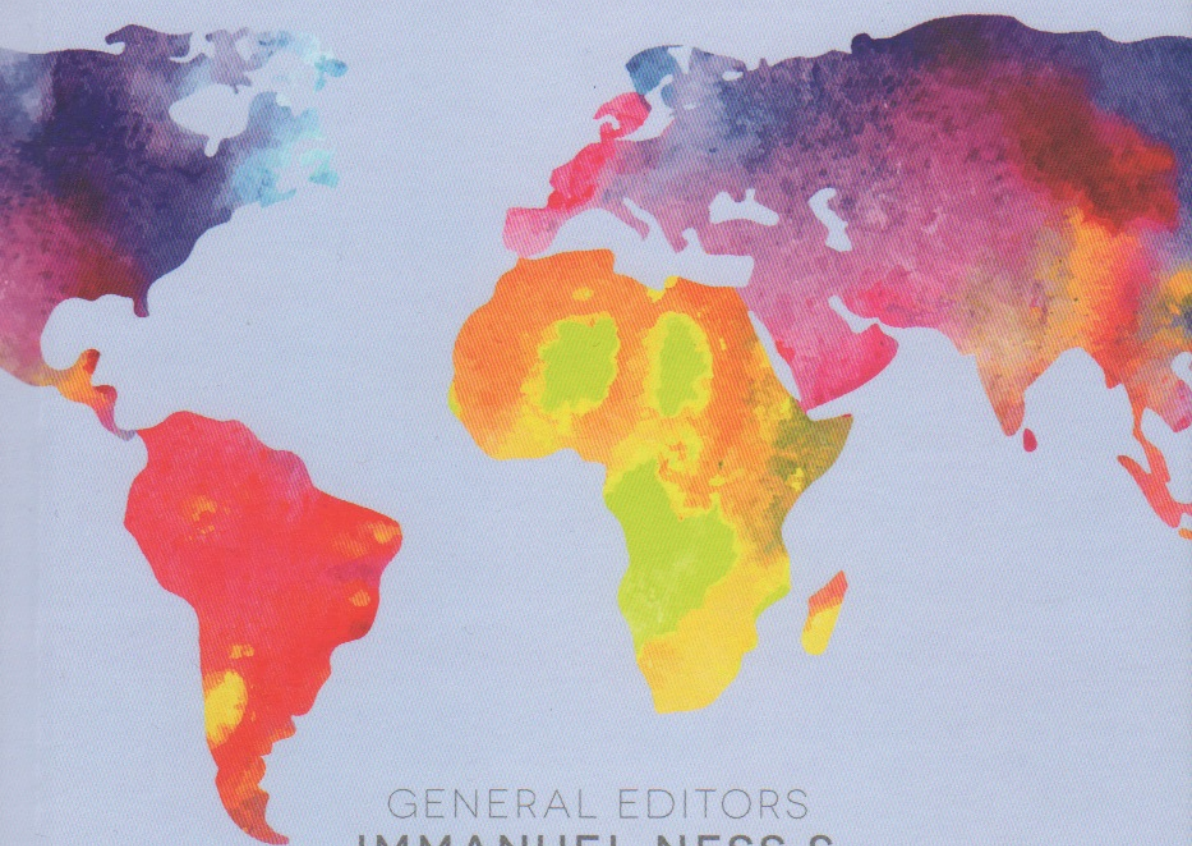


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Sembène, Ousmane (1923–2007)

Sembène Ousmane was born nine years after Blaise Diagne was elected as Senegal’s first African deputy to the French parliament. In the late 19th century, France had gained control over the territory of Senegal after the British had left. It became part of French West Africa. Over the centuries, this region had been exploited for slave and goods trade by the Portuguese and the Dutch. In 1946, Senegal became part of the French Union. Some 12 years later, it became a republic and part of the French Community.

Sembène saw all these changes, but also how they resulted from the struggle of the Senegalese people for emancipation. Hope for self-determination would soon be realised. In June 1960, Senegal became independent and a constituent of the Mali Federation, which it abandoned later that year. Leopold Senghor was the first president of the new republic, whom Sembène, as a communist and internationalist, criticised along with ‘African socialism’, particularly Senghor’s Négritude and the endorsement of a Francophone Commonwealth. After a failed coup led by prime minister Mamadou Dia, a constitution was drawn up and approved. In 1966, Senghor’s Senegalese Progressive Union became the country’s sole political party and remained so until 1978. Abdou Diouf became president in 1981. Senegal

and neighbouring Gambia aimed to combine military and security forces and so the next year they formed the Senegambian Confederation. It was dissolved seven years later. The separatist movement in the southern province of Casamance gained momentum at the beginning of the 1980s. In 2000, the opposition leader Abdoulaye Wade won the second round of the presidential election and ended 40 years of Socialist Party rule, introducing political changes such as giving the president power to dissolve the parliament. Wade’s Senegalese Democratic Party won an overwhelming majority in parliamentary elections in 2001. When 1,863 passengers died in a ferry disaster off the coast of Gambia, the incident had a political impact that led to the government’s resignation. In October 2005, a dispute with Gambia over ferry tariffs on the border resulted in a transport blockade. The economies of both countries suffered. Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo organised talks to resolve the issue. In 2006, the Senegalese army launched an offensive against rebels from a faction of the Casamance Movement of Democratic Forces. Senegal and Spain agreed to jointly patrol the Senegalese coast so as to curb the exodus of so-called illegal migrants heading for Europe, particularly for the Canary Islands. Senegal was and still is a common starting point for poor and desperate migrants setting out in rickety boats.

The Senegalese Sembène Ousmane, one of the key African artists of the 20th century as a writer and a film director, was attentive to this historical process. As Pfaff states, his originality ‘as a filmmaker lies in his having managed successfully to adapt film, a primarily Western medium, to the needs, pace, and rhythm of African culture’, and, specifically, Senegalese culture (1993: 14). In the vein of the African tradition of telling and transmitting stories that creatively reflect the situation of its peoples, Sembène opted for fiction instead of documentary filmmaking. His novels, short stories, and films adopt a social-realist aesthetics and mode of narration, limpid and spare. His movies strengthened the cause of the liberation from colonial oppression. With a sharp political conscience rooted in knowledge of the history, culture, and reality of Senegal, these works portrayed the tensions generated by economic factors, the social classes, the racial statuses, the religious degeneration, and the gender

conditions in the country. He was an African filmmaker and a political artist who criticised *Négritude* (the unreflective affirmation of the value of black or African culture, heritage, and identity) because Africa before the arrival of white colonisers was not an idyllic place.

David Murphy points out that a fundamental element for the understanding of Sembène's view of art is his paper 'Man Is Culture' (2000: 29). In this presentation as a Hans Wolff Memorial Lecture at Indiana University-Bloomington, Sembène explained that the concept of art as an adornment is unknown in West Africa. Humanity is art. Humanity is culture. That is, culture (of which art is a part) cannot be abstracted from the historical roots and human conscience that are at its origin and are produced by it.

Sembène was born in Ziguinchor, Casamance to a Lebou family, and he initially followed the path of his father and became a fisherman. Working in plumbing and masonry gave him an inside perspective of the problems and challenges of the working class. His maternal grandmother reared him and greatly influenced him; she is arguably the reason why women play a major role in his works. Wolof was his mother tongue. He learned basic Arabic at a madrasa and French at a French school until he clashed with the principal in 1936. During the Second World War, Sembène was drafted into the Senegalese *Tirailleurs*, a corps of colonial infantry in the French army. Later he served with the Free French Forces, the resistance organisation founded by Charles de Gaulle in 1940 in London to continue the campaign against the Nazis and their allies. After the war, he returned to his home country. In 1947, he participated in a long railroad strike. *God's Bits of Wood* (1995/1960) is inspired by this courageous strike of the Dakar–Niger railroad workers, from October 1947 to March 1948. It is a portrait of post-Second World War French West Africa, set in today's Senegal and Mali (French Sudan), in the moment that the African working class became organised. It has no protagonist, much less a hero, except for a community of nearly 50 characters who band together in the face of hardship and oppression to defend their rights.

Late in 1947, he went again to France, where he worked at a Citroën factory in Paris, and then on the docks at Marseille, where he started writing. His first novel bears the title *The Black Docker* (1987a/1956), and is about an

African immigrant who faces racism and mistreatment on the same docks. He witnesses the oppression of Arab and Spanish workers, making it clear that their problems have to do with labour despite the fact that they are experienced as racism and xenophobia. Sembène became active in the French trade union movement and joined the General Confederation of Labour and the French Communist Party (PCF), helping to organise a strike to hinder the shipment of weapons for the Indochina War, which he saw as a resistance war against French colonisation. During this time, he discovered two men who became major influences in his work: Claude McKay and Jacques Roumain. McKay was the author of *Home to Harlem* (1928), which looked among the ordinary people for a distinctive black identity. The Haitian Marxist Roumain had been actively opposed to the US occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934, the year when he founded the Haitian Communist Party with other comrades. It is clear that Sembène saw his artistic work and political activism as not merely a personal desire, but as a social necessity (Gadjigo 2010: 115).

He left the PCF in 1960, never leaving the communist ideal and continuing to be a militant through his art, which made use of historical materialism to interpret and intervene in Senegalese society. In his exchange with ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, who had made films about African culture, he contrasted their approaches in a clear manner:

You say seeing. But in the domain of cinema, it is not enough to see, one must analyze. I am interested in what is before and after that which we see. What I do not like about ethnography, I'm sorry to say, is that it is not enough to say that a man we see is walking; we must know where he comes from, where he is going. (Busch and Annas 2008: 4)

In order to discuss an artist, we usually discuss his work and its context. At times, we also consider his life and its connection with his art. Yet in this case we must examine his name as well. Should we write 'Sembène Ousmane' or 'Ousmane Sembène'? This is not a futile question. The first, which was adopted by the artist in his films and books, is written in the style used in official French documents, with 'Sembène', a patronymic surname, first. It bears the mark of history,

therefore calling attention to the persistence of colonialism after the ending of colonisation. The second erases these associations.

Sembène's art gives voice to revolutionary Africa. Despite the individuated characters, the true protagonist of his fictions is the Senegalese people, catapulted by the historical development and the production relations of colonialism to the centre of the contemporary class struggle. His works unmask the new bourgeoisie and critique the persistence of feudalistic structures and cultural obscurantism. For him, the autonomy from colonial powers in Africa was often merely formal. It did not change the economic and social structures in place.

He realised that films could reach a wider African audience that did not have the means or the education to read his writings. In 1962, he went to study at the Soviet Gorky Film Institute in Moscow with a scholarship, where he studied with the Ukrainian filmmaker Mark Donskoy. After returning to Senegal, he directed two short films on 16mm: the documentary *The Sonhrai Empire* (*L'Empire sonhrai*, 1963) and the drama *Cart Driver* (*Borom Sarret*, 1963). The *Sonhrai Empire* (produced by the Republic of Mali) depicts the history of the Islamic Songhai Empire. *Cart Driver* introduces an unidealised style that Sembène would develop later, portraying economic exploitation through the perceptive rendering of a cart driver's everyday in Dakar. His third short film, *Niaye* (1964), based on one of his short stories – 'White Genesis', later included in *The Money-Order* and *White Genesis* (1966) – is the tale of a pregnant young girl who faces the judgment of her community, which tries to prevent the scandal from reaching the French colonial administration. *Black Girl* (*La noire de ...*, 1966) was his first feature and it adapts one of the short stories that can be found in *Tribal Scars* (1981/1974). It won the Prix Jean Vigo in France, because it was a French-language film, calling attention to African cinema and Sembène. The film's main character, Diouanna, is a Senegalese maid who is taken to the south coast of France by her French employers. It is only in this exiled condition that she realises what being colonised and African means; the same process that Sembène had gone through. The success of this film gave him an opportunity to make *The Money-Order* (*Mandabi*, 1968) in his native dialect Wolof. Once again, the film was based on one of his short stories,

'The Money-Order' (1987b/1966), about a village man, used to ordering around his wives, who receives a money-order from his nephew in Paris and helplessly attempts to cash it. Sembène exposes the vanity and cold ambitions of the petite bourgeoisie. It is not just the language that is important, but the power and history of oral communication in its public and private dimensions (Niang 1996: 67–68). In the late 1960s, the filmmaker developed two small projects for public television, *Employment Problem* (*Les Dérives du chômage*, 1969) and *Polygamy* (*Traumatisme de la femme face à la polygamie*, 1969), both focusing on social and cultural problems, which have roots in human exploitation.

The Money-Order had marked the adoption of a critical stance towards the corrupt African elites that followed the racial and economic oppression of the colonial government. *Xala*, as a novel (1974) and a film (1975), would prolong this analysis of the social and moral collapse of post-independence Africa, followed by the books *Niiwam* and *Taaw: Two Novellas* (1992/1974) and *The Last of the Empire: A Senegalese Novel* (1983/1981). It is the story of El Hadji, a rich businessman struck by what he believes to be a curse of impotence, *xala* in Wolof, on the night of the wedding to his beautiful, young third wife. Only after losing most of his money and reputation does he discover the source of the problem to be the beggar who lives outside his offices, whom he had wronged to acquire his fortune. The story satirises modern African bourgeoisie, exposing the corruption at the heart of post-independence governments, as if white colonialists had merely been replaced by a black elite who promote capitalism and imperialism. The man's erectile dysfunction is an image of this failure, the postponing of African emancipation. The short film *Taaw* (1970) is about an unemployed young man in modern Senegal. Although accused of being lazy, he is able to help his pregnant girlfriend who has been abandoned by her family. *God of Thunder* (*Emitai*, 1971) is a film in the Diola language and French portraying the confrontation between French Gaullist colonists and the Diola people of Senegal in the last days of the Second World War. The women are at the forefront of the resistance and the film conveys their social power as keepers, preservers, and enhancers of myths, rituals, and stories. It was banned throughout French West Africa, and was showed at the 7th

Moscow International Film Festival, where it won a Silver Prize. Sembène's films were always welcomed at this Soviet festival, which awarded him an honorary prize for his contribution to cinema in 1979. *African Basketball at the Munich Olympic Games* (*Basket africain aux Jeux olympiques de Munich*, 1972) was shot during the 1972 Summer Olympics that took place in the Federal Republic of Germany, but it was never commercially released due to the Munich massacre in which six Israeli coaches, five Israeli athletes, one German police officer, and five members of the Black September group died.

West African spirituality and religion are crucial topics in Sembène's work. As a child, he came into contact with the Serer religion, whose followers believe in a Creative Divine Spirit called *Roog*. Sembène often helped in the rituals of offerings to ancient saints and ancestral spirits that the Serer people call *Pangoöl*. Then he was attracted to the Layene brotherhood, a small Senegalese Muslim community in Senegal. Some of his artworks draw parallels with Serer themes, even if he opposed religion on the grounds that it mainly had been a social force, superstructurally connected with economic relations of domination and exploitation. His films stated and restated that it is the people who make their history, not the gods. *Outsiders* (*Ceddo*, 1976) is his most relevant film on the subject, laying bare the onslaught of Islam, Christianity, and the Atlantic and Arab slave trades in African history. It shows that the representation of history has been changed by the elimination of older beliefs, but also that the new religions integrated elements from the local culture. This is the reason why the film jumps from the conflict in the 17th century to the present to make connections. This was a narrative structure and editing pattern already employed in his first feature film, *Black Girl*. It was heavily censored in Senegal, apparently because of a problem with the required paperwork, but more probably because of its perspective on religion; in particular, its depiction of the killing of an imam by a tribal princess who resists forceful conversion to Islam. Sembène was able to release an uncut version for international distribution.

The Camp at Thiaroye (*Camp de Thiaroye*, 1988) was the only film that he made in the 1980s and it is a vigorous indictment of European imperialism in West Africa. The film focuses on an event that was a turning point in the fight for

Senegalese independence: the Thiaroye massacre. In 1944, West African soldiers who had fought against Fascism in Europe were waiting for better living conditions and severance pay in a transit camp in Senegal. In the film, the French officer in charge is at first diplomatic, but then tries to cheat them, which provokes a mass revolt. The French response is to open fire on them, killing 35 soldiers. The movie won the Special Jury Prize at the 45th Venice International Film Festival.

Guelwaar (1992) initiated a trilogy on daily bravery that goes unnoticed, which continued with *Faat Kiné* (1999) and *Moolaadé* (2004). Guelwaar opened the 13th Pan-African Film Festival in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, which honoured Sembène as a father of African cinema. It was based on the events around the interment of Henri Thioune, a Christian Catholic who was a popular member of the anti-establishment resistance and whose body was mistakenly buried in a Muslim cemetery. This allows the filmmaker to analyse religious conflict as something that masks real economic and social problems. *Faat Kiné* dissects post-colonial Senegal, focusing on the day-to-day existence of a single mother of two children, whose name is the film's title, struggling for independence and equality. Her life of opulence and flashy female friends is at odds with the lives of other Senegalese women, but the present power and commodity relations inherited from the past shape both groups. *Moolaadé* won the Prix Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival, a prize that rewards cinematic originality and distinctiveness. Set in a small village in Burkina Faso, it denounces female genital mutilation. The last image of *Faat Kiné*'s shows her feet curling in pleasure. The woman who protects young girls from genital cutting in *Moolaadé* is asserting the right to such pleasure.

All of Sembène's films were made under severe technical and financial constraints. Distribution was a challenge throughout his career, especially since he insisted, from *Mandabi* on, that his films be spoken in Wolof. He wanted the movies to be true to their subject matter and to their primary audience members, making them aware of their history (Busch and Annas 2008: 217) and situation (109). In other words, his cinema was a critical and popular narrative art, an activist art that was not simply made for the people, but came from them, out of their striving to

be unshackled. Sembène's convictions were clearly embodied in his films and articulated in his public discourse:

Culture is political, but it's another type of politics. You're not in art to be chosen. You're not involved in its politics to say 'I am.' In art, you are political, but you say, 'We are. We are' and not 'I am'. (cited in Busch and Annas 2008: xx)

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Senghor, Lamine (1889–1927)

In the mid-1920s, Lamine Senghor (1889–1927), a Senegalese veteran of the First World War, was one of the most celebrated figures in the emerging, global, anti-colonial movement. However, he was also a very sick man: during the war, his battalion of *tirailleurs sénégalais* (colonial infantrymen drawn from across French West Africa) had been gassed near Verdun, and Senghor suffered terrible injuries from which he never fully recovered. In the summer of 1927 his health failed rapidly, and the movement he had launched began to crumble. After his premature death that November, aged just 38, his reputation quickly faded, and the inter-war period later came to be seen as a 'failed' one for the anti-colonial struggle. However, since the 1990s, there has been renewed interest in his career and the movements he led.

In the autumn of 1924, Senghor joined the Union Intercoloniale (UIC), an organisation created by the French Communist Party (PCF) with the aim of providing a forum in which different colonised groups could join together in opposition to empire (Nguyen Ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, was one of the most active members of the group in the early 1920s). The UIC was perceived as a threat to colonial interests, for the Communist International (Comintern) of 1920 had adopted a resolutely anti-imperial stance. In practice, this led to little concrete anti-colonial activity but, in 1924, the Comintern called on communists to seek alliances with anti-colonial nationalist movements. This united anti-colonial front would only last a few years but it is in this context that we must situate Senghor's activism.

Senghor quickly became a mainstay of UIC activities and a regular contributor to its firebrand newspaper *The Pariah*. In 1924–25, the PCF carried out its most sustained anti-colonial campaign when it organised opposition to the war in the Rif Mountains of Morocco. Senghor threw himself into the campaign, speaking at countless rallies, and developing his extraordinary skills as an orator. He adopted the 'official' Comintern line and promoted an alliance between all those engaged in anti-colonial struggle. Whereas Jacques Doriot 'translated' the actions of the Rif rebels into a proto-communism, Senghor