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AN AFRICAN BRECHT

The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene

OUSMANE SEMBENE, unruly progenitor of the new African cinema, was born in 1923 in the sleepy provincial port of Ziguinchor, Casamance, the southernmost province of French-run Senegal. His background was Muslim, Wolof-speaking, proletarian—his father a fisherman, who had left his ancestral village near Dakar for the south; prone to seasickness, Ousmane showed little aptitude for the family trade. It was a turbulent childhood. His parents split up early, and the boy—strong-minded and full of energy—was bundled from one set of relatives to another, ending up with his mother's brother, Abdou Ramane Diop. A devout rural schoolteacher, Diop was an important influence, introducing Ousmane to the world of books and encouraging his questions.

This favourite uncle died when Sembene was just thirteen. He moved to Dakar, staying with other relations, and enrolled for the *certificat d'études*, passport for clerical jobs open to Africans. But wilful and irreverent, Sembene was never the sort for the colonial administration. He was expelled from school, allegedly for raising his hand against a teacher, and ran through a series of manual jobs—mechanic, stonemason. His spare time was spent at the movies, or hanging out with friends in the central marketplace in Dakar, where the *griots* or *gewels*, the storytellers, spun their tales. *Gewels* ranked low in the Wolof caste hierarchy, but had traditional licence to depict and comment on all ranks, from king to beggar; the best had mastered the insights of *xamxam*, historical and

social knowledge—a formative influence in Sembene’s later work, as were the structuring tensions of African trickster stories: the narrative quest, the reversal of fortunes, the springing traps of power relations.¹

Sembene was seventeen when Senegal’s colonial masters capitulated to Hitler, and was witness to the seamless reincarnation of Governor-General Boisson’s administration as an outpost of Vichy. An attempt by de Gaulle to claim the city for the Free French, supported by the inaccurate bombardment of the British Navy, ended in failure. But when the Allies landed in North Africa two years later, Boisson switched sides. US troops were stationed in Dakar for the duration of the War, and the local youth recruited into the French-officered *tirailleurs sénégalais*. Sembene, aged nineteen, saw action in North Africa and Germany—black soldiers notoriously sent forward for the worst assaults. The War brought a broader education in the ways of the world: in his 1988 movie *Camp de Thiaroye* Sembene would depict the urbane Senegalese NCO Diatta being taken for an American GI by the girls at Le Coq Hardi, a French-run Dakar brothel: ‘Hey, buy me a whisky, Joe?’ Panic ensues when it turns out he is an African—‘*Horreur!*’—and the bouncers throw him out.

Demobbed and back in Senegal, Sembene got a job on the railways and was caught up in the mass strike of 1947—twenty-thousand workers downing tools across French West Africa, from Dakar to Abidjan, when the colonial administration backed down on wartime promises of an integrated pay structure. The strike lasted five months. Looking back, thirteen years later, Sembene would write of the railway workers: ‘They began to understand that the machine was making of them a whole new breed of men.’² Their leaders counselled passive resistance, refusing to endorse more militant mobilizations, and a compromise was struck. The following year, aged twenty-five, Sembene quit Senegal for the docks of Marseilles. In that harsh and poverty-stricken environment he joined the Communist-led CGT, and resumed his education in the Confédération’s local library—Marxist classics, and the French literary canon. It was here that he began to write: *Le Docker noir*, published in 1956, described the crushing defeat of a black worker–writer by white power structures; a second novel, *O Pays, mon beau peuple!*, is set in Casamance; in 1960, *God’s Bits of Wood* revisited the great Dakar–Niger railway strike.

¹ See Mbye Boubacar Cham, ‘Ousmane Sembene and the Aesthetics of African Oral Traditions’, *Africana Journal*, vol. 13, nos 1–4, 1982, pp. 24–40.

² *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu (God’s Bits of Wood)*, Paris 1960, pp. 32–3.

Returning to Senegal in 1960 after Independence Sembene was scathing about the new elite, still enthralled to the same old masters. The pompous, dwarfish Léopold Senghor, philosopher of Negritude, would be ensconced as their pro-consul for the next twenty years.³ Africa was still emerging—a partial and bloody rebirth—from colonial rule, through the assassination of Lumumba, war in Algeria, resistance movements across French, British and Portuguese territories. Sembene travelled widely throughout West Africa and along the Congo, assessing for himself the realities of decolonization and the political tasks that lay ahead. He has spoken of an epiphanic moment, sitting in a boat on the Congo River: a vision of a new sort of cinema that would both communicate and describe; an evening school for radical mass education. (Later, he would tour his films round the remote villages of Senegal, setting up the screen in the open air and holding discussions with the audience until late into the night.) He fired off applications for film-making apprenticeships abroad, and was taken on at the Gorkii studios to work with Mark Donskoi.⁴

Trickster aesthetic

Popular narratives, world war, Marxism and Modernism, Khrushchev's Moscow, African working-class life: a rich education for any artist. Over four decades of film-making, Sembene has deployed this formation to extraordinary effect. If he has focused consistently on the social relations of Africa's distorted development, the sheer breadth of his aesthetic—the disorientating combination of African ritual and modes of speech with expressionist set-pieces, domestic naturalism, epic choreography, social satire, sexual comedy or farce—projects his work on to a broader, more universal canvas. The complexity of his films eschews surface slickness: narrative realism can be undercut by jarring moments of melodrama, flashbacks, non-professional acting; which yet contribute, as in Brecht, to an epic sense. There is no dogmatic closure in Sembene's work: elements of didacticism are undermined by the revelation of fresh complexities, endings are characteristically freeze frame, the final outcome still unsure. Contested relationships remain open—as in the

³ When, in the 1970s, Senghor decided to convert the country into a 'multiparty democracy', he allocated space for three political parties: one on the right, one in the centre; his own movement, he declared, would be the Left.

⁴ Best known for his Gorkii trilogy. Sembene has stressed the technical nature of his training in Moscow, perhaps as a preventive strike against critics who would search for Donskoi's influence upon his work.

trickster tales: Brer Rabbit's forerunner Leuk the Hare may get away this time; but that doesn't mean he's safe.

Sembene's first film, a mere 19 minutes long, contains many of the elements—though not the humour—that would characterize his future work. *Borom Sarret* (1962) sees Dakar through the eyes of a cart driver—the *bonhomme charette* of the film's title—who narrates the voice-over, in French. Starting off from the crowded working-class quarter, he is hired to take a well-dressed passenger up to the deserted, tree-lined streets of the Plateau, where carts like his are banned. The stark, black-and-white documentary style, reminiscent of Italian neo-realism, is heightened to a more melodramatic register by the effect of non-professional actors and the use of post-synchronous sound. The sense of excess—of anti-realism—is intensified by the soundtrack, the music of the traditional *xalam* giving way to the strings of Salzburg as we reach the Plateau.

Stopped by a policeman, the *borom sarret* tries to pull his papers from his pocket; as he does so, his war medal falls to the ground. His hand reaches out to grasp it, but the policeman's boot stamps down first. We see a subjective shot of his tormentor, towering above. At another point, the driver is pulled up by a traditional *gewel*, who starts to sing the praises of his ancient family name in hope of cash. As the flattery continues on the soundtrack, the camera turns to a shoeshine boy who has found a new customer among the audience; but as soon as he's finished, the sharp-suited fellow kicks the boy's box away and leaves without paying—the sort of story the new *gewel* could tell. The end is still more damning. When the *borom sarret* returns home empty handed, his wife passes him their child and walks out, promising: 'Tonight we will have something to eat'. Here as elsewhere—*Guelwaar*, for instance—prostitution is provocatively postulated as the economic basis of Senegalese life.

Money dancing

Six years later in his fourth film, *Mandabi*, or *The Money Order*, Sembene would again map out the socio-geography of the streets of Dakar.⁵ Initially he had planned to make the film in black and white, wanting at all costs to avoid any element of the picturesque—'*J'avais peur de tomber*

⁵ In between he had made *Niaye* (1964) and *La Noire de . . .* (1966).

dans le folklore'. Instead, the colour is servant to the drama—emphasizing the comically oversized sky-blue *boubou* of Ibrahima Dieng, for instance, the central character: a man dwarfed by his own vanity, the sleeves of his magnificent robe obstruct his hands. The film opens with the rhythmically sweeping blades of a group of roadside barbers, shaving customers beneath a shady tree; their dextrous movements are underscored by the *kora* soundtrack. But rising to his feet to pay, Dieng—played by Makhourédia Gueye, one of the few professional actors Sembene works with—finds that his shave has left him penniless, and must return home to his two grumbling wives. The money order sent home from Paris by Dieng's nephew Abdou seems to offer salvation: 'You will kill us with hope!' Dieng's wives assure the postman. An ironic shot shows young Abdou street-sweeping beneath the Eiffel Tower.

The series of obstacles that Dieng now confronts recalls the list of impossible tasks the trickster must perform, to escape from deadly danger. But while Leuk the Hare will succeed in duping the leopard of his skin or the elephant of his tusks, Dieng's attempts end in repeated failure. At the Post Office, he learns he cannot cash the money order without an ID card; at the Police Station, he can't get a card because he doesn't have a birth certificate; at the City Hall, he is turned away again, for not knowing his exact date of birth; even his own origin becomes unobtainable. Dieng's self-regard—the respect due to a devout Muslim elder—crumbles before the Western bureaucratic structures with which the increasingly elusive money order is hedged. Long shots of the blue-*boubou*'d Dieng as an anonymous figure, lost in Dakar's crowded streets, cut to close-ups of his deeply worried face—the image informed, as Fredric Jameson puts it, 'by its non-visual systemic cause'.⁶ The *mandat* becomes a socially corrosive force: family and neighbourhood relationships begin to crumble; Dieng's encounters with the corner shopkeeper, quack photographer, sharp-suited conman, deteriorate into brawls or end in humiliation. Finally one of his relatives cashes the cheque but pockets the money, explaining to an incredulous and desperate Dieng that he'd been robbed.

In counterpoint to the filming of *Mandabi*, Sembene was fighting his own battle for and against money from France. The Minister for Culture Malraux had secured the funding for Sembene's previous movie, *La*

⁶ *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, London 1992, p. 2.

Noire de . . ., the story of an African girl taken back to France by a white family; but at the price of having voice-over and dialogue spoken in French. Since it is an explicit premise of the film that Diouana can barely speak the language, this was a radically inappropriate form for the interior monologues through which she voices her experience of Europe, her alienation and her fears. In trickster fashion, Sembene managed to turn the linguistic tables on his metropolitan funders by using Toto Bissainthe's beautifully modulated French-Caribbean tones to deliver Diouana's thoughts in voice-over—the non-French speaker articulating, as the white family cannot, a fluent and complex vision of the world. With *Mandabi*, Sembene managed to extract enough funding to cut both a Wolof-language and a francophone version, *Le Mandat*, also released in 1968. But this was the last time he would be dependent on French state funding, or make a wholly French-speaking film. Henceforth, language in Sembene's films—high or low, formal or intimate, Wolof or French—would be a function of dramatic requirement, not producers' diktat.⁷

In any case, the Pompidou government could hardly have been expected to welcome his next project. In the context of intensifying struggles against Portuguese rule—Amilcar Cabral's troops would play as extras—Sembene returned to his native region of Casamance to explore, in *Emitai* (1971), transformations in mass consciousness in the course of anti-colonial resistance. The atrocities perpetrated by French forces requisitioning rice in the region during the Second World War had first been denied by the authorities, then blamed on a handful of Rightists installed by the Vichy regime. In fact, there was an essential continuity of personnel throughout the period. A recurrent pattern in his work, Sembène juxtaposes two socially defined spaces: white military rituals are shown in counterpoint—sometimes ironic, often chilling—to the animist practices of the Diola people, whose fetishes and sacred grove mirror back the flagpole and parade ground of the Army camp. But the heart of the film dwells on the contradictions that confront the villagers, as their traditional deities fail to protect them from the French.

In desperation, their chief Djiméko leads the young men out to battle against the superior occupying force. He falls wounded and is carried back to confront his gods in the great gnarled tree where they dwell. In an extraordinary scene, they claim that he must die for refusing to

⁷ Later films would receive funding from Senegal and, in the 80s, from Channel 4 and Canal Plus.

make the proper sacrifices. Djiméko raises his voice to them: 'I must die, but so will you'. Resistance is taken up by the village women, singing together in defiance of the white commander, in scenes that are intercut with the fatalistic rituals of the defeated menfolk. The men now play the female role, carrying rice to the French, while the women pick up the spears they've left. Just before the massacre—the villagers have been given one last chance to reveal the women's store—important news reaches the Army camp. The photograph of Pétain that stands behind the commander is silently replaced by one of de Gaulle. At the end, the screen goes blank. The shots ring out.⁸ 'I didn't want to indicate what the exact date was—whether de Gaulle was taking power in Senegal, or in France', Sembene has said: 'I wanted to suggest that for us Africans, there was no difference between the two regimes—the methods changed a bit but the objective was still to maintain the French Empire.'⁹

Fetish failures

Sembene's next film, *Xala*—'the curse'—would be a high-spirited assault on the post-colonial elite. Made in 74, its pre-credit sequence, one of the classic moments of African cinema, is a glorious set-piece of the post-Independence 'transfer of power'. Traditional dancers with bare breasts and drums make way for the new leaders who, clothed in African-print shirts and trousers, now mount the long white flight of steps that leads up to the pseudo-classical portico of the Chamber of Commerce. To the cheers of the crowd below, they clear out the symbols of colonial domination—the bust of Marianne, a pair of jack-boots and so forth. As they retire inside, the camera sweeps round to see one of the whites issue a command to the African police force to clear the crowd.¹⁰ Meanwhile

⁸ Under French pressure, the scene that showed the troops shooting down the villagers was cut by the Senegalese authorities. French troops are still stationed in Senegal. 'You don't tell history to get revenge, but to root yourselves in the ground', Sembène would explain when the French ambassador stormed out of a Dakar showing of *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), based on a historical, postwar incident in which thirty-five *tirailleurs sénégalais* were slaughtered and many more wounded as the French Army suppressed a revolt over pay and conditions.

⁹ Guy Hennebelle, 'Ousmane Sembene: "En Afrique noire nous sommes tous gouvernés par des enfants mongoliens du colonialisme"', *Les Lettres françaises*, 6–12 October 1971, p. 16.

¹⁰ All scenes featuring the white chief of police were cut in Senegal. The Interior Minister at the time was Jean Collin, a Frenchman who assumed Senegalese 'citizenship' after Independence. See Momar Coumba Diop and Mamadou Diouf, *Le Sénégal sous Abdou Diouf*, Paris 1990, pp. 101–14.

the President, almost as small as Senghor himself, delivers a speech about socialism the African way. Inside the Chamber the new leaders, now dressed in black Western suits and speaking in stilted French, settle themselves excitedly around the table. Two white advisers deftly distribute an attaché case to each one—Sembene catching the beams of delight as they discover the freshly minted francs inside. The portly El Hadji then invites them all to his wedding: to celebrate their triumph, he is taking a third wife.

Post-credits, the film opens with the bridegroom picking up his first two wives, to drive to the wedding—another set piece. Much of the comedy of *Xala* lies in the vast and finely differentiated range of characters through which El Hadji's fall will be played out. The first wife is dignified and traditional—'got before he became somebody', according to the overheard gossip of a wedding guest. She counsels seemingly deference; but wife number two—Westernized, commercial, brash—berates him furiously for taking a third, his daughter's age. As the elite roll up for the lavish party, El Hadji greets his colleagues from the Chamber; a hint is dropped that all this is being paid for with misappropriated funds. The lady matchmaker, his new bride's aunt, delightedly shows off the presents—chief among them a new car, all done up in ribbons, as if it were getting married. Ngoné herself hides an empty smile behind a Western-style bridal veil. But the wedding night is a failure. El Hadji creeps out crestfallen the next day, attaché case in hand, sadly stroking the beribboned car as he goes by. The matchmaker comments caustically that he is 'neither fish nor fowl', a failure in business and as a man.

From this point on, the film is structured by the tension between El Hadji's outward display of wealth and actual impotence.¹¹ As this central theme is worked out, other strains are revealed. When the city's working women tip their slop buckets away outside his office the morning after the wedding, his ambitious secretary rushes out with her aerosol to spray the smell away. El Hadji arrives in his chauffeur-driven Mercedes and calls the President over for a meeting. Something terrible has happened, he explains: he must have been cursed. By now, a troupe of beggars have established themselves beneath his window.

¹¹ See Laura Mulvey 'Xala: The Carapace that Failed', in Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, eds, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, London 1994.

Strains of their music drift in. Slamming the window shut, El Hadji calls the police to get this 'human refuse' cleared away—'bad for tourism', he adds. The President counsels a visit to his village *marabout*, a witch-doctor who will lift the curse, for a price. The Mercedes heads out across the dry countryside. Eventually, equipped with the appropriate fetish in its leather pouch, El Hadji returns to his bride's house, and assures the matchmaker: 'All will be well now—I'm a man again'. But she, with ineffable smugness, informs him that today will not do: Ngoné has her period.

Meanwhile, the police have driven the whole crowd of beggars out of town and, with them, a series of other figures caught in the round-up—a peasant, robbed of the village funds with which he'd come to buy seed in the capital; a young journalist, struggling to produce a Wolof-language news-sheet.¹² Sembene uses actual beggars to play their roles—genuinely crippled, with deformities or missing limbs: an irruption of the real that disconcertingly undercuts other moments of domestic naturalism—Ngoné's smirk. Purposefully, they now set out on the long walk back to town, as El Hadji's affairs begin to unravel. His cheque to the *marabout* has bounced and the cure has been reversed; his second wife leaves him; his militant daughter Rama walks out, turning down his cash; his Mercedes is repossessed; Ngoné repudiates him; the Chamber scapegoat him for diverting food-aid funds. In a climactic moment, one of his colleagues flings open El Hadji's attaché case—it's empty, save for the *marabout's* leather pouch. At this stage, El Hadji snaps: 'This is the *real* fetish!' he shouts, holding up the case.

In a final scene, the beggars crowd into his home and their leader explains that it was he who had inflicted the spell—revenge for the land that El Hadji had long ago tricked him out of. He can be cured, but only by the beggars spitting on him. The film ends, freeze-frame, with a shot of El Hadji's naked torso, covered in spittle, while he stares backwards, as if into the past, beyond the fetishes—*marabout's* pouch, attaché case, car-bride—to the real curse, the original act of expropriation. On the soundtrack, the noise of the expectorating beggars continues, the unending expression of the dispossessed's contempt for their corrupt and impotent new elite.

¹² Sembene was one of the founders of a Dakar-based Wolof newspaper, *Kaddu*, during the seventies.

Remarkably, in a continent whose film-distribution networks are normally dominated by Kung Fu and Bollywood, *Xala* was a huge box-office hit, its uncompromising message and gleeful satire ensuring it came second only to Bruce Lee in Senegal's 1975 ratings. Clearly the mass audience for the film upset members of the elite, for Sembene's next work *Ceddo*, made in 1976, was banned for many years on the flimsiest of pretexts: that the Wolof title—*ceddo* roughly means 'those who refuse to surrender'—did not adhere to the laws of spelling laid down by President Senghor.¹³

Speech and surrender

Elements of the pre-modern play a complex role in Sembene's cinema. Many of his films are set outdoors, beneath the sky, within a collectively demarcated public space. As in ancient drama, particular stress is laid on the spoken word—the figure who speaks. Present in many of Sembene's films, this theme is explored most fully in the epic struggle over modes of expression that structures *Ceddo*. The protagonists of this mythical history—again, save for the slave-trader's shelter, set entirely in the open air—include the mass of the Wolof people; the king, his court and their *gewel*, Jaraaf; the Muslim immam and his tight-knit group of believers; the white slave-trader and his compatriot, the priest; and the enslaved.¹⁴ The *ceddo* are summoned to an assembly. The king's beautiful daughter, Princess Dior, has been kidnapped by one of their young leaders, in protest against the imposition of the Koran and the depredations of slavery. The *ceddo*'s leader Diogomaye is defiant: the people are unwilling to convert, as the court has done, to Islam. They do not want their children sold as slaves.

Within the fraught, hierarchical space of the assembly, the action develops through gesture—planting the totemic *samp* staff before the king, as sign of resistance—and through exchanges of the spoken word. The

¹³ Senghor himself was not a native speaker of the language. With his film banned, Sembene launched one of his most sustained attacks on the post-independence regime in a novel, *The Last of the Empire*, which gives a ruthless and highly personalized account of the vain and autocratic rule of Léon Mignane, president of Sunugal, and chief theorist of Authenegrfricanitus.

¹⁴ As with the neocolonial advisers in *Xala*, and in striking contrast to the powerfully defined characters of the Africans, the whites here are notably featureless and interchangeable; they do not speak.

king does not address his subjects directly, nor they him: instead, every act of speech is mediated by the *gewel*, and begins with the invocation, 'Jaraaf, neel—' or 'Jaraaf, xamalaal—': 'Tell him, Jaraaf'. The high Wolof in which they speak—elaborate, metaphorical, larded with proverbs, praise and poetic device—is in stark contrast to the repetitive monotone chant of the immam's followers, as they tell their beads.¹⁵ In ensuing gatherings, the immam will move ever closer to the seat of power, finally assuming the throne, while the *ceddo* will be expelled from the assembly. Faced with the choice of conversion or resistance, the people divide, many siding with the immam. Men, women and children are sold to the slave-trader in exchange for guns, and an uprising ensues that will burn the church and bring the immam to power. In a long and beautifully crafted scene, the defeated *ceddo* have their heads shaved, one by one, and are given Muslim names.

The immam's men, ignoring the courtly rules of battle, succeed in killing the young *ceddo* warrior who holds Dior captive. In the fastness to which he has taken her, different rules prevail. As Dior walks down to the sea to bathe, her proud naked body is a taunt both to the court and to the Koran. In a final scene, the two stories converge. Pulling on her robes, Dior gallops into the settlement, gun in hand, and kills the immam. The final frame freezes as she walks away: the future is still uncertain, the forces set in motion still in play.

Ceddo's essential unities of time and space, rituals of ancient drama, are radically disrupted, however, by interventions from a future age: gospel music, jazz and soul accompany the branding of the slaves in the compound outside the assembly; even more startling is the flash-forward fantasy of the priest, envisaging the happy *ceddo*, now dressed in twentieth-century clothes, celebrating a vast, open-air mass. In an eloquent reading made soon after the film appeared, Serge Daney saw the irruption of Afro-American music as a marker of what the *ceddo* would become after slavery, once they had been consigned by the whites to an 'all-singing, all-dancing' culture, condemned as 'people of the body',

¹⁵ To give an instance of the first: Jaraaf's invocation of one young prince begins, 'Wex xatt! ku la mos xam! gaynde Njaay! mēsoo xam ub jell. Yaa dib gilint gu dul fey! Bitterest of the bitter! Whoever tastes you will know. You are a lion, Njaay! You, who have never known defeat. You are eternal fire!': Cham, 'African Oral Traditions', p. 36.

deprived of the word. Stressing the sense of engagement, in the film's early scenes, of every act of speech—each phrase uttered as though the speaker's last—he argued that what was lost, when the recited book triumphed over the freely chosen word, was the people's right to speak: 'A right, but also a duty; a duty, but also a pleasure, a game'. The greatness of Sembene's film lay in posing the question: before they were condemned to sing, what did they say? An answer is suggested in Diogomaye's opening speech: 'No to slavery. No to Islam'.¹⁶

Under the baobab tree

Yet Daney's reading fails to note the continuities in the African tradition of the spoken word. The act of speech, the question: 'What will you say?' lies at the heart of Sembene's 1992 film *Guelwaar*. As so often in his work, different worlds are juxtaposed: town and country; educated, urban Catholics and Muslim villagers. As in *Xala*, for example, the counterpositions are played out through intricate, wide-ranging networks of characters and relationships. Again, the initial premise—a man has died; his body has gone missing from the morgue—combines elements of social farce with political menace. The church service has to be cancelled, since there's nothing to bury; but back at the dead man's house, the funeral party goes ahead. In a scene both grimly comic and deeply moving, his widow pours out her heart to his empty suit, laid out on the bed, and we learn that Guelwaar—nickname ('the noble one') of a local militant—could be both bad-tempered and unfaithful, and that the family has been kept in comfort by the earnings of his daughter Sophie, a prostitute in Dakar. The orange-robed members of a Catholic sect keep up a steady background of hymns in the courtyard as Sophie's colleague explains enthusiastically to the family priest that she'd been first in line to greet the Pope on his last visit to Dakar. Guelwaar's comrades in the struggle against aid-dependency, greeted by his disabled son, settle down to eat and drink.

The other son—brash, cynical, foul-mouthed Barthélemy, home from France—enlists the help of a local police chief in tracking down his father's body. Guelwaar's corpse has been released in lieu of a Muslim's to a family in a distant village, and has been buried with full Islamic rites. The pair's journey of recovery—intercut with the funeral party—

¹⁶ Serge Daney, 'Ceddo (O. Sembene)', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 304, October 1979, p. 53.

sets in train a series of flashbacks, crude enough at first, in which Guelwaar's hard, humorous face gradually comes to dominate the whole screen. Village life mirrors that of the sophisticated urbanites: in counterpoint to the pious prostitutes, the dead man's youngest and prettiest widow is seen calmly flicking through a magazine and announcing to her brother-in-law, by whom she's had two children, that she's just about to leave. The brother, in a show of religious zeal, refuses to have the grave re-opened. His relatives blackmail the village headman: if he agrees to dig up Guelwaar's corpse, they'll reveal what he did with the aid money.

Such a background, portrayed without illusion—at one stage, Barthélemy relieves himself against the national symbol, a baobab tree—effectively undercuts any sanctimony towards Guelwaar himself. By the time we have seen him fleeing naked from the hut of a village beauty, the lady's husband in hot pursuit, his nickname has acquired something of an ironic cast. But on this clear-eyed basis, a sense of who the man really was can be recovered. The police chief recalls Guelwaar lodging a complaint at the station against the thugs who were breaking up women's meetings at his house; the cop accused the women of talking politics. 'Is there a law against discussing the awful situation in our country?' Guelwaar snaps back. His widow remembers confronting him about their daughter's occupation: 'Better to earn it like that than to beg', he replies. Intercut with the mounting confrontation, as the funeral party arrives at the village graveyard to claim back his corpse, are flashbacks of Guelwaar, delegated by his comrades, arriving to address an international aid-donors' conference in the region. Amid packed crowds, with the sun glinting on the flags of the united nations and the assembled dignitaries, Guelwaar raises his finger above their heads and delivers, in Wolof, the speech for which he will be killed:

The pointing finger shows the way. You all know that. But to open your five fingers to a passer-by—that's begging. Our leaders preen and strut about as if this aid were the fruit of their labour. And we, silent people, with no voice and no shame, dance before it . . . These countries, sending us aid, send it grudgingly. They laugh at us back in their homes. And our sons and daughters who live among those people feel humiliated—you know why? Because if a country is always taking aid from other people, generation after generation, all it will be able to say is: 'Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!'

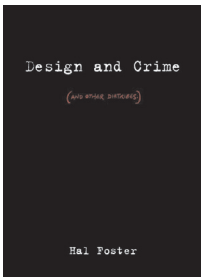
Finally the funeral party recover the body and set off, on foot and horse-drawn carts, back to the city. On the road, they meet a truck carrying a small pile of sacks, stamped 'US Aid'. The young Christians climb aboard and tip the white grain out across the highway—it is a derisory amount. Their cartwheels roll over it as they go proudly on their way. The corrupt local deputy who had promised it to buy off his constituents will have to do better by his people; and they will have to find something other than 'thank you' to say.

Sembene's latest film, *Faat Kine* (2000), is the first of a trilogy on women in contemporary Africa, surtitled 'Heroism of Daily Life'. Faat Kine's valour, though, is of a contradictory sort. Repudiated as a young bride, with two children to bring up, she took a job pumping petrol; now middle-aged, rich and confident, she runs the gas station. The spoken word, so powerfully deployed in earlier movies, is here disembodied, behind glass doors—Faat Kine's singsong voice on the telephone: 'Station Total Point E, bonjour!' She can go out with her women friends, send her ex-husbands packing, take what lovers she pleases. Shockingly for a conservative African country, Sembene shows independent women freely displaying in public the boisterous behaviour traditionally reserved for the private realm—Faat Kine and her friends in an ice-cream parlour, roaring with laughter as they discuss their men. Social tensions remain, even if elite Dakar looks more prosperous now. Faat Kine honks her horn to speed up the working women crossing the road with baskets on their head, and pepper-sprays the wife of one of her lovers. When a proud beggar woman remarks, 'If you've so much money, why don't you share it?' she huffs at the cheek. Yet if Faat Kine has kicked the ladder away behind her, the film still exhibits a tenderness towards her struggles. As she waits for her lover, the final shot closes on her bare brown foot, her softly curling toes.

An opponent alike of Senghor's monarchy, Abdou Diouf's bland managerialism and Abdoulaye Wade's free-market policies, Sembene still speaks wistfully of the trained African engineers and agronomists the Soviet Union once supplied. His Brechtian fusion of uncompromising social stance with radical explorations of popular form has opened the way for the emergence of a new African cinema over the last decades. His influence is powerfully felt in the early work of Souleymane Cissé, for example, and a younger generation—directors such as Idrissa Ouédraogo, Gaston Kaboré, Cheikh Oumar Sissokoh

and Adame Drabo—acknowledged the stylistic debt, while abandoning Sembene’s political engagement for a more commercial road. Now 79, Sembene still champions an ethic of contestation. He is currently filming the last section of the ‘Daily Life’ trilogy in a remote village in Burkina Faso: it explores changing attitudes to female excision. His sense of mischief remains intact. When I asked him earlier this year about the second film in the series, he smiled: ‘I made that one for myself.’

Previous articles in this series have been Tony Wood on the cinema of Aleksei German (NLR 7), Silvana Silvestri on Gianni Amelio (NLR 10) and Leo Chanjen Chen on Edward Yang (NLR 11).



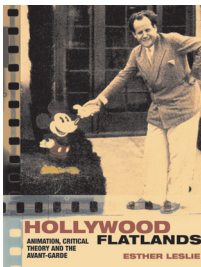
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