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Pictures in Motion or Motion Pictures: Sembène's Natural Products Steal the Show

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Article abstract

Dans ses films *Xala* (1974) et *Ceddo* (1977), Sembène redéfinit l'usage des sculptures traditionnelles en bois, tout en demeurant fidèle aux métaphysiques sahéliennes dans ses innovations esthétiques, littéraires ou cinématographiques. Des masques, un bâton ou une canne jouent à l'écran un rôle qui, en raison de leur propre vitalité et de leur étroite association avec divers personnages, capte l'attention du public autant que le font les héros des films. Sembène oppose, dans la trame de ses films, la force vitale de ces objets africains à celle d'artefacts, symboles de l'Occident. Sculptés par l'homme, les objets africains restent en relation avec l'environnement dont leur substance est tirée ; Sembene établit de surcroît, entre lieux et personnages, des liens profonds, notamment entre les arbres, le bois et les hommes.

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PICTURES IN MOTION OR MOTION PICTURES : SEMBÈNE'S NATURAL PRODUCTS STEAL THE SHOW

Résumé : Dans ses films *Xala* (1974) et *Ceddo* (1977), Sembène redéfinit l'usage des sculptures traditionnelles en bois, tout en demeurant fidèle aux métaphysiques sahéliennes dans ses innovations esthétiques, littéraires ou cinématographiques. Des masques, un bâton ou une canne jouent à l'écran un rôle qui, en raison de leur propre vitalité et de leur étroite association avec divers personnages, capte l'attention du public autant que le font les héros des films. Sembène oppose, dans la trame de ses films, la force vitale de ces objets africains à celle d'artefacts, symboles de l'Occident. Sculptés par l'homme, les objets africains restent en relation avec l'environnement dont leur substance est tirée ; Sembene établit de surcroît, entre lieux et personnages, des liens profonds, notamment entre les arbres, le bois et les hommes.

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Sembène's literary and cinematographic aesthetic overturns what many might simply identify as description, symbol or metaphor : his filmmaking reinvents texts in ways only partially explained by contemporary Western criticism [1]. In particular, man-made objects made of wood, or what V.Y. Mudimbe calls in other African contexts « worked objects » [2], may not merely demonstrate traditional or symbolic roles at the narrative level when they appear in Sembène's films. Upon formal analysis Sembène's natural objects (staffs, masks) often play engaged character-like roles. They prove to be essential features in an innovative literary and cinematic craft that draws upon Sahelian metaphysics and contextual landscape [3]. In Sembène's work we extricate ourselves from

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[1] I would like to express my deep gratitude to Kandioura Dramé, John D. Lyons and Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton for their thoughtful and careful readings of early versions of this article.

[2] Mudimbe (V.Y.), *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington : Indiana UP, 1994, 234 p. ; p. 68.

[3] For a more extensive discussion of Sembène's *landskape*, see Copeland (V.N.E.), « Anthills Touch the Sky : Sembène's Topographical Aesthetic », in *Land and Landscape in Francographic Literature : Remapping Uncertain Territories*. Ed. by M. Compan and K. Pieprzak. Newcastle : Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, 150 p. ; p. 10-26.

Western notions of metaphor as the exclusive domain of meaning for these privileged wooden items.

Inanimate at first glance, they move both at important times in Sembène's films as well as in unusual and evocative ways. When appearing in their Sahelian cultural context, these objects do not fade into a decorative « local color » background. Indeed, the seamlessness of their integration into Sembène's body of work reminds us of the depth of their rootedness in the history and cultures of the Sahel, even as they redefine modern literature and film. Both on the page and the screen, Sembène's natural objects make themselves known with a life force, often as virtual characters themselves, demanding to be noticed.

Some Western viewers and readers may tend to see landscape, nature or these natural products strictly as literary symbols or as decorative elements. Sembène himself has noted that : « Where I come from art is not adornment. The word "art" does not exist in any of the languages of West Africa. On the other hand, *Man* is the symbol of art. He himself is art » [4]. On a basic level, a Western sunset often symbolizes endings, a rose often symbolizes love or tragedy. They are codes, standing in for something else [5] ; or they are decorative items sitting in museums [6]. What is different in Sembène's work is that his landscape and traditional objects « fill their own shoes », express themselves, announcing their own inherent vitality. This is not to say that Sembène does not also use Western symbolism or metaphor to great and deliberate effect : he does, particularly in his mockery of French culture, using symbols of that culture adopted by a post-independence privileged class as in his film *Xala*. But it is the animated presence of natural Sahelian products,

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[4] Sembène (O.), *Man is Culture / L'Homme est culture*. Bloomington : African Studies Program, 1979, p. 1.

[5] Facile assumptions inspired by European literary tradition have sometimes mistakenly been made of both Sembène's written and cinematographic work. For example, in response to an interviewer's use of the term « bourgeois » to describe the elite in his film *Xala*, Sembène snaps : « I don't like these eternal references to Europe because they are wrong » (Chériaa (T.) and Boughedir (F.), « Jeune Afrique fait parler Sembène Ousmane », dans *Jeune Afrique*, 2 avril 1976, p. 54).

[6] Mudimbe reminds us of Merleau-Ponty's unease about museum piece : « We sense vaguely that something has been lost and that these gatherings of old maids, this silence of the grave, and the respect of pygmies do not constitute the true milieu of art » (Mudimbe (V.Y.), *The Idea of Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 67).

dramatized precisely in their juxtaposition to Western symbols that interests us here.

This essay does not explore ritual objects in their traditional setting other than to provide context for the reader at times. Rather, natural objects take center stage as part of a formal literary and cinematographic structure within Sembène's body of work. Mudimbe points out that, generally speaking, African objects « unveil, spontaneously, in their form and symbolism, means, skills, gestures, and rituals passed down to the apprentice by a master » [7]. He further affirms that :

> In their original context, contrary to lax beliefs that they are essentially and only functional, these objects [...] play a more complex role. In effect, they consolidate in their being a heritage [...] all of these objects speak (to those who can really understand) of the continuity of a tradition and its successive transformations [8].

One of the significant transformations that we observe is Sembène's adaptation of cultural meanings into his cinematic and literary texts. The filmmaker's frustration at misunderstandings of this kind of innovation is evident in his commentary from 2000 :

> When I was invited to attend this conference, the title of the proposal I received was « Can African cinema achieve the same level of indigenization as other popular African art forms ? » I said to myself, anyone who can pose this sort of question has in my humble opinion no mental experience of contemporary African realities.
>
> Whatever its form, subject or content, artistic expression stems from a lived and shared social reality. Domestic art, in its variety of forms, from the decorating on the inside and outside of houses, to clothing and adornments, from the art of hairdressing, to the fashioning of domestic utensils, is the most far-reaching testament to this relationship.
>
> If you know how to see, you can easily locate these African signs and symbols where the ethnic roots offer as much to the continent as to the outside world. In short, ethnic culture (individual identity, group identity) coincides with civilization [...].

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[7] Mudimbe (V.Y.), *The Idea of Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
[8] Mudimbe (V.Y.), *The Idea of Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

> [...] Filmmakers [...] have to know how to use their art to make a « new contemporary expression » with its style, its aesthetic. This new expression must be used as a tool to explore and go beyond the past.
>
> [...] I know and can confirm that there are some people around us who have been persecuted for generations for their religious beliefs. Yet these victims have fought, have refused to forget their past. They have built a new society on top of their painful past. We must not let our memory become a silent graveyard – a scar on the surface of our heart, with the witnesses that speak of our history as the masks, the statues.
>
> [...] By confusing the type of folklore commonly produced for tourists, with culture, these African governments have played a part in prostituting popular expression [9].

Most critics address the important social, gender or political themes in Sembène's work : ample studies have been written on his griot-inspired pacing, his « social realist » aesthetic, his Marxist revolutionary agenda, his reassessment of colonial and postcolonial history, the exploration of human trauma, feminist sensibility, use of music and use of dark humor [10]. Few critics, however, have noticed how natural elements are embedded in Sembène's works or identified their formal significance. Françoise Pfaff's and David Murphy's insights will be addressed at relevant points in our analysis. Indeed, in his detailed and thoughtful book,

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[9] Sembène (O.), « Commentary », in *Symbolic Narratives / African Cinema : Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image*. Ed. by J. Givanni. London : British Film Institute, 2000, 256 p. ; p. 185.

[10] Some of the more recent studies include : Russell (S.A.), *Guide to African Cinema*. Westport : Greenwood Press, 1998, 183 p. ; p. 132 ; Ukadike (N.F.), *Black African Cinema*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1994, 371 p. ; p. 101-103 ; Murphy (D.) and Williams (P.), *Postcolonial African Cinema : Ten Directors*. Manchester : Manchester UP, 2007, 239 p. ; p. 50-65 ; Brière (É.A.), « Recycler l'histoire de la décolonisation : fiction et lieux de mémoire », in *French Colonial History*, n°8, 2007, p. 139-154 ; p. 141-142 ; Mhando (M.) and Tomaselli (K.G.), « Film and Trauma : Africa Speaks to Itself through Truth and Reconciliation Films », in *Black Camera*, vol. 1, n°1, Winter 2009 (The New Series), p. 30-50 ; p. 31-37 ; Wang (F.), « Third-World Writers in the Era of Postmodernism », in *New Literary History*, vol. 28, n°1, 1997, p. 45-55 ; p. 46 ; Thomas (D.R.D.), « Fashion Matters : La Sape and Vestmentary Codes in Transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas », in *MLN*, vol. 118, n°4, September 2003 (French Issue), p. 947-973 ; p. 971.

Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction : Sembene, David Murphy raises many justifiable concerns about the limited nature of the critical body of work available on Sembène's œuvre : he calls for a reassessment of Sembène's work beyond what « the tag of social realist allows » [11]. In addition to pointing out Sembène's sensitivity to « the role played by tradition in the lives of African people », Murphy also argues that Sembène's work « contains a serious reflection on questions of form, a reflection that is neglected by the critics » [12]. Sembène himself responds to this point, saying that : « C'est un côté où peut-être l'Européen pourrait apporter quelque chose, un regard sur la forme » [13]. I would argue, rather, that being educated in the West offers its own problems of theoretical bias and that a more rigorous effort must be made both to closely examine the formal text itself as well as to study the Sahelian context in order to understand more deeply the original, unexpected and / or unintended [14]. Murphy's work raises important questions even as his analysis, as we shall see, does still struggle to overcome the type of discourse he seeks to transcend.

Film, in particular, offers a unique visual immediacy for the natural objects that startle us in Sembène's works. The screen captures our gaze, unless we cover our eyes or look away and, even then, looking away often happens only after we have already been compelled to glimpse what we might have overlooked. In *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène,* Françoise Pfaff tantalizes us with the idea that, « the power of objects to create a world is exploited in *Ceddo* [...] » [15]. She then identifies, on a cultural and narrative level of analysis,

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[11] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction : Sembene*. Trenton : Africa World Press, 2001, 275 p. ; p. 7.

[12] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives…*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

[13] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives…*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

[14] In a 1976 interview with *Jeune Afrique*, Sembène ascribes great significance to deeply understanding his own culture and thereby offering cultural authenticity in all its complexity through film : « [...] we [...] must find a kind of writing more and more accessible to the masses [...] we must raise ourselves (and not lower ourselves, as some say), to the understanding of the masses. It's why each author must know the cultural patrimony of his people [...] There is a space that is allotted to him in the dimensions of being [...] There is therefore an empty space to fill, but not in whichever way, not with whichever culture [...] » (« Jeune Afrique fait parler Sembène Ousmane », *art. cit.*, p. 55).

[15] Pfaff (F.), *The Cinéma of Ousmane Sembène : A Pioneer of African Film*. Westport, Connecticut : Greenwood Press, 1984, p. 57-69.

symbolic roles for the items in question. Pfaff proposes that the challenge stick *(samp)* in *Ceddo* represents traditional Wolof bravery, birds in the sky represent danger, and water symbolizes renewal [16]. Yet, a closer examination of Sembène's formal choices demonstrates that the *samp*, the birds in the sky, and the water, all vastly outperform this assessment. The birds in the sky actually appear *after* unspeakable assaults on the village have just occurred ; and thus, the birds do not actually *prefigure* danger. But, even more interestingly, the elements also evoke Sembène's unique use of the surrounding physical environment. The scene is part of a pattern that systematically places birds in the sky, in trees, and then on the ground, tracing a sequence of dynamic visual transitions across a Sahelian landscape. This pattern, among countless other such uses in his work, compels the viewer to take a broader look both at Sembène's treatment of a vast landscape as well as at the role of the elements that comprise his natural landscape.

In *Ousmane Sembène, cinéaste*, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra attributes what is essentially a literary vibrancy to the viewer's imagination. However, this approach limits exploration of the formal innovation underlying Sembène's films and the vibrancy of natural objects, in particular. It would seem that Vieyra extends a vision of inherent textual passivity in literature to the realm of film, a medium he rightfully distinguishes from literature for its ability to reach more people of all socioeconomic means. Yet, as Sembène has pointed out, this access to the larger population implies an even greater responsibility to rise to the complexity of the culture portrayed. Whereas this article will demonstrate the contribution of natural objects based on their Sahelian context and metaphysical dimension, Vieyra further argues that the forms of animated life expression in a film (or text) can only appear as human : « Actually, *the literary work itself is inert*. When reading a novel, a short story, *imagination and intelligence animate and make concrete the human characters while giving them shape* » [17] (italics mine). Though one may acknowledge both the power of the viewer / reader as well as the director / author to shape the film experience the film and text can speak with equal power as a

[16] Pfaff (F.), *The Cinéma of Ousmane Sembène…*, *op. cit.*, p. 57-69.
[17] « En effet, l'œuvre littéraire est inerte en elle-même. À la lecture d'un roman, d'une nouvelle, l'imagination et l'intelligence animent les personnages et les concrétisent en leur donnant forme » (Vieyra (P.S.), *Ousmane Sembène, cinéaste : première période 1962-1971*. Paris : Présence africaine, 1972, p. 147 (italics mine).

players in the equation. Indeed, Sembène's famously impatient tone with interviewers may reflect his own irritation with the search to find meaning in his interviews rather than in the art itself : « Moi, j'écris. Je fais des films. Je ne me pose pas ces questions-là. Ça, c'est le travail de la critique » [18]. Both Vieyra's view of literary works as inherently inert and Pfaff's symbolic reading help to frame a discussion of the relationships between Sembène, his readers / viewers and the literary or cinematic text. Yet, we must still dig deeply, and as precisely as possible, into our understanding of the metaphysical and literary complexity of the textual building blocks, which, in this case, are natural objects and landscape in Sembène's films.

Kofi Asare Opoku, in « Ecology *is* Religion : African Traditional Religion and the Environment », makes an essential distinction between things « made by human beings » and things already present when human beings came to be [19]. Opoku's example of something made by humans, « a path », is a part of nature modified by a human being walking. In Sembène's work, man-made items that we will call natural products are made by Sahelians out of natural substances. Opoku reminds us further of an essence or power inherent in a product as the « true nature of… forms » distinguishable from their materiality [20]. While Opoku explicitly distinguishes between wood and a tree [21], placing the spirit in the tree and not in the materiality of the wood taken from a tree, Sembène's early work seems to collapse that distinction, as elaborately portrayed in his profound mortar and pestle scene in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* [22]. And, importantly, Opoku does revisit the life force of primary materials when discussing Akan and Yoruba invocations of « the spirit of the *materials* used in making… drums » such as the cedar wood of the drum and pegs, and the elephant ear top of the drum [23]. Within Sembène's literary and cinematic frame-

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[18] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives…*, *op. cit.*, p. 233.
[19] Opoku (K.A.), « Ecology *is* Religion : African Traditional Religion and the Environment », in *AAR Meeting*, San Antonio, 2004, p. 4.
[20] Opoku (K.A.), « Ecology *is* Religion… », *art. cit.*, p. 5.
[21] Opoku (K.A.), « Ecology *is* Religion… », *art. cit.*, p. 5.
[22] Sembène (O.), *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*. Paris : Le Livre Contemporain, 1960, 379 p. ; p. 158-159. For a detailed discussion of this scene, see Copeland (V.N.E.), *Ousmane Sembène's Topographical Aesthetic : Bringing Sahelian Nature to Literary Life*. Dissertation. University of Virginia, 2006, 221 p. ; p. 51-55.
[23] Opoku (K.A.), « Ecology *is* Religion… », *art. cit.*, p. 16 (italics mine).

work, the spirited materiality of the man-made wood object appears even more present than the potential spiritedness of a tree found in the Sahel.

Human beings and natural objects share a certain dynamism as well as aesthetic vitality in Sembène's films and novels. Indeed, a general theme of connectedness or metaphysical interchangeability between natural objects and humans is introduced explicitly at the narrative level if one considers the cultural practices of Sembène's characters. We see this, for example, in Sembène's title *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* as well as in the footnote that explains how each « bout » (stick or bit) represents a family member for whom the household head is responsible [24]. Similarly, in the film *Ceddo*, a group of Ceddo elders passes around a calabash containing sand into which sticks plunge vertically ; each member has a small stick representing his family's vote. The choices are to go into exile, to convert to Islam in order to survive, or to resist the Islamic leadership militarily. The Ceddo participant who prefers exile to Islamic conversion takes one of the pots and a statue before he leaves, as well as his particular little stick. In a gesture suggesting a final break with his cultural past, the member who will convert to Islam breaks the stick in half, letting it fall to the ground as he turns and leaves. Each remaining council member then draws his own tiny stick, leaving it to lie flat in the calabash's sand. Whereas the sticks in *Les Bouts-de-bois-de-Dieu* represent individuals, a single stick represents an entire family in *Ceddo*. This symbolic representation of social interactions with natural objects can be seen as related to what Murphy terms « ritual » at the narrative level [25].

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[24] Sembène (O.), *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

[25] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives…*, *op. cit.*, p. 110. Also see : « Another recurring feature of Sembene's films has been the exploration of the hidden meanings of specific objects […] the briefcases in *Xala*, the Qur'an in *Ceddo* […], often through focusing on a series of rituals whether these are "traditional" (the Diolas' debates with their gods in *Emitaï*), "modern" (the rituals of the Chamber of Commerce in *Xala*) or simply invented by Sembene himself (the spitting "ceremony" at the end of *Xala*). This focus on ritual can be interpreted as a visual struggle between competing forces within society and, as such, they constitute yet another feature of Sembene's focus on the interaction of groups rather than individuals » (Murphy (D.) and Williams (P.), *Postcolonial African Cinema*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

Animate and Inanimate Objects in *Xala* and *Ceddo*

Two very different films, *Xala* (1974) and *Ceddo* (1977), both demonstrate how wood carvings assert themselves in an unexpectedly lively fashion [26]. *Ceddo* is set in the past with elements dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries while the action in *Xala* is set in the modern postcolonial era. « Ceddo » refers to a pre-Islamic religious community in Senegal that is opposed to conversion in the name of tradition. The film tells the story of what happens when members of the Ceddo community kidnap the princess Dior Yacine. The Ceddo seek to defend their human and religious rights in the face of the king's corruption guided by a powerful imam. Once banned in Senegal for a decade, *Ceddo* challenges the audience in disturbing ways at the narrative level : a corrupt imam coerces the traditional Ceddo to convert to Islam, a Christian priest silently condones the slave trade, Africans capture and sell their brethren into slavery. The film shows how the traditional African social fabric falls apart in the face of these forces. *Xala*, also controversial for its satire of the privileged upper class in post-independence Senegal, was almost censored as well : substantial cuts allowed the film to be released. « Xala » means sexual impotence and the film relates a parable about a corrupt Senegalese businessman who faces his professional and personal downfall in addition to humiliating sexual impotence along the way. In *Ceddo*, Sembène gives his natural objects free reign to express themselves in a historical setting and mostly outdoors. *Xala*, on the other hand, offers a contemporary urban context in which Sembène explicitly contrasts Western symbols with the presence of natural objects from the Sahel.

Not so Wooden in the Sylvan Realm : *Ceddo*'s Moving Staff

Stabbed into the soft sands of a village square the *samp* (a staff or « challenge stick ») announces a defiant challenge by the Ceddo in the film's story. This object demonstrates the aesthetic interchangeability between natural products and

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[26] *Ceddo*. Screenplay by O. Sembène. Dir. O. Sembène. Perf. Tabara Ndiaye, Moustapha Yade, Ismaila Diagne, Gouré and Madoura Dia. New Yorker Films, 1977 ; *Xala*. Screenplay by O. Sembène. Dir. O. Sembène. Prod. Paulin Soumanou Vieyra. Perf. Thierno Leye, Seun Samb, Younouss Seye and Myriam Niang. New Yorker Films, 1974.

human beings in Sembène's work [27]. In *Ceddo*, the princess and the *samp* seem to mimic one another in style and motion. The traditional *samp* and wooden masks in *Ceddo* are different from the use of symbolism found in Western discourse. First, the figurine on the *samp* markedly resembles the kidnapped princess with her smooth, dark skin, lean, curvy profile and regal hairstyle. Visually, the princess' lithe, ebony body stands out vertically against the Sahelian sands in much the same way the *samp* does in scenes where the camera focuses on the object and moves in for a close-up. Second, the princess and the *samp* figurine share a regal, gliding movement created by her walk, and the camera's treatment of the *samp* figurine. This shared appearance reinforces a sense of human and wood interchangeability. Details of the wooden figure at the top of the stick initially remain unclear. With the *samp* held aloft, one by one the warriors and their coteries head out to retrieve the kidnapped princess from the Ceddo. The camera honors the *samp* aesthetically ; at times, the figurine fills the screen to the unexpected size of a human character. The staff dramatically defies its true, modest and narrow proportions when it dominates the silver screen both vertically as well as horizontally.

In these sequences, the camera considers the *samp* in detail three times, both when the *samp* figurine moves horizontally (twice when Biram's body is brought home) or vertically (once before Saxewar heads out). Upon the return of these warriors' dead bodies, the *samp* also rides back horizontally, face down. In these instances, detail fills the screen : the stylized carving highlights the dark wooden figure's elaborate headdress, breasts and white eyes. The *samp* figure in effect moves with a gentle lilt matching the gait of those who carry it. The inherent vitality of the figure and the privileging of its on-screen presence such that it rivals a human character in size and movement expands this

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[27] Murphy points out that the *samp*, « the staff that acts as their symbol [...] marks the *ceddo's* refusal to convert to Islam... ». He makes mention, almost as an afterthought here in parentheses, that « the figure on top of the *samp* is female, a fact that will prove highly symbolic in light of the Princess's murder of the imam ». Murphy adds later : « Princess Dior does not take her father's place on the throne : instead, the film closes with a freeze-frame of her walking away from the scene of the murder ». He concludes thus : « The spectator is simply left to ponder on the question that the film has raised about religion, power and the role of women » (Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives..., op. cit.*, p. 180-182).

natural product's role significantly. Indeed, on the narrative surface the *samp* twice paradoxically symbolizes the death of a warrior by travelling face down to the village even as on a formal level, the wooden figure simultaneously expresses its own vitality through its movement. The *samp* seems to share the fading of human vitality upon Saxewar's death. We no longer see a close-up of the *samp's* figurine once Saxewar has died : the *samp* returns along with Saxewar's body, the camera offers a mid-range shot of the group of people and the *samp* from a distance ; the *samp* is even hidden by a screen of trees during a medium shot. The various failed rescue attempts that lead to the loss of life as well as the diminished formal presence of the *samp* figurine echo Madior's distress at how traditional values are fading in the face of Islamic influence.

Not one but two characters in the film share similar aesthetic lines and movement with the wooden *samp*. These scenes capitalize on the length of the princess' elegant body and solemn bearing : at her return from bathing in the river during her captivity, upon her return to the hammock after attempting to steal her captor's weapon and, finally, with her return to her native village where she murders the imam. Likewise, the omnipresent griot / musician travelling with the Ceddo guard also unexpectedly fills the screen as Saxewar sets out ; the griot's head stands out against a blue sky, the angular lines of his face, ear, neck, and shoulder, his hat, and the dark polish of his skin accentuated against an empty pale sky. The lines of the griot's upper body and the *samp* bear a remarkable resemblance as well as a similar placement on the screen. All three characters, two human and one wooden, share accentuated characteristics and move similarly in front of the camera. The camera often conceals the stick's actual means of locomotion ; thus, it appears to propel itself. Despite being a staff made of wood, the *samp* defies Western associations of lifelessness with what is wooden. The *samp* expresses a serene movement of its own.

Ceddo : Masks in Motion

In addition to the *samp* in *Ceddo*, traditional masks repeatedly draw attention to themselves. In these instances, the masks are not being used in any traditional ritual or spiritual ceremony in the narrative. As the tensions between Muslims and the opposing Ceddo mount, the Ceddo council meets privately to discuss their options. The scene takes place in a village compound, under a thatched roof, on an earthen patio. What appeared initially to be a light breeze no

longer seems to tug at the participants' clothes. Yet, visible in the upper left corner of the screen, is a red wooden mask hanging from a beam that tilts forward and back, dancing lightly. One almost gets the feeling that the masks participate equally in the animated conversation, both given their dominating visual presence and, in particular, the red mask's continuous, distracting movement. The mask seems to swing alone as the source of its momentum is unclear. As the conversation continues, the position of the red mask shifts to the middle of the screen. The camera even forces us to peer through the moving masks in order to see the human characters who are in conversation.

Several other wooden masks sit on the ground below, filling most of the left half of the screen ; horns on one such mask subsequently fill the right side of the screen. These horns mirror the size and shape of a Ceddo's head and hat ; the red mask offers a brush of color on the screen's top left, reappearing in the top left corner, still swaying. The camera pulls back from one speaker, framing his face with the horns of the masks ; the red mask then sways to the right side of the screen, almost covering another human speaker's face. The camera then pulls back to show the whole group of Ceddo and masks alike. In this sequence, while the masks appear in the background and foreground, they defy expectations and seem to manifest themselves at this significant moment in the narrative when the Ceddo deliberate and reach their decisions.

Xala : Western Symbols in Contrast with Natural Products

The film begins at a moment of historical and political transition as Senegalese officials ascend to the highest levels of government and replace French colonial leaders. The storyline demonstrates in humorous and poignant terms the clash of Western modernity with some aspects of Sahelian tradition. We see the resulting cultural dislocation for the main protagonist due to his materialistic obsessions and personal corruption. In *Xala's* post-colonial urban context, the Sembenian cinematography makes use of similar aesthetics to the same effect as in *Ceddo* but from precisely the opposite vantage point. In this case, *Xala* specifically contrasts the life force of natural products from the Sahel with troubling Western symbols. As metaphors for Western power, these symbols dominate the screen even before the opening credits.

In the early scenes of *Xala*, Sembène relentlessly mocks the new Senegalese privileged class by revealing the shallowness of their power. The new leaders' hypocrisy manifests itself boldly ; they proclaim « Long live Africanity ! » even as they line their own pockets with cash from France. The president of the Chamber of Commerce hangs a self-portrait on the wall behind his place at the table. The discarded white marble busts of French Republican heroes placed outside on the steps suggest their formal rejection of French civilization. Briefcases, on the other hand, are taken inside and appear as the quintessential symbol of the Western businessman ; they ascribe a humorous pseudo-legitimacy to the new leaders. However, these same briefcases that are full of cash and shared among the new members of the Chamber of Commerce cynically kill any promise of effective African self-government. Western suits, ill-suited to the local climate and lacking any hint of traditional Senegalese couture, erase the individual identities of those who wear them. The red carpet, a great emblem of Western glamour and prestige, rolls down the steps of the government building under the feet of the new leadership. Each shiny new car with a personal chauffeur represents the ultimate in modern luxury, comfort and prestige. El Hadji's wedding festivities and their stereotypically Western components (a bride's white veil, the white cake) suggest an accumulation of the trappings of Western culture in El Hadji's life.

These Western symbols (marble bust, photo, briefcase, cash, suit, red carpet, luxury car) and their superficiality that is splattered on the screen in the opening scenes of the film appear incongruous in contrast with traditional Senegalese culture. Murphy argues that :

> the neo-colonial order dissimulates its true nature by surrounding itself with a series of rituals and fetishes with which it seeks to identify. This world of seeming and appearance is explored throughout the wedding reception with Sembene (through his camera) serving as our guide [28].

More importantly they are, in fact, doubly void of content. First, being Western symbols they stand out as grotesque alongside Senegalese culture as it is depicted in the film. Second, being Western symbols they are, by definition, empty and devoid of the life force we have come to expect

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[28] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives…*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

from natural products in the Sahelian context. The sound of traditional Sahelian drumming (on drums made from natural materials such as calabashes and animal skins) somberly reminds us in the opening scenes of *Xala* that the visuals on the screen ring hollow. The drums remind us of an alternative vibrancy, of the life that is found in meaningful connections to landscape and natural products when seen in relation to the history and cultures of the Sahel.

Xala : Natural Products Extinguished

Not only does the film suggest the hollow inappropriateness of Western symbols within the context of the Sahel as it is presented, but *Xala* also demonstrates the tragic process by which traditional objects can themselves be turned into lifeless tokens just like the Western symbols that bombard the viewer early on. Murphy describes the parade of Western symbols as part of a « ritual », encapsulating these and uses of traditional « fetishes » into one category, as though they operate identically on a literary level : « [...] in *Xala*, the representation of various rituals, both "Western" and "African", within Senegalese society becomes a means towards an examination of that society's ills » [29]. He appears to justify this perspective with Sembène's comment on the topic of fetishism : « [...] le rituel est très important. En Europe, c'est pratiquement perdu. Chaque peuple a besoin de ses rituels » [30]. Yet this misses the point since Western symbols and natural products from the Sahel are compared and ultimately play dramatically divergent roles in the film's narrative ; one cannot consider the Western symbols without also allowing for the equally powerful role the Sahelian items play and the specific ways in which they perform. *Xala* identifies and then clarifies the difference between a passive Western symbol and the vitality of man-made products from the Sahel. These traditional objects in *Xala* have largely lost their traditional cultural value, as they have become trivialized by the corrupt and apparently « modern » human characters who own them. Traditional man-made objects in this film tend to be lifeless, with the important exception that proves the proverbial rule, as we shall see : that is, the beggar's cane. Like the Western objects that symbolize shallowness, corruption and inauthenticity, the film's treatment of the misuse of traditional objects comments bitterly on those who own them.

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[29] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives...*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
[30] Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives...*, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

With two other deputies, the Chamber of Commerce president telephones the bank president to plan El Hadji's public downfall. During this scene, a wooden mask hangs on the wall above the three men's heads and a statuette of a kneeling African woman sits prominently on the desk though the camera in no way brings them to life. At best, they are understood solely as decorative artwork. They are, indeed, just part of the background, part of the scenery, having no vitality whatsoever. Similarly, El Hadji lives in a modern home surrounded by mere emblems of his heritage. A mask, a wooden carved profile and calabashes decorate the walls of his living room, with superficial appearance as their raison d'être. These traditional objects join the ranks of the Western briefcases and the red carpet in this film insofar as they symbolize a generic brand of « Africanness ». Similarly, a mask caught between its origins and present displacement in a Western realm troubles the viewer in Sembène's first feature film *La Noire de…* [31]. The mask that the Senegalese maid gives to a French family suffers the same fate as the décor in El Hadji's living room when they hang the object on the wall of their apartment in France. This mask, however, is revitalized when it is returned to the Sahel and shown in a boy's hands in the dramatic final scenes [32]. The important role of the revitalized mask once it is back in Senegal in this final sequence has been left unexplained by Murphy and other critics, given the general inattention to the role of Sembène's traditional objects, and the times and places when they come alive aesthetically.

In perhaps the most important scene to address this issue in *Xala*, a mask is denied its inherent value, at the mercy of the hands that pass it around the table during a meeting in which El Hadji faces the accusations of his equally corrupt and hypocritical peers. Despite being one of the most signi-

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[31] *La Noire de….* Screenplay by O. Sembène. Dir. O. Sembène. 1966.

[32] To his credit, Murphy makes note of this scene in *La Noire de…* though his analysis of it is limited to noting that Sembène uses « elements of a fetishist culture in a similar fashion » (Murphy (D.), *Imagining Alternatives…*, *op. cit.*, p. 101). Also just in passing in Murphy and Williams' book, the authors point out though do not explain how « iterary » Sembène's film is due to « the extremely poignant sequence at the end of the film in which the camera insistently cuts back and forth between the worried Frenchman hurrying back to his car, and the "ghostly" mask worn by the young boy who follows him » (Murphy (D.) and Williams (P.), *Postcolonial African Cinema*, *op. cit.*, p. 51-52).

ficant moments in terms of Sembène's aesthetic treatment of traditional objects, in contrast to the often discussed Western symbolism in the opening scene, the mask in this scene has often been unaddressed by critics. The object first waits on the table and then is passed around as a receptacle to hold the paper ballots that will eject El Hadji from the Chamber of Commerce. To further desecrate its cultural value, the mask has been appropriated for the business of hypocrisy and moneymaking. In this particular instance the mask has no greater value than a common bowl and stands in stark contrast to the lively masks seen in *Ceddo* where they play roles as present as those of humans characters and seem to move of their own volition.

Xala : One Vital Traditional Object Still Alive and Well

In *Xala*, one positive exception to the film's treatment of objects stands out pointedly against the passivity of the previously discussed objects. The beggar's walking stick reaffirms a topographical aesthetic by virtue of its placement in a visually evocative landscape and its expression of an apparent life force. With stunning cinematography, the beggar's walking stick, like the samp in *Ceddo*, announces itself as having its own significant presence in *Xala*. The owner is a blind beggar who holds special status within the narrative as the ultimate judge of El Hadji's corruption ; he epitomizes how tradition can be abused then neglected. As the beggar gets up to leave his spot on the sidewalk after the chauffeur's last ditch request for help to cure El Hadji's impotence, the camera pans over to the top of the beggar's wooden cane. In this extreme close-up, the viewer is nose to nose with a carved wooden face. Indeed, in this film about alienation and inauthenticity, apparently the only surviving vital traditional object suddenly asserts itself. The wooden head on the beggar's walking stick takes the cinematic stage as it dominates the screen ; it saunters along at its own pace, a privileged character with only open blue sky to offset its dark color. Yet, a crucial difference adds to the irony here : the walking stick is *not* in fact offset by a real sky afterall as the samp was in *Ceddo*. The audience becomes aware of the slightly worn blue paint on the wall along an urban street that is behind the cane ; this worn blueness merely mimics the look of real sky. Where the natural environment of the Sahel is obscured in this urban setting, an ironic visual touch in the framing of the walking stick accentuates for the viewer the absence of a real sky.

The Sahelian Realm in *Xala*

In general, the vertical camera movement of Sembène's films pulls the eye upwards or downwards across the environment. The camera's wide angle or close-up shots can and do highlight the first horizontal layers of his topographical aesthetic ; the land / water, the (vegetative) sylvan / human realm and the realm of the sky. The camera's occasional focus on the interplay between two such areas reinforces the edges of these topographical realms, privileging certain spaces and the particularity of each one as well. Sembène's cinematic approach here further asserts his unique expression of the Sahel, exploring the dynamism of traditional African objects and their metaphysical dimension in the process. Throughout *Xala* trees, buildings and people all compete for space in their urban environment. In Dakar, trees, streets, walls and buildings often completely fill the screen leaving little sense of an expansive sky, or even a proportional sky relative to vegetation, human beings or land. When El Hadji leaves the city, heading for the village to consult a marabout about his impotence, the camera offers wide-angle shots that restore somewhat the traditional Sahelian landscape. The sky fills the top third of the screen, and the bottom two-thirds show the land and trees as he travels by cart to a village. Similarly, when the beggars who were rounded up by the police and driven off to the countryside return on foot to the city, the landscape seems to embrace and support the group's difficult journey back. The beggars walk back towards the city across the hot savannah and down a dune. Their figures are silhouetted against a blue sky as they approach the city from over the dune. Yet, once back in the urban setting, their shapes seem lost ; the new environment engulfs them. One gets the sense that a traditional rural environment provides a certain clarity as regards where things belong ; places are defined, naturally and easily sustained in a complementary fashion. Without these natural parameters, the roles of human beings and objects become confused and unclear, with fake options presented as in the case of the blue wall. The Sahelian urban world then appears off-kilter, sometimes hilariously and sometimes tragically.

Xala's three redeeming characters, El Hadji's first wife, the villager who is robbed upon his arrival in the city, and the blind beggar all demonstrate personal dignity and character in the face of modern, urban hardship. They seem to represent the better human qualities of Senegalese life. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that a close analysis of

Xala shows that these three characters all enjoy a connection to landscape (land, trees / wood and the sky) in contrast to the film's other characters. The film's use of leaves dangling and swaying in the breeze, for example, either enhances an admirable character's presence or detracts from the presence of a less desirable character. El Hadji's first wife shows tremendous fortitude as she graciously attends her husband's third wedding. Having fulfilled her social obligation, she leaves the party dignified and alone. As she exits the front gate, the trees take on new importance. We suddenly hear them. Over the sounds of live music at the wedding reception, the wind rustles the leaves, both bringing the viewer along on her lonely departure yet simultaneously creating natural intimacy in the sylvan realm. As she steps outside, the leaves surround El Hadji's first wife's face, embracing her even as they never mask her face but rather drop delicately around her. Her head and the bottom of the tree crown share a privileged space, filling the screen in the poignant, calm moment of her lonely departure.

The next morning El Hadji exits from the same gate, after his embarrassing wedding night when he discovered that he has been struck with sexual impotence. We see the same trees and their movement but they lack any obvious visual or audible connection to El Hadji. Leaves move visibly yet this time no sounds are discernible. We hear only the sounds of voices and music. Here, the trees and wind seem merely to be a Western-style backdrop, purposefully disconnected from El Hadji. Later in the film, fresh from his visit to the village marabout where he sought a « cure » for his impotence, El Hadji returns expectantly to his new wife. As he enters her residence, the viewer sees him striding up the same walkway. This time, however, hanging tree leaves completely obscure his head from view. Upon finding out that his teenage bride is unavailable due to the onset of her menstrual period, El Hadji leaves disappointed, and once again the upper part of his body is obscured by the tree leaves.

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Mudimbe highlights the importance of man-made items in Africa while acknowledging the challenges in unraveling their meanings. He raises the concern that studies must « account for the objects in the context of their own real background and transcend the shortcomings of anthropologists' ethnologization and aesthetization of the objects » [33]. In Western discourse, a life presence that has been turned

[33] Mudimbe (V.Y.), *The Idea of Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

into an object, or as we might say « objectified », has effectively been silenced. That object, removed from its original context, or unifying framework, now merely sits as a passive item to be used. I would argue that one must also distinguish clearly between the use of objects in traditional ritual or ceremony and new literary and cinematographic aesthetics using these same items. To fail to explore the aesthetic dimension of Sembène's representations when traditional masks appear is to default to a limited anthropological perspective on traditional culture, which in many cases may be beside the literary point.

These natural objects are not incidental, token symbols nor are they necessarily expositions of traditional ritual at the narrative level. They are aesthetically complex symbols integrated into the text, specific to their Sahelian context. Our task has been to note their invaluable role in Sembène's modern film-making. In his literary and cinematic discourse, an object derived from nature such as a mask carved from the wood of a tree still has a unique life force when presented in its original cultural context. Its presence can be so significant that it both literally and figuratively competes for attention with human characters. That mask is hardly a mere symbol in the Western literary sense of the word. That traditional object announces itself dynamically ; with a prominent place in Sembène's aesthetic system, it stands as a valuable feature of his literary and cinematic expression. At the narrative level Sembène's work cannot be considered traditionalist in any sense of the word, given his extraordinarily progressive voice for modern social change. With his early Marxist ideology, Sembène might have argued, like any good Marxist, that a worker is alienated from the product he has produced under the capitalist economic system. Sembène's visual texts seem to be resisting a profound and comparable alienation from nature and the vitality of traditional objects, conduits of the dynamism of the Sahelian landscape.

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