...

Thematic similarities can also be drawn from a comparison between Sembene’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, greed, selfishness, vanity, and waste is likewise highly popular in African folktales and so are topics of the lowly rebelling against the powerful....

Structurally, the clear linear progression usually found in Sembene’s films can also be compared to that of the griot’s story....”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. Sembene’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 feature 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, Sembene’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.

Sembene: As Françoise Pfaff said, we did not invent the griots. They exist in every country: people talk of minstrels. But in my country the griot was at one and the same time his own author, his own musician, his own actor, and his own narrator. This made the griot a very important person, despite the fact that, according to general opinion, we were barbarians and savages.

When there were wars between different tribes, griots were never killed. The griot would only be killed when he was lying. Because when the griot lies he deceives an entire people. The griot also had duties and rights: no assembly could be held without the presence of a griot, whatever the social group. If the representative griot was absent, people said: “Call his son; if the son is not there, call his wife—the second, the third, the fourth.” And if nobody was in the house, no meeting took place. That is for me the importance of the griot in my society.

This tradition is out of date and can no longer be applied today. But its spirit can be preserved. That is how one can work and be sincere with one’s own society and make people aware of their situation.

from Sembene Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction. David Murphy. Africa World Press. Trenton NJ, Eritrea. 2001, Chapter 4 “The Indiscreet Charm of the African Bourgeoisie?” Consumerism, Fetishism & Socialism in Xala

One of the most interesting facts about Sembene’s satirical film *Xala* is that it managed to achieve that which is so elusive for most African films, that is, popular box-office success within Africa. It finished second in the 1975 Senegalese ratings behind a film featuring the formidable Bruce Lee, the most successful of

the Kung Fu kings who still dominate the screens of African cinemas today. On top of this success within Senegal, *Xala* also had a respectable career on the Francophone African film circuit. Far too often, African films never even reach a popular African public, their distribution usually being limited to the French Cultural Centres (the film’s non-commercial distribution rights often being bought by the French Ministère de la Coopération), or the African film festivals in Carthage and Ouagadougou. On some occasions, they are never seen at all and remain stored in warehouses gathering dust, as the French-owned distribution companies usually refuse to take a risk on African films, preferring to provide their audience with their tried and tested diet of karate and melodrama.

...Sembene defines his conception of the *xala* in the following terms:

...to my mind it’s not only my main character, El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye, who is suffering from the ‘xala.’ It’s the whole social class that he represents. These people, who often hold vital positions within society, are struck down with a cultural, political, and economic impotence, an impotence that saps their creative instincts. This privileged class plays a negative role. It perverts social progress towards its own desire for material wealth. Thus, it prevents the people from progressing and steals the hard-earned fruits of popular efforts for its own, unnatural ends. Being mere reflections and intermediaries of imperialism, these parvenus are incapable of developing the country. Struck down with the ‘xala’, they impose their temporary impotence on the whole nation.

...*Xala* is structured principally around the notion of fetishism, presenting the rituals of the African bourgeoisie in all their contradictions. An idealisation of the West is shown to exist side by side with a profound belief in superstition and magic. In a 1974 interviews, Sembene showed that he was well aware of these contradictions within his film:

The contradiction lies in the fact that contemporary African society is torn between two types of fetishism: firstly the fetishism of European techniques, and the profound conviction of this privileged class that it can do nothing without Europe’s agreement and the advice of its specialists; on the other hand, there is a fetishism of the marabout, without whose advice any undertaking is doomed to failure. In this situation, genuine human success has nothing to do with the capabilities of Africans, but is rather the result of a happy mixture of the blessings of the European specialist and the marabout.

The truth is that this ruling class is as far removed from genuine European techniques as it is from the genuine tradition of African spirituality. European specialists are no more credible than the marabouts. Having recourse to both is merely the expression of the same impotence.

The theme of fetishism is a long-established one in Marxist theory....The process by which the ‘exchange-value’ of commodities is given almost inherent, religious qualities, effectively denying the labour that went into their making, is described by Marx as ‘the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.’ Sembene’s African businessmen, and El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye in particular, are obsessed with commodities, with the objects that prove their social status, and which stress

their identification with and emulation of the West. However, they are still in the grip of the supernatural. Of the fetishist practices that marked their African upbringing. In such a context, the rituals of the capitalist world and the fetishist world are seen to vie for people's attention: the possession of a briefcase acquires the same ritual status as the possession of a *gri-gri* (i.e. a talisman or charm).

Therefore, in *Xala*, the representation of various rituals, both 'Western' and 'African', within Senegalese society becomes a means towards an examination of that society's ills. However, such questions have received scant attention from critics....

The three feature films made by Sembene in the 1970s, *Emitai*, *Xala*, and *Ceddo*, are without doubt his most symbolic, non-realistic works. ...In *Xala*, Sembene lays bare the 'causal network' of his society by setting up a series of rituals whose contradictions reveal the tensions and the fault lines within the African bourgeoisie.

The film's concern with ritual is evident from the opening scenes. In what could be described as a piece of 'epic' Brechtian symbolism, the African businessmen chase the Europeans from the Chamber of Commerce, at the same time removing all the signs of French colonial power. Dressed in traditional African clothes, they place on the steps of the Chamber, amongst other items, a statue of Marianne, the symbol of the French Republic, and a pair of jackboots, symbolising French colonial domination in Africa. The President of the Chamber's speech, which we hear on the soundtrack, makes it clear that this act is being carried out on behalf of the whole nation. In fact, Senegalese business men had taken control of the Dakar Chamber of Commerce in the aftermath of the social

upheaval of May 1968. Their struggle to gain a larger slice of the economic cake from the French was cast in nationalist terms, turning the issue of the Chamber of Commerce from what was essentially an economic issue into a nationalist one.

The nationalist celebration that opened the film, with its use of African drummers and bare-breasted female dancers, is just a smokescreen for the real transformation that is taking place. Such references to traditional culture are simply token gestures by those in control who seek to appropriate tradition for their cause....

[Sembene] These people that I show in my film are not really bourgeois even if they flatter themselves by identifying with the European bourgeoisie that acts as their model. In fact, they don't belong to any class; they constitute a section of the population, a social category which enjoys an indecent level of 'privilege'. These people were the first to call for the flag and the national anthem, etc., but once they are safely ensconced in power they have 'won through a noble struggle', they begin to behave exactly the same as the 'awful' colonists they had so vociferously denounced. No, these parvenus are not even bourgeois; they are just the extreme periphery of imperialism.

...*Xala* presents a society where the sign of consumerism, fetishism and socialism are shown to intermingle, creating new social meanings. ...*Xala* also produced a profound questioning of notions of male sexuality: El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye's impotence can be read as a symbolic commentary not only on his class, but on notions of masculinity in general.

Only three more films in the Buffalo Film Seminars XII, Spring 2006

Apr 11 Wim Wenders **Wings of Desire** 1987
Apr 18 Andre Konchalovsky **Runaway Train** 1985
Apr 25 Karel Reisz **The French Lieutenant's Woman** 1981

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