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African Lit

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I-Search Research Paper

I’ve taken away so much from what has been discussed and read in class so far about Africa, especially in Senegal. This is a country we’ve seen so much of through books like Xala and even in working on our solutions project. Africa, a place I had once so ignorantly thought of as this large, mostly poor and barren land actually turned out to be so full of life, culture and an intense and shocking history. The general amount of diversity in languages, rituals, lifestyles, and spirituality really interested me. It’s easy to just ignore African culture because it has a very small place here in American society today. Perhaps in the future it will receive the attention it so rightfully deserves. The viewpoints on the supernatural world Africa, and more specifically Senegal are especially ignored here in America, yet they interested me while I read Xala and left me with many questions.

Xala stood out to me because despite the fact that El Hadji was an adamant Muslim, this curse, the xala, was able to eat away at him and render him impotent. It seemed mysterious to me that someone would be able to follow the beliefs of Islam yet still find themselves affected and in fear of what I had initially believed to be part of traditional belief. Was it possible according to El Hadji’s beliefs that he could be cursed in this traditional sort of way while still being Muslim, or was that out of the question? It was this question that began my research journey. When I read this book I knew little about what Muslims or what the people of Senegal believed about curses like this one. I couldn’t even tell you the name of the traditional beliefs to which the xala would fall under or what the traditional religion in Senegal was even called.

After looking at nearly half a dozen websites to try to see what system of beliefs the xala might belong to I can only assume that it would be a part of Serer, also known as Seereer. According to NationMaster.com only about 1% of the inhabitants in Senegal practice traditional African beliefs (Senegal Religion Stats). This made it very difficult to find where the xala may have come from since this receives so little attention today, even over there. It wasn’t until I found a list of traditional African religions by country that I was able to find Serer as a traditional religion from Senegal (Traditional African Religion). No other African belief system was listed as one that was practiced in Senegal. After seeing this name it sounded familiar, as if this religion may have been discussed following our reading of Xala, so I decided to look into it more. What I found absolutely blew me away.

It turns out that there is so much more to Serer than just religion. Apart from the spirituality, Serer is an ethnicity that has made its way around Africa, with a rich history and even its own language. Unbelievably, according to a website called Unexplained-Mysteries.com, “Serer is the name of the second largest ethnic group located in Senegal and the Gambia in West Africa” (2012). What makes this so astounding to me is the fact that despite the fact this ethnic group is so large, it is so unheard of. It took me numerous searches before I could even find information on this group. As a matter of fact, when I searched for Serer, google kept offering to search for “Server” instead, as if I’d made a mistake. According to this same website, “Henry Gravrand believes that their existence can be approximately placed at the time of the Neolithic Era about 10,000 years ago…” (2012). Its ancestors live on but I found it really bizarre that despite being so large and ancient, Serer belief is now dying out and unheard of across so much of the world.

Although I had discovered that there was so much more to Serer, I wanted to focus on the religious aspects of it. It was difficult to find information about their beliefs, however, I was able to find that like many other religions, Serer believe in Gods, yet have a supreme one, their own system of ethics, and that they have certain places for worship as well as certain sacred places. Along with this, they seem to believe in practicing astrology, cosmology, numerology, symbolism, and arts such as dancing and chanting (Seereer Religion (a ƭat Roog)). I’m led to believe that this is where the xala came from because of the lack of other religions and because of the fact that the same article that I had discovered that from had also stated, “The Seereer people being very diverse with different languages, each group refer to the Supreme Being in their own native tongue. The religious beliefs and practices of the Seereer group are however very similar and practically indistinguishable” (Seereer Religion (a ƭat Roog)). This along with the general lack of other options made me hypothesize that curses could be specific to different groups under Serer or otherwise just have been a small factor of the beliefs that didn’t come up under a web search. It remained unknown for sure, however.

In trying to match where the xala came from to Serer I tried comparing what happened in this story to what I had found online, however I could find little comparing the two. What I did find, however, was yet another surprise. When reading this I had initially thought that in the section where Sereen Mada removed El Hadji’s curse that she had been practicing an African tradition to remove the curse, perhaps something of Serer. What I did to find out more was look up unfamiliar terms in this section of the book. I began by finding what a muezzin was.

In the book the muezzin could be found practicing prayers during the removal of El Hadji’s curse. At this point I decided to look up just what a muezzin is. I found online that a “[Muezzin], in Islam, the official who proclaims the call to prayer” (Muezzin) and that they can serve to remind Muslims about prayers (Grieve, 2006, p. 101). It would make sense in this case for the muezzin to appear in this part of Xala because in this case he called all of those who were faithful to pray in an effort to heal El Hadji but it was peculiar that it was a Muslim and not someone of traditional belief (Ousmane).

Next it was time to see if the marabout was also of Muslim faith or if she worked as a part of the traditional, or possible Serer faith. The marabout in Xala, Sareen Mada, serves as a middle man between some sort of higher being and El Hadji. According to the book “Islam”, a marabout is similar to the Shi’I Imam, who “is a focal point of divine power, but also he combines within himself both religious and secular authority”. The book added that “…there exists in North Africa a phenomenon similar to that of the Imam, the warrior saints, known as marabouts.” This served as a good explanation to what Sareen Mada’s job was and gave an intriguing insight as to what could possibly be the answer to my confusion. As I read on in this book I learned something else that was interesting about the marabout. “At first an individual attained the rank of marabout either by demonstrating Baraka or through charismatic leadership based on sherifian lineage (descent from the Prophet Muhammed)” (Kelly, 1984, p. 25).

What I learned from this was that in this part of Xala, the process of removing El Hadji’s curse was not done in a traditional way so much as in the way that the Muslim’s practiced. At this point it seemed that my question could be answered by assuming that it wasn’t in fact a traditional African way of lifting the curse, but an Islamic way. The Muslims must have believed in the curse and therefore gotten rid of it.

This wasn’t the end of my research, however. To be sure this was the case I couldn’t think of any better source to confirm it than to turn to the Koran itself. One verse in Al-Baqarah, or The Cow, verse #102 says “Not that Solomon was an unbeliever: it is the devils who are unbelievers. They teach men witchcraft and that which has been revealed to the angels Harut and Marut in Babylon” (The Koran, The Cow 2:102, p.19) goes to show recognition of witchcraft within the Muslim community. An online source from the perspective of a Muslim that I found even claimed that this proves “Black magic or witchcraft does exist. But it is not an opposing force against Allah (as in some religions that teach the devil has power and is working against God). Rather, this is something that Allah has placed here on earth centuries ago, only to test the people. Similar to the idea of the apple that Adam, peace be upon him, was commanded not to eat. It is a test” (Estes, 2015).

What this also showed to me was more confirmation that the Xala would’ve come from Serer or another traditional belief out of Western Africa. Not only does this show that Muslims believe in curses, but it shows that they do not practice them as long as they are following the law of the Koran. Further proof that the Xala belonged to an African belief rather than Islam came to me in a book called African Traditional Religion. While I was in the library searching for books on the Islam faith I came across a few books about African religion, however, I had a hard time finding any information about the Xala or curses in general in any of these books. This was the same issue I had in my web searches prior to exploring the shelves of the library. When I found this book I noticed a section on Magic. This book says that “Magic, or dynamism is a part of the belief in a spiritual world which is found all over Africa.” Later it states, “Magical charms are made for teething troubles, ancestors are consulted over land disputes, sky gods are prayed to prayed to for rain, above all is the great Creator. All these powers are important, and in turn they may help man in his incessant fight against disease, drought, or witchcraft” (Parrinder, 1962, p. 26). This was interesting because this correlates with the peasants actions almost completely. He cursed El Hadji over a land dispute which is an interesting connection here. What was unfortunate about this book, however, was the fact that although it confirmed that charms like that in Xala came from traditional African beliefs it did not say which specific ones or give any lead into some. I’m lead to believe that I could conclude that these charms are a part of almost all African beliefs according to the first point I shared from this book.

Although my question of what initial religion the Xala came from remains not quite unanswered, simply unconfirmed I can now come to somewhat of a conclusion about my first question. To sum up the explanation to my confusion towards Xala, it seems that El Hadji was an Islamic man. He did not follow the traditional African beliefs of Serer of which I strongly believe the Xala was from. The peasant who cursed El Hadji with the Xala did believe in this, however, or so it seems. El Hadji’s removal of the xala performed by Sareen Mada was not a Serer practice as I had originally thought, but instead a practice that followed the belief of Islam. Sareen Mada, El Hadji, and the muezzin would’ve most likely believed that the xala was a real, yet evil thing. This is believable considering how much El Hadji hated it, although his impotency is reason enough as well. It is also believable because the marabout and muezzin were working so hard to lift the xala off of El Hadji. I think it’s also reasonable for me to conclude that in addition to finding the xala evil, these characters would’ve believed that the curse was a test from Yallah and that with their faithful prayer El Hadji was able to find revival.

At this point it looked as though my question had been answered, yet in my research there was one other part from the Koran that stood out to me, especially given this idea that the xala and curses alike served a purpose in the world of Islam. In my search for answers I found out more about Islam that gave me a deeper insight into this novel and gave the book almost a completely new meaning to me.

I can recall debate coming up in our class discussion about “Xala” as to whether or not El Hadji deserved to be spat upon or forgiven for what he had done. As we know, El Hadji had basically robbed those who were now beggars in order to make himself richer. At this point his deserving still stands for debate but I think that Ousmane tried to make his view on that very clear in this book.

There is a book near the end of the Koran I came across during my journey called “The Slanderer”. This book only has two verses, yet what they said really related to what happened to El Hadji in the end of Xala. “Woe to every back-biting slanderer who amasses riches and sedulously hoards them, thinking his wealth will render him immortal! By no means! He shall be flung to the Destroying Flame. Would that you knew what the Destroying Flame is like! It is God’s own kindled fire, which will rise up to the hearts of men. It will close upon them from every side, in towering Columns” (The Koran, The Slanderer, 104:1-9 p. 432).

This made me rethink the satire behind this book. Obviously Ousmane used satire in Xala to criticize the rich who had received all of the wealth they had by stealing from others and cheating, but I think this story could also serve as a satire to criticize Muslims that had been so caught up in their riches that they were no longer following the Koran. “The Slanderer” basically explains how according to Islam those like El Hadji will be punished for their wrong doings. It also can go to show that what goes around comes around. This can be clearly seen at the end of Xala because El Hadji gets spat upon for doing wrong to the people of Senegal. What’s interesting is that the peasants are also fought by the police even though if you look at it from a certain perspective they did nothing wrong in the first place, or did they?

It looked to me as if at this point the Muslim god, or Yallah, is serving justice to each of the characters because they have all sinned against him. El Hadji could be being punished for his stealing and greed, and the poor could be being punished for practicing that dark magic which the Koran forbids.

It’s interesting that even though spirituality plays such a large role in Xala, myself and others were still able to understand Xala and also able to take away so much from this novel. I do feel, however, that now seeing that it can make a point against not being faithful that I think I can understand it more or at least look at this book in a different way.

During class debates I was one of those people who didn’t understand why the ending of Xala was necessary. I thought it was ridiculous that the people felt the need to shame El Hadji instead of making reparations or forgiving him. Understanding the religious context behind this book has enlightened me as to why the book was to end this way and as a result I can now also understand why Ousmane would’ve felt it important to have the story end this way. Changing the context in this book can make all the difference in what you take out of it as I was able to see after this.

I think that although after all of my research some answers to the questions I had were not clear, I was still able to find out so much more about traditional African beliefs, and even its history and practices. I definitely know more about it now, and the same could be said about the Islamic faith and its beliefs. Through my research journey I not only expanded what I’ve learned about Africa but I have a greater knowledge of world religions as a part, and an even greater understanding of the novel Xala.

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