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Reimagining Gender and African Tradition? Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* revisited

Aaron Mushengyezi

In the film Xala, Ousmane Sembène's interrogation of gender, African tradition, and modernity in postindependence Africa is problematic in many ways. While Sembène reimages gender and tradition in contemporary Africa, his vision is also surreal and romanticized. The paper critiques several binary oppositions which Sembène seems to create in Xala: between the "decadence" of modernity and the "purity" of African tradition, and between revolutionary, "masculine" women and villainous, "feminine" men. The paper raises questions regarding Sembène's vision for Africa: is his symbolic depiction of the xala (the curse of impotence on the African elite) as at once the "curse" of Western colonialism and modernity convincing? and does he see "modernity" as an entirely negative force in Africa?

Introduction

Ousmane Sembène's films often present problems of interpretation, not so much because he usually employs polysemous symbols and interrogates controversial issues in postindependence Africa (which he often does), but because of the way he problematizes the issues with which he engages. In *Xala*, he intriguingly destabilizes issues of gender, tradition, and modernity. I argue that the radical way in which he reimages gender and tradition in Africa, while convincing in many respects, is surreal and romanticist. I posit that in *Xala*, he evokes two problematic binary oppositions: between the corruption and decadence of foreign influence and the purity and morality of African tradition, the former presented as "corrupting" and the latter "redemptive"; and between strong, revolutionary "masculine" women and villainous, weak, "feminine" men. These tendencies raise important questions: is his projection of women and African tradition romanticist? is his symbolic depiction of the *xala* (the curse of impotence on the African elite) as at once the "curse" of Western colonialism and modernity convincing? and does he see Western modernity as an entirely negative force in Africa?

African writers who attempted to reimage the precolonial era tended to portray the traditional patriarchal order with women at the margins, as men's appendages. Thus, while texts like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1994) and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1962) portray women as victims of patriarchal ideology, they do not set out to present a critique of this gender dichotomy. Indeed, writers like Chinua Achebe primarily saw their mission as that of rewriting history, even though they also raised some questions on certain cultural practices that prevailed. Even the anticolonial struggle further ignored or sacrificed the issue of women's liberation in the name of preserving culture or dignifying the past (Peterson 2001:253). Instead, the object of the decolonization movement was primarily getting rid of the colonizer and instituting self-rule with the African (male) elite at the helm of the new political order.

I will first discuss the question of gender, which is one of the central issues Sembène addresses in *Xala*. Many scholars, including Carr (1985) and Stepan (1990), have discussed the question of female space in colonial and postcolonial discourse. They observe that colonial writing on Africa not only ignored its women subjects, but even when the writing considered women, it pushed them to the margins as third-class citizens in the imperial commonwealth. These critics see women in Africa and other former colonies as having suffered "double colonialism": both as victims of oppression by patriarchy in their own societies, and of marginalization in the colonial hierarchy of power. Carr argues that colonial writing not only put women at the periphery of society, but also tended to erase them as an insignificant "other": passive, childlike, needing guidance, irrational, sexually aberrant, and unpredictable (1985:50). Stepan observes that in the nineteenth century, racial discourses claimed that women's "low brain weights and deficient brain structures were analogous to those of the lower races, and their inferior intellectualities explained on this basis" (1990:40). Women have been victims of colonial gender construction and of patriarchal ideology in traditional societies. In many traditional African cultures, women have long been appendages of men, with no cultural rights to inherit land, who can be divorced without any claim to the husband's property, and so on.

However, through his characterization of Rama in *Xala*, Sembène makes a radical statement on the issue of gender equity in Africa. Rama is Sembène's model of the truly liberated African. I agree with B. Mbye Cham (2001:261) that in Rama, Sembène is purging African histories and traditions of Euro-Christian and Arab-Islamic fictions and corruptions, including blind spots imposed by Islam on the role of women. While he admires Adja for her traditional dignity and the purity she radiates, he points out that she epitomizes the negative influence of Islam on African tradition.¹ Subservient, she passively accepts El Hadji's polygamy without so much as raising a finger, because she believes that this is the will of Allah. Both African culture and Islam are portrayed as inhibiting women's assertiveness, leaving them at the behest of the man's patriarchal and phallic power.

N'Gone's mother is the perfect example of women propagating the ideology of the oppressor, through the marital counseling she gives her daughter:

Remember that men and women are not equal. Man is the master. You must always be available. Don't run away. Don't raise your voice. Do as he says. Be submissive. Don't argue with him.²

Sembène obviously does not condone the propagation of an ideology that perpetuates patriarchy and inferiority of women to men, whether in the name of religion or culture. He sees such an ideology as a bad element, one that should be discarded, one that mothers should not hand down to the young generation of girls like N'Gone and Rama. We see this sentiment illustrated well in Rama, when she tells her mother to divorce her father after he has decided to marry a girl her age. "I won't share my husband with another man," she declares, "because "men are bastards. . . . A polygamous man is a liar."

But for all her apparent subservience, Adja Awa is not El Hadji's doormat either. She talks to him as an equal, and asserts her rights as the elder wife, who must be respected. That is why she refuses to get out of the car to go and greet Oumi. In her, Sembène shows that, contrary to what is often portrayed, the traditional woman did enjoy rights and freedoms. In an interview with Murphy (2001:230), he reiterates this point:

D. Murphy: The image you present of women in your society is fairly complex. . . . How do you see the evolution of women's role in society here in Senegal?

Sembène: But the African woman has more freedom than the European woman! You ask the question because Europeans think that the African woman is oppressed. In Africa, women and men have separate powers in strictly defined areas.

Although the assertion that African women have more freedom than European women is unconvincing, Sembène nevertheless makes the point that African women, too, have certain powers and privileges, rights that they enjoy within their cultural domains; hence, in his view, stereotyping African tradition as entirely oppressive to women is misleading.

Sembène acknowledges in *Xala* that the liberation of women can be attained only through education and exposure to modernity, suspicious though he is of the danger of cultural alienation that both processes present. Oumi is "liberated," but she is also a "victim" of modernity. She is an exposed, modern woman, and that status has empowered her. She relates to El Hadji on more than equal terms; in fact, he is the "weaker sex" before her! She is a "masculine female." She and Rama are the perfect demonstration

of women's liberation and power. Unlike Adja (who fails to speak out, even when her husband neglects his duty of providing for her and the children), Oumi can stand up to El Hadji and assert her rights:

Hey[,] stop dreaming. Come down to earth! . . . You are too old to tame a young chic[k]. . . . This is none of my business. Tonight is my turn. I'll wait for you at home. You can't fool me. Your marriage is not working. Tonight at my place.

But then Oumi is a clear case of what Hogan calls "alienating hybridity"—a bad hybrid of modernity and tradition, with its negative ramifications, which leaves the individual culturally disjointed from both indigenous and metropolitan traditions (Hogan 2000:320). Oumi dons a hair weave, and wears makeup and a revealing evening dress. She is materialistic in that she has been taken up by the capitalist consumer culture in Dakar, and she does not hesitate to abandon El Hadji and carry away all the property when his fortune crumbles. Herein lies the paradox in her character: exposure to Western modernity has in many ways liberated her, yet modernity for her is an alienating and corrupting force. Can we blame her frailty on her Westernization? or is it a character flaw?

Rama seems to be Sembène's model for the ideal African woman: she is a revolutionary character, who challenges patriarchy. She denounces polygamy, and openly tells her father, "Men are bastards. . . . A polygamous man is a liar." She shines as the defender of African culture: she wears her hair in an Afro, wears African cloth (Senegalese *boubou*), speaks to her father in Wolof, refuses to drink imported Evian water, and is studying Wolof-language orthography at university. While her mother suffers quietly with her children as El Hadji neglects them, Rama goes to his office to confront him. She is the most sophisticated and mature character in the film. As Gugler and Diop observe, "Sembène posits a selective approach to both the African and the Western heritage. Rama brings the ideas of such a synthesis alive" (1998:151).

Rama embodies for Sembène what men have failed to provide in their leadership of Africa. Indeed, surprisingly, there is no single good educated man in the movie: all the men have sinned and fallen short of Sembène's moral standards. Rama stands as the antithesis to everything of which men have been the guilty accomplices. As Case (1993) has argued, Sembène uses her to disengage the superior-inferior concept in gender relations between men and women. But as we watch her in the movie, we ask: does a Rama exist in Africa? or is she by and large a dream? She is reminiscent of the other revolutionary women seen in Sembène's novels and films. In *God's Bits of Wood*, for instance, Penda wears a military belt and commands leadership of the railway strike in which men have failed or looked indecisive, and they are forced to accept her command. She publicly slaps the man who had molested her in the union building, and by doing that, she answers sexual violence with violence, thereby asserting her right to be respected

by men. Jones argues that Sembène reverses traditional gender roles to show the revolutionary effect of the strike on men and women in Thiès, especially in the way it emancipates the community of women. He reconciles *God's Bits of Wood* with colonial records and historical research about the strike in Thiès to demonstrate that Sembène deliberately rewrites history to suit his gender vision (Jones 2000:123–124), for while women characters like Rama or Penda encapsulate the “Sembènian” romantic vision of a liberated African woman, and of Mother Africa (and it is indeed an inspiring vision), it is also true to say that in reality, this vision is far from being realized.

Reimagining African Tradition?

The way Sembène reimagines African tradition in *Xala* is not new: it has been central to many works of African writers, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1994), Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1962) and *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Ousmane Sembène's novels *God's Bits of Wood* (1962) and *Xala* (1976), and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966); however, the peculiarity of Sembène as a postcolonial writer and filmmaker is that he not only rewrites history, colonialism, tradition, and gender issues, as do many of his contemporaries, but he engages them in a radical and often controversial way. He states his mission in *Xala* in an interview with François Pfaff:

Before we started to make films, Europeans had shot films about the African continent. Most of the Africans we saw in those films were unable to set one foot in front of another by themselves. African landscapes were used as settings. Those films were based in European stories. (Pfaff 1984:3)

As he states in this interview, he sets out to correct the distortions of Africa's historical experience with colonialism. Like other African filmmakers, he sets out—as Gugler puts it—“to *re-image* Africa, and Western viewers are given an opportunity to *re-imagine* the continent and its people” (Gugler 2003:4, emphasis in the original). Concern for the need to reimage Africa and reassert its position in global affairs is in many ways an issue that Sembène grapples with in all his works. In *Guelwaar*, he focuses on the problem of development aid as one that has crippled Africa's independence; in *Xala* he dwells on the problem of the political impotence and ideological confusion of the African elite who have taken over power after independence. Critics like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o see this ideological confusion as resulting from a disorientation of an African elite who have been brainwashed by colonial education. The education they received alienates them from their African traditions and shifts their worldview; it moves the center of their universe from Africa to Europe; from an Afrocentric to a Eurocentric perspective (Ngũgĩ 1993:3–8). From what base, he asks, did

Africans view the world?—from the view of their culture and tradition? or from that of their former colonizer? (Ngũgi 1993:8). Behind what he calls this “culture of apemanship and parrotry,” he sees the politics of language and culture as being part of the larger problem forging a colonial mentality among African intelligentsia (1986:1–2). Thus, he sees the true liberation of the colonial subject as being intrinsically bound up with doing away with the languages, cultures, and ideologies of the former colonial powers. In his attack on his fellow African intellectuals like Achebe and Okara, for instance, who propose a pragmatic hybridization of the two traditions,³ Ngũgi asks how we arrived “at this acceptance of ‘the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature’, in our culture and in our politics” (1986:9). He privileges a radical approach, “a fundamental social transformation of the structures of our societies starting with a real break with imperialism and its internal ruling allies” (1986:xii). Like Sembène in *Xala*, he sees “a struggle between two mutually opposed forces in Africa today: an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other,” the former “maintained by the international bourgeoisie using the multinational and of course the flag-waving native ruling classes” (Ngũgi 1986:2). Sembène shares this vision in *Xala*: he privileges doing away with colonial languages, cultures, and political ideologies as the only way to decolonize the African mind.

In many ways, *Xala* can be seen as Sembène’s indictment of neo-colonialism and the political impotence of the new postindependence African bourgeoisie class, embodied by the protagonist El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye. Though perhaps not as radical as *Guelwaar*,⁴ the film vividly portrays the betrayal of independence—a popular theme, one that runs through Flora Gomes’s *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* (1994), Ingrid Sinclair’s *Flame* (1996), Moussa Sene Absa’s *Tableau Ferraille* (1997), and other films. Sembène views the tragedy of African politics as resulting from a crisis of inept leadership, symbolized by the *xala* on El Hadji Bèye’s manhood—the curse of his sexual impotence. The Africans who take over the Chamber of Commerce in Dakar (probably symbolizing the independent African state) are not only parrots of their colonial master’s ideology, but incompetent, corrupt managers. Their revolutionary rhetoric of “African socialism,” “Negritude,” and “Pan-Africanism”—reminiscent of slogans promoted by men like Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, and Julius Nyerere—becomes an empty cliché as soon as they come to power. The Chamber president and members of his executive later become, in every sense, “white men in black skins.” As N’Goné’s mother puts it, they are “neither fish nor fowl.” They wear European suits, speak French, and despise their indigenous language and culture. El Hadji imports Evian water from France for drinking, cleaning his Mercedes Benz, and refilling its radiator. However, when it comes to polygyny, the President is quick to remind his colleagues: “We must be African as well as modern. Long live Africanness.” El Hadji scolds Rama for her “revolutionary ideas,” reminding her that it’s people like him “who kicked out the colonialists,” and that “polygamy is part of our religion.”

Yet only when the *xala* strikes his manhood does he really remember his African traditions and the healing power of the marabouts.

I will discuss *Xala* in relation to an issue that I think is central to the film: the curse that has struck the African elite and the question of Western influence. I propose that in *Xala*, Western modernity is demonized as the *xala* that has plagued postindependence African politics. The Frenchmen in the Chamber of Commerce in Dakar hand over power to Africans at independence, and the latter renounce all the symbols of colonialism like the statue of Marie-Antoinette. In the film, the Chamber President rhetorically radiates this resolve by Africans to take over and manage their destiny:

Never before has an African been President of our Chamber of Commerce. We must take what is ours. What is rightly ours. We must control our industry and commerce our culture and our destiny. We must show our country that we are as capable as any other country. . . . Our struggle for independence is over. This is an historic day. It is a victory for our people. Our people are now governed by their own people in the interests of all the people.

His words echo the wish not only of the leaders, but also of the people, whose aspirations for political freedom and economic prosperity are high. At the same time, they depict the wrong objective of the change and its lack of a clear mission. The overall motivation is simply to “replace” the white face in the chair with a black one, the latter continuing from where the former has stopped: it is simply to see that African people “are now governed by their own people,” rather than a conviction to change things as such. Thus, Sembène treats this takeover as a mere change of guards, rather than the result of a fundamental change, when Senegalese leaders start parroting ideologies they neither properly understand nor can implement. In his inaugural speech, the President says: “We have chosen Socialism, the only true Socialism: African Socialism. Socialism with a human face. We have achieved independence.” Sembène is clearly impatient with the postindependence class of leaders, who mimic foreign ideologies instead of evolving their own, ideologies that would fit their societies, cultures, and conditions.⁵

Suddenly, as soon as the independence euphoria is over, the leaders’ revolutionary fire dies down. In the film, Sembène captures the irony of their ambivalent identity and cultural alienation, and satirizes their new-found culture of capitalistic consumerism. Taking on another virgin his daughter’s age becomes for El Hadji a celebration of his wealth; however, Kebe, the self-righteous member of the Chamber, tells us that El Hadji has diverted 100 tons of rice imported for the hungry peasants and used it “to buy a third wife.” El Hadji’s wedding thus becomes the epitome of celebrating an insatiable greed for accumulation and self-aggrandizement. The virginal N’Gone becomes the symbol of its materialist fetishism.⁶ To

this discussion, we shall return. The wedding party also provides us with a snapshot into the corruption that goes on behind the scenes when Kebe is seen demanding a 15 percent commission from a businessman to handle a tourism project.

In *Xala*, we witness the alienation of the ruling class from the masses when El Hadji complains to the Chamber President about beggars in front of his shop: "President, can't we get rid of this human rubbish? Is this independence?" To which the President responds with orders to Police: "Can you send me a police van? I want to clean the streets of beggars. It's bad for tourism." We cannot help but wonder: is this the solution to the problem of destitute people in Dakar? Does it serve any useful purpose to treat the symptoms of rural-urban migration by peasants who have suffered severe droughts, poor harvests, and hunger? The only place they can look for food is the city. In the film, a poor peasant narrates his ordeal to the *Kaddu* newspaper vendor, who promises to publicize the news all over the world:

As you know we've had a drought for many years. The crops have been poor. The villagers sold what little millet they could harvest. I had all their savings here in my bag to buy what they needed in the city. That's the money that was stolen. It's more than I can bear.

The peasant's lament demonstrates the plight of the poor, who have been dispossessed at all levels of society. The pickpocket is a miniature version of an elite counterpart like El Hadji, who has failed to account for the money he was given by the National Food Board to import 100 tons of rice for the starving masses.

As Sembène pinpoints the root of corruption, materialism, and alienation in Senegal, he blames it on the influence of capitalism, which has snapped the moral fiber that checked the excesses of African society. No sooner do the Africans take over the Chamber of Commerce from the French than we see the latter sauntering back to the Chamber with briefcases laden with money, which they distribute to African executives. As they open the briefcases, a smile spreads over their faces. We are left guessing as to what the money betokens, but we sense that it smacks of bribery and that Sembène uses it to signal the genesis of corruption. Have the revolutionaries been given a bribe or commission on some deal? Is it donor funds that are ending up, as they often do, in private pockets? When we see Kebe asking for a commission from a businessman to handle his tourism project, we are reminded of this incident. Is Sembène suggesting the briefcases full of banknotes denote the monetization of human greed and acquisitiveness? The scene does not provide ready answers.

One easily sees a relationship between this incident and the way Achebe traces the genesis of corruption in Nigeria in *Things Fall Apart* (1994): the monetization of the economy and commercialization of justice. When a monetized economy (replacing barter trade) is established with

trade in palm oil, African materialism, formerly policed by a strict traditional judicial system through the mediatory power of the Egwugwu (ancestral spirits), is let loose as the traditions that formerly held people together fall apart. The power of the council of elders (Ndichie) and Egwugwu is undermined and replaced by that of the colonial administration and the court messengers (*kotma*), who begin demanding bribes to bail out prisoners.⁷ That is Achebe's thesis of the genesis of corruption, a thesis to which Sembène also seems to subscribe. But *Xala* raises another important question: is Western influence solely to blame for the curse that has afflicted the elite, resulting in their impotence, both physical and symbolic? or rather, is Sembène presenting the power of the curse on El Hadji's manhood as partly the indictment for discarding the morals of his African traditions, and at the same time as a check on the corrupting power of foreign influence?

The film seems to answer the above questions in the affirmative. As soon as El Hadji gets to the acme of his capitalistic accumulation and marries the beautiful virgin N'Gone, the *xala* attacks his manhood. He fails to deflower her, and ends up scuttling to every marabout for healing, despite his stated rejection of traditional beliefs. When N'Gone's mother asks him to sit astride a mortar with the pestle between his legs in order to fulfil African rituals for good luck in his marriage, he angrily dismisses the suggestion: "It's ridiculous. . . . It's all nonsense. Sit in a mortar with the pestle between my legs? Never!" When he is struck with impotence moments later, her proverbial words resonate with wisdom: "You all think you are Europeans. You discarded your culture. But you are neither fish nor fowl." The metaphor of fish and fowl is striking here, because the two kinds of animals inhabit different environments: one is aquatic, and the other lives on land. The contrast in the proverb clearly brings out the message: people like El Hadji are living in neither one continent nor another; their ambivalence hangs in the void of cultural insignificance. I will briefly analyze the sequence of the wedding night, when the *xala* strikes El Hadji, because in many ways it illustrates Sembène's use of the curse as an indictment of this elite class.

A good interplay of *mise en scène* and cinematographic qualities effectively captures the ironic twist in El Hadji Bèye's wedding. In the first shot, we see the mother, bride, and groom going up the stairs. The camera is placed below them on the steps as they walk away and disappear into the hallway toward the bedroom. The shadow of the door closing is a cut point to the next scene (a technique made famous by Quentin Tarantino). The next shot begins with cross-cutting action between the bride and the groom as they prepare for the anticipated moment of sexual celebration. As the mother prepares her daughter, the film cuts to the groom in the bathroom, shaving and washing. We hear a voiceover of the mother counseling her daughter, on which Bèye is eavesdropping in the bathroom. His back is turned to the camera, but there is a shot of his reflection in the mirror. The mirror is dirty and faded, evidently like the soul of the person being reflected in it.

In continuation of the back-and-forth cutting, the film cuts back to a revealing black-and-white photograph of N'Goné on the wall. The mother and bride are barely visible at the right edge of the frame. By focusing on her picture and then briefly on her body as she turns around, the film makes her into something of a material artifact, into which she has been commodified, yet she is innocent and pure, something that a cursed, corrupt man like El Hadji Bèye cannot physically possess. This is the crux of the film. When the mother and daughter are ready for him to come out, he shuts the light out on himself, foreshadowing the entrapment of his literal darkness to come. We see this in the next shot, as the mother and the presumed aunt come into the bedroom holding a cockerel to slaughter on the bed to signify the traditional celebration of N'Goné's virginity. But that won't happen, as the girl says in a voiceover: "Badienne, nothing happened. I'm still a virgin." We see an intense close-up of the mother's face in front of the gown and N'Goné's picture in the background. She tells it like it is: "She came to you pure and you crumpled like a wet rag. Get up and do something!" The women's dominance becomes apparent. The film cuts to a close-up of Bèye, still holding his head weighed down by guilt and shame—guilt because he refused to perform what he calls a "ridiculous" ritual when N'Goné's mother had asked him to sit astride a mortar with a pestle between his legs, as custom demands, to bless his marriage. Now he thinks (we presume) that his refusal might be the cause of the *xala* on his manhood. Surrounded by three women, El Hadji feels worthless: he is no man. The women verbally accost him and "exile" him from the room. As he walks down the lonely street, slowly and dejectedly, he is unaware of his car and driver behind him. We know what is haunting his mind, for we can hear playing in his mind a voiceover of the bride's mother scolding him for ignoring tradition.

It thus becomes clear that N'Goné is too pure for the decadent El Hadji Bèye to pollute; indeed, throughout the movie, he never gets to possess her. And her mother's words, ringing in Bèye's mind, seal this damning effect at the closure of the sequence: "I told you to straddle the mortar. But you took no notice. . . . See the result of your stubbornness. You all think you're Europeans. You discarded your tradition. You are neither fish nor fowl." These words resound in our ears, like a judge's hammer, as we watch El Hadji Bèye's car slowly disappear into the corrupt city where he belongs.

In the final sequence, when we later discover that the *xala* was imposed on El Hadji by his half-brother, its vindictive power becomes even more significant. He defrauded the poor man of his share of inheritance (his land), and as a result he is now a beggar and blind. At this moment of catharsis in the plot, beggars storm El Hadji's mansion. The half-brother unravels the shocking and utterly embarrassing story:

It is our vengeance. What I've become is your fault. You took our share of the inheritance. You forgot our names and we were expropriated. I was sent to prison. I am your half-brother. I arranged your *xala*. The marabout told you that.

If you want to be a man again, take your clothes off. Stand naked in front of us and we'll spit on you. Do it!

The beggars' action here obviously raises the important question of human dignity that El Hadji has violated by misappropriating his half-brother's inheritance. He transgresses both his rights as a human being and the kinship bonds that define human relationships. In other words, El Hadji has been dehumanized by materialism that comes with modernity, and of which all the members of the Chamber are guilty. The audience agrees that he deserves the shame of stripping and being spat on by the beggars.

In this sequence, Sembène presents the *xala* as a triumph of African tradition over modernity, insofar as it can tame an individual's moral excesses and the corrupting influence of capitalist accumulation. Sembène uses this sequence to make a statement for African tradition and its ability to control El Hadji's moral decadence: he defrauds his half-brother, who inflicts him with the *xala* as his revenge. And although Sembène argues elsewhere that he approves of neither Western capitalist fetishism nor the marabouts' spiritual fetishism (Murphy 2001:108–109), yet we see a sense in which he clearly privileges the latter's power over the former. I therefore agree with Vieyra, that while Sembène shows that there are good and bad marabouts, he makes the point that the spiritual power of good marabouts works (1987:37).

Malkamus and Armes, in contrast, see the triumph of tradition over modernity in spatial terms. They argue that in the politics of space, tradition prevails over modernity. They demonstrate this triumph through El Hadji's internal contradictions. He refuses to perform the traditional marriage ritual, and yet resorts to marabouts for healing; he visits them in a suit and shuns the dirty environment, but then when his check bounces, they reimpose the *xala* on him, and he scolds Rama for replying in Wolof when he speaks to her in French, but when he asks to address the Chamber in Wolof, he is told French is the official language and by wanting to use Wolof he is being "racist, sectarian, reactionary" (Malkamus and Arms 1991:195).

The *xala* is therefore as damning as it is liberating: damning because when El Hadji dispossesses his half-brother of his family land, he transgresses kinship and violates the customary laws that protect an individual's rights of inheritance. He angers the spirits of the dead, as it were, and in so doing brings a curse on himself. The *xala* imposes a condition on him for which he cannot get medical treatment from the hospital; it brings him down to consult the same wretched of the earth he calls "human rubbish." But therein lies the "liberating" power of the curse: El Hadji has to be spat on by the beggars as the only remedy for getting the curse off himself, that is, to "become a man again." It's the only hope for him and his family. We therefore assume that after the spitting (healing) session, his manhood is restored, as he makes amends with his half-brother he defrauded. We assume that he becomes a liberated and morally "reborn" man. Equally significant is the fact that his "rebirth" occurs when he is with his

traditionally dignified first wife, Adja Awa, who is described as the “Eve, the giver of life[,] . . . a model of Senegalese womankind,” who “recovers his ‘Africanness’” (Pfaff 1984:157). His salvation comes after the materialistic, Westernized Oumi has deserted him. It is a kind of “homecoming,” but it is a change that nevertheless must come after he has lost everything he acquired fraudulently from his business dealings at the Chamber. In fact, we begin seeing his fundamental change of consciousness when his economic empire begins to crumble—when the Chamber decides to disown him. It marks the beginning of his ideological renaissance:

What is shocking about my behaviour? Apparently I am the black sheep. What am I accused of? What are we but petty officials and subcontractors? What do we do but redistribute the leftovers? We’re the scum of the business world! . . . Each of you here is a bastard! Worse than me. Much worse. We’re all in the same boat. All of you, like me, have signed cheques which bounce. . . . Dare blow your tops about injustices we’re all guilty of.

That El Hadji can now attack the Chamber members for their hypocrisy is significant for his eventual development as a tragic hero. Like other such characters, he suffers to begin a process of expiation. He shines above the other corrupt, holier-than-thou Chamber members, who ostracize him though they are equally guilty. In my view, it prepares him for his salvation at the close of the film. By losing all, he, in a sense, regains all—his conscience, his manhood, his morality. One therefore agrees with Vieyra’s observation, that El Hadji’s impotence “can only be temporary, for people need to be able to hope for change”; however, that this change results from “the action of beggars, cripples, the sick, in other words by people reduced to rock bottom” (Vieyra 1987:37) becomes another question.

If we are to assume that the spitting scene is the “prescription” for El Hadji’s “salvation,” how credible is this “prescription”? While it is true that in African traditional religion some people may possess the power to heal and to curse, is spitting on someone in that manner an African, nay Senegalese, “traditional” ritual of healing? Symbolic though it may be, does it not at the same time misrepresent the African traditions that Sembène seeks to reclaim and defend? Indeed Sembène has been taken to task for “misrepresenting” African tradition in the last scene in *Xala*. Pfaff recounts an interesting example in an interview with Assane Seck, the Senegalese Minister of Culture:

In the last scene in *Xala*, people spit on El Hadji. Well, such a scene does not exist in reality. It cannot exist. One day, when I was Minister of Foreign Affairs, Senegalese ambassadors gathered and we watched *Xala*. Sembène was with us. Our ambassadors were embarrassed when the film, with its army

of beggars, was shown abroad. Sembène was asked where he had seen this. He answered: "it does not exist." We asked him where he had seen people spitting as was the case in *Xala*. He answered the same thing. But, he countered, in Senegal, when something disgusts us deeply, we draw the spit from the depths of our throat and throw it sideways, far away. This is true. The idea is true but the fact that this is done to someone, as it occurs in *Xala*, is inaccurate. . . . The act is symbolic. People strive to understand what they see. This is why some of our films are successful in Senegal and not abroad. There they are not understood. . . . Using images which do not exist in reality . . . can mislead people. (1984:47)

The above quotation raises many pertinent questions. That the ambassadors were embarrassed by the pictures of the "army of beggars," of course, was part of Sembène's intention. They should be ashamed indeed for the failure of their government to address the abysmal conditions of the poor. And if Sembène's films are not well conceived in the Western audience, it is because they are not meant for their primary consumption in the first place. As Sembène has said elsewhere, he views his role as *griot* (storyteller) for his people through film, and it is for these that his message is meant (Mulvey 2000:537); at the same time, however, if he uses surreal images and empty signifiers that have no context within Senegalese culture, then it amounts indeed to a misrepresentation of the culture both at home and abroad.

The other question that arises from Sembène's treatment of the modernity-tradition duality is: does he blame everything bad in Africa on an external origin? For instance, while African writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka reimagine African tradition, they recognize that precolonial Africa was not rosy either. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe attacks colonial officials and missionaries like the District Commissioner and Mr. Smith for using high-handed methods to subdue the Africans and erase everything symbolizing African culture; however, Achebe also shows abundant bad African traditional practices: leaving twins in the evil forest, human sacrifice, treating lepers and *efulefu* as outcasts in society, and so on. And practices like female circumcision still persist. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka ridicules schoolteacher Lakunle, who has become brainwashed by Western modernity, and has become a parrot of foreign ideas he does not understand, which he tries to use to woo a beautiful, unschooled village girl, Sidi. But while Soyinka attacks this colonial hangover in Lakunle, he does not spare Baroka, the village chief, either, for Baroka has thwarted development for his area by bribing contractors so the railway line does not pass through Ilujinle because such progress would threaten his power. So is Sembène recommending a return to "true" African traditions as the way to liberate Africans from the corrupting influence of modernity? Is he turning a blind eye on the positive impact that has accrued from the intercourse between African and Western traditions?

It is possible to conclude that Sembène's ideal model of a liberated Africa is one where a generation of young people like Rama break away from the patriarchal and traditional inhibitions of the old generation, and from the cultural alienation and corruption of the modernized comprador class of the likes of Bèye and Oumi. Rama is a rare jewel, and in her we see a largely romanticized vision of Africa, but that is not to say that women have not made great contributions in Africa. Indeed, Ingrid Sinclair, too, recaptures, in her movie *Flame* (1996), the heroism and betrayal of Zimbabwean ex-guerrilla women fighters in the Chimurenga, the liberation movement that led Zimbabwe to its independence in 1980.

It is also true that if Sembène romanticizes Mother Africa and her revolutionary women, it is because of his strong pan-African vision of a totally free, united, culturally dignified continent, where men and women have equal opportunities and aspirations. But while we move toward that ideal, we recognize that Western civilization has had many positive influences on African tradition, and Africans cannot blame all their failures on colonialism and corruption from without. In a nutshell, *Xala* provokes some nagging questions: has Sembène lost hope in the emasculated African men who have failed in their leadership role since independence? does he see women as the hope for the salvation of Mother Africa, as the ones who can take her to the "Promised Land"? His film provokes these and more questions, which remain unresolved in the viewer's mind.

NOTES

1. Sembène treats Islam as an equally alienating and corrupting influence on African culture. For a detailed analysis of this subject see Makward 1991 and Cham 1991.
2. This and subsequent quotations from the film are based on *Xala/The Curse* [video recording], written and directed by Sembène Ousmane. British Film Institute: Connoisseur Video, 1995.
3. Achebe privileges a harmonization of the two traditions as the way forward for Africa's language and cultural development. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, a collection of his essays, he writes: "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me, there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it." In *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Kongi's Harvest*, Soyinka similarly advocates a symbiotic accommodation of both the modern and indigenous traditions in the postindependence nation-state.
4. *Guelwaar* is perhaps Sembène's most vicious attack on the politics of foreign aid in the developing world. His anti-aid crusade is demonstrated in the movie by a group of young people, who, in response to Guelwaar's crusade, destroy and trample on food-aid supplies meant for starving peasants.
5. However, even leaders who have tried to advance African-oriented ideologies have met with suspicion and resistance from Western powers. For instance, in 1986 Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni popularized his "no-party" movement ideology of popular democracy

based on “individual merit” as another alternative to multiparty democracy. Also, he advocated barter trade, through which he got the Mityana-Mubende road built in exchange for supplying beans to Yugoslavia, but this progress was soon frustrated by donor countries and the IMF and World Bank. Similarly, his brand of “no-party democracy” has had to be traded for a return to multiparty politics.

6. Laura Mulvey (2000) gives a good and insightful historical preview of the concept of “fetishism” and how Sembène treats it.
7. In *Things Fall Apart*, when the Umofia elders are arrested and imprisoned for destroying the Christian church, the court messengers (*kotma*) demand 250 bags of cowries for their release, but they take fifty bags as a bribe. See, for instance, 1994: 178, 195–197 (Original publication date 1958).

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