

Xala: Decoding El Hajj's Symbolic Ethnicity in Ousman Sembene's Anti-epic *Xala*: A Question of Language

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Abstract: *This paper is both a film and literary study that examines the legacy of imperialism and the problems of decolonization through their depiction in Ousmane Sembène's 1976 film Xala. It is a landmark work critiquing the tendency of the leaders of countries freed from the bond of colonialism to maintain the old order, despite equipping themselves with the trappings of their own culture, so-called symbols of ethnicity. The term 'symbolic ethnicity' refers to a strategy of self-identification in this case, by using objects that are identifiable as 'African'. This paper attempts to decode this phenomenon of post-colonial Africa as it is shown in the film, and from there extrapolate larger meanings from those objects and the act of self-identification, as well as to explore how the tactic fails, why it fails, and to suggest remedies. Through the course of the exploration further questions of study along those lines also become apparent, such as the difficult coexistence of two social realities, Africanité and modernité.*

Keywords: ethnicity, culture, social critique, Ousmane Sembene, Xala, africanité, collaboration, neo-colonialism, African nationalism, Otherness, alterity, identity, alienation

INTRODUCTION

In her article, "Xala, (Ousmane, 1976): The Carapace That Failed", Mulvey (2008) centers the film within an hieroglyphic mode of film-making that "evokes three processes: a code of composition, the encapsulation of an idea in an image which is on the verge of writing; a mode of address that asks that an audience apply its ability to decipher the poetics of the 'screen script'; and finally, the work of criticism as a means of articulating the poetics that an audience recognizes, but leaves implicit" (p.517).

There are certainly many culturally-charged signs and codes as hieroglyphs that deepen Sembene's social critiques implicit within the film. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to decode El Hajj's symbolic ethnicity, as well as to position it within the larger context of the film's critique, which takes aim at the imperialist tradition, what we might refer to as the pillars maintaining its legacy labeled by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonizing the Mind* as "the neo-colonials, or the international bourgeoisie, and the flag-waving native ruling classes" (2), otherwise classified by Gayatri C. Spivak in her article 'Can the Subaltern Speak' as the "Dominant foreign groups and the dominant indigenous groups..." (Williams, 1994:79).

It is important to note that in this film the characters as well as the filmmaker are treading the pit-fall ridden territory of the post-independence, postcolonial era in which the legacy of imperialism must be taken into account by people at all levels of society as they negotiate a present time which is only too-evidently pregnant with the issues and problems of the future. Functioning at all levels is the characters' struggle to maintain an even keel between the lure of the retreat into "Africanité" and the unavoidable pressures of "modernité".

SYMBOLIC ETHNICITY

Sembène's sardonic eye does not fail in the opening scene, in which the white colonial leadership is replaced by local political elites. The local leaders arrive and remove French political symbols from the cabinet room, only to replace them with "African" symbols. The symbols, however, are to be considered as representative of the hollowness of the Africanité touted by the new leaders. As Sollers (1962) defines it in his article, "Ethnicity", these icons, fetishized articles of an ungraspable (because too vast an idea) "African identity", serve as a base for "symbolic ethnicity" (p.292).

Sollers' (*ibid.*) "symbolic ethnicity" operates on two levels: first, it attempts to preserve (usually an immigrant's) native authenticity during the process of assimilation. One observes this practice in the desire for car bumper stickers and key chains proclaiming a person's national origin. In the opening scenes of *Xala*, since African symbols simply replace the French, they are in essence merely placeholders for the implicit meanings of the French symbols.

Secondly, the "symbolic ethnicity" acts as a type of cataloguing of what it means to be, in this case, African. The superficiality of this tactic, demonstrated by the removal of French and the addition of "African" symbols, extends its reach by implying that to be 'African' one must simply be equipped with the symbols of "africanité" (see also the film *Pièce d'identité*, which explores this very issue). The paradox here is that nothing could be further from the truth. This truth is borne out by the fact that the new politicians rapidly conform to their new roles, and like the statues and paintings, these men are simply placeholders for the colonial government, a situation whose future conflicts are foreshadowed by Geschière (1995) who comments that "If democratization means no more than imposing Western models and institutions upon African societies, it is doomed from the start" (p.7). 'Symbolic ethnicity' can be used to chart the level of assimilation, or 'contamination' of the subject, in this case, El Hajj.

The new ministers are subsumed into maintaining and even guaranteeing French influence in their government. "The Maka, like other Africans, often call the new elites 'whites'. This connotes that these people are viewed as the successors to the whites ("the ones who follow in the footsteps of the whites"); but it also underlines the general idea that the new elites transgress old categories: (*ibid.* p.100). Contrary to their vocalized pretensions of African socialism, there has been no revolution in ideology, only a superficial, cosmetic alteration. This new Africanité is little different from the program of the colonial powers, that of profit. Indeed the overt aim of colonialism was the 'civilizing mission', yet the covert goal, the real purpose driving the public relations 'mission' machine, was economic gain. With colonial administration came colonial controls on all aspects of local life. In other words, the colonists introduced paperwork. At a basic level, the introduction of 'red tape' separated the haves (literate) from the have-nots (illiterate). El Hajj is but a cog in the new administration, whose other members are to be seen making deals in which they will be paid cash to avoid leaving a paper trail. The quest for personal profit as opposed to national progress is what has changed in the government ministry.

Once the old colonial order has been symbolically deposed, it returns in the form of French functionaries bearing the iconic briefcases full of cash, which are distributed to the new cabinet ministers. Sembène does not let these neocolonialist overtures go unscathed, as noted by Villiers (1976) "...the aid projects were, as a rule, misconceived by the donors and mishandled by the recipients..." (130) and as perceived through the filmmaker's lens, "countries bitterly resented the stake which aliens were acquiring in their economies" (*ibid.*). Consider the scene of the arrival of the briefcases. Outside the ministry the joyful crowd

(dressed in traditional attire and entertained by traditional Mandiani rhythms on the djembé drum [a curious element in the film, since 1. The Mandiani (Malinke/Mandingue) are not the majority ethnic group in Senegal and 2. The sabar drums are typically Senegalese, while the djembé originated in Guinée. While Mulvey (2008) considers this single instance of traditional cultural representation as Sembène's cinematographic refutation or disagreement with the nègritude movement (p.518), it may conceal other issues worth considering in a separate study]. The crowd cheers as the French government icons are placed ignominiously on the steps, but are forced back by the military police, or Cerbères, led by a French bureaucrat. The people are mishandled and separated from the money, which is being "loaned" as capital to establish the government that will rule over them. Symbolically then the democracy is unstable at the outset, since the people are distanced from the structures of power.

ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE, COLLABORATION

The drawing of ethnic distinctions along the semiotic value of exteriors is a "dissociative strategy" (Sollers, 1962:288). Ethnicity must be seen as a fluid frontier, which 'contaminates' each group along the lines of contact. Once contact has been made between two groups, there is no return to the past. Contact and the resulting influence at all levels of culture are irreversible, because they are indelibly linked to the passage of time. Because culture is a human phenomenon, and because humans are constantly evolving on the plane of intellectual activity, culture, too, is in constant flux. That is why one cannot turn the clock back to the 'good old days'. The 'dissociative' strategy as a tool of social superiority points out the cultural lack of the Other. El Hajj marks a point along the continuum of his assimilation into the colonial mold in the way he treats his social inferiors, as noted below.

The process of dissociation is, according to Sollers (*ibid.*) a struggle for power (p.289). Each group attempts to demonstrate the 'Otherness' of the others. The most successful group will be the one with the economic base and consumer commodity brokering power to win members from the opposing group. Thus the lines of ethnicity drawn up by the power-incumbent European gaze have corrupted the local elites, men such as El Hajj and his fellows. In his essay, "The Process of Decolonization, Problems and Issues", Cooper (1962) comments on the type of self-serving camaraderie enacted by the new ministers: "Strategically situated in modern sectors of African society, these new groupings have special forms of solidarity and seek for themselves elitist distinction" (p.120).

de Villiers (1976) observes: "...when certain business concerns are indigenized the Black Africans are just as liable to exploit the people as were the foreigners from whom they have taken over..." (p.143). In metaphorically deposing the colonial government, their act of resistance to influence (the replacement of symbols) quickly becomes collaboration; their corruption and inability to run a government requires the behind-the-scenes manipulation of the neo-colonialist advisors and bankrollers, whose briefcases signify the fall of "africanité", or true indigenous "authenticity" the moment they are handed over to the new politicians. "All too often the so-called economic revolution has merely substituted a group of wealthy foreigners with a group of local members of influential families or of the ruling party" (*ibid.*). Receiving the briefcase is followed by a vestimentary transformation, from local costumes to European business suits. Accepting the foreign financial assistance is tantamount, in Sembène's dialectic critique of post-independence power structures, to swearing an oath of loyalty to the former powers.

Men of Hajj's cloth are then the generic elite beings fed into the neocolonialist economic manipulations, calling to mind facets of Jan Mohamed's Manichean allegory. The economy

of the Manichean allegory describes colonialist fiction as a machine used to dominate the other. The process works as follows: the fiction presents the native as a savage, unredeemable at best. Given that the goal of the mission is to civilize, if the savage is without redemption then the mission will continue indefinitely, resulting in the perpetual operation of the covert aim. The Manichean allegory then is the way fiction works to establish the power relations between black and white, good and evil, and any other oppositions that will serve the colonizer's purpose. Sembène is therefore, representing through the semiotic circuitry of the peaceful revolution, the function of the colonialist gears that turn local resistance into subtle, unconscious acts of collaboration. El Hajj and associates are completely unaware of their role in preserving the presence of the colonial power.

How it is then that such unwitting cooperation can occur? Where does it originate? At the practical level, it is just another element of the legacy of imperialism. To quote E.M. Debrah's (1962) essay 'The Psychology of African Nationalism', "they are strongly dependent on foreign contributions simply to maintain the machinery of an independent government, the cost of which cannot be reduced beyond a certain level" (p.58). At the theoretical level, it is a function of the allegory, operated by colonialist fiction. Discussion of this fiction is necessary for the analysis of *Xala*, because the film must be considered as a text in the post-colonial continuum, particularly because it attempts to provide the hieroglyphic cues that examine the vulnerability of the newly independent nations and their leaders and at an even deeper level displays the roots of that vulnerability. What is crucial to the understanding of that vulnerability within the colonialist literature is that the object of most of the fiction, the native, often had no access to the literature, being illiterate. He could therefore not argue with the representation of himself. Even with the advent of colonial schools for the local population, challenges to the false representations were not instantly forthcoming. The problem of 'unwitting' cooperation is therefore rooted in a deeper mechanism instilled during the process of assimilation of the colonist's language. As Debrah (*ibid.*) further confirms, "They inherited an economic, administrative and educational system which helps to perpetuate colonial relationships" (p.59).

Thiong'o (1994) takes pains to point out the nefariousness of this language imposition on native cultures (p.33). It initiates a process of gradual alienation, in which a native person traverses from the empowering position of having his own language and the culture associated with it, to being forced to learn a new language, complete with its own culture, and in which he must then begin to identify with that language and thus the accompanying culture. The process results in a psychological break caused when a child learns one language and cultural identification at home and yet another at school. The language imposition is then a violation, but when a child grows up in a society that has largely accepted the fact that French, for instance, is a factor of life and has adapted to it, the individual is less likely to break from that quotidian reality, illustrated by El Hajj's insistence on using French throughout the film, save the attempt to switch to his native Wolof during his ritualized trial and ejection from government. Such a phenomenon is also charted in the novel *Le baobab fou* (*The Mad Baobab*) by Ken Bugul, in which the Senegalese girl begins to think of herself as white, as French, because of the influence of the mission school. She is uprooted from her heritage, has no links to her past and becomes not only metaphorically but also psychologically "alienée".

Thiong'o (*ibid.*) examines language's role in the production of culture, through which process identity is constructed. El Hajj is a victim of the colonialist's educational system. Once this area is established, it becomes patently clear that, as has happened across the world, if one's language is usurped one loses the means of culture and identity production. This notion

touches on Marxism, and the message is that a return to using local languages will be tantamount to regaining the control of the means of culture and identity production, a point not missed by El Hajj's daughter, Ramata. The language question is therefore also a political issue, an issue ignored by El Hajj, whose use of French represents his high level of assimilation into the Manichean allegory on the "symbolic" plane. His daughter on the other hand, an icon of what Thiong'o labels the resistance tradition, is fully aware of the inherent power of language.

LANGUAGE AND RESISTANCE

The resistance is a grassroots movement, whose main weapon is its native language. There are a number of scenes in the film that oppose the imperialist tradition incarnated in El Hajj, and the resistance movement, exemplified by Ramata. Consider her visit to him at his wholesale goods' store. El Hajj confronts Ramata about her use of Wolof when he addresses her in French. The "symbolic" trappings of the scene are vital underpinnings of the dialog, which ends inconclusively. Note that he is still wearing his business suit, while she is dressed in a Senegalese garment. Ramata is a college student, and was necessarily educated in French. The fact that she maintains Wolof in her daily life, except presumably at school, demonstrates that she has evolved more than her father in her negotiation of the culturally-conflicted social space of newly independent Senegal.

A last comment to conclude discussion of the scene is to note the two maps of the African continent. As the camera shifts views, one can see that on the wall visually separating father and daughter is a map of Africa replete with the political boundaries imposed by the colonial powers. This colorless map represents that which prevents the father-daughter pair from entente: the dregs of the colonist's legacy (the Berlin Conference of 1884 which created the relatively unchanged political boundaries of the African countries), with its drive to divide and conquer. Behind the progressive Ramata is a colorful map of a 'unified' Africa, the dream of pan-Africanism. That particular dream is difficult to conceive because of the multitude of languages that serves as 'ethnic' boundaries. A paradox arises when considering pan-Africanism because European languages are seen as unifying forces in countries in which there are many different local languages, and where the colonist's language acts as a sort of lingua franca. There seems at this time to be no resolving that issue. In Ivory Coast, for example, a person is wise to speak French unless he's at home, for fear of being seen as ridiculous or uneducated (from a discussion with Dr. Samuel Zadi): clearly a sign of national identity crisis.

On the language question Thiong'o (*ibid.*) criticizes Senghor and Achebe, claiming that what they wrote was not for the local masses, but for the local elites and foreigners. It seems that he views the négritude movement, for example, as a form of cultural resistance that became cooperation. With Senghor, the cooperation continued to a higher level in that he became President of Senegal. This reflects the political ascendancy of the patriotic nationalistic section of the petty-bourgeoisie before and immediately after independence. It is they who strengthened the links to imperialism. Thiong'o (*ibid.*) makes the questionable claim that this class would have erased African languages altogether because it is through French or English that they remain in power (p.47).

Thiong'o relates his own experience of colonial alienation. Language, according to him, is the means of spiritual subjugation (p.33). In his life, he grew up speaking Gikuyu, but at school was forced to give it up in favor of English. Naturally it didn't totally disappear, but his point is to show that not only were students to learn the new language, they were forbidden to use their native language. The students who slipped and spoke in Gikuyu were given a

button, which passed from hand to hand as transgressions against the rule occurred. At the end of the day, the last person to hold the button had to name the person he'd gotten it from, and this went on down the line to the very first offender. In this way the students exposed one another, and the teacher had his list of outlaws without any work on his part. As Thiong'o points out, this taught the students the lucrative value of betraying one's community (p.35).

El Hajj seems to have learned that lesson only too well, for how else is it that he finds it completely natural to profit from the food aid program by selling the produce at below cost? As Lewis (1962) writes "for the social and other changes wrought by Western civilization have freed countless Africans and Asians from the restraints of clan and custom... and created a sense of omnipotence without politics" (p.114). Insidious and wanton corruption such as that practiced by El Hajj might then also be traced to the legacy of colonial education.

The notion of 'Otherness' is a double-sided contamination

The colonial discourse (incorporated into El Hajj's personality and demonstrated in the way he treats the beggars) commodifies the native, denies him individuality, makes of him a "generic being"), exchangeable with other natives who are also fed into the allegory. This commodification and reduction of the native's humanity aids the colonial administrator in exploiting him. El Hajj demonstrates another level of his assimilation of imported value systems in his commodification of the cripples and beggars, one of whom turns out to be the brother he betrayed by having him disinherited, demonstrating yet another consequence of cultural alienation. As Lewis (1962) writes, in the era of independence, "Actual and supposed kinship bonds are partially replaced by economic self-interest" (p.114).

Why does El Hajj treat his fellow citizens as Other? As seen in colonialist literature, an encounter with the other occurs at the edge of civilization, with a wild, uncontrollable and *incomprehensible alterity* (Jan Mohamed, 1985). The subject is faced with two choices when he meets this alterity: identifies with it, or finds differences. El Hajj displays the same blind sense of superiority when he confronts the crowd of beggars near his store. If he chooses to identify with the beggars (the other), he will judge them by their own cultural values, and he can only do this if he sees the other as similar to himself, in short, as a person. In choosing to judge according to superficial differences, El Hajj allies himself with the European who retreats to his own cultural security, to his moral superiority as a source of judgment criteria. This notion of moral superiority subverts the potential of colonialist literature because it does not explore the other. Instead it confirms ethnocentric ideas:

Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture... however, this entails in practice the virtually impossible task of negating one's very being, precisely because one's culture is what formed that being (65).

As a postscript, one can imagine that in order for El Hajj to open to the other he will first have to disconnect himself with his largely assimilated French bureaucratic identity. His symbolic ethnicity, both as a hinge linking him to his local origins, and also as an instrument of his assimilation into the Manichean allegory (as a mechanism sustaining neocolonial imperialism) is a complicated issue. To comprehend this issue requires the leveraging and balancing of the study of psychology, of identity (its loss and replacement), the effects of globalization and political economy, and the social pressures implicit in negotiating the post-colonial space. By the end of the film El Hajj regains his sexual potency by undergoing a

humiliating ritual. Yet the final scene is inconclusive, we are left wondering if he will regain his political authority, and if so, how, and through what rituals? It is not clear whether he has learned his lesson, if his submission to the spitting ritual indicates a return to his roots, or if he undertook that ritual for simply pragmatic reasons. The larger question behind this interrogation is whether or not the film and its final scene offer hope for the future. If the past, as stated above cannot be recovered, what then must be done?

CONCLUSION

If El Hajj has not learned the lessons of history, then there is no possibility for his redemption either, and the potential of syncretism and thus progress lies with his daughter's generation. In critiquing the 'civilizing mission' and its 'literacy' as an administrative tool taught to the native as needed for the benefit of the colonial administration, Thiong'o (1994) sees it as being concerned with nothing other than the total subjugation of the local. Education was the tool of the colonizer, the result of which is men such as El Hajj, caught between assimilation and cultural alienation; all while being corrupted by the reins of power. To counteract colonial education's influence and the alienation it caused, it becomes manifest to reacquaint natives with their own languages, their inherent mode of self-identification, by actually teaching local languages and literatures. The quest for their relevance begins as a return to locally created identities.

Thiong'o (*ibid.*) asks for a return to the native historical situation before the European languages were imposed, but this is an impossible dream. Once contact has been made you can never go back, despite Cooper's (1962) hypothesis, Lewis (1962) contends that "it seems to me that the process of decolonization will not be complete, in any area, until there has been eradicated, not only all visible signs of colonialism, but also the psychological abnormalities which accompanied it" (p.94). Going back is to retreat into the comforting systems of the past, which lead, as Jan Mohamed (*ibid*) points out, to petrification and death (p.75). What is in operation today is the negotiation between the idealized past and the realities of the current time. El Hajj is trapped, prevented from progressing by his assimilated orders of "symbolic ethnicity". His daughter offers hope for successful negotiation of the diachronic terrain of postcolonial space. In Senegal local languages are maintained, preserved (as much as living language can be) and with them their accompanying cultures; the Senegalese of Ramata's generation proves that culture and language are in constant flux, and they adapt. The quest to overstep the symbolic boundaries of El Hajj and political elites of his genre, then, is an ardent quest to negotiate the political terrain that is this language question.

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