



PROJECT MUSE®

Art for Man's Sake: A Tribute to Ousmane Sembène

Samba Gadjigo

Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, Volume 49, Number 1,
Spring 2008, pp. 30-34 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frm.0.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/252626>



Ousmane Sembène. *Courtesy of New Yorker Films.*

Art for Man's Sake A Tribute to Ousmane Sembène

Born: January 1, 1923, Ziguinchor, Casamance, Senegal

Died: June 9, 2007, Dakar, Senegal

Samba Gadjigo

Ousmane Sembène was known among film critics as “the father of African cinema” and, among African filmmakers, as “l’Aîné des anciens” (the oldest of the elders). He wrote ten books of fiction (novels and short stories) and one essay over a period of forty years (1956–1996) and, between 1962, the year he came to filmmaking, and 2004—forty-two years—he directed eighteen films: four shorts, ten features, and four documentaries.

After the release of *Xala*, his fourth feature, in 1974, Sembène told the Tunisian film critic Tahar Cheria: “In this part of the world (Africa), there is one thing we must recognize: filmmakers carry a mission and, more generally, the artist is the one who prepares a revolution, the one who incites it. I would go further. Even in the middle of a revolution, the true artist is the one who prepares the next revolution, he incites revolt: that is his necessary role, his possible glory, and also his limit. Through his work of analysis, clarification, unmasking and denunciation, the artist arouses in his people’s consciousness the clear conviction that revolution is necessary and possible” [The artist has a historic and social responsibility, and art should be a liberating activity].¹ Almost two decades later, after the release of *Guelwaar* (1993), the American film critic Michael Atkinson, in his examination of Sembène’s film production, echoed Sembène’s profession of faith: “Quite possibly the only filmmaker left in the

world who cannot be bought and sold, Sembène represents the dying heritage of political films still possessed of a virginal faith in social change, a faith not in films for profit's sake or even film's sake, but for man's sake."²

Ousmane Sembène was born in Casamance (southern Senegal) in 1923 and died at his Dakar residence, Galle Ceddo ("House of the Rebel"), on June 9, 2007, at the age of 84. He died at 9:00 PM, the exact time I was boarding a South African Airways flight at New York's JFK airport to go see him. I had last seen an already frail Sembène on November 10, 2006, and those of us who belonged to a very narrow circle of friends knew his days were numbered. But, his illness remained a well-kept secret until February 2007 when, for the first time since 1969, he missed the Ouagadougou Panafrican Film Festival, which he cofounded. For four decades, he was known as the occupant of Room 1 at the Hotel Independence, the site of the festival. I last spoke with Sembène a week before he died and, as he always did when I came to Senegal, he gave me his shopping list on the phone. We both looked forward to seeing each other on June 10. He was expecting me that morning, also expecting to enjoy those bags of vanilla nut coffee and boxes of bath salt I carried for him in my suitcase. There was indeed a long love story between Ousmane Sembène and tobacco, coffee, and water! When I landed in Dakar that morning, seven hours after boarding the South African flight, I learned "Tonton" Sembène was gone, gone seven hours earlier. In the eighteen years I had known Ousmane Sembène, this was our first missed rendezvous. Over those eighteen years, his work had become for me more than a scholarly interest—it was a political imperative. I became his liaison with American universities and other cultural institutions, his biographer and, most importantly, his "jarbaat" (nephew) and friend. With him, I roamed the world: Africa, Europe, and the United States.

My first encounter with Ousmane Sembène dates back to my high school years in the 1970s (1972, precisely), when I first read his third novel and masterpiece, *God's Bits of Wood*. This book was my first exposure to African literature, after years of alienation caused by a school curriculum that included only French classics. The effect on my self-image, my worldview, and my political consciousness as a "francophone African" was instantaneous. Like a tsunami, I was swept away by a sudden awakening to the realities of class, race, gender, the realities of culture and politics. After studying *God's Bits*, a historical fiction about the west African railroad workers' strike of 1947, not only did I stop believing Hegel's view that "the only history in Africa is the history of the white man in Africa," I understood (albeit with a somewhat obscured awareness) that "to write history is also to make history." Whereas my high school books were written by history's "winners" (either the former colonial master or his surrogate, the neocolonial elite), in his novel, Sembène appropriates one of the major narratives of African colonial history and turns it on its head, giving agency to the black African railroad workers and thereby transforming them into "makers of history."

During my college and graduate years (1974–80) at what was then the Université de Dakar (now named after the famous Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop), writers of the “Négritude” movement were made part of the canon, albeit reluctantly. But Sembène’s works remained marginalized, to the point that I did not even know him as a filmmaker. It was at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, in the 1980s that I discovered Sembène’s body of film work. I met the man himself in 1989, seventeen years after I first read *God’s Bits of Wood*. As a young assistant professor of French and African literature at Mount Holyoke College, I returned to Senegal to extend to Ousmane Sembène an invitation from the Five-College consortium to be artist-in-residence for a month.

Despite our missed rendezvous this past June 10th, I did see Ousmane Sembène again, but only for a few minutes. I saw him not at this Galle Ceddo residence, not at his office at the old communications building on the Avenue de la République, but at the morgue of the Hôpital Principal, the site of Sembène’s official funeral. It was 3:00 PM and, despite the scorching rainy season heat, the room was absolutely packed—the adjacent streets became an extension of the morgue. Artists and officials from the whole country and from neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso gathered, waiting to pay their respects to the last “Ceddo.” Before Sembène was wrapped in a green shroud embossed with gold Arabic letters, in preparation for public viewing, and against the backdrop of Koranic songs, I took two minutes to visit the father of African cinema. As I looked at his peaceful face, his closed eyes, and his deliberately smiling lips (he was no doubt smiling at the Koranic songs, thinking: “They can chant as they like but they will never get me”), I was suddenly transported back to Djerisso, to the shooting in 2002 of *Moolaade*, his last feature film. After all those years of studying Sembène’s work, it was only then that I fully understood both his 1974 statement to Tahar Cheria and Michael Atkinson’s judgment of Sembène.

It was June 2002. I was present at the shooting of *Moolaade* in the village of Djerisso in Burkina Faso. It was the first time I was invited to his set and the first time Ousmane Sembène allowed any academic or journalist to film him at work producing an African film, transforming his ideas into images. (My own documentary, *The Making of Moolaade*, was an attempt to capture that experience). Like many rural African villages, Djerisso seems completely cut off from the rest of the world: no paved roads, no running water, no electricity. The unrelenting heat of the tropical sun was replaced at night by dust and mosquitoes. Sembène was then seventy-nine years old. He had brought with him a crew of dozens of technicians, artists and actors, as well as very heavy machinery. The film is a crusade against female genital mutilation, also referred to as “female genital cutting.” The shooting had been going on for nine weeks—five days a week, 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM, with only a one-hour lunch break, which Sembène never took, preferring to meditate on the afternoon’s work. Over twelve hours, he would only have a glass of sour milk. One after-

noon, about to shoot a scene while seated in his director's chair, Ousmane Sembène collapsed, his eyes rolling upward: he had fainted. It took ice water and fanning to bring him back. It was high drama on the set, but not for long. Indeed, as soon as he could once again sit in his chair, Sembène summoned his crew back to work. As I discreetly approached Sembène and suggested he take a few days off to rest at a Banfora hotel, I was startled by his incisive reply: "Let's get back to work. I will have plenty of time to rest after I die." Following his collapse on the set, a village health care worker came every evening to see Sembène; for hours, the "infirmier" (nurse) fed his weakened body through intravenous tubes. The next morning at 8:00, unfailingly, Sembène was back on the set.

As I stared at Ousmane Sembène's face, for the last time, that June afternoon, in the morgue of the Hôpital Principal, images of Djerisso flashing back on the dark screen of my mind, I was suddenly filled with hope—hope that I will see him again, every day, because, like few great artists of our times, he had merely traded his perishable body for eternity. In that Djerisso heat, when Sembène was fighting death to collect images, he embodied the greatness of a true artist, torn between beauty and pain, between his love for humankind and the madness of creation. Ousmane Sembène used to say that one had to be crazy to make films in Africa. What truly makes the greatness and timelessness of artists like Sembène is their sense of responsibility toward humankind, their duty to generate hope, to galvanize their fellow men toward action against all forms of alienation and oppression and so make for a better tomorrow. Ousmane Sembène felt a calling: through his art, he sought to fulfill his responsibility to contribute to the building of a new life for the living. It is a sense of responsibility that, unlike the Hollywood model, does not allow rest or individual comfort. Instead, throughout his writing and film "career," this old communist felt that each of his works was a stone he offered for the building of a new world, a better world for humankind. Rejecting Atkinson's prophecy, I have the hope that Ousmane Sembène is not the last heir of political filmmaking, not the last to have faith in films for man's sake.

*Samba Gadjigo is Professor of Francophone Studies at Mount Holyoke College and Ousmane Sembène's official biographer, and representative in the United States. His books include *Ecole blanche*, *Afrique noire* (l'Harmattan, 1990) and *Ousmane Sembène, Une conscience africaine* (Homnispheres, 2007). He directed *The Making of Moolaade: A Documentary Film* (2006).*

Notes

1. Tahar Cheria, "Interview with Sembène Ousmane," *Cinéma Québec* 3, nos. 9–10 (August 1974).
2. Michael Atkinson, "Ousmane Sembène: 'We Are No Longer in the Era of Prophets,'" *Film Comment* 29, no. 4 (July–August 1993): 63–69.