MYTHS, TRADITIONS AND COLONIALISM IN OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S *EMITAI*

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The correlation of myths, traditions and colonialism is so intricate that we will essentially focus here on its illustration in the Senegalese film *Emitai.*

To set a ground for discussion, it is important to mention that since its birth, cinema has continuously distorted the image of Africa as seen through the eyes of European and American directors. To the Western viewer, Africa has been primarily the land of escape through exoticism: a land in which Tarzan would swing happily from tree to tree amidst barbarous natives whose past, myths, and traditions had been ignored and neglected. This was a consequence of the colonial or neo-colonial ideology which some films would both express and justify. Yet, in such context, it would be biased not to mention the honest and sincere attempts made by some European directors such as René Vautier, Jean Rouch, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker. They would, however, favor Africa's past rather than relate to its contemporary societies.

African cinema by black Africans began in the sixties at the time of Africa's new era of independence, which is not surprising since cinema is generally a reflector of the society which produces it. Ousmane Sembène is now Senegal's leading filmmaker. Presently 53, Sembène has travelled extensively. He came to film through literature and to literature through union action while spending many years as a worker in France. He also stayed in Moscow, where he acquired his training as a film-maker. He has written six books, numerous articles, and has made eight films which are either adaptations of his literary works or based on his own scripts.[1]

[1] Ousmane Sembène's main literary works are *Docker Noir* (Black Docker), 1956; *O Pays, Mon Beau Peuple,* 1957; *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (God's Little Bits of Wood), 1960; *Voltaïque* (a collection of essays), 1961; *L'Harmattan,* 1963; *Véhi Ciosane,* 1965; *Le Mandat* (The Money Order), 1966; and *Xala,* 1972. His

Emitai, a color feature film made in 1971, depicts the life of a Diola village during the Second World War. At that time, France was conscripting young villagers in her colonies for duty with her armies. The film shows us a village emptied of its young men, with only women, older men, and young boys remaining. The villagers are forced to submit to such measures with resignation for fear of reprisal, as illustrated in a scene where an old man is left tied up in the scorching sun until his son comes out of hiding. One day, the French colonel receives the order to take most of the rice stored in the granaries. When the Diolas learn such news, the older men go to the forest to consult with the god of crops and rain. The high priest and chief of the village, Dmikolo, convenes his council, whose divergent opinions lead him to the decision to attack some soldiers of the colonial army. As a consequence, Dmikolo is killed and the villagers prepare to bury him. The French commander interferes with the burial and warns that it will not be completed until the rice is provided. In the meantime, all the women of the village are forced to sit under the hot sun to hasten the men's surrender. The men go to consult with the spirits, who remain silent because some villagers have distrusted them. Then, after a soldiers' raid on the village and the killing of a young boy, the men decide to turn over the rice in order to free the women. At that point, after the young boy's death, tension increases on both sides. The men bring the rice and prepare to carry it out of the village. Yet, hearing the women's cries and laments as they are burying Dmikolo and the young boy, they stop and leave their rice baskets on the ground. Although the French officer orders them to resume their walk, nobody moves. This results in the killing of the men by the black soldiers.

To give to his film a definite political dimension, Ousmane Sembène based his plot on a succession of true events linked to the African resistance to French colonialism during the Second World War. As mentioned before, the film takes place

films are the following: *Borom Sarret*, 1963; *Niaye*, 1964; *La Noire* de . . . (Black Girl), 1966, *Le Mandat* (The Money Order), 1968; *Taw*, 1970; *Emitai*, 1971; and *Xala*, 1975. He is now finishing his latest film, *Ceddo*.

among the agrarian Diolas who live in the small isolated villages of Lower Casamance. They have a long history of resistance to foreign influence and are a good example of traditional African values. Sembène links their resistance to a much longer past than the period illustrated in the film:

> My first goal was to make of this film a school of history. We know that in ancient times in Africa—during the medieval period—there were stories of resistance. It would appear that during colonialism there were no struggles for national liberation, and that's not true. During the period of colonialism I can show that not a single month passed when there was not a resistance effort.[2]

The Diolas' traditional beliefs encompass a complicated cosmology.[3] They believe in a Creator or Supreme Being and in spirits governing nature. For them, man has a privileged place in the universe and he is in permanent contact with visible and invisible forces. If wars, sickness, or drought disrupt the balance of the universe, the priest will offer sacrifices to the spirits to reconcile the life forces that will, for instance, bring rain and fertility to the fields. In such respect, the title of the film is very significant since "Emitai" means "God of Thunder," the thunder which brings rain but also symbolizes anger and strength. The Diolas believe in reincarnation, but when someone dies, this person has to be buried immediately because without proper funerals, souls will be restless and become wandering spirits who may seek revenge. In reference to the film, it is significant to stress that the priest frequently assumes the function of the chief, thus assuring the political as well as the religious cohesion of the group.

It is therefore by design that Ousmane Sembène selected the Diolas among the various ethnic groups of Senegal. Their independence is legendary and their religion goes back to ancestral African beliefs, untouched by imported religions such as Islam or Christianity (In Senegal 86 percent of the population is moslem). By tradition, they are opposed to the selling

[2] Harold Weaver, "Interview with Ousmane Sembène," *Issue*, 2, No. 4 (1972), 58.

[3] See Louis Vincent Thomas, *Les Diolas* (Dakar: I. F. A. N., 1959).

of rice, and the contents of their granaries is closely kept, which explains the villagers' resistance in the film. For them, rice cultivation insures domestic organization, the repartition of tasks, and the legislative system. Divorces, for instance, can only take place after the rice is harvested so as not to endanger their means of sustenance.

In *Emitai*, besides African myth and traditions, the second force at stake is colonialism, and it is the clash between those two antithetic entities which will bring about the final holocaust of the film. Here, Senegal is under French rule after having been subjected since the fifteenth century to Portuguese and English domination.

Unlike British colonialism, which was basically anti-assimilationist with its system of indirect rule through existing indigenous institutions, French colonialism pursued a policy of direct rule and theoretical political assimilation. As such, French assimilation was "based on the revolutionary principle of the equality of man and at the same time on the assumption of the superiority of European civilization and in particular French civilization."[4] France's "mission civilisatrice" was to convert barbarians into French subjects. This implied a total dismissal of centuries of African culture as primitive customs or superstitious beliefs. Consequently, the power of traditional chiefs was diminished by the French administration as they were often considered as low-ranking officials. They were deposed and replaced when they refused to cooperate. This latter characteristic gives even more significance to Dmikolo's rebellion against French authority in *Emitai*.

In addition to its missionaries and administrators, France maintained its control over foreign dependencies through the colonial army. The hierarchical pattern of the army generally included white superior officers, black and white subordinate officers, and black privates. The last-named group came from all countries of Western Africa. They were called "tirailleurs" and were in fact black mercenaries sometimes recruited by force, receiving a minimal instruction, small salaries, and rifles

[4] Michael Crowder, *Senegal: A Study of French Assimilation Policy* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 1.

with which to fight in European wars or else to put an end to occasional revolts in Africa. In such a way, blacks—whether chiefs, civil servants, or soldiers— were against other blacks to strengthen white rule in French Africa.

Ousmane Sembène's setting, from 1941 to 1944, is not accidental. It throws light upon the new aspect French colonialism had taken in West Africa and particularly in Senegal. At that time, under the Vichy government, Senegalese representative institutions had been suppressed and the country was subjected to heavy economic exploitation. Due to the influence of Nazi ideology within Pétain's government, the concept of racial superiority was officially applied to the detriment of the Africans. The recruitment of forced labor among Africans was intensified as was the drafting of men into the armed forces, and farmers were assigned production quotas for exportable foodstuff. Later, such policies of political, economic, and social discrimination were, at first, hardly altered by the allegiance of West African governors to De Gaulle in 1942. It was only later, in 1944 ,at the Conference of Brazzavill that a new and more liberal French colonial policy was to be adopted. This conference, under the chairmanship of General De Gaulle, set a basis for the total integration of the colonies into the French community. Yet, this concept did not materialize until 1958 at the eve of the independence of all of France's African territories.

In this Second World War context, the black man was socially and psychologically castrated since he was prevented from determining his own destiny and identity as an African. If he refused to cooperate, he was often a dead man; if he surrendered, he degraded himself and was no longer a man. In the Diola village depicted in *Emitai*, the young blood of the village has been mostly sucked to be poured on European battlefields, and only the women are left to face the elders' slow action. They have to take an active role and they become the catalyst of resistance although they do not participate in the men's palavers. Ousmane Sembène, as in many of his other literary and cinematographic works, breaks with the stereotypic image of the passive and submissive African woman. To understand

the role of the woman in *Emitai*, we have to keep in mind that rice has a religious meaning for the Diolas since it is offered to the spirits. The woman, therefore, protects the rice because of its religious implications and also because it is she who is responsible for the vital sustenance of the village. In Senegal, except for ploughing, rice is a woman's crop while peanuts are mainly cultivated by men. The woman's fecundity is thus embodied in the rice/milk she produces. She resists in order to maintain tradition as well as her own integrity. Ousmane Sembène likes to point out that the African woman has often played an important role in movements of resistance:

> First of all, I have to say that the story of *Emitai* comes from a true event. The person who led the struggle was a woman. . . .I can even talk of modern days in Senegal. In 1963, the women left the indigenous quarter called the Medina to overthrow Senghor. Men joined the march, and before the palace they killed more than 150 people. I think it's the white man who maintains that our women have never participated in our struggles. The participation of a woman in the struggle has several levels. The fact is that the African culture has been preserved by the women. . . .The women are less alienated than the men and much more independent than the men.[5]

In this struggle between the spiritual and the material, the spear can scarcely oppose the rifle. Traditions are overcome by France's economic needs and modern technology. Sembène takes great care in delineating the fact that the relations between the oppressor and the oppressed are based on economic factors. The ultimate villagers' action is desperate and the unbalance of powers somewhat reminds us of Ethiopians throwing spears at the Italian planes invading Ethiopia just before the Second World War.

Further analysis shows that *Emitai* includes three elements: (1) the fertility entity, represented by earth/women/rice; (2) the collective phallus, which relies on what is left of the tribe's male elements, all of whom are placed under the authority of the ancestors, spirits, and God as traditional father figures; (3)

[5] Harold Weaver, "Interview with Ousmane Sembène," *Issue*, 2, No. 4 (1972), 58.

the colonial authority's usurped power, which challenges the traditional one.

Here, the female symbol of rice is coveted by the male elements, and this constitutes an Oedipal triangle in which the powerless and impotent village fetish is defeated. White authority would be associated with Oedipus' possession of the woman/mother after the killing of the man/father, a situation in which Oedipus is the usurper of his father's prerogatives. In the film, whites castrate and then kill the legitimate father-figures in order to possess the female element represented by earth/rice. Since rice refers to orality, and since the possession of rice implies killing and scattering of blood, one does also perceive the symbolic vampiric, even cannibalistic, aspect of colonialism.

It is interesting to note that viewed according to traditional African concepts, the two male elements of *Emitai* assume the same rivalry as in the previous analysis. Yet, in such perspective, colonialism would be viewed as a persecuting force associated with invisible or at least exterior elements (the mechanisms of colonialism which were more often than not beyond the reach of the people they oppressed). In *Emitai*, however, some villagers perceive their exploitation. This is indicated in the words of an old man which are translated to the white commander by his African sergeant: " He says that their children don't fight for them, they fight for you."

If one associates colonialism with sorcery, whose true meaning is different from magic (in which one emphasizes the individual's extraordinary powers to protect or attack others), the white man would be feared because, as the sorcerer, he is said to hunt, trap, and catch his prey. One cannot, in such respect, but compare the sorcerer's hunt with the way black recruits were captured and then forced into the French colonial army. According to African myths and traditions, the sorcerer embodies the forces of evil. He bears resemblance to both the Western devil and the vampire. Consequently, one would have a clearer understanding as to why the villagers would come to seek advice and protection from their spirits to fight the forces of evil represented by colonialism seen as a form of sorcery. This could therefore be compared to Western myths

and traditions in which one seeks the help of religion to oppose the devil's action.

After those two analyses, it is striking to note that both the Western and the African approach result in the same concept of dispossession. In the first case, the Oedipal triangle depicts the anguish of castration; while in the second case, the devouring/incorporating process of sorcery translates the anguish experienced by man in terms of his own individuality, namely his noncastrated being.

The theme of castration is repeatedly used by Sembène. A study of the semiotic function of objects in his film will only reinforce the theoretical assumptions which have previously been made. *Emitai* contains many phallic symbols, such as spears, rifles, long-handled shovels, and trees.

At the beginning of the film, a young man is surrounded by the black soldiers. When captured he drops his spear. Sembène uses a long close-up to show it lying flat in the dried grass. The next sequence opens on a group of young boys walking to the fields, with shovels held upright like spears, on their way to penetrate and plough the earth/mother. This symbolic transfer of power emphasizes the tragic fate of the men, whose manhood is now taken over by the young adolescents. During the fight between Dmikolo and the colonial soldiers, the spears are raised and then fall, powerless, in front of the bullets/sperm coming from the guns/phallus. When the chief is killed, his spear is ritually put alongside his body. Yet, at the time of the funeral, the spears are planted around him: his body is inert but his spirit of resistance lives on. In the final sequence of *Emitai*, the women have taken the active role. They dance around the bodies of the chief and the young boy before burying them. They hold the spears in the same way men would under normal circumstances. Here men are defeated. They are made to carry the rice baskets, which is a task usually performed by the women. Reversed roles are imposed upon the Diolas by the colonial authority in its disrespect of local social structures and traditions. The men's utmost stage of castration will soon climax into death itself. During the women's dance, a close-up focuses on a young boy holding a gun which he does not

fire. He aims at the sky in prefiguration of future struggles in which Western colonialism will be fought on the level of its own modern technology. After the African spear has been defeated, the gun/phallus is erect again in the hands of a young boy symbolizing the future strength and pride of Africa.

Dealing with trees, in his many shots of the forest, Ousmane Sembène devotes much attention to the huge and barren baobabs in which people hide, watch, and give signals. The Sacred Tree is most significant. Men sit at its foot for their palavers. They pour the blood of roosters and goats on its dead trunk in their effort to appease the spirits and also to metaphorically rejuvenate and invigorate their own manhood (those are old men) and, at the same time, the collective village phallus, whose potency has been weakened by the scattering and spilling of its young blood abroad.

Referring to Senegal's traditions and past, Ousmane Sembène reasserts his definition of the African filmmaker in terms of such traditions and past. In a lecture given at Howard University in 1975 he said, "We must understand our traditions before we can hope to understand ourselves." For him, the African filmmaker is like the griot, who is similar to the European medieval minstrel: a man of learning and common sense who is the historian, the raconteur, the living memory, and the conscience of his people. According to Sembène, African cinema should be a film school, that is to say, a means of expression as well as a means of education. Here, it is to be stressed that film is closer to the oral tradition of Africa than literature. Film is also accessible to popular audiences because it is a collective experience based on audiovisual elements with facets similar to the griot's storytelling. Faithful to his cultural background, Sembène chooses to give a realistic, un-Hollywoodian image of his country.

In *Emitai*, the filmmaker reacts against the image of the good, irresponsible, brainless, childlike, and docile "savage" which has been diffused by the Western world. In representing Diola myths and traditions, he reacts against the fact that they have long been ignored. He fights clichés according to which Africans spontaneously offered themselves on the altar

of Europe's battlefields, everready to "die magnificently."[6] In the film, one of Sembène's characters says, "First the white man wanted our men and now he wants our rice," while another adds: "This war is not ours, it is the white man's war." Both do equally perceive their exploitation.

Also exploited are the black mercenaries, who are made to feel superior to other blacks. In this case, Sembène deals with a theme with which he is very familiar since he served in the French colonial army. He emphasizes the failure of French assimilation policies through a scene in which black soldiers speak pidgin French ("Moi connais pas") like uprooted cultural bastards who are not French and no longer African.[7]

In its illustration of French colonialism, *Emitai* stresses the contradictions and the opportunistic aspect of such a system. If colonialism officially debased or negated African myths and traditions, it exploited them as well, when judged necessary: the white commander is aware of the Diolas' burial customs, and in preventing Dmikolo's funeral, he uses this element as a way of influencing the villagers' submission.

Finally, it is noteworthy to realize that Ousmane Sembène not only denounces colonialism and its fascist methods of fighting fascism, but he also criticizes traditional African religions. For him, "all religions are opiums"[8] in that they provide a spiritual escape from reality. In *Emitai*, the elders lament near the Sacred Tree: "Where are our gods? Where were our gods when the whites raided our village? Where were our gods? Where are they now?" The elders seek shelter in religion to justify their resignation in front of aggression. For Sembène, men and women have to forge their own destiny without solely relying on gods and spirits. Before dying, Dmikolo has a dialogue with the spirits:

—The Spirit: If you have offended the gods, if you no longer believe in us you will die.
—Dmikolo: So I must die but you will die with me too.

[6] In Alphonse Sèche, *Les Noirs, l'Armée Noire: Le Loyalisme des Sénégalais* (Paris: Payot, 1919). Although the book was written after the First World War, its themes persisted throughout the Second World War and thereafter.

[7] For more realism, Ousmane Sembène includes three languages in his film: Diola, French, and pidgin French.

If Dmikolo's words call for the spirits' death, men and women will have to forge their own destiny without solely relying on gods and spirits. The village has spiritually surrendered to Western materialism because the gods were absent—or, rather, they were remote from man's prayers and needs. If the gods are dead, a new awareness and a new action will have to be found.

In his study of the past, Ousmane Sembène gives to Africa a full consciousness of the dimension of the forthcoming struggle. This struggle may imply changes or alterations in African traditions and values, but one should never forget them. Here, not only is religion or colonialism involved but anything that may weaken, colonize, or corrupt the African mind and delay the necessary action. It is indeed "to all the militants of the African cause"[8] that Ousmane Sembène dedicates his film.

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[8] At the beginning of *Emitai*, the following words appear on the screen: "I dedicate this film to all the militants of the African cause."