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Portrait of a Contemporary Griot: Orality in the Films and Novels of Ousmane Sembène

THE majority of Ousmane Sembène's literary and cinematic work is a critique of the conflictual relationships between the colonizer and the colonized, the state and the people, the rich and the poor, and the elders and the youth. Thus, his novels and films address issues involving tensions that are commonly created by uneven power relations. Well-known novels by Sembène include *Les bouts de bois de dieu* (1960), *L'Harmattan* (1964), and *Xala* (1974). In 1963, he created his first short film "Borom Saret" (1963), followed one year later by "Niaye" (1964). In 1966, Sembène completed "La Noire de ...", his first full-length film that won first prize at the Film Festival of Carthage and gained him the title of Best African Filmmaker at the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar. Films to follow included "Le Mandat" (1968), "Emitai" (1971), "Xala" (1974), "Ceddo" (1977), "Camp de Thiaroye" (1988), "Guelewar" (1992), "Faat Kiné" (2000) and "Molaadé" (2004). Though one could write numerous articles on the themes covered by Sembène's large, multimedia corpus (poverty, African feminisms, circumcision, religion, politics, etc.), one aspect of profound interest is the role of the griot, or West African storyteller, in Sembène's work.

Before the written word became a prevalent form of self-expression in West Africa, the griot served as the oral historian, musician, and entertainer of the community. His role was complex, and became even more so during and after French colonial rule. The modern griot's function shifted along with the extreme sociopolitical change Senegal experienced during its emergence as a nation after independence. As West African countries, such as Senegal, sought to establish a national identity, the griot's role became increasingly political. During this time, many self-proclaimed griots and artists emerged. Ousmane Sembène was one of the most prolific and influential members of this group of professional modern day griots.

This study will examine the role of the griot in Sembène's literary and film work and how his portrayal of this character becomes a self-reflexive commentary on his own role as an artist in contemporary society. Of course, language plays an essential role in Sembène's griotic project. By using both French and Wolof in his work, Sembène plays with formations of *la francophonie* as both a linguistic and cultural construction. Can one be defined as a *francophone* artist if he still uses Wolof in his work? Where does "l'africanisme" end and *la francophonie* begin? Thus Sembène's self-proclaimed position as griot becomes increasingly hybridized as he chooses to employ two distinct languages in his projects. Furthermore, this inherently hybrid stance opens up a new realm of "francophone" literary and cinematic production.

The term griot carries myriad cultural connotations. Traditionally, West African griots belonged to a certain caste. Within the Senegalese griot the caste, there existed a series of subgroups, including the *gèwel*, *jéli* and *gээр*. Moreover, the

griot tradition had a hereditary component in that only descendants of a certain lineage had the ability to become griots and access to the knowledge and skills of former griots. The European term, *griot*, is a derivation of a Portuguese word meaning, “to cry or to call.” However, the term griot has been appropriated by and is most frequently associated with the French language; the terms *griot* and *griotte* are employed to describe male and female storytellers, respectively.

The function of a griot is a complex mixture of storytelling, historical preservation, and performance. The traditional role of the griot was historically and continues to be controversial. He belonged to the lowest cast, yet, by virtue of his societal function, he was privy to much historical and political information. In fact, one of his assigned tasks was to preserve the history of the country through story and song. In his book entitled *Le Maître de la parole*, the Guinean author Camara Laye states:

En vértié, le griot (...) avant d'être historien, est, avant tout, un artiste et en corollaire, ses chants, ses épopées et ses légendes, des oeuvres d'art. La tradition orale tient donc de l'art plus que de la science. Et tout comme le sculpteur africain, la réalité historique placée devant le griot n'est pas contée par telle qu'elle apparaît. (Laye, 21).

In truth, the griot (...), before being a historian, is, above all, an artist. Therefore, it would follow that his songs, chants, poems and legends are all works of art. The oral tradition is more closely related to art than to science. Exactly like the African sculptor, the historical reality placed in front of the griot is not always told as it is. (Author's translation)

This quote describes the “artistic” license taken by griots when recounting historic narratives in society. During the colonial period, this “artistic license” became even more subjective and problematic. Since storytelling was how the griot made his living, his stories often changed according to the social or political agenda of his patron. One can hardly criticize the griot for ensuring his financial survival, however, this aspect of the griot's existence calls in to question the authenticity of his historical accounts. The role of the griot is commonly compared to that of the Renaissance artist forced, by virtue of his social standing and profession, to seek patronage from wealthy noblemen in order to pursue his own artistic projects. However, at a certain point, his projects no longer become his, and he is used purely as a political tool for those in power.

Through his work as a cinematographer and writer, Sembène calls for a re-interpretation of the griot's role in contemporary Africa. Sembène's claim to being a “new griot” is essentially political, beyond its obvious articulation of artistic camaraderie with other contemporary genres, including film, literature, visual arts, and music. By relating the author or cinematographer to the West African griot, he calls for a re-interpretation of past griotic functions. In doing so, he both critiques and redefines the role of the griot in West African society.

In order to fully understand how Sembène views his role, it is necessary to explore his personal relationship to the term “griot”. He is not a *gével* by birth (that is to say, he does not belong to the traditional griot caste), but he is a griot by trade. This professional association gives him the liberty to redefine and re-explore to the role of the griot in contemporary society. In addition, the title of “griot” serves to authenticate his body of

literary and film work among the African artistic intelligentsia. As David Murphy states in his book *Sembène: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction*:

The modern African writer is often compared to the traditional griot, with the purpose of such a comparison usually being to link the contemporary African writer to a traditional form of African storytelling. As a result, the author's work is given the stamp of that most problematic of concepts, 'authenticity.' (Murphy 54).

In addition to defining himself as a griot as a means of lending authenticity to his corpus, Sembène is primarily concerned with redefining the griot as a character who upholds truth and justice in the face of moral corruption. In his own work, Sembène vows to remain close to the experience of the people. The following citation, found in the *avertissement de l'auteur*, (Author's Note) at the beginning of Sembène's novel, *L'Harmattan*, describes his artistic vision as he associates the role of the modern novelist with that of the traditional storyteller.

Je ne fais pas la théorie du roman africain. Je me souviens pourtant que jadis, dans cette Afrique qui passe pour classique, le griot était non seulement l'élément dynamique de sa tribu, clan, village, mais aussi le témoin patent de chaque événement. C'est lui qui enregistrait, déposait devant tous, sous l'arbre du palabre, les faits et gestes de chacun. La conception de mon travail découle de cet enseignement: rester au plus près du réel et du peuple. (Sembène, *L'Harmattan*, 3).

I don't theorize about the African novel. However, I

remember that in the so-called classical Africa of the past, the griot was not only the dynamic figure in the tribe, clan, or village, but also the chief witness to every major event. It was he who recorded and who, under the palaver tree, recited the events and acts of everyone before the entire community. My conception of my work flows from this teaching: one must remain as close as possible to reality and to the people. (Author's translation)

This passage illustrates Sembène's mission, to present an account of what he witnesses and understands to be the realities of African people. By situating himself in a clear historical framework, Sembène seeks to link his own Marxist ideals to a long tradition of African storytelling. He is, in essence, attempting to create a "new griotism" for modern Africa, one that is particularly colored by his own political views. Whereas the griot of the past was an empty vessel into which historical information was poured in order to be accessed by those in power, Sembène calls for a greater sense of "griotic agency". His work exemplifies the ways in which a griot could use his information for the benefit of not only himself, but the proletariat as well. Whereas the griot of the past was only concerned with his own wellbeing, Sembène's ideal griot uses his information and relates stories for the benefit of the people.

In his seminal work on the portrayal of the griot in contemporary African film, Mbye Cham asserts that Sembène views himself as "the mouth and ears of his people". Moreover, "prefers to amalgamate, adapt, develop, and enhance certain features of the *gèwel* (griot) and the *lekbat* (storyteller)." (4). Sembène's amalgamation of griotic traits and functions echoes how he views his mission as a contemporary African artist. By

re-interpreting the past role of the griot in his work, he attempts to redefine an idealized role of the modern griot.

Sembène's first film, "Borom Sarret," blatantly critiques the moral corruption of the griot's character. The film's protagonist, a slight, poorly clad cart driver encounters a plump, well-dressed, gold-toothed griot who turns tradition into a tool of exploitation. In order to strip him of his morning's earnings, the griot fabricates a tale about the cart driver's past nobility. The griot's falsified story about the cart driver, which would have been considered authoritative according to Senegalese oral tradition, is presented in stark contrast to the reality of the cart driver's actual social oppression. By placing the griot in his old narrative, Sembène is able to critique the past corruption of this figure in Senegalese society. By criticizing the corrupt *modus operandi* of the griot of the past, Sembène articulates the characteristics of his vision of West Africa's modern griot: one who values truth, justice, and the good of the people over power and monetary gain.

The figure of the beggar who takes on griotic functions in the film and the novel, "Xala," more accurately describes how Sembène views his role in contemporary society. Though this figure appears in only three scenes, he is an integral part of the narrative. "Xala" is a commentary on a West African nation emerging from its colonial past, in the process of developing a distorted value system based on money and power. The narrative follows El Hadji, a corrupt member of the African elite, who is stricken with *xala*, or the curse of impotence. This curse is not only embarrassing for El Hadji, but detrimental to his social standing, as it compromises his role as a powerful member of the emerging nation. The literary narrative is punctuated with

scenes in which a street beggar makes his presence known. Though he is never a direct participant in the literary or filmic dialogue, the reader senses his presence throughout the narrative. The following quote sets the tone for how this omnipresent character is represented in both the *Xala* filmic and literary narratives.

At the corner of the same crowded, busy street, on the right-hand side, the beggar sat cross-legged on his worn-out sheep skin, chanting. Now and again his piercing voice dominated the other noises. Beside him lay a heap of nickel and bronze coins, the gifts of passers-by. (Sembène, trans. Wake 27)

This description of the beggar's "piercing" voice could be taken as a metaphor for the striking messages that habitually stand out in Sembène's work. Though his work is complex and layered, his opinions regarding certain aspects of Senegalese society are clear. During self-reflective moments for El Hadji, especially those regarding the *xala* in relation to his social standing, the beggar's chant appears, seemingly out of nowhere. An example of this is found in the following quote:

El Hadji: 'I'll be Frank, I can't even manage an erection with the girl. Yet when I left the shower I was stiff. Then when I got to her, nothing. Nothing at all.' The President sat with his mouth open, unable to utter a sound. The beggar's chant, almost as if it were inside the room, rose an octave. (29)

After postulating that the *xala* was caused by his second wife, El Hadji realizes that it was in fact the beggar who put the curse on him. In a moralistic speech regarding land, clan rights,

and corruption of the nation's new power, the beggar informs El Hadji that he cursed him because El Hadji had stolen land that was rightfully his. After acting as quiet observer for years, the beggar finally takes a stance against the distorted value system of the nouvelle-bourgeoisie and proclaims the truth regarding what he has witnessed. His speech is, in essence, a request of his fellow downtrodden members of society to take action against the corruption perpetuated by those in power. The novel ends with a grotesque scene in which the beggar and his indigent companions take turns spitting on the naked torso of El Hadji. Perhaps needless to say, this biting social commentary provoked a fair share of negative response from the Senegalese bourgeoisie at the time of the film's first screening.

The aforementioned characteristics of the beggar mirror Sembène's own griot technique. Like the beggar, Sembène observes the truth about Senegalese society and conveys those aspects, through various media, to a wider audience. In the case of Sembène, he calls for solidarity among artists, intellectuals, and the general population in order to effect change in his adolescent nation. The extreme action taken by the destitute members of society at the end of "Xala" speaks to the potent and controversial messages presented by Sembène regarding the intricacies of the formation of nationhood in Senegal. By exposing the truth regarding the monetary and moral corruption of the nouvelle-bourgeoisie, Sembène lessens their power within the societal framework, thus imposing a *xala* of sorts on the ruling class.

Another important aspect of the role of the traditional griot is the celebratory function. The griot is present at all major events to observe and preserve the history of the moment, while

performing traditional songs and stories about those involved in the ceremony. At the wedding of El Hadji and N'Gone, his third wife, N'Gone's *Badyen* takes on the role of the griot. The *Badyen*, a Wolof term meaning maternal aunt, is traditionally in charge of planning the wedding and taking care of the entertainment. The term *badyena* also takes on a broader meaning of female solidarity and inclusion within the Senegalese cultural context. The celebratory griotic function appears in the following quote: “The Badyen's joy knew no bounds. She intoned the praises of the family lineage, backed by the female griots, who took up the chorus” (11). In the same way, Sembène praises certain aspects of Senegalese culture in his work, a specific example being the celebration of strong women within Senegalese society takes place in the film “Faat Kiné.”

“Faat Kiné” is the story of a single mother, raising two children from different fathers. Through a series of flashbacks and vignettes, Sembène portrays the hardship that the protagonist, Faat Kiné, has faced – from the conception of her first child before she passed her baccalauréat exam to the graduation party of her two children eighteen years later. The revealing conversations between Faat Kiné and her two best friends are not only entertaining, they also expose the concerns, fears and desires of this group of middle-aged Senegalese women. Through their discussions and actions, Sembène celebrates the *joie de vivre* and strength of the protagonist and her two female companions.

One cannot discuss the role of the griot without examining the tools used to tell the story. We use the term “tools” to refer to both the media Sembène uses to express his ideas about Senegalese society and the language used in his work. As

previously mentioned, as a modern griot, Sembène is primarily concerned with truth and realism in his work. Concerning his choice of media, both the written word and film lend themselves to particular types of realism. Issues surrounding this notion arise in the adaptation of the novel *Xala* into a film. In the novel, there are numerous explicit scenes that refer to El Hadji's flaccid member and his various attempts at having intercourse with his wives. However, the film only hints at such problems. In the film, instead of seeing the flaccid penis, the audience observes El Hadji looking into his pants and looking up with a horrified expression on his face. Whereas the written word has the potential to be more verbally explicit (and therefore realistic), film has the potential to present visual images that can make a significant visual impact on the viewer. A specific example is the scene between El Hadji and the beggar at the end of *Xala*. In the book, the ending scene reads as follows:

Methodically, El Hadji unbuttoned his pyjama jacket. The first spittle struck him in the face. 'You must not wipe it off.' Adja Awa Astou lowered her eyes. She was crying. A female cripple pushed her and said coarsely: 'Spit if you want him to stuff you again.'... El Hadji's face was running with spittle. He had taken off his pyjama trousers. They were passed around from hand to hand like a trophy. The man who had taken the wedding crown placed it on El Hadji's head. The tumult grew louder... (103)

The scene is certainly disturbing to read, but not half as disturbing as seeing it played out in the film: The beggars are filthy, with missing teeth and gnarled bodies. When they slap Adja and Rama, the sound is so loud and painful that it makes the

audience cringe and flinch. The level of shame and disgust associated with the spitting is elevated by the somber, almost contemplative expression on El Hadji's face. The visual transformation of this character, from a powerful businessman to a victim of *xala* and social oppression, is striking. At the end of the scene, as the "tumult" grows louder, the camera begins to circle the room, disorienting the viewer and putting him or her in the place of El Hadji. At one point, the camera is actually in the middle of the room where El Hadji would be standing, and the beggars are spitting into the camera lens.

When reading this scene, one does not feel this same juxtaposition with El Hadji. The graphic nature of the spittle is especially nauseating. Each yellow mass of coagulated saliva hits the torso of El Hadji with a slap and slides down to his waist. The film ends on a frozen frame, with El Hadji standing in the middle of the room and spittle flying through the air.

An important issue regarding Sembène's choice of media is syndication and distribution. Sembène, along with various other postcolonial writers, including Camara Laye, mentioned earlier in this study, were encouraged by certain French publishing houses to create work exemplifying a typified "Africa". Not wanting to fall into the old role of the griot, by using his body of information to create work for the benefit of another more "powerful" than he, Sembène chose to use this opportunity as a chance to convey his own ideas about Africa to a wider European audience. Ironically, similar to the old griot, Sembène had to create his original work in a media that would be lucrative enough to allow him to continue creating work. As a result, by writing in French for a Western audience, Sembène was excluding a large portion of the proletariat about and for whom

he was writing. If Sembène wanted his work to be recognized by his own people, he had to create it in an appropriate media. Which brings us to the question of language.

In the case of Sembène's socio-political context, the question of language is of great significance. All of his novels are written in French, with the exception of certain phrases or terms left in Wolof. However, his films are created in both French and Wolof. Obviously, if his first books were being published in France, they had to be written in French. However, what can one make of his subsequent use of both French and Wolof in his film work? Is this a political move, or purely pragmatic? In a 2002 interview with Nicole Aas-Rouxparis, Sembène addresses this point:

Q: Parlons de la langue. Quel est aujourd'hui votre rapport à la langue française? Je pense par exemple aux échanges entre Rama et son père dans *Xala* au sujet de wolof et du français.

Q: Let's talk about languages. Today, what is your relationship to the French language? I am thinking, for example, about the exchanges between Rama and her father in *Xala* regarding the use of Wolof vs. French.

R: L'Europe est en retard sur l'évolution de l'Afrique à ce sujet. La langue est un produit de politique. Ce sont les hommes au gouvernement qui décident de cette politique. A mon avis, toutes les langues recèlent de la richesse. Cela dépend de qui les emploie et comment on les emploie. Dans nos écoles, au Sénégal, nous enseignons toutes les langues européennes. Nous écrivons aussi dans les langues africaines, et nous avons même traduit la Bible et le Coran. Personnellement, je ne veux pas qu'on nous enferme dans la

francophonie.

A: Europe is behind on the evolution of Africa regarding this subject. Language is a product of politics. The government officials are the ones who decide this. In my opinion, all languages are full of richness. It depends on who uses them and how they use them. In our schools, in Senegal, we teach all of the European languages. We also write in African languages, and we have even translated the Bible and the Koran. Personally, I don't think that we should enclose ourselves in a strictly French speaking environment/limit ourselves to the French language. (Aas-Rouxparis 577) (Author's translation)

The scene in "Xala," to which Aas-Rouxparis refers, is particularly revelatory regarding Sembène's own linguistic views. Rama, the eldest daughter of El Hadji, joins a political group at the university, and insists on only speaking Wolof with her family and her fiancé. Her polemical views do not match those of El Hadji, and he ends up beating her and prohibits the use of Wolof in the home. This scene is Sembène's commentary on the nouvelle bourgeoisie's obvious disdain for and rejection of the mother tongue in favor of the colonizer's father tongue. From a pragmatic point of view, Sembène also recognizes that one cannot completely abandon French, as it is the language of politics and business. He explains his point of view in the following quote from the Rouxparis interview:

Q. Mais, vous, vous avez écrit vos romans en français, vous avez fait vos films en français ou en langues nationales avec les sous-titres. Vous avez fait un choix pour communiquer avec votre publique.

Q: But you wrote your novels in French, you directed your films in French or in the national language with subtitles. You made a choice in order to communicate with your public.

R: Je n'ai pas fait de choix! J'ai un outil et je l'utilise. Les langues sont un moyen qui nous permet de communiquer, c'est tout. Savez-vous qu'à l'heure actuelle il y a beaucoup plus de professeurs qui parlent français et anglais sans compter leur langue africaine- aux Etats-Unis qu'en Europe?

A: I didn't make a choice! I have a tool and I use it. Languages are a means of communication, that's all. Did you know that at this very moment there are many more professors who speak French and English, not counting their African language, in the United States than in Europe? (Aas-Rouzparis, 577) (Author's translation)

While his first statement was more ideological, this quote reflects Sembène's pragmatism concerning the use of language in his work. He recognizes the political structure for what it is, and works within the system to make his message heard. His films, namely "Xala," and "Faat Kiné," were created using both French and Wolof. "Faat Kiné" is a particularly interesting study on his systematic use of both languages, and a realistic representation of speech patterns that would actually occur in Senegalese society. In this case Sembène uses both languages in order to fulfill his griotic mission of realistic representation.

In the opening scene, *Faat Kiné*, a member of the nouvelle bourgeoisie, speaks French with the clients in her gas station. She receives a phone call later on in the day from her daughter, explaining that her daughter passed her baccalauréat exam.

Again, Kiné speaks French on the phone. French dominates the first thirty minutes of the film until Kiné's daughter returns from school and interacts with her grandmother and the *domestique*. Here, they all speak Wolof together. When Kiné returns, she speaks Wolof with the grandmother and French with her two children.

This is perhaps the most linguistically revelatory scene in the film. Kiné speaks Wolof to her mother out of respect for tradition, and the fact that her mother most likely prefers speaking in Wolof to speaking in French. The viewer learns early in the film that Faat Kiné is a strong, skilled woman who is dedicated to the advancement of her children. She speaks French to them to encourage their academic and professional development. A pragmatist to the end, Kiné knows that the educational system and the business world both operate in French. If her children are to succeed, they must be comfortable with this language.

It is fascinating to observe how Kiné's demeanor changes as she switches between the two languages. French is her language of business. When she is speaking French, even to her children, her posture is very straight and her chin is tilted up. When she is speaking Wolof with her mother, she is often lounging on the sofa, lighting up a cigarette, or in one scene, even removing her uncomfortable undergarments. Likewise, she speaks Wolof with her two friends as they slouch in their seats, sip drinks and speak freely about personal subjects such as relationships, sex, AIDS, and children.

In following with Sembène's penchant for realism, it is clear that the film "Ceddo" is entirely in Wolof. "Ceddo" is a political commentary on the expansion of Islam throughout

Senegal. The film is set in rural Senegal in the 19th century. Considering the film's setting, it is logical why Sembène would choose to set this film in Wolof. During the 19th century, French was primarily spoken in the larger colonial cities, such as St. Louis or Dakar, and not in smaller settlements or rural communities. Sembène's choice to use Wolof in "Ceddo" further reinforces his role as a "realist" griot. As Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda states in his article on African cinema, entitled "Challenging Stereotypes":

To produce a film in Africa is an act of resistance. It is about looking at the world's stories and giving one's opinion about them, capturing and inquiring about collective memory, attracting, entertaining, and informing. It is also about making Africans realize that cinema is a powerful tool for development. (1)

This quote succinctly articulates what Sembène attempts to accomplish in his work as a modern day griot. His work reflects what he understands to be the reality of his country and inspires his compatriots to change and improve the nation's sociopolitical climate. The films "Borom Sarret," "Xala," and "Faat Kiné" provide a clear framework in which to examine the ways, both blatant and subtle, in which Sembène redefines the role of the griot in contemporary society. In addition, the content and narrative techniques used by Sembène fulfill his Marxist vision of what the modern griot should strive to accomplish in his work, a realistic portrayal of the various experiences of Senegalese men and women. Sembène's use of language mimics this self-consciously constructed artistic and political position. As we have seen, he uses Wolof in his films and novels to

preserve the “realistic” qualities of his narratives. However, his use of French is a clear choice to inscribe himself within the larger community of *la francophonie*, comprising not only fellow African authors, but also myriad postcolonial voices around the globe.

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