COMMUNITY, CARNIVAL, AND THE COLONIAL LEGACY IN OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S *XALA*

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Whether reading Ousmane Sembène's novel, *Xala* (1973, in French), or viewing his film of the same title (1974, in French and Wolof), one is struck by a narrative atmosphere unlike any other. What makes this political fable by the Senegalese author, screenwriter, and director distinctive is its curious combination of storytelling elements. It effortlessly blends, for example, satire with pathos, social realism with magical realism, folkways with utopian allegory, and mythological symbolism with concrete political discourse.[1] The continuous interplay, moreover, between *Xala*'s no-nonsense narrative tone, on the one hand, and the undercurrent of ironic humor, on the other, lends the story's anomalous elements a fitting discursive texture. At the heart of this serio-comic narration is the predicament of *Xala*'s protagonist, the seemingly prosperous El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye. El Hadji's financial fortunes, social standing, and personal stability disintegrate when he finds himself unable to consummate his marriage to a much younger third wife, N'Goné, and becomes convinced that he is a victim of *xala* (pronounced "khala"), a Wolof term for the curse that causes impotence. El Hadji's downfall, including the communal defilement and shaming of him in the final scene at the behest of a blind street beggar—Gorgui in the film version—symbolically dramatizes the failure of the neocolonial bourgeoisie in Senegal (Gugler and Diop 147, 148) and, by extension, elsewhere in Africa.

Sembène himself has placed emphasis on the political relevance of African creative expression. In comments related to the film version of *Xala* he has asserted that African cinema, and art in general, needs to be politically engaged: "In my view, African cinema must be, above

all, political. Its role should be to boost the growing consciousness that Africans have in their own historical situation [. . .] An artist must necessarily pose problems of a historical nature [. . .] This is important in order to understand the current situation in Africa" ("Film-makers and African Culture" 80). Although the finely interwoven elements in *Xala* resist reduction to any single political doctrine, the story's assessment of Africa's political situation corresponds in several key respects to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961), an analysis of the dynamics of power in the colonial and post-colonial world. In particular *Xala*'s portrayal of the betrayal of Africa's economic and social interests by a venal entrepreneurial and political elite is anticipated by Fanon's trenchant observations.

At the same time *Xala*'s blend of ironic and boisterous humor, its keen perception of human folly, and its intriguing plot devices ensure that delight rather than diatribe is the story's primary means of examining forms of corruption in contemporary Africa. To entertain in order to edify is of course a timeless objective of storytelling—an approach referred to explicitly in the African context by one of Sembène's literary peers, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe: "Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight) [. . .] Their artists created their works for the good of . . . society" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 29). Achebe's comment, from his essay "Africa and her Writers," is part of his exploration of the productive bond between African oral tradition and contemporary African literature. Sembène likewise alludes to the benefits arising from African oral tradition for modern African artists and their audiences. "The artist must in many ways be the mouth and ears of his people. In the modern sense, this corresponds to the role of the griot in traditional African culture" ("Film-makers and African Culture" 80).[2] The griot, who is the traditional poet, historian, musician, and voice of morality and political criticism in parts of West Africa, including the area of Wolof culture in Senegal, practices an art that fuses instruction with entertainment (Diop 233-35, 245-48, 271-72; Blair ix).

Furthermore, Sembène and Achebe each employ features of traditional African storytelling in their fictional writing—albeit in individual ways: "unlike Achebe, who integrates known Igbo oral narratives within the narrative of some of his works, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* most noticeably, Sembène seldom employs individual Wolof narratives in his novels or films. Instead, he selects and adapts certain formal features of the oral narrative tradition in order to construct his work" (Cham 27). Partly because of these features, in fact, *Xala*, possesses some of the accessibility of folk storytelling, a trait that contributes to the delight of both novel and film. One hears an echo of folk tradition, for example, in the ploys adopted by the two leading male characters, El Hadji and the blind beggar, in their conflict with each other, a treacherous give and take that one also finds in the competition between trickster figures in folklore. It is precisely the incorporation of traditional African elements into the writing of Sembène, Achebe, and others that has facilitated the creation of a distinctive African novel, one capable of resisting domination by Western models (Booker, *The African Novel in English: An Introduction* 21).[3] This process accords with the view of the novel as ever-changing and, in its truest nature, anti-authoritarian expressed by Mikhail Bakhtin (Booker, *African* 20). Bakhtin's analyses, moreover, of the anti-authoritarian tendency of folk literature linked to European carnival helps shed light on the social and political protest mounted in the boisterous final scene of *Xala*.

In that final scene a group of diseased aud disabled street people, led by the blind beggar, confront El Hadji and coerce him to atone ritually for his transgressions (and for those of his powerful brethreu) against them. But in order to coerce El Hadji the beggar must first make him believe that it is he, the beggar, who has imposed the *xala* on El Hadji, and that he alone can remove it. One of the most intriguing features of the narrative is that Sembène never lowers the beggar's mask to reveal whether the *xala*, is literally the source of El Hadji's impotence or whether his impotence may be understood purely in psychological terms, that is, as a function of anxiety. The story permits either interpretation (Updike 142; Gugler and Diop 154). Sembène's

narrator reinforces the notion held by nearly all of the characters who comment on El Hadji's tribulation that it is *xala* that afflicts him. Long before El Hadji finds any relief the narrator remarks in plain terms, "El Hadji souffrait atrocement de son *xala*"; and when a marabout, Serigne Mada, who apparently has lifted the curse, re-imposes it after El Hadji's check bounces, the narrator observes, "Il renouait l'aiguillette à El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye [. . .] El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye retrouva son *xala*" (67;150-51). And Sembène's very title helps authorize the supernatural explanation. One character, however, Pathé, who is a psychiatrist as well as the fiancé of El Hadji's eldest daughter, Rama, suggests a psychological explanation (73). And El Hadji himself visits the psychiatric hospital at which Pathé works in hope of relief, though the only relief he experiences occurs later, not through modern psychiatric treatment, but rather under the influence of Serigne Mada (72-81; 114). The beggar's trick, then, consists either of imposing the magical curse on El Hadji in order to force him to humble himself or of causing El Hadji to *believe* that he has imposed it in order to achieve the same result. Either way El Hadji, who previously had prided himself on his immunity to superstition—"jamais je ne me suis ridiculisé ave ces trucs"—does believe and consequently submits to a humiliating penance at the end of the story (34).

Whether or not the beggar is viewed as possessing magical power, his explanation of his reasons for imposing the *xala* on El Hadji is essential to the story's portrait of its protagonist. Prior to the final scene the narrative reveals that El Hadji achieved success in business both before and after Senegal's independence from France through a variety of unprincipled financial practices (11, 133, 138-39). For a time during the late colonial era he was an intermediary in property transactions, and it was perhaps during this period that he swindled his own clan, called "Beye." He is reminded by the beggar, who belongs to the same clan, that with the help of powerful people, and using fraudulent legal and financial practices, El Hadji stole a great parcel of the Beye land at Diéko (Jéko) over twenty years earler; then he had the man who now confronts him thrown into prison.[4] Later, when the man was released,

El Hadji and his powerful associates defeated him again. Thus, in his greed and corruption, El Hadji caused the ruin of the man who became a beggar. "Ce que je suis maintenant est de ta faute," he declares to El Hadji during the speech in which he recounts these events, events which have caused the beggar to seek retribution against the formerly wealthy man (165-66).[5] His urge for retribution resonates with a description by Fanon of the urge of a typical colonial subject (allowing that the beggar's oppressor is an opportunistic native, rather than a settler, serving European interests):

> Overpowered but not tamed; he is treated as an inferior but he is not convinced of his inferiority. He is patiently waiting until the settler is off his guard to fly at him. The native's muscles are always tensed [. . .] He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter. (53)

During the colonial era El Hadji was an outspoken critic of the French colonial presence and "ses alliés, les assimilés"—although doubt is even cast on the sincerity of his anti-colonial speeches (40; 138-39). Yet now he imitates the French. He only drinks Evian bottled water in the novel, while in the film Rama refuses to drink the Evian he offers her and angers El Hadji, who is inclined to speak French, by addressing him in Wolof (31, 138, 143).[6] In the film, moreover, his chauffeur, Modu, pours Evian into the radiator of El Hadji's Mercedes. The more sinister aspect of El Hadji's post-independence hypocrisy, however, is his corrupt work as a middleman on behalf of foreign, probably French, interests (11, 138-39). Sembène makes clear that much of El Hadji's work during both the colonial and postcolonial eras, and with French and non-French associates, is done at the expense of his fellow Senegalese. Particularly notable in this regard is the trade he has done in rice. After he was removed as a school teacher by the French colonial regime due to his trade union work, El Hadji undertook various business ventures and, with a partner from the Lebanese and Syrian business community, gained a monopoly

in the rice trade for many months. This was an especially lucrative development for the pair since rice was a food "de première nécessité" (10). But El Hadji's dubious dealings involving rice did not end with the colonial era, for his virtual theft of thirty tons of the staple from "la Société Vivrière Nationale," gave him the means, according to one of his irate colleagues in the "Groupement des Hommes d'affaires," to marry his third wife (129-30, 133, 136-37). The practical significance of El Hadji's repeated misuse of so much rice in a poor country is clear: a multitude might well suffer disastrous privation as a result. In addition a related, highly charged symbolism surrounds El Hadji's handling of rice. David Uru Iyam, examining *Emitai*, another film by Sembène, paraphrases a finding by Francis G. Snyder about the enduring significance of rice for people in Senegal, who "regarded rice as a sacred product and therefore, rarely sold it for cash. It was, however, exchanged for other goods, especially cattle" (82). Iyam then observes, "by using rice to tell his story [in *Emitai*], Sembène illustrates the desecration of traditional standards and precepts" (82). Similarly El Hadji's misuse of rice in *Xala* helps indicate that he and the entrepreneurial group he represents are a scourge to the values of the larger community, of the nation in which they have assumed positions of leadership.

But because El Hadji first made a name for himself as spokesman fighting for the good of that larger community—"[*il*] militait avec ses compères pour la liberté de tous"—his repeated betrayal of it in his financial affairs makes his hypocrisy all the more stark (25). In his corrupt business activities, materialistic lifestyle, and recurring orders to have his blind nemesis and the other beggars removed from the precincts of his office, El Hadji is determined to set himself apart from the larger community (49, 166, and film). Prior to *Xala* this kind of hypocrisy had been vividly sketched by Sembène in the short story "Communauté" (1962). The animal figures in this tale and the opening and concluding devices—"Au temps jadis où les homes et les bêtes se parlaient, les animaux avaient des réunions entre eux"; "Depuis ce jour-là, les dieunahs (les rats)"—explicitly reveal the presence of

the folk tradition in Sembène's art, while the adversarial relationship between the two central male characters, El Hadji Niara, le chat, and Inekeiv, le rat, adumbrates the relationship between El Hadji and the blind beggar in *Xala* (111,115). In the short story El Hadji Niara uses the religious fervor he derives from his pilgrimage to Mecca to convene "les rats," ostensibly for the purposes of converting them and having them join "une vaste communauté" (111). The rats attend the prayer-meeting presided over by El Hadji Niara, who shortly gives the order to the other cats, "sus aux infidèles" after he is challenged by Inekeiv (115). In both stories the self-importance of El Hadji prevents any enduring realization of or participation in a larger community.

Sembène portrays El Hadji, then, as a privileged, self-important, and venal member of the post-independence African business community. He is a type who possesses a modest degree of power and prestige but lacks the social conscience necessary to improve conditions for others. He and his associates embody, in short, the neocolonial middle class, which, according to Fanon lacks a full connection to the community it uses but fails to serve: "The national middle class lives to itself and cuts itself off from the people, undermined by its hereditary incapacity to think in terms of all the problems of the nation as seen from the point of view of the whole of that nation" (154). In the final scene of *Xala*, however, El Hadji's concept of himself and his world are penetrated by the concepts of the impoverished people from whom he normally is polarized, including, notably, people who are diseased and disabled. Previously El Hadji has enforced this polarization: " 'quand notre nombre est quantitativement gênant, vous appelez votre police pour [. . .]' 'Pour nous éjecter comme des matières fécales,' opina rapidement le gars avec la taie sur l'oeil, le bras tendu, menaçant" (166). But now the blind beggar gives orders and the disabled outcasts force themselves and their will on El Hadji and his family, with the result that these adversaries begin to resemble one another, each group taking on the other's accustomed identity while also retaining its former one. This reversal if further underscored in the passage that immediately precedes the arrival of the police at the home of El

Hadji and his first wife, Adja Awa Astou, a moment in which a leper is momentarily ascendant and El Hadji is labeled a leper:

> Un éclat de rire hideux déchira le moment d'accalmie. Debout sur le canapé, le lépreux déclara de son ton nasillard:
> — Je suis un ladre! Je le sus pour moi. Moi, tout seul. Mas toi, tu es une maladie infecticuse pour nous tous. Le germe de la leper collective. (167)

This trenchant metaphorical evaluation of El Hadji's function in a struggling African community speaks to the far reaching consequences of unchecked, neocolonial greed.

As depicted both in the novel and especially in the film, El Hadji arranges for the group of beggars to be rounded up by the police when they become too much of a nuisance near his office. But this group of dispossessed people go from being a relatively marginal presence both in El Hadji's world and in the narrative to being the dominant presence in the concluding tragi-comic scene in El Hadji and Adja's home. In terms of Fanon's analysis they represent a fictional *lumpenproletariat*.[7] This term refers to the population of uprooted and starving African peasants who migrate from a colony's countryside to its urban areas and who become petty criminals, prostitutes, or simply unemployed. This despised segment of colonial society not only is created by but also erodes colonial domination in Fanon's view, and it becomes in the process a potent political agency:

> This *lumpenproletariat* is like a horde of rats; you may kick them and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts they'll go on gnawing at the roots of the tree. The shantytown sanctions the natives to invade, at whatever cost and if necessary by, the enemy fortress. The *lumpenproletariat*, once it is constituted, brings all its forces to endanger the "security" of the town, and is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the heart of colonial domination [. . .] All the hopeless

> dregs of humanity, all who turn in circles between suicide and madness, will recover their balance, one more go forward, and march proudly in the great procession of the awakened nation. (129-30)

The blind beggar especially reflects the evolution of the *lumpenproletariat*. Having migrated during the colonial period from the countryside after he and his clan were dispossessed of their land, and having endured routine confrontations with the police, the beggar invades El Hadji and Adja's home with the outcasts through the trick of the *xala* (corresponding to the *lumpenproletariat*'s "most cryptic methods") (Fanon 130).

Notwithstanding *Xala's* distinctive tone, its deployment of boisterous and irreverent humor to comment on the ills of society is a device a long pedigree. In connection with the European tradition this was a topic of particular interest to Bakhtin. In the books *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin explores the ways in which folk literature and festivities associated with carnival, with its reversals of hierarchical order, stirred liberating social and political responses in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Bakhtin maintains that medieval folk festivals linked to carnival "expressed the people's hopes of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order, of a new truth [. . . and] presented this happier future of a general material affluence, equality, and freedom [. . .]" (*Rabelais* 81). Analyses of carnival by Bakhtin and others suggest that the liberating possibilities that reside in carnival are embraced by a disadvantaged or oppressed group.[8] The oppressed group in *Xala* is comprised of the afflicted outcasts who confront El Hadji in the story's final scene. The outcasts' function is comparable to that of the medieval folk masses insofar as their explicit humor, laughter, and unbridled appetites, according to Bakhtin, shatter the order, decorum, and stability fostered by the social elite.

In many respects this final scene in El Hadji and Adja's home is analogous as well to the medieval, carnival-like 'feast of fools' which Bakhtin examines in *Rabelais and His World*:

> Another essential element [of the medieval folk festival] was a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king [. . .] at the "feast of fools" [. . .] From the wearing of clothes turned inside out and trousers slipped over the head to the election of mock kings and popes the same topographical logic is put to work: shifting from top to bottom, casting the high and the old, the finished and completed into the material body lower stratum for death and rebirth [. . .] (81-82)

Certain elements in the *Xala* scene modify or intensify those described by Bakhtin. For example, it is the recently prosperous El Hadji, not a peasant or outcast, who becomes the king of fools (although his current impoverishment makes him an outcast to his former associates and his second and third wives): "Lentement, un pied après l'autre, El Hadji grimpa. Les dominant tous, il fit curculer son regard [. . .] Celui qui avait ravi la couronne de marriage la posa sur la tête d'El Hadji" (170-71). And rather than turn his clothes inside out El Hadji must suffer the greater degradation of completely stripping his clothes from his body. Nevertheless, *Xala* does dramatize Bakhtin's point: the inversions involved in bodily functions (the internal becoming external) underscore social inversions (Bakhtin 11). Such a dynamic is at work when the disabled and dispossessed band led by the blind beggar coerce El Hadji to atone ritually for his transgressions by becoming the object of their collective act of making the internal external: spitting. The subversive, carnivalesque atmosphere of this scene is heightened, moreover, by the narrator's frank descriptions not only of the grotesque body and its functions, but also of the coarseness, commotion, and laughter of the outcasts (161-71):

> Adja Awa Astou était statufiée, rivée au sol, incapable d'articuler un mot. A la hauteur de ses mollets, un home-tronc la frôlait. Angoissée, le frisson de l'écoeurement lui montait jusqu'aux cheveux. La nausea gagnait tout son être.

> Une des boîteuses, d'un gest rapide, lui ôta son écharpe et s'en cuvrit la tête, provoquant l'hilarité générale. (162)

For Bakhtin, carnivalesque laughter is the antagonist of "established order" and "official ideology" (81, 84). It must be acknowledged, however, that rhe laughter at the end of *Xala* is not unequivocal, not tantamount to joy, since it is conditioned by so much human degradation and suffering.

Colonialism and its legacy shaped generations of El Hadjis—individuals motivated primarily by individual gain, who forgot how to think and act for the collective good. Yet since El Hadji is underwritten by wealthy Western interests (particularly evident in the film version's opening sequence), since his profiteering and materialism are not unknown in rhe West and elsewhere outside of Africa, perhaps those of us who belong to *Xala's* non-African audience, are meant to quesrion our own complicity in the poverty, corruption, and injustice that the film explores.[9] In all events the final scene attests to the empowerment that accrues from envisioning differently, as the beggar and Sembène bave, in the postcolonial world, providing a glimpse of a different kind of social srrucrure, one in which the powerful group is not the few but the many. Such a vision of liberation, however, is mixed with tbe dread of violence by the "les forces de ordre" in the story's final gesture (171). The audience is left to determine for itself, therefore, whether liberation of the oppressed or official violence will be the long-term fate of the society Sembène portrays.

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NOTES

[1] A remark by Fredric Jameson concerning *Xala*'s final scene is suggestive of the range of elements that the story blends: "The representational space of the narrative is lifted to a new generic realm, which reaches baek to touch the powers of the archaic even as it foretells the utopian destruction of the fallen present in the mode of

prophecy" (84).

[2] Achebe makes much the same point: "the role of the writer, the modern writer, is closer to that of the *griot*, the historian and poet, than any other practitioner of the arts" (Rowell 86). Prior to *Xala*, in the novella, *Vehi-Coisane, ou, Blanche-Genèse*, Sembène depicted a griot acting as the voice of conscience and political criticism—outspoken before a traditional ruler who has gained power through immoral means. Also, with respect to Sembène's use of the griot in the novel that followed *Xala*, see Vincent Odamtten: "The aesthetic and ideological achievement of *The Last of the Empire* [*Le dernier de l'empire*] is further illustrated by its synthesis of other conventions of African oral tradition (seen in part by the parenthetical interjections of the griot, or raconteur)" (117).

[3] See Sarah Lawall, who speaks of "the productive relationship between orality and literacy that has largely conditioned the modern African imagination" (2172).

[4] El Hadji's connections to forceful parties during the colonial period as well his activities at the time as a middleman suggest that he served French interests even then (10).

[5] It may well be that the beggar's blindness, like his sickly cough, is also a consequence of these events: his health, like that of the people he leads, has been compromised by his poverty (165-66).

[6] See Jill Taylor's analysis of the multi-lingual exchanges ("code switching") between El Hadji his first wife, Adja Awa Astou, and his eldest daughter, Rama (67-71).

[7] See Jameson 84; Booker, "Ousmane Sembène: *Xala*" 19; Gugler and Diop 149, 155n.12.

[8] See Jung 197, 199; Hyde 188.

[9] On the other hand, Sembène's perspective on bourgeois entrepreneurship may have undergone some modification since the time of *Xala*. In a March 2001 *New York Times* article by Stuart Klawans, Sembène is quoted in connection with the title character of his most recent film, *Faat Kine* (2000): " 'Faat-Kine subverts the society of the past. She establishes her own independence [. . .]

Africa's society and economy are held together today by women'" (2:15). The latter remark reflects Sembène's long-standing support of African women. But Klawans observes towards the end of the article that "what's new in *Faat-Kine* is a wholehearted endorsement of its heroine's entrepreneurship."

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