

SEMBENE IN SENEGAL
Radical Art in Neo-colonial Society

by

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FRONT PAGES: I changed the order of the pages, putting the personal pages (dedication and acknowledgements) first.

TABLE OF CONTENTS: I removed the clumsy looking subtitles to produce a cleaner look.

BODY OF TEXT: No changes apart from insertion of some extra subtitles and subtitles to enhance accessibility.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: I added three entries, ADOTEVI, ENAGNON and KANE, inadvertently omitted in original.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Fírinne Ní Chréacháin', written in a cursive style.

Dr Fírinne Ní Chréacháin

7 May 2019

FOR YETUNDE
AND ALL GOD'S BITS OF WOOD
BANTY MAM YALL
WHO CONTINUE THE STRUGGLE
FOR A BRIGHTER AFRICAN FUTURE
AND A FAIRER WORLD

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A kǐí dúpẹ́ ara ẹni.

ABSTRACT

This study asks whether it is possible to produce revolutionary art – in this instance cinema - in the neo-colonial context. It defines revolutionary art in terms of its ability to expose the exploitative structures of neo-colonialism in a language accessible to the masses, and to inspire the exploited to fight back. It takes as a case study the films of Ousmane Sembene produced during the first two decades of neo-colonialism in Senegal. The study first examines Senegal and Sembene prior to 1960, confirming that France's continuing grip on Senegal is the result of a high level of hegemonic control. Sembene emerges as a complex product of the contradictions of French colonialism in its specific Senegalese form. The production of the films is looked at as concretely as possible, taking into account the ideological conditioning of Sembene himself, the contradictions of the medium and mode of production, the direct and indirect interventions of the state, and the ideological and cultural obstacles to communication between the artist and the masses. The study concludes that it is possible to see Sembene's work as stretching to the maximum the margin of manoeuvre provided by the contradictions of neo-colonialism in Senegal, or as an example of the power of hegemonic forces to incorporate even the most radical artist such a society can produce.

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ABBREVIATIONS

INSTITUTIONS, POLITICAL PARTIES, COMPANIES, ETC.

AEF	Afrique Équatoriale Français
AOF	Afrique Équatoriale Français
BDS	Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais: name of Senghor's party 1948-1956
BPS	Bloc Populaire Sénégalais: name of Senghor's party after merger with others, 1956-58
BSI	British Senegalese Institute, Dakar
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail (most prominent trade union group in post-war France)
CLAD	Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar
COFEGES	Conseil fédéral des groupements économiques du Sénégal
COMACICO	Compagnie Africaine Cinématographique Industrielle et Commerciale
ENS	École Normale Supérieure, Dakar
ENSUT	École Nationale Supérieure Universitaire de Technologie, Dakar
FEANF	Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France
FEPACI	Fédération Pan-Africaine des Cinéastes
IFAN	Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, Dakar (Institut français d'Afrique Noire up to 1966)
PAI	Parti Africain de l'Indépendance: Marxist-Leninist party founded by Majhemout Diop in 1957. Recognised by the state as the 'official' Communist party in 1976
PIT	Parti de l'Indépendance et du Travail: name adopted by members of original PAI who rejected its 'official' status from 1976
PS	Parti Socialiste: name of Senghor's party from 1976
RDA	Rassemblement Démocratique Africain
RND	Rassemblement National Démocratique: Cheikh Anta Diop's party/front, founded in 1976
SIDEC	Société d'Importation, de Distribution et d'Exploitation Cinématographique
SNC	Société Nationale du Cinéma
UCAD	University of Dakar->Université Cheikh Anta Diop, 1986
UNIGES	Union des Groupements Économiques du Sénégal
UPS	Union Progressiste Sénégalais: name of Senghor's party 1958-76

SELECTED INTERVIEWS

Below is a list of interviewees referred to in the study. Initials only will be used as references in the text, alongside those of the interviewer, in all cases the present writer. For example, an interview with Ousmane Sembene will be referred to as (OS/FNC).

AA	Alassane Agne, Lecturer in Psychology, ENSUT
AB	Abdoulaye Bathily, historian, leader LD/MPT
ABD	Abdoulaye Bara Diop, sociologist, Director of IFAN
AFD	Aram Fall Diop, linguist, IFAN
AL	Assane Lô, Administrative Assistant, BSI
AK	Assane Kane, extra in <i>Camp de Thiaroye</i>
AS	Assane Sylla, philosopher and linguist, IFAN
AT	Alioune Tine, linguist, UCAD
BBD	Boubacar Boris Diop, novelist and journalist, SUD FM (Dakar radio station)
BK	Boubacar Kane, teaching inspector, ENS
CAN	Cheikh Aliou Ndao, novelist and poet in French and Wolof
CDS	Carrie Dailey Sembene, wife of Sembene 1973-86
CS	Cheikh Sow, technician, ENS
D	M. Diallo, Senior Tutor, ENS
DC	Dame Cissé, businessman, Dakar
FS	Fatou Sow, sociologist, UCAD
HC	Henri Camara, unemployed, Dakar
IN	Isseu Niang, actress
MD	Madior Diouf, senior lecturer in literature, UCAD
MK	Mohamadou Kane, professor of literature, UCAD
M.K	Maguèye Kassé, DVC, UCAD, member PIT
MN	Mamadou Ndong, technician, ENS
M.D	Majhemout Diop, leader PAI
N	Ndong, technician, ENS
OS	Ousmane Sembene
PD	Pathé Diagne, linguist
PDF	Penda Djigo Fall, teacher, Lycée Lamine Guèye, Dakar
PS	Pape Seck, filmmaker
SM	Sarah Maldoror, filmmaker
SPG	Sémou Pathé Guèye, philosopher, editor of <i>Gestu</i>
TMD	Thérèse M'Bissine Diop, actress

INTRODUCTION

This study, as its title seeks to convey, is an attempt to explore the mode of existence of radical art – in this case, mainly film - in neo-colonial society, by means of a concrete case study: that of the work of Ousmane Sembene, novelist and film-maker, in the first two decades of neo-colonial rule in his country, Senegal.

At this point, one should introduce the work and the problematic. But since much of this thesis is about the social determination of consciousness, the social situatedness of both film-maker and audience, the importance of historical and social context, the effect of the conditions of consumption on the message, and not least because Soyinka has complained about critics who spend their time dissecting the social determinants of writers but never laying their own petty-bourgeois determinants on the academic table (Soyinka, 97), I have decided to present the materials initially in the form of a narrative. I shall therefore begin by setting my own original encounter with Sembene's work in context, and attempting to express how the relationship between the work, my socially-conditioned self and the conditions of consumption gave rise to a number of questions which this study attempts to explore.

My interest in Sembene began in the mid-1970s when, as a post-graduate student at the University of Texas, I undertook a formalist comparison of his most famous novel, *God's Bits of Wood*,¹ and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet born*. Sembene's beautiful book kept irrepressibly bursting free of the formalist constraints and demanding a more human, more social, more political reception.²

From 1976 to 1986, that reception became possible, at least to an extent, when I found myself teaching Sembene as part of a francophone African literature course in a university French department in Nigeria. That decade was perhaps the most exciting time in modern Nigerian history to be a part of university life. Despite increasing economic and political difficulties, there was an exhilarating feeling that the university was part of the struggle in the wider society, and that this in turn was part of a world-wide struggle against Western

¹ For a list of Sembene's literary works and films up to 1984, see Bibliography.

² Fírinne Adelugba, "Point of View in Two West African novels: a comparison of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet born* and Sembene's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*" (MA thesis submitted to the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Texas, May 1976).

imperialism.

The war was over and the Federation still intact. The military were being forced to wind down and hand over to civilians for the first time since 1966. There was a rare combination of freedom of speech and militancy, which normally do not cohabit, and which would be repressed again with the return of the military by the mid-1980s. But in the meantime, teachers' and students' unions were revived, and links were made with the Nigerian Labour Congress. There was even the long-term hope of a genuine petty-bourgeois/proletarian alliance.

A new generation of intellectuals was coming to the fore who were aware that Marxism-Leninism offered a better understanding than nationalism of the growing class divide and of the continued foreign domination via the local bourgeoisie and pseudo-feudal class who made it possible. Progress Publishers and Peking Press flooded university bookshops. In 1983, my own university, Ahmadu Bello, where a veritable Marxist-Leninist counter-hegemony was developing, hosted the Marx Centenary Conference, whose standard of debate and vitality made academic history.

Ahmadu Bello was at what they call, in my present advanced capitalist context, the cutting edge of the process. An interdisciplinary approach began to emerge organically out of the lucky institutional accident which placed Arts and Social Sciences in the same faculty. Sembene was not only prominent in the decolonised French syllabus, and in the English department, but in Political Science where students learned more from *Xala* about the misdeeds of the national bourgeoisie than from all the scholars put together, much as Engels had about 19th century French economics from Balzac (Marx and Engels, 91). The Drama department, following Ngugi's example, took plays in Hausa to the peasants in the surrounding villages. Sembene's move to film in Wolof to reach the masses in the early 1960s made him an obvious fore-runner of Ngugi, and together, he and Ngugi brought into focus the contradictions of Soyinka's elitist Euro-centred art. Finally, Sembene had the edge over Soyinka and Ngugi and the rest of us in terms of his impeccable proletarian origins.

I hope I have not painted an out-of-perspective picture of the context in which I became familiar with Sembene's work. I am not suggesting that the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie is the key to social transformation - its internal contradictions were all too obvious even at the time. Nor am I saying that Nigeria was at a revolutionary stage of its history: it obviously was not, or

the military would not have been able to take power again in 1984. But within the limitations of the level of the struggle and of the mode of insertion of petty-bourgeois intellectuals into it, and of my own sense of identification with - though completely peripheral place in - it all, there was a reality about Marxism-Leninism as theory and practice which, I feel, brought *God's Bits of Wood* alive for me in way that Texas and formalism had not.

My own sense of identification with Nigeria's struggle to free itself from neo-colonialism is rooted in the fact that I am a product of Western imperialism's first colony, its only colony in its own back-yard, and the first of its colonies to win political independence. I grew up under Ireland's brand of neo-colonialism.

As a child in Dublin in the 1950s, I wondered why my cousins who had emigrated to England had free milk and orange juice, why my mother complained that the butter we produced cost them less than it did us, and why they went to school free while I cracked my brains in the hope of a rare scholarship. I wondered what was wrong with us that we didn't have these things.

Culturally, I tip-toed through the world of the *Dandy* and *Beano*, the only comics I knew, not recognising their social landscape and feeling excluded from a code they seemed to share. Later, I learned my own language in a dark cottage in the south-west of Ireland, by candle-light, with an urgency born of the knowledge that once the old woman died, the library, as Hampaté Ba says, went with her. Later again, I read in Dadié's *Climbié* about the *symbole*, the punishment-pebble children were forced to carry for speaking African languages, and recognised our tally-stick, which, along with the Great Famine, had virtually finished my language off.

In America, I read Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, and a lot of what he said was familiar. Much of what I met in neo-colonial Nigeria, and in African literature, and in Sembene, was familiar. My journey to Africa was not about self-discovery through the encounter with the Other: I simply went to another ex-colony which was trying to become a nation, and to another culture struggling to decolonise like the one I had left.

Being Irish meant that I was used to thinking of nationalism and socialism - Pearse and Connolly - as intertwined strands of the anti-imperialist struggle. I was also used to the political struggle and the cultural struggle going hand in hand. I was used to a literature saturated in politics, the expression perhaps, like African literature, of a people deprived of real power.

For me, then, in Nigeria in the early 1980s, *God's Bits of Wood* was a novel created

within a Marxist-Leninist matrix and which I read, with the tools I was just learning to handle, via a Marxist-Leninist grid. *God's Bits of Wood* was Marxism made fiction, with the masses as protagonist and the class struggle as plot. It was men - and women - making their own history, transforming their consciousness and their material world through the class struggle. But it was also Lenin's theory of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. These were not just French or British workers, but doubly-exploited workers fighting against a racist system which sought to convince them of their inferiority as Africans in order to pay them less than their French counterparts. *God's Bits of Wood* was about colonised people transcending exploitation and its accompanying ideology through struggle, redefining themselves and their relationship to the world, and reinserting Africa back into history.

In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene penetrated ideological smokescreens, exposed the real nature of the exploitative system, and identified the source of potential change in an embryonic proletariat whose traditional communal solidarity could be drawn on to build class consciousness. He incarnated his clear vision in memorable and truly representative characters. In a powerful appropriation of the novel as genre on behalf of Marxism, he situated and developed these characters in the contradictory world of colonial capitalism, and dramatised the living out of these contradictions in unforgettable scenes full of the energy and vitality which colonialism had not managed to kill in Africa and which were now harnessed to the liberation struggle. He left me, and many of my students, with a huge inspiring feeling that revolution was not only necessary but possible, and that our local struggle and the one Sembene's characters had fought were part of the same struggle for a better Africa and a fairer world.

The fairer Africa that *God's Bits of Wood* pointed forward to was one in which I could see my children growing up. It was a modern Africa with full development of its productive forces. It was Bakayoko proudly driving his train across the savannah, not Senghor's Eurafrica version in which Africa continued to provide the raw materials, while Europe monopolised the technology (Hyman, 161). Sembene's Africa meant we could be modern without the oppressive relations of capitalism, and African without the shackles of a feudalism and patriarchy that were still all too obvious in daily life even on a university campus.

As a woman bound to African social structures by family ties, I valued Sembene the feminist. In *God's Bits of Wood*, Mame Sofi, Ramatoulaye, Dieynaba all reassured me that a woman did not have to be an Assitan, passive and uncreative, in order to survive: thanks to the

struggle, writes Lahbib to Bakayoko, 'in future...we will have to reckon with them' (Sembene 1973, 308).

But it was not just *God's Bits of Wood*. There was all the rest of Sembene's work. There were the other novels written in Europe in the 1950s and early 1960s: *The African Docker* in which the theft of the African docker's novel by the French writer symbolises the colonial looting of the continent; *O Pays mon beau peuple*, Sembene's Maoist novel, where Oumar Faye is assassinated for attempting to build a peasant cooperative that would destroy the colonial capitalist economic monopoly; and *L'Harmattan*, based on the 1958 referendum, where a small petty-bourgeois and proletarian vanguard led by a remarkable young woman carry on a valiant political struggle against the colonial state and its local allies who baffle and bribe the masses into acceptance of the neo-colonial order.

After Sembene's return to Senegal in 1963, there were the films. Thanks to the contradictions of a neo-colonial distribution system, in Ahmadu Bello we only saw *Mandabi* and *Xala*,³ but they captured the new bourgeoisies, bureaucratic and national (or comprador) respectively, in all their contradictions, in unforgettable images which made these classes the laughing stock of Africa.

Above all, there was the man himself and what he represented: Sembene son of a poor fisherman, kicked out of school at fourteen, proletarian of all trades - builder, mechanic, docker - and finally, thanks entirely to his own efforts, world-famous writer and film-maker. There was Sembene who went to film school at forty because his novels in French were not reaching his own people, and because he was convinced that film could raise consciousness and contribute to the struggle for real national liberation and socialism. The spoken or unspoken point of reference was of course his fellow countryman Senghor, privileged and elitist, whose art and politics had been tailored not to combat but to serve imperialism, whose anti-Communism was notorious, whose 'promotion' to the Académie française in 1983 seemed strangely anachronistic in our context of determined decolonisation, and whose hopelessly incorporated *Négritude* Sembene's Marxism-Leninist tools so ably deconstructed.

There were, however, a few questions, some my own, others shared with colleagues.

³ The film *Mandabi* (The Money Order) and *Xala* both appeared originally as novellas written in French. The film *Mandabi* exists in two original versions, Wolof and French (*Le Mandat*).

Why did the militant tone of the pre-1963 novels become so muted once Sembene returned home and started making films under neo-colonialism in 1963? What happened to the proletariat of *God's Bits of Wood*, which after all, was based on the real proletariat of the historic 1947 strike? Was their non-appearance in the films a reflection of their failure to develop in reality, or was Sembene himself responsible for artistically silencing, under the neo-colonial dispensation, those to whom he had earlier given voice? Why was there no longer any visible sense of resistance in *Mandabi*, with its victim-protagonist, and why had the bourgeoisie replaced the people centre stage in *Xala*? Why was resistance in *Xala* in the hands of the unreliable lumpen, that 'dangerous class' that Marx had said could so easily become the 'bribed tool of reactionary intrigue'? (Marx 1977, 47)⁴ And why, again in *Xala*, did the plot depend on magic and mysticism, rather than on class consciousness and the class struggle? *Ceddo* (not seen but heard about and discussed), obviously raised questions concerning its banning in Senegal, but also, coinciding with the moment that *Elesin Oba* was under attack in Nigeria, came under a certain suspicion as a celebration of a residual feudal class to be expected from a Soyinka but certainly not from a Sembene.

There were also questions about the mode of existence of Sembene's work in Senegal under neo-colonialism and Senghor. Had the move to cinema brought the message to the masses, or how had operating under the neo-colonial state affected the works and their possible impact? How had Sembene managed to get the French to pay for the making of films which satirised their own continued presence in Senegal, and how had this Communist managed to escape the fate of Ngugi, jailed first, then forced into exile?

In 1988, I met Sembene for the first time, when he came to London for the screening of *Camp de Thiaroye*. What came across most forcefully was the man of the people image - he told how he visited schools and consulted peasants, and how the fame of *God's Bits of Wood* had now spread to every corner of Africa to such an extent that he could say that, when he travelled in the remotest areas, 'I am no longer carrying the book, the book is carrying me' (OS/FNC).⁵

A year later, I was in Dakar at the 1989 ALA conference, and had the chance to do a little

⁴ In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon also draws attention to the revolutionary spirit of the lumpen, but also warns against their potential to be co-opted by the ruling class.

⁵ I had three interviews with Sembene between 1988 and 1991.

preliminary fieldwork. Sembene was a household name all right, his international comings and goings announced on national news like those of the Head of State himself. *God's Bits of Wood* was on the *baccalauréat* syllabus, and young people could tell you unhesitatingly who Sembene was - 'a self-taught writer' - but had never laid eyes on him: it was even suggested to me by a mischievous journalist that they probably presumed him dead like most of their other set authors. Asked about Sembene's relationship with Senghor, which for me symbolised the essence of the anti-imperialist struggle, these same young people assured me they must have got on well, they were both artists. The educated petty-bourgeois Senegalese of 1989 seemed to express surprise when I mentioned Sembene the Communist, declaring that he had no political affiliation, which befitted an artist, and which they appreciated, being thoroughly cynical about the whole political scene.

My narrative is underpinned by certain philosophical assumptions and expresses certain critical concerns. It assumes, for example, the existence of an objective social world, and the need for a theory to interpret it. It assumes that the struggle to understand the world is a prerequisite to changing it. It assumes history, and a class struggle which moves it forward. It assumes that within a given global system - like capitalism - all phenomena are inter-related, from the price of butter in Ireland in the 1950s to Ngugi's peasant drama in Kamiriithu in 1977. It assumes that art can play an ideological role in the struggle against imperialism, by raising the consciousness of the exploited and inspiring them to fight back. It assumes that, in this process, a relationship between the real world and the fictive one is established.

These, of course, are concepts and concerns that the so-called cutting-edge of Western criticism has taken some trouble over the past twenty-odd years to erase from our consciousness. Foucault, rejecting the validity of any totalising theory, talks of 'the sterilising constraints of the dialectic' (Sarup, 94), and Deleuze echoes him, condemning transcendent explanations of any kind, including the 'grand narrative' of Marxism (ibid, 100). Epistemology is abandoned, and we are left with a Nietzschean 'perspectivity of knowledge' (ibid, 94). Instead of the dialectical struggle for truth we have the study of truth effects (ibid, 94). Instead of objective reality we have linguistic constructs and inventions.⁶ Classes are no more, and in their place we have a battle between discourses, if we're lucky, or an endless slipping and sliding from metaphor to

⁶ Irish revisionist historians are at present busy turning many of the objective facts of Irish history into 'inventions'.

metaphor and signifier to signifier. Struggle is still recognised, but since power is everywhere and we are all both oppressor and oppressed, it is a Nietzschean struggle, courtesy again of Foucault, of 'all against all' (Sarup, 90). History is dead, and ideology with it. Instead of an art that helps us to grasp what the world is about, we have Derrida's texts that cannot say what they mean or mean what they say (Sarup, 42). Realism has become a dirty word.

This brings me to one more reason that I introduced Sembene in narrative form. I left Nigeria in 1988. After seven-odd years in the heart-land of advanced capitalism, I discovered, when I came to the famous 'writing-up' stage, that I was so inhibited by the dominant post-structuralist and post-modernist discourse that I had to ease my way into writing by means of a personal story. Narrative was a way of reminding myself of a repressed linguistic and conceptual context, a way of easing myself back into speaking a language that the organic intellectuals of advanced capitalism have struck off, written out of the dictionary, with the consent of Western Marxists who, here in London a couple of years after we celebrated the Marx centenary in Zaria with that unforgettable conference, declared Marxism irrelevant to the modern world (Amuta, 73). Yet it was very obvious in Nigeria that, given Africa's colonial history and consequent under-development, Marxism-Leninism was the only theory which could ensure sustainable development. In addition, in my own present context of life on a council estate in England, it is these 'outdated' concepts that I have found most useful for interpreting advanced capitalism under the Tories, as well as for recognising, through the smokescreen of the Western media, the current quite blatant re-colonisation of Africa by the USA. But it is a struggle to hold onto the forbidden and devalued language, as well-meaning English 'Africanists' warn you not to mention 'old-fashioned' Marxism at job interviews, and, oblivious to Ama Ata Aidoo's market-woman (Ní Chréacháin, 1991A), encourage you to replace your own crude 'neo-colonialism' with their more up-beat post-colonial approach.

There are a number of things about the dominant post-structuralist, post-modernist discourse which I take issue with. In many ways I feel that it is post-structuralism, and not Marxism, which is outdated: it takes us back to the old worn idealism versus dialectical materialism debates, and there is something very *déjà vu* about it. Take, for example, objective reality: I do not believe that the world of words creates the world of things - has Lacan forgotten that the man who thought gravity was a word drowned in the swimming pool? And I find it offensive to be asked to think about the slave trade or the Irish Famine as 'inventions' existing

only in my head, or at best British 'cock-ups' rather than the logical outcomes of the actions of generations of capitalists determined to satisfy their expanding needs. Or take the approach to the rational: post-structuralism has derided Descartes out of existence. But I believe, like Hegel, that she who looks for a rational purpose in the world is more likely to find one, and like Jameson, that dealing with the world rationally is a constitutive act, helping to make it behave accordingly. I do not disbelieve in the unconscious, but neither do I see why it should be privileged: freedom lies in struggling to become conscious of what is going on in that dumping-ground of unprocessed experience which the West tends to see as some sort of sacred locus of the authentic. Or communication: I accept, with Lacan, that in a sense I am spoken by language (Sarup, 8), but I also believe that with effort I can become more conscious of how it speaks me, struggle to transcend this and learn to speak it in such a way that I can communicate with my fellow human beings and thereby contribute to transforming our shared world. I do not believe that conceiving of power as everywhere helps in the struggle against the ruling class, nor do I believe that Foucault's small struggles can amount to anything more than the spontaneity and inconsequential skirmishes whose limits Marx pointed out a long time ago, unless such struggles are informed by and integrated into a totalising theory which gives them meaning and coherence. What I do know is that those who actually wield power - the capitalists - have no such squeamishness about rationality and broad totalising plans to exploit the rest of us.

What about post-colonial theory? I have sat in endless 'Africanist' lectures and conferences since I came to this advanced capitalist end of the world, but whereas in Zaria Marx and Lenin had opened innumerable windows for me onto our local world of neo-colonial capitalism and our place in the global scheme, post-colonialism has not, regrettably, been able to do the same. When I first landed in England in 1988, I had thought, very naively, that scholars of Africa here would have everything to offer that we had there, only in a more polished form because they have, for one, a constant supply of light, water and salary. What I met was post-colonialism.

Post-colonialism, as I see it, is a by-product of the other 'posts', and as such has inherited everything that opposes them to Marxism: Aijaz Ahmad calls it an 'apocalyptic anti-Marxism' (Ahmad, 283). Like the other 'posts', it rejects totalising theories and grand narratives (Mongia,

5), the dialectic (Bhabha, 25) reason, history and progress.⁷ It refuses to recognise capitalism as what Arif Dirlik calls a 'foundational category' (Dirlik, 298). It is yet one more idealism, inhabiting an imaginary zone which Spivak calls 'post-colonial space' (Ahmad, 278) rather than dealing, as Ahmad says, with the 'determinate histories of determinate structures' (Ahmad, 283), and is characterised by a view of social relations and political commitment which, according to O'Hanlon and Washbrook, is 'extremely voluntaristic' (O'Hanlon and Washbrook, 166). Much post-colonial discourse, it strikes me, is captured in the French phrase, 'to take one's dreams for reality': history happens inside discourse, as with the post-structuralists and post-modernists, and not in the real world.

So much for post-colonialism's post-structural and post-modernist heritage. What has it added to our understanding of Africa?

From my experience in the endless conferences, it seems to me that Spivak's post-colonial space is more here than there: it seems to be much more about the feelings of a handful of Westerners or Others living in the West than about the millions upon millions of Africans living in Africa (I am using Africa as shorthand for all parts of the world colonised by Western capitalism). In the words of Niyi Osundare, post-colonial is 'yet another name invented for the African experience from outside' (Osundare, 205).

As such, post-colonialism seems to be of interest to two main groups. First there are the Western academics, for whom it seems to be not so much a rejection as a recycling of Conrad: even if the description changes, they do not question their God-given right to do the defining. The African is no longer barbaric, he has been to school, he has learned the language and can even write back, and is patted indulgently on the head for this cheeky accomplishment. This may be useful and necessary therapy for the academics concerned, perhaps suffering from guilt about the real agents of barbarism in the Conrad story, just as it is useful on the job front as something different - *vive la différence* - from teaching mainstream English or French. But it seems to me to have as little to do with African reality as had *The Heart of Darkness*.

The advanced capitalist post-colonialists are assisted in their recycling exercise and search for therapy by their 'African partners' or 'authenticity agents'. Real McCoy Africans in the

⁷ Two articles by Aijaz Ahmad and Arif Dirlik respectively in Mongia, ed. (see bibliography) present excellent critiques of post-colonialism from a Marxist point of view. They express much more eloquently than I could many of my own misgivings.

eyes of the West, these are unrepresentative of the society they are fleeing from, but make a living out of representing it, or rather, out of demonstrating the happy marriage between their African roots and their successful integration into the Western post-colonial world. Congratulations all round to host and honoured guest: a mutual admiration society is formed. For me, with my 'francophone' African background, we are not too far from Senghor, his *Négritude*, and his *métissage culturel* in Paris in the 1930s, and the unholy partnership definitely smacks of the infamous Coopération⁸ which replaced colonialism: déjà vu again.

Personally, there is no place for me in the post-colonial world. 'The Empire Writes Back' and 'Europe and its Others' are titles my mind, such as it is, cannot think. Back to where? For the best - literally - part of my life, 'back' or 'home' meant Nigeria. The giant of Africa is a huge and wonderfully varied place, with a potential academic self-sufficiency, an exciting internal argument, which has to be experienced to be believed. It has no need to write 'back' to any Western father figure: the main writing it has to do to the West at this stage is to beg the migrant (!) brother or the cousin to send in a few pounds, since the post-colonial programmes of the World Bank have destroyed the naira.

In addition to the philosophical base inherited from contemporary advanced capitalist philosophy, post-colonialism has its buzz words: hybridity, migration and boundary-crossing are but a few. Hybridity is Homi Bhabha's passport to the West: I wonder if he is aware that Senghor introduced it as an ideological cooler in the 1940s when *Négritude* was becoming too hot for the French to handle. The 'authenticity agents', turning their own necessity into a commoditisable virtue, have elevated hybridity to a privileged epistemological status: 'the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision' (Bhabha, 5). As Dirlik says, it is 'an expression not so much of an agony over identity as of a new-found power' (Dirlik, 302). But as a category, hybridity is not very useful to most of the world who, as Ahmad says, 'are not really free to refashion themselves with each passing day' (Ahmad, 289), a pastime which tends to depend, as he says, on the availability of surplus (ibid, 291).

As for migration and boundary-crossing, I feel that many migrants who have not had the privilege of participating in the post-colonial debate might find this romanticisation of boundary-

⁸ The French Ministère de la Coopération was set up by de Gaulle in 1959, ostensibly to provide technical and military assistance to the newly 'independent' colonies, but in reality to ensure that French economic and military interests continued to be prioritised by neo-colonial regimes.

crossing quite offensive, had they survived the experience of doing what post-colonial theory celebrates: I think of Joy Gardner, killed in front of her small made-in-England son by British immigration police - and she is only one. As Ahmad says, 'most migrants tend to be poor, and experience displacement not as a cultural plenitude but as a torment ... post-colonialism is also, like most things, a matter of class' (Ahmad, 289).

What has post-colonial theory done to enrich our understanding of colonialism? Not much, I feel, for the simple reason that it refuses to recognise capitalism as a 'constituting moment of history' (Dirlik, 299). It is, on the whole, like the other 'posts', silent about capitalism, though, as Dirlik points out, it is in many obvious ways a product of global capital and a response to the latter's ideological needs. We all know that when something remains silent about its origins and conditions of possibility, we should smell a rat.

If you do not confront the history of capitalism, you cannot, to my mind, confront colonialism. The colonialism I for one am interested in, and that I thought this debate was about, *is* by definition colonial capitalism: it is the penetration of Western capital into African society. But post-colonialism collapses vastly different definitions of colonialism into each other - much as Homi Bhabha collapses the master into the slave (Bhabha, 26) - neutralising all. As Niyi Osundare says, Post-colonialism has taken the sting out of 'a trope ... whose accent is blood-stained' (Osundare, 205), by equating the histories of the 'formal and superficial coloniality' of Canada, Australia and New Zealand with that of Africa. When the USA (Dirlik, 300) is included in the list, the ideological rat begins to smell seriously.

Post-colonialism, like its progenitors, rejects nationalism and the nation state. I remember trying to get my mind around this at a recent post-colonial conference here in London entitled 'Empire, Nation, Language' where nationalism seemed to be a monochrome dirty word identified with the BNP, and there was not a single mention, over three days, of the national liberation struggles which have gone on through this century and which made the coining of 'post-coloniality' possible. When I made the mistake, in the electric jargon-filled tension of the tea-room, of drawing attention to this omission, an Irish-American post-colonialist asked me which primary school I taught at: maybe she wanted to ring up the principal and get the heretic sacked.

Nationalism and the nation state are condemned, like Marxism, on grounds of Eurocentrism: post-colonialism, itself a solidly Western product, must prove itself more royalist

than the king, as the French put it. But as Ahmad says, Indian national consciousness was not a product of British colonialism but of the struggle against it (Ahmad, 278). And he goes on to remind us that 'at the apex of the world system, the nation state is alive and well in the USA and Japan' (Ahmad, 284). Being Irish, from a nation that was around long before Cromwell et al, the nation state is not something I am willing to relinquish at this stage of history simply in order to join the gang.

I could go on, but I will not, because basically I feel that post-colonialism has little to offer an Africa engaged in a desperate struggle against global capital. Ama Ata Aidoo calls it 'a pernicious fiction' (Mongia, 1) but surely it is a fiction best fought in history rather than discourse. Niyi Osundare, convinced that 'the tag "post-colonial" is more useful for those who invented it than it is for .. its passive signifieds' (Osundare, 208), still engages in lengthy dialogue with them, but surely this is tilting at windmills, and takes time and energy which might be better employed on other things.

My intention in this study, then, is to look at Sembene's work in the broad context of the global struggle against capitalism and Western imperialism. I shall be taking as a given that the basic context of all human endeavour throughout this century has been, and still is, the struggle between Western capitalist imperialism and anti-imperialist forces, between two radically different modes of production and distribution of material wealth: capitalist and socialist. Capitalism, the dominant force, led originally by Europe and now by the USA, has been eating its way for over a century into the fabric of social life at all levels across the planet. At the beginning of the century, Lenin was already saying: 'We know at the present moment that there is not a corner of the earth that is not under the control of a small group of capitalist countries' (Lenin, 154). In the 1950s, a very young Mongo Béti announced the degree to which Africa was caught in the imperialist net: 'The only reality of Black Africa, its only deep reality, is colonisation and what it brings with it' (Béti. 137). Almost thirty years later, Ngugi echoed him: 'The fundamental opposition in Africa today is between imperialism and capitalism on the one hand, and national liberation and socialism on the other' (Ngugi, 78-9). The so-called end of the so-called Cold War a few years after Ngugi wrote this does not change this fact. The onslaught of Western imperialism is intensifying, not diminishing, as the century draws to a close. The majority of the world population is more oppressed and exploited by a capitalist minority now than at the beginning of the century, and they *are* still a vast majority from a world perspective,

despite various moves - like handy genocides, calculated birth control campaigns and the invention of AIDS (here, the use of the word 'invention' receives my full backing) - to reduce them. In the heart-land of capitalism, where the trickle-down effect of imperialist pillage has reduced the 'absolute poverty' statistics, it is possible for people to convince themselves that the poor are now a minority, and that all that is needed is for the reasonably well-off majority to show a little more charity to the handful of homeless. In Africa, on the other hand, classes are becoming more, rather than less visible, the gap separating the outrageously rich minority, buttressed by Western capital, from the huge, exploited majority widens daily, and this, in addition to the fact that the one-time petty-bourgeoisie is rapidly slipping down to join the masses, makes it less easy to convince an African academic of the irrelevance of Marxism-Leninism than to convince her/his Western counterpart, for whom the cutting edge of the discourse of domination is now gay and animal rights.

Imperialism and the struggle against it therefore provide a macro-context for this study. It is not sufficient for my purpose, however, to apply anti-imperialist theory to the works of Sembene in a general way. This is what I feel I was doing in Nigeria, and, as the narrative points out, it left some unanswered questions. I felt at the time that these problems might be solved by an approach which would combine general theory and more concrete data. I have therefore decided to try to use the tools of an anti-imperialist approach to analyse the works in the highly particular context of Sembene's own country within a given historical period.

Senegal will thus provide an immediate, concrete context for the study. What does this mean, in anti-imperialist terms? I am not, obviously, going to try to define Senegal in terms of a metaphysical Wolof mind, Soyinka style: my focus will be on Senegal's place, historically, within the imperialist framework. Since Senegal is France's oldest colony in sub-Saharan Africa, it means that the general theory of imperialism will be mediated by the specificities of the French variant, and secondly, that Senegal's own particular place within French imperialism will be included in the analysis. But I do not intend to stop short once the French factor has been included. To be really concrete, this study has to deal with the precise conjuncture of French colonisation with the historic and social conditions it met on the ground. Senegal will therefore be taken as a specific example of the way French colonisation worked in particular local historic and social conditions.

This, then, is why I have chosen to study Sembene on his home ground. But why the

choice of 1963-1977? In the narrative, I indicated that I perceived a change in Sembene's work which distinguished the novels written in France between 1956 and 1963 from the work - mainly film - produced after he returned home in 1963. Now, in 1960 the former French colony of Senegal was transformed into a French neo-colony under Senghor. Was the change in the work related to the new context of production? This explains my choice of 1963 as a starting point for the study. The next two decades (those comments of the Senegalese *baccalauréat* students notwithstanding), are ones in which Senghor, armed with *Négritude* and African Socialism, tries to consolidate the neo-colonial state on behalf of French capitalism, and is opposed by Senegal's anti-imperialist forces. Sembene, with his Marxism, his camera and his determination to communicate with the masses, is clearly a part of these forces at an ideological level. In 1980, this particular historic confrontation ends with the departure of Senghor, and an economically wrecked neo-colony is abandoned, under Abdou Diouf, to the mercy of the new American masters, alias the WB and the IMF. The fourteen years covered by our study correspond to a significant era in Senegalese history, and one that is short enough to allow for a detailed and concrete examination.

What can such a study hope to yield in terms of results? Hopefully, situating Sembene's neo-colonial work in its concrete material context will provide insight into the various changes which I perceived to have come about in the work after 1963, which I mentioned in the narrative. This in turn should make it possible, bearing in mind the specificities of neo-colonial Senegal, to arrive at some conclusions as to what neo-colonialism does to art, and what, if anything, art is able to do to neo-colonialism.

Although a Marxist approach to Sembene would seem to be an obvious one, given both the ideological orientation of Sembene himself and the importance of Marxism-Leninism in the context of the anti-imperialist struggle in which he produced his work, the existing studies of Sembene have not paid much attention to this aspect. I would now like to take a brief look at the three major studies I am aware of in French and English.

The first is Paulin Vieyra's *Sembène Ousmane: Cinéaste*, published in 1972. It covers Sembene's early films, up to and including *Emitai* (1972). Vieyra, who died in 1982, was a close personal friend of Sembene, and very much involved in the making of the films as Sembene's public relations man and producer. This proximity to the subject is what gives the work its peculiar strengths and weaknesses.

It is a large, untidy work whose lack of synthesis is symptomatic of the urgency Vieyra obviously felt about getting precious materials on record lest they be lost to posterity. It contains a wealth of documents, from film scripts to reprints of press reviews and interviews, and is a wonderful resource for future researchers. Vieyra has done quantities of this type of record-keeping for which African cinema is indebted to him. I shall be making reference to this material throughout the study.

Vieyra's work contains everything from practical details about the making of the films, like the problem of unexpected winds during the filming of *Mandabi*, to critical evaluations of the works based largely on the criteria of Realism. In terms of cinema context, it provides a wonderfully concrete feeling of the making of Sembene's films in the 1960s. But what it does not provide is an overall grasp of the general social context of production, perceived from an explicit and coherent perspective. I feel that this is partly a result of haste and lack of distance, partly an effect of self-censorship.

This self-censorship operates at both personal and political levels. Vieyra is Sembene's friend, and he writes about him, as he himself says, with a mixture of frankness and reticence (Vieyra 1972, 141). Secondly, Vieyra is a civil servant, and a Dahomean working for the Senegalese government, and must certainly be conscious of a double need for caution. What we get as a result are tantalising glimpses of the social reality, like the one of Senghor saving *Mandabi* from the Senegalese censors (ibid, 93). It is possible, reading between the lines, to deduce a certain amount about the nature of the society which produced the films and in which they existed. Vieyra's constant preoccupation, for example, with proving that the films are works of art and not propaganda, gives us a hint of the nature of critical onslaught to which they were subjected at the time. But although Vieyra writes from an implicitly anti-imperialist stand-point, the only overt references to politics are negative ones, as when he insists that Sembene stayed clear of political activity once he returned to Senegal (Vieyra 1972, 24). The famous events of 1968, which almost brought down the government in Senegal, are mentioned only insofar as their Parisian counterpart held up the editing of *Mandabi* (ibid, 92). The headings of the various sections of the book speak of its significant silences: 'The Man', 'The Work', 'The Author' - but never the social context, neo-colonial Senegal. It is precisely the relationship between man, artist, work and social context that our study will try to foreground.

The second study of Sembene is Martin Bestman's *Sembène Ousmane et l'esthétique du*

roman négro-africain (1981). It deals with the novels (including *The Money Order* and *Xala*) up to 1973.

I have made a detailed analysis of Bestman's book elsewhere (Ní Chréacháin, 1992). My basic problem with Bestman is that, whereas Sembene's work is informed by a unifying and totalising theory of society, Bestman has no comparable tools to deal with such material. In the thematic section of the book, he depends on the very limiting and self-contradictory tradition-versus-modernity model. Thus, for example, where Sembene shows us the articulation of patriarchy with colonial capitalist oppression, and the exploitation of certain traditional structures by the new 'modern' system, Bestman is unable to move beyond a bits-and-pieces approach in which, at best, youth confronts age in the interests of individual freedom. He thereby lands himself in a complete contradiction: his book seems to be intended as a celebration of 'negro-African' aesthetics, presumably an expression of a communal way of life, but much of the time he comes across as the voice of modernism and petty-bourgeois individualism promoting capitalist values - and in Sembene's name. Sembene's wonderful young heroes, who, unlike Bestman, know what they are doing and can distinguish between those traditional values on which Scientific Socialism could be built, on the one hand, and, on the other, those oppressive traditions which consolidate the privileges of a minority, are reduced in Bestman to angry young men and women opposing the extended family system on grounds that it inhibits the accumulation of private capital and individual advancement!

In the aesthetics section, Bestman is again caught in a contradiction. Now, Sembene's colonial works are striking examples, as I already mentioned, of the use of the novel form to express a Marxist sense of history - history understood as progress, via the struggle of opposites, to a new, higher level: at the end of *God's Bits of Wood*, the people and the situation have been transformed, and are a step closer to realising the dream of the 'better life'⁹ which inspired the strike. Bestman accurately describes the discontinuous, convulsive movement of *God's Bits of Wood*, and makes an analogy with jazz syncopations, but fails to tell us where the movement is heading or what its purpose is. In failing to see the formal structures as an expression of a revolutionary social transformation, the narrative leaps and discontinuities as expressing the transformation of quantity into quality characteristic of revolution, I feel that, instead of a

⁹ See facing page to List of Characters in *God's Bits of Wood*.

criticism which enriches our understanding, he gives us one which impoverishes it, and falls short of what the work itself, unmediated, can do for us.

The third study of Sembene is Françoise Pfaff's *The cinema of Ousmane Sembene: a pioneer of African film*. Published in 1984, Pfaff's book covers all of Sembene's films up to and including *Ceddo* (1977).

Pfaff, like Bestman, adopts the tradition-versus-modernity model, and attempts to focus exclusively on the cultural context. For this, her patron, in his preface, congratulates her on a new and refreshing approach, and accuses previous critical studies of Sembene of having been 'impenetrably political' (Pfaff). Now, apart from the fact that culture is a social product which cannot be adequately analysed in isolation from the rest of society, including politics, and that Pfaff must surely have known Sembene's views on this, expressed in his 1975 lecture *Man is Culture* (Sembene, 1975) at her own university, Howard, to embark on the interpretation of an artist like Sembene without the political axis is surely to disable oneself from the start. This is not to say that Pfaff's work does not serve a purpose. For the general Western reader unfamiliar with Africa, and even, to an extent for any reader unfamiliar with Senegal, Pfaff provides valuable cultural decoding. In addition, for the reader coming to Sembene's films from a predominantly literary background, the work contains a useful and accessible introduction to Sembene's adaptation of cinematographic techniques to the African context and above all to his target audience, as well as an introduction to the history of cinema in Africa. Like Bestman's book, Pfaff's sensitises the reader to the presence of African artistic devices and forms in the works. But as with Bestman - and though Pfaff's work is more coherent - I cannot help feeling that an approach which isolates culture falls short of Sembene's holistic grasp of society.

Both Bestman and Pfaff, in failing to confront Sembene's Marxism and to consider the merits of dialectical materialism as a critical approach to his work, end up diluting and distorting it. I will give just one example at this stage. Sembene's first film, *Borom Sarret* (1963), deals with the miserable existence of a horse-and-cart driver in Dakar. The poor man, after a hard day during which his passengers for the most part use his services but cannot pay for them, is forced to accompany what he hopes will finally prove to be a paying customer into the exclusive Plateau area from which carts are officially banned. His means of existence, his horse and cart, are confiscated by the police as a result. This is obviously a stinging comment on the class nature of Senegalese society, and the wretched lot of the majority. But for Pfaff, trapped in the

tradition-versus-modernity discourse, it says no more than the cart driver's inability to adapt to the modern world, and his 'awkward choice (sic) of an anachronistic trade'! Would the cart driver have fared better, one is tempted to ask, had he chosen (!) some more modern trade, like shining the shoes of the wealthy bureaucrats and French businessmen who perpetuate his oppression?

Finally, I would like to mention briefly a recent addition to the library of Sembene criticism. This is Clara Tsabedze's *African Independence from Anglophone and Francophone Voices: a comparative study of the post-independence novels by Ngugi and Sembene* (1994). It is refreshing to find a comparative francophone/anglophone study in the first place. Secondly, Tsabedze is unusual in that she does not shy away from politics. She situates Sembene's and Ngugi's novels in the context of imperialism, examines them in terms of comparative French and British neo-colonialism respectively, and above all comes up with an interesting conclusion about Sembene which I shall refer to at the end of this study.

My own work will hopefully go beyond Tsabedze's, mainly in the degree of concreteness I hope to produce. She remains on the level of theory and textual analysis for the most part, and does not venture into the area of the actual material production of art which will be central to my own approach. I shall elaborate further on this approach in Chapter One. At this stage, let me simply say that my examination of Sembene's development as an artist within the context of Senegal in the 1960s and 1970s will take into consideration everything which I consider relevant to artistic production, from the nationalisation of cinema by Senghor in the 1970s to the drop in the market price of groundnuts.

In addition to library research and textual analysis, the study is based on two years of part-time field-work in Senegal, resulting in eighty hours of recorded interviews. These interviews covered three main concerns: reactions to selected Sembene films, perceptions of Sembene, and impressions of the social context at various stages during the years covered by the study. I feel ambivalent about the field-work at this stage. I am convinced that this sort of approach is invaluable and irreplaceable, but on the other hand I have serious reservations about my own use, in this particular case, of this powerful critical tool.

My first problem has to do with language. Since my budget, which came almost entirely from local part-time work, did not allow for extensive use of informants and interpreters, who would in any case have required a type of training I was not equipped to give them, the vast

majority of the interviews are in French rather than Wolof. In the Dakar context in which they were carried out, this did permit some level of communication across the classes, from leaders of political parties to businessmen, students, secondary school pupils, taxi-drivers and mechanics, but the depth of discussion would obviously have been much more satisfactory had I myself spoken Wolof, and I was constantly aware that Sembene's target audience, the masses, were under-represented. This is one illustration of the truth of Sembene's and Ngugi's position on the language issue: that without an African language one is not equipped to deal with African literature.

My second reservation about the interviews was my own lack of a sociological background, which resulted in the interviews, for all their bulk, not directly yielding anything which could be termed scientific results. This raises the whole problem of inter-disciplinarity, which permeates not just the interviews but this entire study.

I believe totally in the necessity of an inter-disciplinary approach. Art cannot be studied in isolation. But the difficulties such an approach poses, given the present level of division of labour in society, are enormous. As Jameson says, the dialectical approach means that you cannot say anything until you have first of all said everything (Jameson 1974, 306). And not many people are equipped to think everything, let alone say it. Are we therefore to be left with an impossible choice between a narrow, specialised approach on the one hand and a Jack-of-all-disciplines one on the other? The answer clearly lies in collective work. In the meantime, this study, in promising to show the relationship between the price of groundnuts and the nationalisation of cinema, is perhaps expressing a worthy intention rather than realising a dream. But I know it is a step in the right direction, and the very deficiency of its present execution will inspire more adequate solutions.

I shall deal in detail with the theoretical issues my approach raises in Chapter One. In conclusion at this stage, let me spell out what I hope to cover in this study in order to examine the process of artistic creation in the neo-colonial context. After the methodology chapter, I shall, in Chapter Two, set the stage for the neo-colonial study, by providing a brief survey of what I consider to be relevant aspects of Senegalese history and society up to 1960. Chapter Three will examine aspects of Sembene's early life in Senegal in the colonial context, and will also look at his life in France between 1948 and his return home in 1963. Chapter Four will cover Sembene's successful entry into full-scale commercial cinema in the 1960s. Chapter Five will provide an in-

depth study of *Mandabi* (1968), which signalled his arrival as an accomplished film-maker. Chapters Six and Seven will deal similarly with the 1970s and *Xala* (1975). Chapter Eight is an 'endnote' on *Ceddo*, Sembene's last work of the period. In the epilogue, I hope to take a brief look at what has happened to Sembene and Senegal in the post-Senghor era.

CHAPTER ONE

ART AND IDEOLOGY: CRITICAL MODELS AND METHODS

In the Introduction, I described in narrative form what Sembene's work represented to me when I was teaching in Nigeria, and the questions it also gave rise to. In this chapter, I want to look more analytically at my own critical assumptions and preoccupations at that stage, to examine their historical antecedents, and to construct a critical model for use throughout this study.

Since the focal point of this study is art, we must begin with art: but only in order to remove it again immediately from the top of our list of preoccupations, as it were. My first assumption in Nigeria was that art was a social product, and that in order to say anything at all about it, one had to place it in its social context. I hope to develop this centrality of social context further in this chapter. But for the moment, I merely want to acknowledge that a discussion about artistic assumptions must begin, not with art, but with society.

Bearing this in mind, the most fundamental set of assumptions underpinning my response to Sembene in Nigeria were the following: that in class society, history is the history of class struggle, that the dominant mode of production at present is capitalism, that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism, and that the fundamental struggle in the world today, despite appearances, is the struggle between capitalism and socialism. I have already stated my alignment with these positions in the Introduction and do not propose to examine them further here.

The second assumption centres on the role of ideology in the struggle. The exploited majority remain in bondage partly for ideological reasons: their inability to see how the system works, or how they are programmed into accepting it. Transcending this ideological mystification is seen as an essential component of the struggle to change the system. In this chapter, I would like to look more closely at the implications of this view of ideology.

The third assumption is that art plays a role in the ideological process. To quote Amuta, it is 'an instrument for the preservation or subversion of the existing order' (Amuta, 8). Sembene

obviously falls on the subversion side of this divide. I saw his ideological role as a double one: to penetrate the ideological smokescreens and allow the masses to see clearly, and secondly, to inspire the masses to do something about the oppressive reality. In this chapter, I hope to examine this assumption and its implications more thoroughly.

Before embarking on an examination of these assumptions, let us draw up an initial working model based on the implications of my response to Sembene in Nigeria. It looks like this:

- the imperialist exploitation of Africa can only be transformed by the masses
- the masses do not understand how imperialist exploitation works, nor the role ideology plays in inducing them to accept their own exploitation
- art can play an ideological role in exposing the system and building their confidence in their ability to fight it
- art thus contributes potentially to social transformation

Since this is obviously an ideological model, let us look first of all at ideology itself, at the development of the concept and of its role in reproducing or fighting imperialism. The model contains two distinct uses of ideology within Marxist theory - what Larrain would call negative and positive definitions respectively (Larrain, 249): in other words, ideology as false consciousness, distortion of reality in the interests of the ruling class, on the one hand, and on the other, ideology as an emancipatory body of ideas to be used in moulding a new consciousness essential to the struggle against capitalism.

Let us look first at ideology as false consciousness. It will be remembered that this meaning of ideology - expressed in the model as the masses' inability to understand their own exploitation - is based on two ideas developed by Marx. The first is the assertion that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class (Marx and Engels 1996, 64), in other words, that the way we think is determined by the control of the ruling class over the means of ideological production. The second is the famous theory of commodity fetishism, according to which the exploitative reality of capitalism presents itself to consciousness in inverted form (the free market concealing the very un-free labourer) and we have to struggle in order to turn it right-side up again (Marx 1983, 76). This in turn led Lukács to develop the theory of reification, in which capitalism, the first 'unified economic system' in history (Lukács 1971, 103) manages to appear so fragmented on the surface that we see only 'a diversity of mutually independent objects and forces' (ibid. 70). In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács claims that this reification of

consciousness is what prevents the masses from grasping the system as a totality and understanding how it programmes them to accept their own subordinate role in it.

The second, positive meaning of ideology - in the sense of a weapon used by a subordinate class to fight oppression, and expressed in the model as the need for the masses to develop sufficient confidence in themselves as a class to oppose exploitation - became popular under Lenin. It was further developed by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and by Gramsci in *The Prison Notebooks*: both saw the growth of a positive proletarian consciousness as a prerequisite to successful struggle.

This brings us to the ideological role of art. Thankfully, we no longer have to spend so long debating this as we would have in the hey-day of art-for-art's-sake. It is fairly clear by now that the ideological role of art did not begin with the Proletkult. From the village story-teller of communal society reinforcing the values of the whole community, to the mass art of advanced capitalism created to ensure mass consent to exploitation, to Mongo Béti at the height of the anti-imperialist struggle in the 1950s crying out that 'to write about Africa is to take sides for or against colonisation' (Béti, 138), art has always had either a conscious ideological function or at the very least an ideological effect, and, in class society, as Engels said, it has always been partisan (Marx and Engels 1984, 88), and has served to perpetuate or subvert the existing system. Even the art-for-art's-sake people themselves, it has been pointed out, were making an ideological statement in rejecting the commodification of art under capitalism (Vaz 116), and where art refrains from direct reference to the discourse of power in its content, as Jameson says, it secretes it in the form (Jameson 1988, 202).

Let us now look at the precise roles assigned to art in the working model: as both demystifying agent and builder of a positive class consciousness. In Nigeria, I saw *God's Bits of Wood* as fulfilling both roles magnificently, and Sembene's neo-colonial works, on the other hand, as somehow falling short. Let us now see how this dual role of art develops in historical terms.

Demystification and inspiration: various Realisms

Art as a means of ideological demystification takes us straight back to the theory of Realism: it is no accident that the father of European Realism was also the author of *History and*

Class Consciousness.¹⁰ For Lukács, Realism was the artistic cure to the disease of reification. The basic qualities Lukács looked for in the Realist novel - and which neither Naturalism nor Modernism could provide - were what reification had destroyed: an understanding of the totality, of history, a sense of perspective, an ability to see 'beyond the divisive symptoms of the economic process to the unity of the total system underlying it' (Lukács 1971, 74). Realism plunged beneath the surface to the deep structures of society, and resurfacing, described the world, not as it appeared to the naked eye, but in all its essential interconnectedness. Nothing remained in isolation, everything was related by a 'complex process of mediation' (ibid, 169).

At a certain level, I read *God's Bits of Wood* in Nigeria in terms of Lukács's Realism, and it certainly fulfils the expectations of art that Lukács introduced. If Realism is about grasping the deep structures of society and projecting these in a concrete form, then Sembene's story of the strike is a brilliant concretisation of the essence of colonialism: the use of race to raise class exploitation to the second power. And when Lukács talks of Realism operating through the creation of 'typical' characters 'whose innermost being is determined by the objective forces at work in society' (Lukács 1963, 122) and who 'react with their entire personality to the life of the age' (ibid, 57), I for one see Mame Sofi, embodiment of the new, combative mood of the post-war years, confronting the colonial police with her sand-filled bottle, and behind her, in imagination, I see the citadels of imperialism falling like so many Dien Ben Phus.

Lukács, however, only takes us part of the way in terms of our definitions of ideology above, and also, I feel, of my Nigerian reading of *God's Bits of Wood*: he is satisfied if art has succeeded in laying bare the workings of the system, in demystifying. For the other meaning of ideology - the building of a positive sense of class identity vital for combating oppression - we have to turn, I feel, to the Social Realism of the USSR in the 1930s, to the role of art in the active moulding of the consciousness of the new socialist citizen, to the recommendations at the Writers Congress of 1934 that novels should have 'positive heroes' and inspire faith in the future. We have to turn from Lukács' critical realism to Lunacharsky's 'realism with optimism, realism with a militant mood' (Swingewood, 109).

But it is when we come to examine the critical theory of the anti-imperialist writers and

¹⁰ I have used capital initial letters throughout this study when referring to literary movements, e.g. Realism, Neo-realism, the Anti-imperialist school.

critics from Africa and the Caribbean based in France in the 1950s, who provided a literary context for Sembene's early work, that I, for one, have the feeling of everything coming together: my own approach to Sembene in Nigeria, Lukács, and the Soviets. The Anti-imperialists combine Lukács' emphasis on art's ability to demystify by conveying the essence of reality together with the USSR emphasis on an art that can contribute to a positive psychological orientation, and the end result is very similar to the working model I was unconsciously using in Nigeria. Alexis, the Haitian Communist writer, in a seminal article on the novel published in 1957, thus appeals to writers to 'describe the realities of society and life with scrupulous truthfulness' (Alexis, 91) - the Lukács tradition - and in the same article calls for 'a fighting realism' which would 'sing of the beauty, the drama and the struggles of our exploited people' (ibid, 85-6), and which is closer to Lunacharsky's optimism and militant mood.

Reading the theory of Anti-imperialist Realism, one is tempted to ask whether it was made for *God's Bits of Wood* or *God's Bits of Wood* for it. Caribbean writer and theorist Sainville, writing in 1958, seems to be describing Sembene's novel a couple of years before it was published: 'realism: to study the people's struggles and suffering, exalt their joys and sorrows, describe their successes and failures... and tell the story of their revolt and of how they made a more human life for themselves' (Sainville 1958, 218).

Finally, the Anti-imperialists foreground the problem of the masses as target receivers of the demystifying and consciousness-building art (a problem Lukács, trapped perhaps in his petty-bourgeois consciousness, and in his fixation on the novel as absolute, never raised). This, of course, had been the huge irony of *God's Bits of Wood*, so perfect in theory as an ideological weapon, and yet so powerless thanks to its mode of existence as a novel in French with a target audience which did not know French and could not read. It was also the problem Sembene set out to solve by abandoning the novel in French for cinema in Wolof. It was the problem Ngugi was still trying to solve by working in Gikuyu, and the Ahmadu Bello drama students by turning to Hausa, in 1980. The Anti-imperialists in the 1950s, though none of them showed the initiative of a Sembene, faced the problem squarely, and, despite the seemingly insurmountable difficulty, did not for a moment contemplate an alternative audience to the masses whose consciousness they hoped to raise and whom they hoped to inspire. Alexis, for example, called on writers to live with the masses and absorb their language and signifying systems in order to be able to talk to them about themselves, and declared his own intention to write his novels henceforth in

several languages including creole (Alexis, 101).

The model I was using in Nigeria, then, based on an ideological role for art in which art exposes the exploitative system to the masses and helps to mould a new, revolutionary consciousness among them, is clearly one which has run right through this century. The reason is not far to seek. With the existence of a potentially global mode of production in the form of capitalism, and the real possibility of a socialist alternative from 1917, this has, after all, been the first time in history that the struggle for the control of the masses' consciousness has become an issue on a global scale - a struggle in which the much maligned Proletkults and Social Realisms were more than matched by the American 'consciousness industry' (Jameson 1988, 207), as titles such as Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) and Edward Bernays *The Engineering of Consent* (1956) remind us. In such a context, art could hardly have escaped conscription.

In such a context, the huge claims made for art are also understandable. "We are the engineers of souls", says Gorki in 1934 (Swingewood, 73), and in 1959, Césaire, with a Surrealist flourish, goes even further: 'We propagate souls, we multiply souls, we even invent them' (Césaire 1959, 118).

What conclusion can we draw from having established the historical antecedents of the model I used in Nigeria, which is based on a belief that art can play an ideological role in exposing the nature of capitalist exploitation to the masses and inspiring them to act against an oppressive system? And where do I stand at present with respect to my original assumptions?

First, let me specify that, although I have assumed the model in my own name throughout this discussion, lest I unwittingly put words in the mouths of colleagues in their absence, I feel that, in its essential features, it was the dominant model in the Nigerian context of my narrative, at least at Ahmadu Bello: it was Ngugi's model, imported to Nigeria, and it was what inspired the drama students to take their work out of the campus into the villages.

One question I must ask, then, is what made it possible for Lukács, the Soviets in the 1930s, the Anti-imperialists in the 1950s, and Nigerians in 1980, to share what was, in essence, a model of art as ideological weapon, and what makes such a model so unmentionable in post-structuralist, post-modernist London in the 1990s? At this stage, I can make two suggestions. The first is that the Soviets, the Anti-imperialists and the Nigerians all have in common - because their objective situation gives them no option - what Lukács called 'that minimal hope of a

change for the better' which he claimed was the condition of possibility of Realism (Lukács 1963, 68). Secondly, it is perhaps a matter of degrees of reification. The first half of this century, even in the West, experienced a less intense form of reification, and therefore could still think in terms of Lukács' history and totality, and, in explanation of Nigeria in 1980, perhaps this is still true at the end of the century the further one moves from the advanced capitalist heart-land: perhaps it is still possible, because necessary, to see the total system, and insist that art expose it, in those parts of the world where the penetration of the capitalist ideological machine is less effective, while at the same time the social ravages of capitalism are more blatant.

Where do I stand at present with respect to the model? To the extent that it is a model of communication between artist and the oppressed of society with a view to social transformation, I consider it valid and intend to use it with some modifications which I shall specify. This is not to say that I take on board, for example, Lukács' insistence on the 19th century novel as an absolute, and the Soviets similar privileging of the novel in the 1930s. Clearly this is a secondary consideration, and was never an issue in my Nigerian context, where Ngugi's peasant theatre and *Matigari* were both seen as interesting experiments. When I talk about the model's essence, I mean those parts of it on which a Lukács and a Ngugi - or a Brecht - would agree.

In other words, insofar as the model emphasises the ideological importance of art, and the right of the critic to judge art by its ability to demystify and to mobilise the masses, I am ready to defend it in the present context of a global capitalist system which oppresses the majority. In such a context, the artist, cannot, without being dishonest, fail to recognise that everything we do contributes to the perpetuation or subversion of the system. This is the old, worn - and still valid - literature-as-political-commitment argument. It is based on human values without which even this present discussion would not be taking place at all.

This is not to say that one is judging art by extra-artistic criteria. We have not forgotten Trotsky, and his constant reminders to the Soviets that art must be judged as art. *God's Bits of Wood* only succeeds at the ideological level because it is so good *as art*, because its message comes to us through such thoroughly human characters caught up in such a humanly meaningful situation.

The other essential aspect of the model that I am ready to defend is its unashamed recognition that art is an attempt to communicate and influence. The model is, essentially, a

communication model, with a sender, a message and a receiver, and an expected practical outcome. At one end is a live, flesh-and-blood artist, at the other, a recognisable, socially-determined reader or viewer. I find this refreshing, at a time when I am asked to consider both author and reader, and myself, as nothing more than collections of texts. I lap up Amuta's words when he says he needs to know who made the Ife bronze in the museum, and for what purpose (I would add for whom?), and I echo him thankfully when he says that to omit the artist is to dehumanise art (Amuta 82-3).

This is not to deny the possibility of difficulties in the communication process. It is not to deny that the author's subconscious, in a converse of the Balzac case (bourgeois writer unwittingly reveals social structures condemning capitalism), may throw up a reactionary message which drowns out the revolutionary one s/he thought s/he meant to write. It is not to deny that, even where s/he did send the revolutionary message, it fell on ears which read it differently from his or her intent. What is important, I feel, is that the will to communicate be upheld, and retained as an evaluation criterion. I find it odd, on the one hand, that it should even be necessary to state this when talking about a social activity like art, but it has to be made explicit after decades of a dominant criticism whose object is an orphan 'text' miraculously responsible for its own birth and read only by will o' the wisp critics trying to make us believe that they are invisible.

Thirdly, in terms of the target audience, I am ready to stand by the criterion which judges art by its ability to communicate with the whole society, and not merely the same will o' the wisp critics I have just mentioned. Yes, the difficulties of doing this in a society so divided against itself are enormous, and the transparent communication and universal appeal of the village storyteller hang tantalisingly above us, unattainable. But to give up on the dream is to accept a concept of art which at best colludes in reinforcing the social divisions of which we are victims, and at worst reduces art to a secret society language whose only purpose is to keep a handful of academics across the globe busy. When even Eagleton tells me that the real meaning of the famous 'text' is discoverable, not by the common man, but only by 'criticism' (not even the live human critic!), I can only despair at what happens to the best of critics in the advanced capitalist context.

The power of the adversary: reification, hegemony and other obstacles

On the other hand, I now want to look again at some of the ideological issues the model raises, and the difficulties such a communication model poses. These problems cover a wide range of areas, from the mode of production of art to the incorporation of the work by the state. But let us begin with the problem the model sets itself: the communication of an ideological message, the demystification and inspiring of the masses.

The point I want to draw attention to here is the power of the enemy: in other words, the nature of the ideological process which masks the reality of exploitation, and which art is supposed to be able to expose. I detect in the language used by both Lukács and the Anti-imperialists that, in emphasising the power of art - 'we are the engineers of the soul' - they tend to de-emphasise the power of ideology. This comes across, for example, in Lukács' image of ideology as a veil (Lukács 1971, 59, 66). Veils do conceal, but they are fragile things, through which reality is already semi-visible even before art steps in to tear them.

The image of the veil is logical if one sees ideology as no more than the mystification by the ruling class of those they exploit, operating at a conscious and almost purely intellectual level. This is, admittedly, one way of interpreting Marx's statement that the ideas of the ruling class are always the ruling ideas. It implies that the conscious distortion, the 'lie' told by the ruling class, can be countered by the exploited simply grasping the truth. I feel that the consciousness-raising which art was supposed to achieve was often conceived as this kind of straight-forward, almost one-off procedure. This is the tone that comes across in the words of a precocious young Mongo Béti in 1955 talking of a literature in which the 'dubious deals' of the West would be 'denounced, deconstructed, spread out across the page for all to see' (Béti, 137). In French, the term *prise de conscience* is more graphic and more abrupt than the English 'consciousness-raising' suggests: it connotes that consciousness is grasped, taken, occupied, held once and for all.

Part of the problem lies in the many meanings of ideology, as Eagleton - who enumerates sixteen - has pointed out (Eagleton 1991, 1-2). When we say that art has an ideological effect, do we mean, for example, that it counters an organised body of ideas and beliefs: e.g. Marxism, or Christianity, with an equally organised system? Or, by ideology, are we implying a whole process of social conditioning in the interests of a particular class, where ideology becomes, as it

does for example with Althusser, virtually synonymous with culture, in which case it will take a lot more than an alternative view of the world to transform consciousness? With this in mind, I now want to look again at Marx's and Lukács' reification, and to introduce Gramsci's hegemony, popularised by Raymond Williams.

Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, on which Lukács' reification is based, implies that we are dealing with something much more fundamental than a veil (though even Marx himself uses this image (Marx 1983, 84). Capitalism is such that everyday experience is reflected in consciousness in inverted form without any conscious intervention from the ruling class: our consciousness sees only the free circulation of goods in the free market, while the un-free labourer remains hidden from view. And, while commodity fetishism applies only to capitalism, Marx elsewhere shows that this process of inversion is common to all situations where humans confront problems they cannot solve. Calling religion 'inverted world-consciousness' (Marx 1975, 38), he refers to the creation by humans of all-powerful gods which help them to deal with their own powerlessness.

Lukács, too, though still clinging to his veil, admits that our ability to tear the veil diminishes as the system develops: 'As capitalism advances, it becomes increasingly difficult to find anyone penetrating the veil of reification' (Lukács 1971, 86). He then introduces a more formidable image: 'As the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structures of reification progressively sink more deeply, more fatefully into the consciousness of men' (ibid, 93).

It is, of course, Gramsci's elaboration of the theory of hegemony which gives the most comprehensive picture of the all-pervasive nature of capitalism's power over the consciousness of those it exploits. With Gramsci's theory of consent, we come a long way from the idea of a misrepresentation of facts which can be countered by a more correct version of reality. Gramsci's consent is obviously based on a more comprehensive statement by Marx about ruling class ideas: 'Each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled merely to carry through its aim to represent its interest as the common interest of all members of society' (Marx and Engels 1970, 65-6). In other words, we are no longer dealing with a blatant lie that can be exposed, but with a presentation of the system which convinces the exploited that there is something in it for them. The interests of the ruling class are thus internalised by the exploited as their own. This is obviously much more difficult to grasp and to expose, as Eagleton

has illustrated (Eagleton 1991, *passim*).

Since Gramsci, others have spelt out the implications of this hegemonic process in ways which underline its depth, its comprehensiveness, the internalisation involved, and the degree to which the process is unconscious. For Althusser, ideology, synonymous for him with the hegemonic process, constitutes our very identity: it interpellates each one of us as subjects to accept our (exploited) place in society (Althusser 1971). For Raymond Williams, hegemony includes but goes beyond ideology to embrace the whole of culture and tradition - culture seen as 'the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes'. Hegemony is:

a saturation of the whole process of living - not only of political and economic activity, but of the whole substance of lived identifications and relationships, to such a depth that the processes and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seems to most of us the processes and limits of simple experience and common sense. It constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society (Williams 1977, 110).

It is worth noting that the image of the veil has now given way to one of liquid: the hegemonic process seems to run in our very veins, and interestingly, it is the same young Mongo Béti, quoted earlier announcing the capacity of art to expose the misdeeds of the ruling class, who now uses a similar metaphor to Williams, describing colonisation as 'penetrating every corner of our body, poisoning all our blood' (Béti, 138).

All of this surely confirms that the image of the easily-torn veil is itself an ideological way of dealing with the problem, an attempt to cut down to size verbally that which seems too daunting to deal with in reality. One thing is clear from this discussion: the ideological function art has been called upon to fulfil is not a mere setting straight at the intellectual level along with a touch of enthusiasm and militancy, à la Lunacharsky, but a profound and pervasive re-education of consciousness, a process as thorough and on-going as the one the dominant hegemony undertakes on our behalf.

My second problem with the model is the assumption it makes about the artist him/herself: that, while the masses are blind to the workings of the exploitative system, the artist somehow miraculously is not. The theorists who tell us about reification and hegemony never consider themselves contaminated, and they generously seem to offer a passport to the ideology-

free zone at least to the great artists (Marx and Engels 1976, 91-2, 108). Yet they do not tell us how they or the great artists have managed to transcend the socialisation responsible for the masses' myopia.

Thirdly, we do perhaps need to ask ourselves to what extent ideological work - by art or any other means - does play a real role in revolutionary activity. Can interpreting the world correctly contribute to changing it? Marx, acknowledging that the 'ideological domain' is where people 'become conscious of the struggle and fight it out' (Marx 1909), insists that revolution only takes place when the forces and relations of production have come into contradiction with each other, and that unless this is already the case, demystifying people about the nature of the world achieves nothing (Marx 1970, 15). He gives the example of the revolutionary literature of France, which had little impact in a Germany which was not ready for it (Marx 1977, 65).

This means that, given the artist's own social conditioning, getting a grasp on Lukács' totality in the first place is problematic, and in the second, creating a work of art that can convey this totality to masses saturated in the ideological fluids of the dominant hegemony is a more formidable task than perhaps the would-be 'engineers of the soul' admitted to themselves. And thirdly, it may all be a waste of time if history has not adequately prepared the terrain.

But this is not to say that the task should be abandoned. It should be remembered that, if Lukács developed the theory of reification, he also developed the theory of Realism. It is the same Gramsci who, while acknowledging the power of the dominant hegemony, reminds us that no hegemony is ever total, points to the promising growth of a proletarian counter-hegemony in his native Italy, and emphasises the vital role of ideological work in building class-consciousness if the struggle is to be sustained. Williams, too, insists that hegemonies, no matter how apparently powerful, are also essentially fragile in that they operate by repression, and the repressed can reappear (Williams 1977, 125). Above all, perhaps, we should remember that the great work of art - the one that captures the essence of the historical age - is uniquely equipped to deal with the saturation of consciousness by the dominant hegemony, in that art operates similarly to hegemony, working its way into every corner of our consciousness. Difficulties or not, hegemony or not, societies have managed to produce works that do both the things we ask of them: expose and inspire. Art does not have to be what Eagleton accuses it of being in bourgeois society: not the demystification of ideology, but ideology to the second power (Eagleton 1977, 70).

Our argument above considers the problem of communication only in terms of the artist and the audience, and whether the artist can grasp and convey reality clearly. What has been left out is all the other elements which enter into the communication process and which can interfere to prevent demystification and the moulding of revolutionary consciousness. These include problems of material production (publishers, patrons) and problems with power (state repression or incorporation). In other words, the production of art is not just an ideological process, it is also partly material, and partly overtly political.

Refining the model

I now want to modify the model to include hegemony and its effect on both artist and audience, as well as these other factors. This will, I feel, give a more comprehensive account of how art functions in society and whether it can contribute to its transformation.

The new model proposes that we see the artistic work as the result of a social process involving four elements: the artist, the mode of artistic production, the state as controller of ideological production, and the audience. It is vital to recognise three things about these elements: that they exist within a determinate historical and social context, that they are only meaningful in relation to this context and to each other, and that they are all undergoing constant change. Throughout the study, as I apply the model to Sembene's works, these complex, often contradictory and dynamic inter-relations will be explored. In looking now at some cardinal aspects of these elements - and this brief survey does not pretend to be comprehensive - I shall, however, present each one separately.

The artist

Let us begin with the artist. We cannot hope to exhaust this topic here, but let us look at a few areas which will hopefully be explored more fully in the course of the study. Let us start with the artist's relationship with the dominant hegemony.

This time, we are not dealing with the artist as an ideology-free spirit through whom reality is miraculously conveyed in all its transparency, but with a historically and socially conditioned human being, subject to the force of the dominant hegemony like everybody else. In terms of emancipating the masses, we are dealing with somebody who, while s/he may be part of the solution, is just as likely to be part of the problem. We are not dealing with 'the radical artist' as some sort of absolute, as I for one tended to do in Nigeria. To be sure, our artist is

'radical' in intention, in that we have evidence from her/his work and perhaps from what s/he says of a critical view of social injustice. But this intention must be seen for what it is really worth and constantly reviewed. For example, has our artist merely had an intellectual encounter with Marxism at one point or another, or does s/he live her/his Marxism with her/his whole self? Does s/he perhaps rise above traditional patriarchal conditioning while abroad, but then sink back into it once home? The relative success or failure of the artist's on-going struggle to transcend the dominant hegemony will be expressed in the works, and the critic, recognising the textual evidence with the help of contextual information, will be able to trace the progress of that struggle.

Related to this is the issue of the artist's conscious commitment, which may not always coincide with the imprint of her/his unconscious on the work. Like Raymond Williams, my problem is not commitment in itself, but rather that the artist's commitment may not be serious enough (Williams, 201). If the commitment does not run deep enough, the unconscious may contest it, and a struggle will ensue. We may get a work which operates like a Balzac in reverse, intending to talk about the emancipation of the masses but instead reinforcing the impression of the all-powerful dominant hegemony.

(i) Artistic form

But the artist's struggle is not just to transcend the dominant hegemony: s/he has to express this in a form which helps the masses to transcend their own socialisation. Communication, as speech act theory reminds us, depends on shared social, cultural, and, in this case, artistic codes (Holub, 86). Between the story-teller in the communal village and her/his audience, there was virtually perfect congruence, lost with the development of class society. We need to ask how wide the gap is between our artist and the masses. Again, we are dealing not with an absolute but with variable distances from artist to artist, and with variations over time. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Lukács are not much help to us here: they seem to be waiting for the masses to 'catch up' with the highest development of bourgeois art. It is the Anti-Imperialists in France who, painfully aware of themselves as a petty-bourgeois colonially-educated elite cut off from their own people, really confront the problem, at least at a theoretical level. Sainville confesses that his grasp of the masses' language is inadequate for literary creation (Sainville 1958, 220). Alexis stresses the need for artists to become 'like the people's own flesh and blood'

and to master their symbolic forms (Alexis, 87), and castigates those who 'approach the people with so many mental reservations and describe them in the third person' (ibid). Sembene takes the most drastic step in practical terms: he rises above the obsession of his period with the novel as the highest achievement of bourgeois art, and turns to film.

The main problem with the communication issue in the African context, to my mind, is not the glaring one of language or literacy in the literal sense. It is the danger of the artist assuming that, once these problems have been 'solved' - by writing in Yoruba or making films in Wolof - communication is bound to follow. The situation of the African artist, in the context we are dealing with, is often less polarised than that described by the Anti-imperialists. Though still a member of a Western-educated petty-bourgeoisie, s/he was perhaps born in a village, and has relatives among the peasantry or the urban proletariat. S/he can speak the people's language, in the literal sense, at least, and like everybody else, s/he had a grand-mother who introduced her/him to traditional forms of literary expression. But this is double-edged: it may lure the artist into a false sense of security. S/he may be deluded into believing in her/his continued communicative competence, when in reality the heavy investment in Western culture has caused the grasp of the people's culture to atrophy: the people have moved on, culturally, without the artist. S/he may further complicate the problem by operating perhaps unconsciously in several different cultural codes at once, some familiar to the masses, others unknown to them. I want to suggest that this mixing of codes makes it even more difficult to introduce the new, the revolutionary: the new is usually communicated by first establishing a code and then breaking it, but if the code is not clear to begin with, the break cannot be taken on board. I shall come back to this in discussing the audience. Finally, there is the question of intention: the artist may think s/he is producing for the masses, but socialisation into a different class and the grip of the dominant hegemony may decide otherwise. Amuta is pessimistic on this score, and is convinced that the petty-bourgeois artist ultimately writes for her/his own class (Amuta, 69). I prefer to see this, like the other issues under discussion, as an area of struggle: a struggle in which a Ngugi, for instance, has gone further than an Osofisan. Once again, the critic needs to remember the fluidity and changing nature of this situation - that the artist may grow closer or more distant from the masses over time - and, rather than labelling her/him once, remain sensitive to how the work reveals this on-going struggle.

(ii) Relationship to the political struggle

I feel a compulsion to raise the question of the artist's relationship to the political struggle, yet I do not, at this stage, have any definitive answers. One thing is clear: our starting point for this discussion is not an imaginary norm which defines the artist as necessarily situated above the fray of public life: this is just one socially determined stage in the development of the European concept of the artist. Artists have been involved in politics throughout history, to a greater or lesser degree according to the context. Engels points out that all the great Renaissance artists were actively involved in public life, and often in the military (Marx and Engels 1976, 29). This century has perhaps raised the question as never before, given the capitalist/socialist polarisation. The list of artists who became card-carrying Communists in the first half of the century is a lengthy one, from Picasso to Sembene himself. And Alexis not only became a Communist but died for Haiti.

But why exactly is this important? What question are we asking when we raise it? Are we, for example, suggesting that an active involvement in politics improves art in some way? Is this involvement more important in the case of our artist - who, after all, has taken on the power structures of society as her/his artistic project - than in the case of a less overtly political art? Are we implying a relationship between the artist's power to expose the unjust system, and her/his direct political involvement? If so, on what is this relationship based? When we raise the issue of the artist's involvement with politics, are we saying that s/he has to be involved, in order to know what s/he is talking about: that you cannot create an art which unmasks a system and inspire people to fight it without having fought it actively yourself? Or are we talking in terms of a need for some sort of moral consistency, which sees a form of hypocrisy at work in an art calling for revolutionary action created by someone safely seated behind a computer? Is the art the theory, and does it need active political involvement to complete it as praxis? Only one thing is clear in all of this: that the artist must ask her/himself these questions, and they will be imprinted in the work in however mediated a form. One more element has come to muddy the waters through which the clear view of the oppressive system can be seen.

But perhaps, when we raise this issue, we are focussing, not on art, but on the struggle, in which art only plays a part. Perhaps we are seeing art as secondary, as a means to an end. Is this what Fanon is doing when he says that the artist who writes about the struggle provides a basis

for hope, but that to really ensure hope, he must 'throw himself body and soul' into the struggle itself, and when he says that culture and struggle are synonymous (Fanon, 187)? Is it what Sékou Touré, whom Fanon quotes, had in mind when he told artists to take part in the revolution, and 'the songs will come by themselves'? (ibid, 166). Are there times when our artist, to be consistent with her/his sense of her/himself as one struggling for the emancipation of the masses, will feel required to abandon the pen for the gun? Is the artist not a member of society first, and an artist second?

(iii) Personal life

Finally, the artist is also a human being, and this, too, is imprinted in the work and affects its ability to transcend the dominant hegemony. It is amazing to me that I should feel I have to state this fact, but such is the Western paranoia about this aspect of the artist in the post-everything age that it does have to be made explicit. Acknowledging the artist's human being status does not have to mean that we look for his wife or mistress in every fictive woman he creates. But there is a relationship - often a complex, highly mediated relationship - between the artist as human being and the so-called 'implied author'. Let us take a clear-cut example. The artist responsible for a wife and a large family is more likely to internalise the demands of the publisher, which may not be in consonance with his revolutionary message, than the bachelor who can squat indefinitely with his brother. The artist's wife is therefore present in the 'text', not necessarily as a character (though we should not rule this out in bending over backwards to be sophisticated), but in the form of this economic tension concerning the publisher that the artist is struggling to resolve. And once again the masses reading the text are reading more than a transparent view of the system.

The mode of artistic production

Let us now look at the question of the mode of artistic production which the artist 'chooses' from among those available in the historical and social context in which s/he is creating, and at how this affects communication in the new model.

The first issue we need to consider is the relationship between the artistic mode of production and the general mode of production in the society. Eagleton has pointed out that at any given time, several different modes of artistic production may be operating in a society, and that some are farther removed from, and therefore less dependent on, the general mode of

production than others, and leave the artist greater freedom of expression (Eagleton 77, 46-8). In other words, under capitalism, art is commoditised, but the artist has a better chance of saying what s/he wants if s/he chooses as mode of production to sing in a local hall or do street theatre rather than direct films. Vazquez, the Mexican critic working in the 1960s, had already labelled film 'the most painful and obvious example of the hostility of capitalism to art' (Vazquez, 220). On the other hand, street theatre does not reach the huge audiences to which our radical artist aspires, and film does. The contradiction is evident.

Eagleton's other major contribution in this area is his emphasis on the fact that the mode of production is 'a significant constituent of the literary product itself' (Eagleton 1977, 48) and therefore of its meaning. It is 'an internal constituent rather than an external limit of the character of the text' (ibid). Eagleton gives the example of the potential ideological impact of the choice of a repressed national language in the colonial context (ibid). This means that the mode of artistic production may actually have more meaning and impact than content: that a love-song in Wolof may carry a more radical message in terms of our model than all the rousing printed French words of a Bakayoko in *God's Bits of Wood*.

The state and artistic production

Let us now turn briefly to the relationship between the state and artistic production. The state controls society in the interests of the ruling class, preferably through the hegemonic processes, what we shall call, after Althusser, the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), and, where hegemony is weak, through force and repression. Like everybody else in the society, as we have discussed, the artist is subject to what, by analogy with Eagleton's distinction between the general and artistic modes of production mentioned above, we might call the general mode of ideological production. What we need to add here is that s/he is also, as an ideological producer, the object of special attention from the ISAs, and, where necessary, the repressive machinery of the state. Secondly, the artist's other activities, like political involvement, may draw state attention, and this in turn will have repercussions on the artistic work.

As repression can result in unwanted publicity and martyrdom, the state, where its hegemonic hold over the society is sufficient, will prefer to react by obtaining the artist's consent to domination by the ruling class, in other words by incorporating her/him, or by incorporating the work itself. Jameson has called 'co-optation' the central problem of political art (Jameson

1988, 209). Let us therefore look at it in more detail.

Incorporation can start working on the artist right from the pre-creation stage. S/he internalises rewards and punishments which the state, via direct repression or the ISAs, has meted out to her/himself on previous occasions or to others, and, consciously or unconsciously, s/he reacts to this, accepting and negotiating, with consequent self-censorship, or by outright rejection and exposure. To use Eagleton's language, this process will be imprinted on the work. Secondly, at post-production stage, the ISAs can dilute or distort the work's message by a range of incorporative methods, from according the artist state honours, thus destroying her/his oppositional credibility, to getting their organic intellectuals to condemn her/him with faint praise in the state-controlled media. Thirdly, the ISAs can incorporate the work via the mode of consumption: *God's Bits of Wood* on the Senegalese *baccalauréat* French literature syllabus reads very differently from the *livre de chevet* an old railway worker described to me with deep emotion in Dakar in 1990.

Incorporation is the most flexible and subtle weapon in the arsenal of the ISAs. It actually thrives on opposition up to a certain point, and uses it for the legitimisation of the ruling class. Williams talks of 'alternative and oppositional initiatives and contributions which are made within or against a specific hegemony' which then sets certain limits to them, and concludes that 'nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic' (Williams, 114). Back in 1957, Anti-imperialist Sainville had expressed his own awareness of how incorporation works: 'You cannot cite as evidence against the existence of such silencing the few non-conformist publications which now and again see the light of day. Mystification, if it is to be truly effective, has to allow the real world to be expressed now and again' (Sainville 1957, 217).

The most obvious conclusion to draw from our discussion of the communication act so far is that the text which finally presents itself to the consciousness of the receiver - the masses - is a lot more complex than it may have seemed to begin with. It is much more than the author's conscious commitment to exposing the essence of society. It is the struggle between her/his conscious commitment on the one hand and the grasp of the hegemony on his/her unconscious on the other, as well as her/his internalisation of the often contradictory demands of the state and needs of the audience, together with the articulation of the mode of artistic production with the general mode of production. and, as if that were not enough, this complex self-contradictory text

comes to the audience packaged by the ISAs and the producers, who between them determine the mode and conditions of consumption which will condition how the text is read. Valéry's statement that 'every work is the work of many things besides the author' (Eagleton 1977, 44) would seem to be a serious understatement.

Art, then, is certainly not reflection, in the sense of mirroring the reality we can perceive without it. Marxists, distancing themselves from reflection as simple mirroring, have asserted that it is the social reality mediated by the consciousness of the artist (Amuta, 82). But we have seen that it is mediated by a good deal more than that. The only thing that is constant is that, unless one situates the work in the context which generated it and which, in a highly mediated way, it does reflect, one will miss much of what and how it means. But before we consider context, the question of meaning indicates that we must now consider the audience.

Reception of the artistic work

Just as the flesh-and-blood artist as an active agent in artistic production has been largely repressed in Western criticism, the idea of the real audience or reader is frowned upon, and at most we get a pseudo-universal 'implied' 'imaginary' or 'ideal' reader usually synonymous with the critic. True, reception theory was part of main-stream criticism in the 1960s and 1970s in Germany, and appeared in a muted, diluted form in the USA as the reader-response approach (Holub). But the reader remained, for the most part, within the text. My view on this is that the implied reader is a meaningless construct in the abstract, and only becomes useful when interpreted in terms of the range of readers an actual, socially-determined context provides.

It is symptomatic of the fragmentation of advanced capitalist society that, where reception theory did exist, it was posited on the absolute divorce of reception from creation: intention was radically and irreversibly separated from effect. It was only after a decade or more of frustration with this truncated model that the leader of German reception theory, Jauss, finally came around to our own model which holds both ends of the process in dialectical tension (Holub).

In dealing with the audience, we are dealing with the problem of reading. Now, whether we look at reading as a matter of 'competence' or as simply a matter of agreed conventions, communication is problematic. Just as the artist should not assume that using Wolof is a sure path to success, so it should not be assumed that a switch to a non-literary medium necessarily

solves the illiteracy problem. Endowment with physical eye-sight is the necessary but far from sufficient condition for understanding cinema: Notcutt and Latham's educational film on the dangers of malaria, which included a huge close-up of a mosquito, completely misfired because the audience concluded that if mosquitoes were that big in the white man's land, no wonder he was always worrying about them (Notcutt and Latham, 146) - an extreme and early example of a persistent problem.

As we saw with the artist, the problem of a lack of shared cultural codes between the 'traditional' masses and the 'Westernised' artist, as spelt out by the Anti-imperialists, needs to be nuanced. The masses are not the pure product of 'tradition' the Anti-imperialists had in mind when they talked about the need to steep themselves in the people's symbolic forms. In terms of artistic taste and expectations, the African masses are also, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the extent and depth of capitalist penetration in their area, the product of the capitalist: they too have absorbed Western culture, but have entered by a different door from the petty-bourgeois artist. Like the artist, their codes and expectations are complex, and the chances of congruence between them and the artist are not huge, which is not to say that the struggle to communicate should be abandoned.

In terms of the dominant hegemony, our audience, like the artist, comes to the text, not with totally reified consciousnesses, as in Lukács, but from somewhere between total incorporation into the dominant culture and on the other hand, access to alternative or oppositional ways of being and seeing - counter-hegemonies. In neo-colonial society, for example, their consciousness may have traces of the old solidarity of communal society, vying with the ideology and way of being of the feudalism this developed into, and of the new foreign dependent capitalist order. The artist's success in communicating will depend on her/his ability to identify the nature and degree of reification in the audience's consciousness, and to work to enlarge the already emancipated zones.

Both in terms of code-sharing and degrees of reification, the cardinal problem, as I see it, is the question of how the new, revolutionary message can be taken on board. How, through a work of art which speaks the language they know, the language of the dominant hegemony, does an audience deeply convinced that the priest or imam is the messenger of God reach an understanding that he is, in some contexts, the messenger-boy of the imperialists? The success of the new message - that they are exploited and can do something about it - will depend to a large

extent on how well or badly equipped they already are ideologically to grasp it. We can take on board the partly new, but not the totally new. All communication contains an element of preaching to the converted.

We discussed when dealing with the artist how the problem of operating in several codes at once, on both sides, aggravates the difficulty of absorption of the new message. From the point of view of the audience, Brecht's de-familiarisation or shock tactics, for example, under such complex conditions may result in total disorientation, and the masses may simply abandon the attempt to take the new on board, repress the break in the code, and fall back on their own dominant interpretative grid. Instead of a *prise de conscience*, prejudices will be confirmed, and the new remain unread.

The conditions of consumption

Finally, we need to look at the conditions of consumption. The conditions of consumption are, to an extent, a function of the mode of production: a big budget film must needs be shown in a mass cinema, and will come across quite differently from the same film, pirated and shown in the local youth club under a radical leadership which encourages a discussion after the show. The conditions of consumption connote expectations: the masses, accustomed to a diet of mass-produced American films, may expect only entertainment from their local cinema, and this may militate against the taking on board of serious messages intended to raise consciousness. On the other hand, our neo-colonial mass audience may also bring into the cinema with them the expectations of another mode of production - that of oral literature, where entertainment and education go hand in hand - and this may work in favour of our artist's aim.

In considering the effect of the conditions of consumption on the way the message is read, I feel we must also bear in mind the wider context of consumption: the society itself. Marx and Engels mention in the *Manifesto* that the socialist and communist publications of France fell flat when transferred to the less radical political environment of Germany (Marx and Engels 1977, 65). The audience's ability to take on the new message is, as we saw earlier, a function of the relative respective strengths of the dominant hegemony and the counter-hegemonies.

Another aspect which forms part of the conditions of consumption is the audience's perception of the artist, what Boris Tomashevskii, who developed this aspect of reception in the

1930s, calls the 'relevant' biography; not all artists, he reminds us, have relevant biographies, and it is not the truth of a biography that matters but the myth the audience has absorbed (Holub,20). Perception may be based on the artist's prior artistic reputation: I may look for *God's Bits of Wood* in all Sembene's subsequent works, and either insist on finding it, or feel disappointment when I don't. A new film is read through the experience of earlier ones, provided, of course, that the audience is aware that the same individual artist made them all. Finally, the audience may have a perception of the artist external to her/his art, as a public or political figure. Again, this is a familiar concept when it comes to mass art: popular artists are made and unmade in terms of public perception of their extra-artistic lives. But, as mentioned earlier, biography has been devalued in literary studies as an aid to understanding the creative process, and in terms of the audience, it has hardly been explored at all by the dominant schools of criticism.

We cannot leave the question of the audience without at least raising the thorny issue of impact. Impact is notoriously difficult to assess, but we can, at least, in this study, do some of the quantitative ground-work, in finding out whether the works have been consumed at all, and even in some basic qualitative analysis of responses. We can also evaluate potential impact by studying the reaction of the state.

History and society

The last category I want to look at in terms of the model is what some would call context, but which I prefer to call history and society. This is such a fundamental category to any study of the process of artistic production that I feel calling it merely 'context' diminishes it, suggesting that it is a sort of optional category running parallel to the real object of attention, the 'text itself'.

But although history and society are so fundamental to this study, I do not feel that I need to say very much about them, given all that has already been said above. History and society saturate the categories which constitute the model at all levels. Both artist and audience are historically and socially conditioned. We cannot hope to begin to understand them or how they function in the model without a grasp of their historical and social determinants. History and society are what the work expresses, via more or less complex mediations, and what it hopes to transform. The modes of production, both general and artistic, are historically and socially determined, and the state, with its repressive force and hegemonic machinery, defends the interests of a particular social formation at a particular historic juncture.

The historical and social aspects of neo-colonial Senegal will therefore form a significant part of the subsequent pages of this study. It remains to describe briefly the form their appearance will take. My approach to them will operate broadly in terms of Marx's theory of society - of the mode of production and social relations or classes which constitute the base of society, and the super-structural forms - the politics, ideology, culture - through which conflict between the classes is expressed. I hope to do justice to the basic economic interests which, however many times mediated, inform everything that happens in neo-colonial Senegal, as I hope to do justice to the hegemonic struggle, in ideology, culture, and art, to reproduce or subvert neo-colonial interests. Sembene's work will take its place within this big picture.

CHAPTER TWO

SENEGAL 1600-1960: FROM THE JOLOFF EMPIRE TO THE NEO-COLONIAL STATE

Every anglophone African student knows that the so-called francophone African countries have been more deeply affected by French colonial rule than their own societies have been by the English, and that Senegal is the most French of the lot. Implicit in this popular perception is the idea that the Francophones, and especially the Senegalese, are more subservient to the West than their anglophone counterparts. My study of Senegal does not lead to a replacement of this image, but more to its reaffirmation. In this chapter, therefore, I simply want to draw attention to the intense degree of imperialist penetration of the country which will produce not only a Senghor but a Sembene. I believe that Senegal, by the time our study proper commences in 1963, is more deeply integrated into Western capitalism than any other part of West Africa, and that the effect on the entire social structure, from the economy, to class formation, politics, ethnicity, religion, ideology and the national psyche which is a product of all these, has been the creation of a culture of dependence which goes so far beyond that experienced in other colonies that the dialectical rule of quantity into quality would seem to apply. Dependence is a feature of all societies under imperialism. In Senegal, it is such an old and at the same time intense experience that it seems to be of a different nature from the norm, even in francophone countries.

The mercantilist stage

Much of Senegal's importance to imperialism can be explained in terms of its geographical location, at the most westerly tip of the continent. Thus, while it finds itself at the periphery of the great African empires (Majhemout Diop 1972, 13), it the closest part of sub-Saharan Africa to both maritime Europe and the Americas. From the 15th century, Senegal will look increasingly outward, rather than inward, turning its back to its African hinterland and its face to Europe, as its ruling classes lock it deeper and deeper into the grip of the West. Five hundred years later, in neo-colonial Senegal, Senghor's official state cultural policy, *Enracinement et Ouverture* (which may be roughly translated as 'connecting with our roots while remaining open to the outside world') will still be grappling unsuccessfully with this

imbalance.

Senegal's strategic interest for European capitalists remains constant through the various stages of capitalist implantation - as the natural first port of call in sub-Saharan Africa for European mercantilism looking for a way to the East in the 15th century, as a natural corner of the triangle throughout the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, as the pilot colony to be used by the French in conquering the rest of West Africa in the early colonial era (19th century), and as the hub of the import-export business for the whole of 'French' West Africa in the first half of this century, what Ki Zerbo calls 'The Golden Age of the Foreigners' (Ki-Zerbo, 429). Finally, neo-colonial Senegal is handily placed as a French military base for its role in holding Africa for the West throughout the Cold War. Thatcher, never one to miss an opportunity to further imperialist interests, more recently used the French military base in Dakar to re-conquer the Falklands (Chaigneau, 54).

To understand the nature of the historic relationship between the West and Senegal, one needs to go back to the break-up of the Joloff Empire in the 16th century. Why so far back? As Césaire says, the shortest route to the future is via the past (Césaire 1956, 193), and the 16th century was when the Western imperialist rain began to beat the Senegalese.

Peripheral though Senegal was to the great African empires of Ghana, Mali and Gao, it was integrated into the trans-Saharan trade, and it was on this trade that Joloff rose and held sway over not only the Wolof kingdoms but most of the rest of what is now Senegal in the 14th century (Ki-Zerbo, 232). The disintegration of the Joloff Empire two centuries later, thanks to the supply of European arms which enabled the kingdoms of which it was composed to secede, is one of the earliest pieces of evidence of the impact of Western mercantilist interests on this part of Africa (Barry 46, 61).

The Portuguese first landed in Senegal in the 15th century. They were followed by Dutch, French and British commercial interests, which, by the 17th century had established three trading posts at Rufisque, Gorée and St Louis (Ki-Zerbo, 694). Throughout the era of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Senegalese coast would become one of the areas of Africa most hotly contested between the European powers (ibid, 231). For the next three hundred years, the Europeans supplied arms in return for slaves to the Senegalese monarchies, and played them off against each other (M. B. Ndiaye, 61-3). They also supported the monarchies against the rising Muslim

theocratic republics, and internally against popular uprisings. By 1850, with Western industrial capitalism now moving into its full-blown colonial stage, this part of Africa was so weakened by divisions between the monarchies and internal class divisions that, when the French stepped in for the kill, defeat was inevitable. Senegalese historian Boubacar Barry sums the situation up very succinctly when he says that the Europeans dismantled Joloff in the 16th century and reassembled it under their own authority in the 19th (Barry, 46-62).

Caste and class

The internal dynamics of Senegalese society were deeply affected by the relationship of the Senegalese ruling classes with European mercantilism throughout the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. I now want to take a closer look at the social structures of this society, as I feel it not only gives us a better grasp of the lay of the social landscape in 1960 in terms of the origins of neo-colonial classes, but actually provides us, I want to suggest, with a number of paradigms for understanding the relationship between Senegal and Western imperialism.

Let us look first at an early social division, predating the arrival of the Europeans: that of caste. The caste factor is common to much of Sahelian society. Based perhaps on the distinction between original inhabitants of village communities and later arrivals forced to practise crafts in addition to agriculture to pay the higher land rent demanded of them (Massaer Diop, 17), people of caste, throughout the period we are dealing with, are exploited, their surplus expropriated on ideological grounds of biological inferiority and uncleanness.

My main interest in the caste factor is the ideological inversion I see at work in reproducing it. In reality, the non-casted are dependent on the people of caste for vital goods and services (the blacksmith, for example, is a man of caste). In terms of the dominant hegemony, however, this dependence is inverted ideologically and people of caste, rather than receiving fair remuneration for their services, are expected to show gratitude to their 'superiors' for whatever gifts the latter generously provide. Senegalese sociologist Abdoulaye Bara Diop denies that exploitation is the basis of the caste relationship (1981, 84), but Majhemout Diop, founder of the radical Parti Africain de l'Indépendance (PAI), refers to it as camouflaged slavery and feudalism (Majhemout Diop 1972, 49).

The caste factor survives in modern Senegal, if not in terms of the division of labour, at least at the social - and sometimes political - level. Sembene has satirised its political persistence

in *The Last of the Empire*, and on the social level, exogamy is still an abomination, in a different category from religious and racial inter-marriage.

I want to suggest that this ancient form of exploitation, so deeply rooted in the Senegalese psyche, is a paradigm for Senegal's relationship with the West. It is as if the whole nation now interprets itself as casted with respect to the West, and expresses centuries of intense exploitation in terms of Senegal's need for its Western 'superiors' rather than what it has been for centuries: Senegal's economic and strategic usefulness to the West.

Caste, however, originates in ancient society, and is not the principal division in Senegalese society in the centuries preceding the colonial conquest. Let us now look at the social structures of the monarchies which were wheeling and dealing with the West throughout this period. In the three centuries prior to the conquest, a fully-fledged feudalism would appear to have developed. Slavery as a dominant mode of production would appear to have been by-passed in Senegal thanks to the commoditisation of slaves by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The principal class division in the monarchies was therefore between the military aristocracy, or *ceddo*, and the peasant producers, or *baadoolo*.

Once again, I feel that the relationship between the West, the Senegalese aristocracy, and the *baadoolo*, contains a paradigm in terms of the neo-colonial society we shall be studying. Let us therefore look at it in more detail.

The military aristocracy, the *ceddo*, lived off the numerous taxes imposed on the *baadoolo*, the productive class, and from pillage and slave-raiding, originally of the neighbouring kingdoms, later even of their own *baadoolo*. The lives of the *baadoolo*, who had no political representation and were not allowed to carry arms, were a nightmare of poverty and insecurity. The only relatively safe place for the *baadoolo* was under the protection of a powerful monarch, who could, however, turn out to be as dangerous as those from whom he protected them (Abdoulaye Bara Diop 1981, 128-9).

I feel this is of interest to us on several counts. First, as far back as the 16th century, we are dealing with a sharply class-divided society which gives the lie to Senghor's insistence that classes do not exist in Senegal: his African Socialism is based on a communalism which had not been the dominant mode of production since well before the Joloff Empire.

Secondly, we need to note the role of the West in the development of Senegalese

feudalism. The use of the ruling class by the West to extract slaves, and the West's consequent enhancement, via arms sales, of the ability of the aristocracy to oppress the masses, and the consequent dependence of the aristocracy on the relationship with the West, rather than on the development of their own productive forces, is fundamentally the same model that we find in 1960. In fact, this feudal aristocracy is one of the sources of the famous Senegalese *grandes familles*, which we shall find filling 25% of the seats in the National Assembly in 1960, and occupying 90% of local government offices (Majhemout Diop 1972, 230-4). Any artist trying to transform this model should know that s/he is dealing with centuries of Western-aided class oppression.

The relationship between Senegal and Western mercantilism in the three centuries preceding the colonial conquest thus nurtured a society whose keyword is dependence - the dependence of the ruling aristocracies on the West, and the dependence, in turn, of the masses on the ruling class which exploits them. While neither of these features is exclusive to Senegal, I feel that, proximity having made for longer and more intense relations with Western capitalist interests, the sense of dependency is already deeper here than elsewhere at this stage. From the mid-19th century, French colonialism will recognise this culture of dependency, and nurture and exploit it further.

Colonial Senegal 1850-1946

In colonising West Africa, French motives were no different from those of other Western capitalist nations: to tailor the colony to the needs, no longer of mercantilism and capital accumulation, for which the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade had been ideal, but of industrial capitalism, in other words, to produce raw materials and provide markets for industrial products. The banning of the slave trade in 1848 is an expression of this transformation of the mode of production.

The 'privileged' position of Senegal in the colonial exercise is testimony to the degree of penetration already established by this stage. Like all the other colonies which would make up the AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française: French West Africa), Senegal would be of direct economic interest. But, given its geographic location and the firm foothold the French had by now developed there, it would also play a special role as a springboard for conquering and controlling the hinterland (Ki-Zerbo, 435).

In this section, I want to look briefly at the form taken by colonial capitalist exploitation in Senegal, and at how the Western imperialist hegemony operated on all levels from the economic to class development, the political and ideological superstructure, and the articulation of the ethnic and religious factors with class and with each other.

General Faidherbe, known fondly to the French Establishment as 'the father of modern Senegal' (Milcent, 32; Makédonsky, 93), who was sent out as Governor of Senegal in 1854, personified the spirit of the imperialist age (Makédonsky, 67) and the twin goals of exploiting Senegal directly and using it to bring the rest of West Africa under French capitalist control. In under a decade, he began the process of developing Dakar from a fishing village into the chief port and later the capital of the AOF, made France's first trading port, St Louis, which dated back to and took its name from Louis XIV, the capital of Senegal, made plans for a railway between St Louis and Dakar, installed a telegraph system (Makédonsky, 68), and set up the Bank of Senegal (Hesseling, 122). In 1857, he formed the first battalion of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, an infantry corps of the French army recruited initially in Senegal and later throughout the AOF and AEF (Afrique Equatoriale Française), to put down resistance in Senegal and the hinterland (Milcent, 33): the last of the Wolof monarchies would fall to the French in the 1880s, and, in the interior, Samory Touré, legendary military ruler of the Mandinka empire, would finally be captured by the Tirailleurs in 1898 (Ki-Zerbo, 392). Later, in the anti-imperialist 1950s, the role earlier played by the Senegalese in the downfall of Samory, who became the symbol of African resistance to the West, was something they were less than proud to acknowledge (Majhemout Diop 1953, 157). Sembene's own greatest (and unrealised) ambition, which he spoke about constantly, was to make an epic film about Samory.

From the beginning, then, Senegal distinguishes itself from the other colonies of the AOF. In economic terms, it is more intensely exploited than the other colonies, at least in the early phase, up to the 1920s. Politically, it is more fully integrated. In addition to Dakar's status as the capital of the AOF, Senegal differs from the other colonies in that in the 1870s the three old trading posts – St Louis, Rufisque and Gorée – with the addition of Dakar, thanks to the Paris Commune, are 'elevated' to the level of French *communes*, making all those born therein *citoyens* - French citizens - while the vast majority of Africans in the AOF retained the title of *sujets* (subjects). The Senegalese Quatre Communes would be the only zones of the AOF to have the right to political activity before 1946. We shall be coming back to this in the next chapter, as

Sembene was a *citoyen*. Finally, in social terms, the stronger French presence in Senegal, especially in the Quatre Communes, meant a much greater development of infrastructure, including French educational facilities, in Senegal than throughout the AOF.

Economy

I would like to begin this brief overview of colonial Senegal by looking at direct economic exploitation, as this will, to a great extent, determine the nature of the neo-colonial society which is the context of our study.

Cash crops are notorious for their distorting and disabling effects on colonial capitalist economies. Senegalese groundnut production from the middle of the 19th century is one of the most glaring examples. French capitalism took everything out and put next to nothing back in, beyond the infrastructure needed for extraction. A French academic, who had first visited Senegal at the turn of the century, surveyed the miserable rural landscape in 1947 and asked: 'What happened to the millions of gold francs the groundnuts earned?' (Suret-Canale, 200).

Groundnuts had been grown in Senegal as far back as the 17th century (M. B. Ndiaye, 91), but they had no commercial interest until the refineries of Bordeaux and Marseille discovered in the 1840s that they made better soap than the English palm-oil version (Klein, 68). Groundnut production went from 500 tons in 1850 to 500,000 tons in 1930 (M. B. Ndiaye, 91). Up to the 1920s, groundnuts were the chief cultivated crop exported by the AOF, and the bulk of them came from Senegal (Suret-Canale, 248, 277). Looking at the ecologically wasted Senegalese countryside today, it is hard to imagine that Senegal was capable of contributing so much.

Senegalese peasants did not voluntarily give up their subsistence millet-growing in favour of the cash crop: a 1900 law decreeing that the colonies must pay their own administrative costs expressed itself in increased taxation (Klein, 71). The result was a dramatic fall in food production between the two European wars (Suret-Canale, 73). Exploitation was clearly more intense in Senegal than elsewhere: by the 1930s, Senegal was the only colony importing food for peasants (ibid, 373). Senegalese rice imports went from 25,000 tons in 1936 to 150,000 tons in 1960 (Klein, 84). By 1960, Senegal was behind the rest of Africa in terms of agricultural technology, as groundnuts can be cultivated purely by increasing labour exploitation, rather than by modernisation (Majhemout Diop 1972, 91). Only half of the cultivatable land in the country

was under cultivation (ibid, 90), and the soil of the part that was, the groundnut basin, was exhausted (A. B. Diop 1984, 13-5). Senegalese peasants were 1/7 as well off as they had been in 1900 (Klein, 93), and their income was one of the lowest in Africa (R. Cruise O'Brien 1979, 30).

The irony, and one of interest to our study, is that groundnuts were the only economic legacy the colonial capitalists left to the neo-colonial state: Senegal is known as 'the Groundnut Republic' (Majhemout Diop 1972, 91). Over 70% of the active population of the Senegal that Sembene returns to in 1963 is involved in groundnut production, and it is the most important single source of government revenue (PIT, 19). With falling prices imposed by the EEC on Senegal in the 1960s, the French capitalists, who have made huge fortunes from it at its peak, now relinquish a liability gracefully to the state, and turn their sights to more profitable cash crops elsewhere, notably in Côte d'Ivoire (Makédonsky, 165). The French you meet in Senegal in 1990 assure you that 'there is nothing in Senegal,' with a disclaiming and slightly disdainful shrug, as if they were talking about 'natural' resources, rather than the direct result of their own historic intervention.

I feel that the groundnut tragedy is once again revealing of the nature of Senegalese dependency. The groundnuts are a clear example of French pillage of Senegalese resources. Yet the Senegalese perception of the situation is that they need the French, and cannot survive without French 'Aid'. In 1990, after an interesting discussion with a Senegalese academic (who had written a thesis on Sembene's use of language) on the dire state of the Senegalese economy, I was taken aback by his conclusion: 'We're afraid they're going to abandon us' (AT/FNC). It would be hard to find a Nigerian intellectual worrying about 'abandonment' by the English in 1990. The Senegalese cling to their molesters. Their collusion in their own disablement is symbolised by their national dish: *ceeb u jen* - rice with fish - in a country where millet grows better than rice, and what rice they do have they reject, insisting on broken rice from Thailand, which the French 'help' them to import.

Religion

Let us now look at the effect of colonisation on the pre-colonial social classes we outlined in the previous section. Clearly, the essential contradiction of colonial capitalist society at this stage of agricultural exploitation is that between the peasants, on the one hand, and the French capitalists on the other. I now want to look at how this intense level of exploitation was

achieved, in terms of the intermediary role of other classes, and the role of ideology.

In the previous section, I mentioned, but did not dwell on, an aspect of pre-colonial society which it is now essential to consider: resistance to the monarchies and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which the *ceddo*, with the help of the West, managed to contain throughout the pre-colonial era. It is the nature of that resistance which determines the success of ground-nut exploitation in the colonial era. Let me explain.

Baadoolo resistance to the *ceddo* in the pre-colonial era took a very specific form: it operated exclusively within the framework of Islam. Though Islam in Senegal goes back a thousand years, having been brought in by the Berber Almoravides in the 11th century (Makédonsky, 46), and spread in the context of trans-Saharan trade, it had not made much headway at the stage that the European mercantilists arrived in Senegal. The more powerful marabouts did however begin to develop political ambitions, and to compete for power with the *ceddo* aristocracy by attempting to establish theocratic states (Abdoulaye Bara Diop 1981, 219). As they opposed the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which had damaged the trans-Saharan trade on which they had depended, they were often supported by the *baadoolo* and slaves. (Majhemout Diop 1972, 61). Between the 17th and 19th century, a number of popular uprisings against *ceddo* tyranny were led by marabouts (Barry, 50). The resulting perception of the marabouts as social liberators would prove the key to their rising popularity among the oppressed as the monarchies fell between 1855 to 1889, and to their usefulness to colonial capitalist interests.

In the military resistance to the French in the second half of the 19th century, Muslim leaders initially fought alongside the *ceddo* aristocracy (Massaer Diop, 20). But by the early part of this century they had decided to put religion before nationalism and concluded that the best way forward for Islam was to cooperate with colonial rule (Magassoumba, 43-4). The French, in turn, impressed to see the devout queuing to pay their tithes to their marabout, while refusing to pay colonial taxes (Makédonsky, 129), and rapidly discovering that their own initial hegemonic policy of *Assimilation* was costly and impracticable, were ready to see how they could exploit this alien faith.

Disoriented by the fall of the monarchies and the brutality and trauma of the conquest, hundreds of thousands of *baadoolos* and former slaves flocked to the marabouts to provide them with a sense of belonging and an alternative social identity in an alien Western imperialist world

(Abdoulaye Bara Diop 1981, 250; Suret-Canale, 539). By the turn of the century, the religious statistics were already beginning to resemble what they would be in the 1960s: over 80% of the country would be Muslim.

But to understand fully the usefulness of Islam to colonial capitalism, we need to look at the precise strand of Islam the marabouts propagated in Senegal. Senegalese Islam is a form of Sufism, based on the relationship between the follower, or *taalibe*, and a charismatic marabout. From the point of view of our study, the Senegalese Sufism which developed in the context of colonial capitalism is important on three grounds: its insistence on a culture of obedience, summed up in the much-quoted line of a poem by the founder of the Mourides, Amadu Bamba: 'Be with your sheikh like a dead body in the hands of the undertaker' (A.B. Diop 1972, 276), its unquestioning acceptance of temporal authority, summed up in the words of Tijjani leader Al Aaji Malik, 'God.....has given the French victory, grace and favour. He has chosen them to protect us' (ibid, 323), and its emphasis on the spiritual value of labour (ibid, 265), which meant that the *talibese* did not have to take precious time off from the cultivation of groundnuts to pray.

It does not require much imagination to see how such a system served to integrate the Senegalese peasantry into colonial capitalism. From the point of view of our study, the marabouts, in taking 80% of the population under their wing in this way, effectively managed out of existence the class consciousness which Senegalese peasants, under the intense exploitation of colonial capitalism, might otherwise have acquired. Abdoulaye Bara Diop emphasises that the marabouts' hold over the peasantry, unlike that of the military aristocracy which was based on force, is purely ideological, and is therefore reversible by '*une simple prise de conscience*' (Abdoulaye Bara Diop 198), 343]. But, as I tried to establish in Chapter One, a *prise de conscience* is never that simple. The marabouts' hegemonic hold over the vast majority of Senegalese will be as powerful as ever when we come to the neo-colonial period.

In class terms, the *grands marabouts*, popular reputation notwithstanding, were integrated into the new system as dependent capitalists exploiting a semi-feudal system on behalf of the West. The colonial capitalist state rewarded them with land, grants and facilities. The support of the colonial state for the marabouts is one of the most striking pieces of evidence that French colonial hegemony is not essentially about making people French, it is about nurturing a culture of dependence. Once this is understood, many of the apparent paradoxes disappear - like that of the Colonial Office bending over backwards to organise the Hajj, and in the neo-colonial

era, the alliance between the marabouts and the Christian President Senghor against the fervent, but orthodox, Muslim Prime Minister, Mamadou Dia, in 1962. As Froelich says, the French did more for Islam in Senegal than a millennium of proselytising (Froelich, 166).

Class

So much for the integration of the peasants and the marabout aristocracy into the new society. Let us now look briefly at the other classes.

The children of the *ceddo* aristocracy who were not killed or exiled during the conquest were incorporated into the new society at a high level: they attended Faidherbe's School for the Sons of Chiefs, and became higher civil servants. The striking image of the Knight in *Ambiguous Adventure*, so feudal yet so modern, holding urbane conversations with the French administrator, is not, as I had once thought, a surrealist figment of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's imagination.

Colonial capitalism also produced new classes: an indigenous bourgeoisie, a petty-bourgeoisie, and a proletariat. Of these, the indigenous bourgeoisie, which had been developing around the French trading posts in the pre-colonial era, and which now began to get rich quick thanks to the groundnuts, soon proved threatening to French hegemony, and were dealt with brutally: by the 1930s, they had been temporarily wiped out. We shall be looking at their fate in detail in the context of *Xala*. The proletariat, comparatively significant in Senegal compared to other colonies thanks largely to the building of infrastructure mentioned earlier, did not acquire the right to union activity until Blum's Socialist government in 1938: we shall be looking more closely at them in Chapter Four. The petty-bourgeoisie, whose role in theory was to fulfil the colonial capitalist need for petty clerks, but who had aspirations of their own, also ultimately proved threatening. Their struggle took place within education and politics. We shall be looking at it presently. But first, since we have seen how religion is articulated with class to facilitate the groundnut economy, let us now look briefly at the effect of the groundnuts on the ethnic factor.

Ethnicity

Looked at numerically, the main ethnic groups in Senegal are the Wolof (33%), the Tukulur/Peulh (21%), the Sereer (19%) and the Joola (14%) (Abdoulaye Bara Diop 1981, 20-1). But numerical strength and ethnic dominance are not to be equated. The last of the ethnic groups to arrive in Senegal, the French, never make up more than 1% of the population, but throughout the colonial era, and still in the neo-colonial Senegal Sembene returns to, they have an influence,

as the representatives of imperialism, out of all proportion to their numerical strength. As Majhemout Diop says in 1970, they are a 1% who consume as much as all the Senegalese together (Majhehout Diop 1972, 15), and the Senegalese feel that they are much more numerous than they actually are (R. Cruise O'Brien 1972, 26).

In terms of indigenous groups, it is generally agreed that Senegal does not have an ethnic problem on the same scale as many other neo-colonial nations. This is partly thanks to what is perceived as a long tradition of cohabitation, facilitated by the flat countryside. The three main groups, the Wolof, Sereer and Tukulur, are believed to have arrived together in Senegal as the Ghana empire disintegrated (Ki-Zerbo, 232) and cohabited on the banks of the Senegal until the Sereer moved further south in the 11th century to escape Islamisation by the Almoravides (Makédonsky, 48). Similarities in language noted by Cheikh Anta Diop come from this shared past (C. A. Diop, 339, 461). In the Wolof myth of origin, the Wolof Ancestor has a Tukulur mother, and his name has been traced to the words of the Sereer wise man who discovered him (M.B. Ndiaye, 53). Senegalese historian Iba der Thiam calls this early period a *creuset de métissage*, or melting pot (Lô 1991, 6). An important factor is perhaps that all the groups in question had similar hierarchical social structures: the Sereer had remained closer to communalism longer, but they too became more hierarchical under the influence of the Mandingo. The Wolof kingdoms had senior officials who were Sereer and Peulh, (Makédonsky, 233), and inter-ethnic marriage was common among the ruling class. Today, ethnic intermarriage is even more common, having none of the negative connotations associated with caste or religion.

Hand in hand with this happy melting-pot perception goes the undeniable fact of Wolofisation and what has to be recognised as a Wolof hegemony created by colonial capitalism.

The Wolof are no strangers to the French when Faïdherbe arrives in 1854. They are the original occupants of the three European trading posts, and the Wolof monarchies of the coast, as we have seen, have been trading slaves for arms with the French for three centuries. This relationship is further consolidated under colonial rule. The Wolof are the dominant group in the Quatre Communes, the peculiar political unit we shall presently discuss. They are the first to become French civil servants (Hesseling, 176). The Wolof are also the occupants of most of the groundnut basin, and will dominate the groundnut trade on the African side.

Wolofisation, or the spread of the Wolof language and culture, symbol of the new Wolof hegemony, is closely related to the groundnut trade. As the language of the mainly Wolof middle-men, Wolof increasingly became the language of the majority of Senegalese towns, which were themselves products of this trade. By the 1960s, Wolof would be spoken, at least as a second language, by 80% of the population of non-Wolof towns as far north as Podor, and as far south as Ziguinchor (Diop and Diouf, 240).

Once again, as with the development of the Muslim hegemony, we see the way imperialist implantation works. What flourishes under colonial capitalism, at least in terms of the exploited masses, is not principally French culture (French is written and read by only 12% of the Senegalese in 1960, despite over a century of official colonisation), but Islam and Wolof. But in each case it is the content of these cultures which expresses the imperialist intention. We have seen the carefully nurtured obedience of the masses inspired by Senegalese Sufism. In the case of Wolof, there is an important contradiction between its seeming spread and its simultaneous disablement as a truly hegemonic cultural force.

The new, colonially-produced Wolof hegemony cannot compare to the earlier cultural and linguistic hegemony of the Joloff Empire, in which the Wolof language, by the imperial decree of Jajaan Jaay, was the official language of state and people (Makédonsky, 54). In the colonial state, as in the neo-colonial state that Sembene returns to, Wolof may be the language of the majority, but it has no official status: French is the official language. Wolof is given no official or institutional encouragement to develop, and its inferior status is internalised by those who speak it, for many of whom, in any case, it is a second language, or a language acquired on the street and not from the rich ancestral sources, a language in which they do not have much stake. The French actively denigrate the language, while allowing it to spread because it suits their purpose: the Wolof of the 80% of the Senegalese population is a poor thin soil for a human mind to grow in, yet under French colonial rule, it replaces the more adequate resources of people's original cultures. This is Césaire's nightmare of colonial culture at its worst (Césaire 1956).

When we think of Wolof hegemony in the colonial state, then, it is in very relative terms: the Wolof ruling class are the chosen favourite 'partners' of those who ultimately spin the hegemonic web, the French capitalists. The Wolof have a closeness to the French expressed in the popular term 'cousins', which Sembene picks up and uses ironically in *The Last of the*

Empire. But they are distant cousins many times removed, from a very subsidiary and dependent branch of the family. In a snatched and unrecorded interview in 1992, Sembene expressed to me his disgust with their role in perpetuating Senegalese dependence.

I shall not at this stage say anything further about the other groups. Sembene's own group, the Lebu, a sub-group of the Wolof, and the Joola of Casamance, where he was born and spent much of his childhood, will be looked at in Chapter Three.

Culture and education

In emphasising the expansion of Islam and Wolofisation under French colonial rule, I am not trying to create the impression that direct French cultural hegemony did not exist nor that the popular image of African school-children reciting that their ancestors were Gauls with blond hair and blue eyes had no basis in reality. Of course, repression of the cultural identity of the colonised and its replacement by the foreign culture is one of the tools of colonial domination: I am Irish, I should know. And of course education is one of the most powerful hegemonic institutions. But it is also important to keep a sense of proportion, and to recognise that the numbers affected directly by French cultural hegemony were very small compared to those whose cultural identity shifted, as a result of colonisation, in the direction of Islam and Wolof.

The Gallic ancestors were part of the famous policy of *Assimilation*, popularly regarded as the feature which distinguished francophone Africa from the English colonies. *Assimilation* was the official colonial policy for about sixty years, from Faidherbe's arrival as Governor in 1854. Its purpose was the creation of an African elite devoted to the colonial cause. This ideological and practical goal was to be achieved through French schooling. French education was to be 'the second conquest': as one colonial officer put it in 1885, 'every regiment must be followed by a school-teacher' (Mouralis, 60-113). The assimilated products of the schools would then have the rights and privileges of *citoyens*, while their compatriots suffered under the dreaded *Indigénat* (see Chapter Three).

In principle, *Assimilation* and access to citizenship via French education applied, in a restricted elitist way, throughout the AOF. But the possibility of becoming an *assimilé* was much greater in Senegal, which had a head-start in terms of French schools, partly on account of its long-standing French resident population. There had been a French school on Gorée Island as far back as 1815, and by the time Faidherbe arrived in 1854, there were four in the colony

(Mouralis, 60-2). Faïdherbe immediately founded *L'Ecole des Otages* (The School for Hostages, which he later renamed The School for the Sons of Chiefs) for the children of the conquered ruling class. By 1884, St Louis had a secondary school, when primary schools in the rest of the AOF were still rare. In 1918, because of its special position in the AOF, Senegal was allocated the AOF Teacher Training College, L'Ecole William Ponty, as well as the AOF School of Medicine and only technical college (Suret-Canale 467-471). It is little wonder that up to 1946, Senegal took the lead in education in the AOF.

Assimilation had already run aground by the second decade of this century. As Césaire pointed out, genuine *Assimilation* - the 'perfect mastery' of French culture by the colonised - is a contradiction in terms (Césaire 1956, 198), creating not a subordinate elite but an independent one. The French, conscious that by no means must education be allowed to become 'an instrument of social unrest' or turn out 'bitter rootless elements who might despise us', to quote the AOF's first General Inspector of Education in 1917 (Suret-Canale, 476-9), therefore soon settled for a policy of *Association* which, in educational terms, would provide the necessary low-level indigenous man-power without threatening the colonial cause. *Association* provided a very different curriculum, with inferior qualifications, from the *Assimilation* one which was equivalent to that taught in France. It therefore killed two birds with one stone: cutting off the road to higher education, and ideologically, educating for inferiority and dependence.

The *Association* curriculum is instructive in terms of education for dependence. The focus was on the provision of basic utilitarian skills rather than the ability to think and question. This current ran right through the curriculum, from science to history. Mathematics laid emphasis on the practical rather than on general principles: as the General Inspector of Education, Georges Hardy, put it, 'we do not calculate, we count' (Mouralis, 94). In language teaching, use of an African language was punished by making the culprit sit in the corner wearing donkey's ears (Ki-Zerbo, 441). The French which was substituted for the pupils' own means of expression was to be concrete and practical, focussing on the writing of business letters and reports. The use of imagery and the imagination were not to be encouraged - according to Hardy, the pupils already had wild imaginations without any help from the French (Mouralis, 93)! But history was the most interesting terrain of struggle. Some of the French felt it was too dangerous to be taught at all: 'our ancestors were Gauls' would ultimately lead to the French Revolution. On the other hand, it was vital to counter the oral history of the indigenous

historians, the *griots*, 'a worried and worrying lot' according to Hardy, who were anti-French and persisted in seeing French rule as temporary (Mouralis, 97). It was therefore decided that the history taught would focus, not on the Gauls but on Africa, and its purpose would be to present the relationship between Africa and France in terms of the 'civilising mission'. The Inspector of Education, Hardy, stipulated that Senegal was to be presented as 'a poor country ravaged by tyrants' (Mouralis, 97), while France was to project itself as 'a rich, powerful nation' which has 'brought the benefits of civilisation to savage peoples' (Mouralis, 96). On the other hand, El Hadj Omar, the famous Islamic scholar who had mobilised armed resistance against the French, was to be presented as 'a sinister agitator' (Ki-Zerbo, 441).

Access to education was a major terrain of struggle. A few early birds, like the politician Lamine Guèye and Senghor, had got through the net, but they were the exceptions. In the 1920s and 1930s, the petty-bourgeoisie struggled to get the *baccalauréat*: the colonial authorities ensured that this was so difficult that some even died in the effort, from depression and over-work (Dia 1985, 21). Others, who managed to make it to teacher training college in France, were expelled almost as soon as they arrived (Suret-Canale, 486). A French Communist head of L'Ecole William Ponty who was sympathetic to Senegalese aspirations and tried to reintroduce the *baccalauréat* was immediately recalled to France (Dia 1985, 23).

Education is about conformity in most societies, but capitalist education usually leaves room to encourage intellectual curiosity in an elite. Colonial capitalist education, on the other hand, leaves no place at all for innovation. It is about getting limited tasks right, learning the rules and obeying them, rather than confronting contradictions and questioning received ideas. Sembene explores this in *God's Bits of Wood*, through the education of Ndèye Touti in the Teacher Training College, which blinds her to the exploitation inherent in colonialism, and distorts her view of the world and of her place as a colonised African in it, and on the other hand that of Ad'jibid'ji, who, in the hands of her political activist step-father, Bakayoko, approaches the world with real intellectual curiosity.

I cannot help feeling that Senegal, with its head-start in colonial education, has been more deeply affected than the other colonies by its internalisation and reproduction of the value-system of colonial education, with its emphasis on learning rules rather than problem-solving. There is a saying among the Senegalese themselves that 'the Senegalese is he who knows everything and understands nothing'. The Senegalese intellectuals who start attacking Sembene's

French grammar from the 1950s, and continue to attack it right through to 1990, are products of this system, which has continued to reproduce itself throughout the neo-colonial era. The adulation of Senghor, the grammarian, Africa's first *agrégé* and member of the Académie française, institutional custodian of the French language, seems to far outweigh, even among the Senegalese Left today, the fact that Senghor's own adulation of the French was one of the factors responsible for the depth of Senegal's dependency.

The anti-imperialist struggle 1946-1960

I now want to look at Senegal's transition from pilot colony of the AOF to neo-colony, in the context of the worldwide anti-imperialist movement, and especially the movement in the AOF, which came to a head after the Second World War. I shall be asking what place Senegal occupied in this movement, given its own specific history, and what precise form neo-colonialism would take in Senegal as a result in 1960.

The war was a watershed for France and for its African colonies, as it was throughout the Western imperialist-dominated world. The Brazzaville Conference in 1944 was an attempt to contain growing African discontent. Its bottom line - that Africans would remain, as Chinweizu says, second class citizens (Chinweizu, 109) - was ratified, with a few concessions like the abolition of forced labour (the *Indigénat*) and greater access to French higher education, by the new Fourth Republic constitution in 1946. Post-war France was determined to hold on to the African colonies for several reasons. Without the colonies, a defeated France was automatically a second-rate power (Mwayila, 29; McNamara, 98). French post-war economic recovery was slow compared to Germany or England (Tint, 113-4), and France was heavily dependent economically on Africa. Thirdly, France had to hold Africa against Communism. With the threat of Fascism out of the way, the fundamental confrontation globally was between Western capital and Communism. For France this was especially important in that the French Communist Party was extremely strong at this stage, with 25% of the seats in parliament, and the Americans were threatening to withhold Marshall Plan funds badly needed for French economic recovery from countries where Communism had too much influence (Tint, 113).

Initially, the attempt to hold on to Africa did not look promising. In 1947, an anti-imperialist rising in Madagascar was brutally repressed, with 7000 dead (Ki-Zerbo, 615). But the movement was gathering momentum. With India independent in 1947, China in 1949, the

humiliating defeat of the French in Vietnam in 1954, and the armed struggle in Algeria from 1952, there was every indication that the AOF would shake off the French yoke. Yet by 1960, a political deal had been struck, and a balkanised AOF, in the form of separate states, and with the exception of Guinea, was, in all essential respects, as tied to France as ever. Obviously, the process which brought about this state of affairs for Senegal is of interest to the period we shall be studying. Let us therefore take a closer look at it.

We need to begin by looking at the political landscape in Senegal at the beginning of the anti-imperialist struggle. I mentioned that the Quatre Communes were the only area in francophone Africa where political activity was permitted and which had representation in the French parliament prior to 1946. The question we need to ask is what effect, if any, this head-start in politics had on the anti-imperialist struggle in Senegal, and subsequently on the period of our study.

There is a belief in Senegal that the political head-start has endowed the Senegalese with a taste for the democratic process which they have never lost. This is seen as a plus in a continent plagued by military coups. The implication is that the Senegalese stand up for their rights and cannot be bullied. In line with this argument, Klein, for example, emphasises that the special status of the Quatre Communes helped to keep alive a spirit of initiative all too lacking in colonised cultures (Klein, 76). I would suggest that there is also a flip-side to the tradition of Senegalese bourgeois democracy: the political bickering between the various members of the elite kept them busy, diverting their attention from real contradictions. This tradition would continue to prove its usefulness to imperialist interests in the neo-colonial era. A second point is that the privileged political status of the Quatre Communes was a thorn in the flesh of the peasantry, which, as we shall presently see, helped to distort the nature of the anti-imperialist struggle in Senegal from its inception.

Post-war politics

What were the potential political forces on the ground in Senegal in 1946, and how were they managed to bring about the neo-colonial arrangement of 1960? Basically, the main potential threats to French capitalist interests were the peasantry, the proletariat and the petty-bourgeoisie. The peasants - marabouts and promises of paradise notwithstanding - were becoming increasingly impatient with the draconian *Indigénat*. The workers' numbers were again on the

increase thanks to post-war investment in light industries, and they were becoming more organised and vocal, now that unions were again allowed: this is the mood of the 1947 strike reflected in *God's Bits of Wood*. The petty-bourgeoisie, especially perhaps those of the Quatre Communes who had been led to believe that they were citizens of France and now, with the 1946 Constitution, saw that they were not, had organised themselves under the leadership of Socialist Lamine Guèye to fight, if not for independence, at least for equal rights. Finally, the post-war era produced a petty-bourgeois minority, especially among intellectuals, who were increasingly drawn to Marxism. The answer that the French found to all these brewing problems was Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Since Senghor will be such a central figure in our study, it is worthwhile paying some attention to him here. I do not intend, at this point, to pick apart Senghor's faithful supply of propaganda in the interests of the French ruling class. This has been done more than adequately by Adotevi, Towa, and Enagnon (See Bibliography). I shall be mentioning *Négritude* in the next chapter. I would, however, like to point out that, once one grasps the anti-Communist, pro-imperialist core of Senghor's thought, the seeming inconsistencies and constant U-turns which Hyman, in his otherwise excellent intellectual biography of Senghor, puts down to empiricism, cease to puzzle. The most obvious of these 'inconsistencies' is perhaps the advocacy of *Négritude* by Africa's greatest Francophile. But what is Senghorian *Négritude*? An ideology which basically proposes a permanent international division of labour leaving the West a monopoly of science and technology, the weapons of domination. And what is its political arm, Senghorian African Socialism, if not an ideological diversion from the centrality of class struggle?

I am more interested, at this stage, in looking at Senghor's political role in the anti-imperialist struggle. It is significant, though not always emphasised by biographers, that it was the French who brought Senghor into politics. Left to himself, his aspirations would appear to have been more academic than political (Senghor 1980, 105). In 1935, he had been the first African to pass the prestigious *agrégation*, the examination admitting successful candidates to the civil service (Hyman, 75), and by 1944, he had been appointed Chair of African Studies at the elite French training college for colonial administrators, the ENFOM (Senghor 1980, 105). In 1944, de Gaulle, already aware of his usefulness from some of the papers he had written (Hyman 95), invited him to sit on the Monnerot Commission preparing the new French constitution, and in 1945, a French research grant took him back to Senegal (Vaillant, 198), where Lamine Guèye

gave him the leg-up into Senegalese politics that Sembene describes in *The Last of the Empire*. But Lamine Guèye's Socialists were mainly the Quatre Communes *citoyens*, and they were becoming increasingly demanding. In addition, another event occurred which threatened the French: a new political party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) was founded in Bamako in 1947 (Nzouankeu, 24). Trans-territorial and radical, supported by French Communists and voting with the PCF in the French parliament, it had a branch, the Union Démocratique Sénégalais (UDS), in Senegal. Within months of this branch being formed, Senghor broke with Guèye's Socialists, and, encouraged by the French who promised him the support of the marabouts (Hyman, 158), set up his own party, the Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais (BDS).

Over the next decade, the peak of the anti-imperialist struggle, the BDS, the brain-child of French imperialism, would dominate Senegalese politics, and would systematically neutralise the various potential threats to French imperialism mentioned above. The peasants were brought on board thanks to a combination of the marabouts' influence and Senghor's direct efforts. The marabouts' collaboration with the Christian Senghor becomes easier to grasp when one bears two things in mind: that Senghor was the protégé of French imperialism, out of which the marabouts had done so well, and that Communism, because atheist, was anathema to the marabouts as it was to both Senghor and French capital. In the political struggle that lay ahead, with its millions of newly enfranchised peasants, the doctrine of obedience to one's marabout meant millions of automatic votes for Senghor. As for Senghor's own efforts to win the peasants over, his main strategy was to play on their historical resentment against the *citoyens* of the Quatre Communes. Himself a *sujet* born outside the Quatre Communes, the elitist, royalist Senghor, dressed in a simple Mao outfit, trekked through the bush during the 1952 and 1956 election campaigns, eating with the peasants, winning hearts and votes as 'the khaki MP' (Diop and Diouf, 91), the 'MP of the *baadoolos*' (Mamadou Dia 1992, 177), and presenting a populist image of the BDS in total contrast to the flamboyant urban-based campaigns of his *citoyens* rivals (Nzouankeu, 24-5).

The proletarians were similarly taken on board. In reality, Sembene's dig at the Senegalese MPs in Paris in *God's Bits of Wood* notwithstanding, Senghor's relationship with the most important trade union, that of the railway workers, had been cordial since the 1947 strike: in the archives in Dakar I came across several amicable letters between Senghor and Ibrahima Sarr, the union leader whom many consider to be the prototype of Bakayoko. During the election

campaigns of the 1950s, Sarr raced up and down the railway line collecting votes for Senghor and the BDS, and his second-in-command, Aynina Fall, died campaigning for the BDS in 1952 (Mamadou Dia 1985, 56-61).

By 1956, the BDS had a virtual monopoly of Senegalese politics. In 1958, Lamine Guèye's party merged with them (Hesseling, 166). It is not an exaggeration to say, then, that thanks to Senghor's efforts on behalf of French imperialism, and of course to the cooperation of the marabouts, the outcome of the anti-imperialist struggle was, unknown to the majority of those ardently fighting the successive elections, more or less a foregone conclusion in Senegal. All that remains to be examined, to complete the picture, is the role of the small group of Marxist intellectuals.

Unlike the other colonies of the AOF, in Senegal, as we saw, Communist opposition was neutralised in the early stages. In 1957, however, the Parti Africain de l'Indépendance (PAI), francophone Africa's first Marxist-Leninist party, came into being (Nzouankeu 24, 27). Intended, like the RDA, as a trans-territorial party, its influence remained largely limited to Senegal where it was based, and France. Headed by Majhemout Diop, a Senegalese pharmacist, it was a small party, composed mainly of those Marxist intellectuals who had not gone over to the BDS, and a few workers. In France, it was supported by the Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France (FEANF), the union of African students' in France (Nzouankeu, 27). The party's immediate agenda was independence, its long-term programme Scientific Socialism (Benôt, 209). From 1957 to 1960, the years of transition to neo-colonialism, it gave the BDS a harder fight than its numbers might have warranted. I now want to look briefly at this transitional period.

The lead-up to Independence

Senegal's official position, represented by Senghor as leader of the BDS, throughout the transitional years 1956-60, might look confusing on the surface but was fundamentally consistent. The basic issues were two: independence or not, and, either way, whether the AOF and AEF were to remain as political units, or to be broken up into separate 'national' entities, e.g. Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, etc. Senghor was against any break with France, and also against breaking up the AOF. He proposed a French Federation, of which the AOF, as a unit, would be a member (Hesseling, 162).

On the independence issue, Senghor thus remained solidly in the French imperialist

camp. At a moment when the colonised people of the world demanded independence with increasing insistence, his fear, expressed just before the Bandung Conference, of 'the fatal pressure of African liberation' (Hyman, 158) never left him. This is the Senghor whom Sembene constantly accuses in *The Last of the Empire* of 'swimming against the tide of history'.

On the balkanisation issue, however, for the first time in a long idyllic relationship, Senghor found himself out of step with French imperialism. Determined at all cost to weaken Africa, the French were set on balkanisation (McNamara, 80), and in 1956, appointed Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, a committed advocate of balkanisation, as Adviser on African Affairs (Hesseling, 162), a post Senghor had coveted. Senghor knew that, unlike Côte d'Ivoire, the rising economic star, Senegal, whose whole *raison d'être* since the beginning of the century had been as an instrument for managing colonial capitalism throughout the AOF, would have difficulty surviving alone under the new dispensation. Personally, also, he did not relish the thought of being locked into a small, disempowered Senegal when he could have represented a more powerful AOF within the French Empire.

In 1958, the first issue - Independence or not - came onto the agenda with the return to power of de Gaulle in France. The famous 1958 referendum on the new 5th Republic constitution asked Africans to decide between Independence and membership of the newly formed Communauté française. Senghor made a secret deal with the French (F. Ndiaye et al, 146), and, between him and the marabouts, whom the French had bribed heavily (Hesseling, 169-70), the Senegalese voted a resounding 'yes' to the Communauté. The PAI gallantly opposed them, and lost: Sembene tells the tale from the PAI point of view in *L'Harmattan*. Senegal was, however, as we know, not alone in last minute betrayal of anti-imperialist aspirations: only Guinea would keep the faith.

In 1960, de Gaulle was in a stronger position, and the AOF was sufficiently crippled by balkanisation, and cowed by what the French had done to Guinea, where they had taken everything, down to the light fittings, with them as they left (Makédonsky 167): he was able to yield to pressure and 'grant' Independence. At this point, Senghor made a last-ditch attempt to avoid balkanisation. Leaning on some small print in the 1958 constitution, (Hesseling, 171), he attempted to persuade Dahomey (now Bénin), Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and French Sudan (now Mali) to join the Communauté as a unit with Senegal. French imperialism, in collaboration with Houphouët-Boigny, worked on the intended partners (Mansour Ndiaye, 125),

and in the end, only French Sudan joined Senegal and were granted independence as a unit to be known as the Federation of Mali.

At this point, but for Senghor and French imperialism, history might have taken a different course. The Malian leadership under Modibbo Keita was genuinely socialist, as opposed to the lip-service diversionary African Socialism of Senghor (Mansour Ndiaye, 126). The Malians wanted a 'real independence' (F. Ndiaye et al, 89). Mali had been less intensely penetrated in terms of colonial capitalism than Senegal. The Malians had never felt they were French. French imperialism in Mali had been straightforwardly brutal. Less susceptible to the imperialist mirages which had so attracted the Senegalese, the Malian national psyche lacks the dependence which is such a dominant feature of the more deeply penetrated Senegalese. It is perhaps in recognition of this that Sembene in *God's Bits of Wood* makes his protagonist a Malian, contrary to the reality (Ibrahima Sarr was Senegalese). Had the Federation of Mali lasted, and had the Malians been able to dominate it, it would certainly have proved a threat to imperialist interests and set a dangerous example. The French were already nervous that Modibbo Keita would help the FLN in Algeria by shipping in arms through Dakar (Mansour Ndiaye, 126), in sharp contrast to Senghor who had been so helpful the previous year (1959) in allowing the French military access to try to overthrow Sékou Touré in Guinea (Mamadou Diand, 21).

Typically, the French were quick to exploit internal contradictions in their own interest. Within months of its birth, there was a crisis in the Mali Federation. The Senegalese, who had expected to dominate the 'inferior', 'bush' Malians, now felt the Malians had invaded the federal capital, Dakar, and the Senegalese ruling class, who had adapted to a century of domination from the French, could not cope with what they saw as domination by their fellow Africans. To cut a long, typical story short, with French encouragement, Senghor accused the Malians of plotting a coup, and the federation collapsed in its fourth month. At the height of the crisis, Senghor, erstwhile ardent defender of a federal Africa, waxed more anti-imperialist against the Malians than he ever had or would against the French, going on radio in Wolof to announce, 'They want to colonise us' and declaring himself ready to die for Senegal (Mansour Ndiaye, 132)!

Senegal thus became an independent republic, and rushed to sign the new deals with de Gaulle's Ministère de la Coopération, giving France preferential status in everything from culture to defence.

Conclusion

It may seem that I have dwelt at too great length and in too much detail on what some might consider a fairly typical example of a pre-colonial society transformed by colonisation and finally making the transition to neo-colonialism.

Certainly, there is much about Senegal's story that typifies the penetration of Western capital into Africa. But that is surely one reason for telling the story again: to remind ourselves, in this 'post-colonial' era - an era of collective amnesia, as Ama Ata Aidoo says (Ní Chréacháin 1991, 5) - of all that went on, of the ancient roots of the system, the carefully planned strategies, the drugging and corrupting of the ruling class, the reinforcing of the structures which held down the exploited majority, the moves and counter-moves that have ensured its reproduction down to today. There is nothing accidental - or 'contingent' as the various 'posts' prefer to say - about the penetration of Western capital into Africa and its destructive effects on the lives of the majority of Africans.

But Senegal is also atypical, or maybe it would be more accurate to say that it is a *reductio ad absurdum* of colonial typicality. The Senegalese ruling class has been the privileged Head Prefect of French colonialism in West Africa, and has all the strengths and weaknesses of Head Prefects: a superficial confidence not to say superiority complex which is heavily dependent on their closeness to the West, a passion for following rules made by others, a fear of thinking beyond the existing system. The Senegalese masses, for their part, have struggled, but their struggle has been hi-jacked from them - by the marabouts, by the politicians. The result is a lack of self-confidence and self-reliance that would be inconceivable in any Nigerian.

As Césaire says, the essential characteristic of colonial culture is its lack of initiative, creativity and self-reliance (Césaire 1956). The coloniser cultivates these lacks in the colonised the better to exploit them. We have seen how the French nurtured the cultures of the feudal monarchies and the marabouts, and added to it their own colonial education, in an effort to ensure that the Senegalese would forget how to think for themselves. What can we say of a culture in which for centuries the *baadoolo* majority had no share in the values of the 'community', of a twentieth century peasant population who are taught to think of themselves as 'corpses in the hands of the undertaker', of Lamine Guèye, a Senegalese with initiative if ever there was one but who, at the peak of his political career declares: 'We can do anything if France

is with us, nothing if it is not'. It is into this exploited and dependent culture - a culture in which people have been reared to believe that, in Sembene's own words, they 'cannot create anything useful, not even a needle' (Sembene 1973, 279) that Sembene is born in 1923. It is this society whose conditioning he will have to transcend and which he will try, through his art, to transform.

CHAPTER THREE

SEMBENE 1923-63

If we accept the image of Senegal sketched in the previous chapter, then Sembene comes from the area of 'French' West Africa which has the oldest links with France, from the pilot colony used to conquer all the others, the colony most deeply penetrated by colonial capitalism: he is the product of a culture of dependency on the West unparalleled in any other part of West Africa. Yet, judging by the four novels published between 1956 and 1963, he seems, at least throughout the period this chapter covers, to escape, more than any other 'francophone' African artist of his time, the dominant hegemonic influences which held the rest of his society in bondage to French imperialism. He would seem to be a near-perfect embodiment of the revolutionary artist whose essential qualities were described in Chapter One.

The revolutionary artist: Sembene's early novels

I have hinted in the Introduction how powerful these novels are, and shown how my enthusiasm for them, and my sense of loss when Sembene's approach seemed to change under neo-colonialism, were what inspired this study in the first place. This study is not about these fascinating, inspiring novels, but about the subsequent neo-colonial works which, for me, did not live up to their promise: it cannot therefore do any justice to them here. Given, however, that one of the purposes of the study is to establish the distance between the neo-colonial works and these early ones, let us remind ourselves of a few of their more striking features.

Sartre once said that if a written sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society, then it made no sense (Williams 1977, 201). Sembene's first four novels go far beyond this requirement. They communicate a huge love of humanity and faith in its ability, through struggle, to realise its full potential.

In the Sembene of the 1950s and early 1960s, the Sembene of the novels, the global class struggle and the struggle for African liberation are one: they inform and enrich each other. The love of humanity does not stop Sembene pointing fingers and identifying the forces of oppression. In the context of colonial capitalism in Senegal, these take the forms we identified in Chapter Two: economic exploitation hiding behind a racist ideology, and underpinned by traditional patriarchy and maraboutic Islam. Sembene spells out clearly that these forces must be

confronted and fought. The words on the strike banner in *God's Bits of Wood* ring out with particular meaning in the patriarchal, feudal, colonial context described in that chapter: 'Treat as a friend who treats you as a friend: treat your boss as an enemy' (Sembene 1973, 20). But the love of humanity is not lost, as the last words of the novel remind us: 'Happy is the man who does battle without hatred' (ibid, 333).

In the novels, the society, dependent though it is, throws up the necessary counter-forces to fight oppression. There are great visionary leaders: Oumar Faye in *O Pays mon beau peuple* (1957), Bakayoko in *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), Tioumbé in *L'Harmattan* (1963) - men and women whose dedication, courage and sense of self-sacrifice are legendary. People are inspired and mobilised. They fight. Even when they lose, or where the price for their small gains is high, they do not lose sight of their goal: a world where 'no man or woman dares to strike you because they know you speak the truth' and where they will 'never again be forced to bow down before anyone' (Sembene 1973, 323) and nobody will be forced to bow down before them.

The people in these novels attack all the inter-related aspects of the culture of dependency, and in attacking, find the means to transcend them. Patriarchy, religion and the whole colonial capitalist order these serve shake in their foundations as Tioumbé drags her battered body from the floor where her father left it and leaves the family home for ever, or as Ramatoulaye plunges the knife into the throat of her brother's *Tabaski* ram.

Sembene's strength lies in the way the smallest domestic struggle has its significance in the global struggle against exploitation. This is what distinguishes him from so many writers of the time, in whose works the same domestic problems never get beyond the level of generation-gap, or battle-of-the-sexes analysis. Both Lukács and the Social Realists would have loved the early Sembene.

I have read these early novels, with their heroes, their fighting people, their determined struggle, many times, and they never fail to move me. In addition to their breadth of vision and their dynamic sense of history, idealism and nobility are words that come to mind. They are novels which manage to get us to focus on the worst in humanity - its ability to oppress and exploit - and yet leave one feeling happy and optimistic about being human.

The fundamental question we are asking in this chapter is how the class-ridden, dependent, collaborationist Senegal we described in Chapter Two produced an artist capable of

creating such novels. And perhaps we are also hoping for some advance clues as to why, after 1963, his work should be so different. In short, we are trying to get a picture of Sembene at forty which will help us to understand him and his work over the following two decades.

The artist in the model proposed in Chapter One has a stake in social transformation, is free enough of the dominant hegemonies to see how the exploitative system works, and is culturally close enough to the masses to be able to communicate with them and inspire them. Sembene's early novels, apart from the fact that they are novels and in French, and are therefore out of the reach of the African masses, have the potential to do all this. We are therefore asking, what is it about Sembene that enables him to produce works that seem, in content if not in form, to fit the model so well?

My own thinking about this before embarking on this study had depended to a large extent on what I will call my Sembene legend. For me, the essential ingredients in the Sembene recipe were his class background and his encounter with Marxism-Leninism. Sembene's poor fisherman father, his truncated education, his years as a manual labourer in Senegal and in France were what gave him both a stake in changing the system and a culture shared with the masses, while Marxism-Leninism gave him the analytical tools to transcend the various hegemonies of domination in colonial Senegal more consistently than other writers of the period.

It is difficult for me to say with certainty where my Sembene legend came from. My biographical sources, which amounted to Sembene himself and his friend Vieyra, who has merely edited what Sembene told him, provided the raw materials, and, I feel, to some extent processed them in the direction I have described, for reasons I shall later discuss: they started the Sembene myth. No doubt my imagination, fired partly by the novels, did the rest.

In this chapter, I want to look at some of the available biographical material covering Sembene's first forty years, bearing in mind my legend, the theoretical model and the early novels, and attempt to situate Sembene in the context of the various hegemonic forces we saw at work in colonial Senegal in Chapter Two, as well as the context of France in the 1950s where the encounter with Marxism-Leninism took place and his career as a writer began.

Let us begin engaging with the biographical materials with a brief résumé of the generally accepted stages of Sembene's career up to 1963. I am not for a moment suggesting this is value-free. The major biographical sources, at the present stage of Sembene research, are

Sembene himself and Vieyra. This period lies outside of my own period of study, and I have not done any original research on it to date. I therefore propose to take the 'facts' as presented by Sembene in various interviews, and by Vieyra, who sympathetically selected and edited what Sembene told him, and to use them as a working document.

Sembene was born in 1923, in Ziguinchor, the most important town in Casamance in southern Senegal. His father, a Lebu fisherman, had moved south from his native Dakar to 'seek his fortune', and, failing to do this, had fallen back on fishing (Vieyra 1972, 10). Sembene was the last of his father's children, and his parents divorced while he was still a small child. His father remarried, and Sembene's unhappy relationship with his step-mother meant that he was moved about a lot, from relative to relative, at an early stage. He travelled around Casamance with his father, he lived for some time with his grand-mother in Lower Casamance, and at one stage, having proved too hard to handle by the Casamance branch of the family, he was sent to an uncle in Dakar who promptly sent him back for the same reason (Vieyra 1972, 10). He almost ended up in a detention centre at one point.¹¹

At eight, he was sent to stay with his maternal uncle in the Casamance town of Marsassoum. This uncle had been a primary teacher, and was also an Islamic scholar. Sembene was sent to the colonial school, and settled down and applied himself so well that, by the time his uncle died four years later, he had almost reached the level of the Primary Certificate (CEP), which took average students at least six years. After his uncle's death, he was again sent to relatives in Dakar, where he continued to study for the CEP. But before he had taken the examination, he had physically assaulted the school principal and was expelled (Vieyra 1972, 11).

With such credentials, no other state school would take him, and his family would not pay for a private school. At fourteen, he became a manual worker, first training as a mechanic, then as a builder, but continued his education at night school. When de Gaulle 'liberated' Dakar in 1942, he joined the French army and travelled to Niger, Chad and Germany as a driver. Demobbed in 1946, he returned to Dakar, where he hung around for the next two years, inter alia observing the strike which he would recreate ten years later in *God's Bits of Wood*.

¹¹ This information comes from an interview with Sembene entitled '*L'enfance de Sembene Ousmane*', originally produced in the form of a vinyl record and which I received on tape, without more detailed source information, from friends in Lomé in the 1970s.

In 1948, he left for France, where he worked as a docker, and attended trade union evening classes. He joined the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1950. He travelled widely throughout Europe, and visited China, Vietnam and the USSR. On a return visit to Africa in 1960, he travelled from Senegal to the Congo by road (OS/FNC). His first three novels appeared between 1956 and 1960, when he decided to turn to cinema. After a year at the Moscow Film School (Vieyra 1972, 21), he returned to Senegal in 1963. His only collection of short stories, *Voltaïque*, had been published in 1962 and his fourth novel, *L'Harmattan 1: Référendum*, written partly in Moscow, was published the year he came home.

I propose to contextualise this biographical skeleton along two axes, historical and structural: historically, dealing first with Sembene's childhood and youth, mainly in Senegal (1923-48), and then with his years abroad, mainly in France (1948-63); and structurally, in terms of the articulations of class, ethnicity, religion, culture, and ideology. The analysis at this stage will be necessarily inconclusive. We are dealing with a complex, multi-factorial - or over-determined - situation, and with the first half of a man's life, and the approach must be open-ended.

The Sembene legend Part 1: Senegal 1923-1948

The class factor

The legend of Sembene's childhood and youth in Senegal paints a picture of social disadvantage: the poverty of his family, leaving school at fourteen, the manual labour. Where does Sembene really fit in class terms in the colonial Senegal of his youth? If we set the legend in context, we find that, using the ruling class as a yardstick, it is a fair assessment. Reading the various Senegalese autobiographies and biographies of the colonial era - mostly, admittedly, of the ruling class, since they are the ones that tend to get published - it is obvious that, compared to a Bouna Ndiaye, son of Albouri, king of Joloff, educated by the colonial authorities in the School for Sons of Chiefs and later in Cairo, who became a high-ranking civil servant (M. B. Ndiaye), or to a Senghor, son of a wealthy early bourgeois who had made a killing from the groundnuts, in boarding school from the age of eight until he left for France at twenty-two for further education (Hyman 12-14), or even to a more modest Mamadou Dia, who was briefly Prime Minister in the early 1960s, and who, as the son of a minor civil servant, had struggled to wrest his own education from the colonial authorities in the 1930s (Mamadou Dia 1985), the Sembene

described in our biography is definitely a child of the masses. Thrown from relative to reluctant relative, roaming the country-side in semi-delinquency before he was eight, unable to pay his school fees, a huge gulf separates Sembene from the security, stability and opportunity enjoyed by the children I have just mentioned.

On the other hand, taking the poorest Senegalese peasant as yard-stick, Sembene, as I shall try to show, was not so badly placed in the colonial world. This is what the legend does not speak of, and given that the legend has already established Sembene's disadvantaged place with respect to the most privileged, it is the silence I want to focus on here. But the partial truth in the legend must not be forgotten, nor the sense of proportion sacrificed, in the passion for making the silences speak.

Ethnicity: Sembene the Lebu

What the legend turns our attention from is that, though Sembene's father was a poor fisherman by the time Sembene was born, he was also, ethnically, a Lebu, and politically, having been born in Dakar, a *citoyen*.

What did it mean to be a Lebu in colonial Senegal? I did not mention the Lebu specifically among the ethnic groups in Chapter Two, as they are a small sub-group of the Wolofs, with whom they share a language and culture. In addition to the fact that they therefore are part of the dominant Wolof hegemony mentioned in Chapter Two, there are three main points to make about them in the context of our study: their devotion to Islam, their long history of cordial relations with the French, and how well their ruling class did out of this relationship.

The Lebu, fishermen by trade, broke away from the Wolof monarchy of Kajoor at the end of the 18th century, and founded their own Islamic theocracy in the Cap Vert. Dakar at this stage was simply one of their villages. They developed relations with the French who had established themselves on nearby Gorée island, enjoying French protection against the Kajoor monarchy, and supplying the French with drinking water. From the mid-19th century, as the 'owners' of Dakar, they found themselves at the heart of the colonial enterprise. In 1857, the French governor tricked Dakar from them in a bloodless coup, whence began what Lebu philosopher Abdou Sylla refers to as a process of 'kid-glove colonisation' (Sylla 1992, 53). The traditional community tax hitherto paid by the French was turned into private pensions for the Lebu elders. The Lebu helped the French to conquer the neighbouring Sereer kingdoms of Siin and Saluum,

and were decorated for service to France as far back as 1860 (ibid, 58). They also placed their Islam at the service of the French.

As the owners of what would become the highest priced land in Senegal, the Lebu did so well out of colonisation that, with the advent of Senegalese semi-autonomy in 1957, they campaigned unsuccessfully to have Dakar declared a 'free zone' remaining under French rule (F. Ndiaye et al, 145). In other words, exactly a century after the French had tricked Dakar from them, their ruling class was crying out to remain under the control of the tricksters.

Sembene the citoyen

In addition to being Lebu, the Sembenes were also *citoyens*. Compared to the vast majority of the AOF, the *citoyens*, as mentioned in Chapter Two, were what Morgenthau calls 'a privileged oligarchy' (Morgenthau, 34). Ki-Zerbo refers to the 'disgraceful disparity' between the *citoyens* and *sujets* (Ki-Zerbo, 503), and we saw in Chapter Two the resentment this nurtured in the latter. 'Citizenship' was highly exclusive: out of an AOF population of approximately 15 million in 1921, two years before Sembene was born, only 25,000 (0.001%) were *citoyens*, and of these 23,000 were in Senegal (Suret-Canale, 421), and this would change very little up to 1946.

A string of social privileges went with being a *citoyen*, from not living under the shadow of conscription or facing the daily reality of forced labour, arbitrary imprisonment and flogging at the whim of any minor colonial official, which were the lot of the *sujets* under the dreaded system of the *Indigénat*, to having access to better schools and hospitals, the right to trial by a French court, and to wear the colonial *casque* - the standard head-gear of French colonials - and boots rather than sandals in the army (Ki-Zerbo, 437). Clearly, since it was the right of all those born in the Quatre Communes and of their descendants, down to the poorest Lebu fisherman, citizenship was not automatically synonymous with wealth. But it was synonymous, in the colonial context, with a degree of social status. That Sembene's father, struggling fisherman though he may have been, enjoyed this status is evident. Sembene mentions that political meetings were held in the family home, and concludes that his father 'must have been somebody'.¹² He also paints a little scene in which the colonial administrator is chatting with his father, encouraging him to grow flowers in his garden, to which Moussa Sembene replies, with a

¹² 'L'enfance de Sembene Ousmane'.

type of dry humour his son inherited, that if he needs aesthetic satisfaction, he can always look at his wives.¹³ Needless to say, colonial administrators were not in the habit of chatting with social nobodies, and the latter, in any case, did not know enough French to chat to them.

Sembene and colonial education

In addition to being a Lebu and a *citoyen*, Sembene had been to school. As we saw in Chapter Two, in colonial Senegal, where the commercial route had been so totally blocked, education was virtually the only means of social promotion. The legend does not deny Sembene's education, but stresses its negative aspect - that he had to leave at fourteen without his Primary Certificate. In a country which produced francophone Africa's first *agrégé*, a Sembene without a simple *CEP* seems to cut a poor figure in terms of privilege, and an authentic one in terms of sharing the lot of the masses. But we need to look more closely at Sembene's education in the context of colonial education in the 1930s, which we touched on in Chapter Two.

Sembene spent a total of about six years in formal colonial education (1931-37) and had reached the level of the Primary Certificate before being expelled. Judged against Senghor's *agrégation*, it is not much, but judged against the situation of the majority of children of the AOF in the 1930s, the era of *Association*, when, as we saw, colonial politics and the economics of the Depression combined to make education a battle-field between a reluctant colonial state and an insistent aspiring petty-bourgeoisie, it places Sembene, in having got to school at all, in a privileged 3% minority (Suret-Canale, 489).

Sembene is privileged on two counts: Senegal, the pilot colony, has the most schools up to 1946, and he has an educated uncle who sends him to school and oversees his progress there. Finally, the *CEP* of the 1930s, the standard we are told he had achieved, whatever about the certificate, is not to be compared with the lowly Primary Certificate of today. Sembene at fourteen - and he would still continue in evening classes in Dakar - was already far from your average AOF 'illiterate' (Vieyra 1972, 13).

Unpicking the legend

Where is all this leading us? We began with the child of a poor fisherman, educationally disadvantaged and ending up in manual labour, a good candidate for promoting radical social

¹³ Ibid.

transformation. We now seem to have a Lebu Sembene whose people, far from fighting imperialism, have a greater stake in it than any other group in Senegal. We have a Sembene whose people are by definition more committedly Muslim than most, and whose nice maternal uncle insisted that he study the Quran alongside his colonial schooling: we saw in Chapter Two the role Islam played in dampening the development of anti-colonial consciousness. We have a child whose father, struggling fisherman or not, is a social 'somebody' in the colonial world. And we have a *citoyen*, with the privileged integration into the colonial system and sense of French identity that this implies.

These are the objective elements the legend downplays. In addition, we could mention the young Sembene's subjective response to the situation. Despite his uncle's plea, as he packs him off to the colonial school, 'that he should not become a white man' (Hennebelle 1978, 114), the young Sembene, far from wanting to get rid of the French, as the writer of the novels of the 1950s, and our artist in the model clearly do, cannot get enough of them. Not only is he by birth a *citoyen*, he ardently supports the *Assimilation* that accompanies this, right up to the age of twenty-seven. Vieyra, writing in the nationalist Senegal of the 1970s, tells us almost apologetically that Sembene joined the French army in 1942 out of a sense of patriotism (Vieyra 1972, 15). And as for education, that major French ideological weapon and consciousness-controller, when Sembene finally gets to school, he loves it, and when he is kicked out, batters on the door for re-admission.

I am not, however, trying to create a new myth to counter the old one. Let us therefore now try to establish a sense of proportion.

At this stage, there is only one fairly firm conclusion that I can draw about the young Sembene in the terms of our discussion. Given that he had a poor fisherman for a father, had Sembene not been a Lebu and a *citoyen*, and had he not had a colonially educated uncle who sent him to school, I would not be writing this now. The Sembene of my original myth, the unadulterated underdog, outsider Sembene, as opposed to this new more colonially integrated and relatively more privileged one, could not, in the French colonial context, have become the famous artist people all over the world write theses about. And as for my original surprise that Senegal could produce someone like Sembene, what I have had to recognise is that only Senegal, the pilot, privileged colony, could have produced him, as only it could have produced Senghor, at this stage.

But before coming to even the most tentative and temporary conclusions with respect to the meaning of the young Sembene's relationship to the various hegemonies, we need to nuance the ethnic, religious, political and ideological factors we have raised above.

Let us look more closely, for example, at Sembene's Lebu identity and the articulation of the ethnic factor with French colonialism. If we take Lebu identity as connoting intimacy with the French, non-resistance to them, benefit from the colonial relationship, and an Islam placed in the service of colonialism, then we need to build into the picture of Sembene's Lebu identity two 'attenuating' factors.

The first is the question of class, of the mode of insertion of the Sembene family into Lebu society. The Sembenes are not on the list of Lebu ruling families provided by Sylla (Sylla 1992, 124-7): they may have less stake in maintaining the status quo than the beneficiaries of the colonial state pensions.

Secondly, I feel we need at this stage to include Casamance in the picture. Sembene was born in Casamance and spent the best part of his first twelve years there. Casamance is in the south, far from the intensely colonial Lebu-*citoyen* world of Dakar. The main Casamance ethnic group, the Joola, are strikingly different from not only the Lebu but all the ethnic groups which make up the core of Senegalese society. The fact that I did not mention them in Chapter Two is a reflection of their marginality in Senegal and in the grand Western imperialist design.

Three things distinguished the Joola from the Lebu during the period under discussion. They did not have a hierarchical social structure - Roche describes them as living in small communities 'combining freedom and a fierce desire for independence with the traditional virtues of African solidarity' (Roche, 36). They resisted the French right up to 1920, twenty years after Samory had fallen, and a good fifty years after the Lebu had helped the French to bring down Siin and Saluum. They also resisted Islam, clinging to their traditional animism.

I do not want to over-emphasise the Casamance factor. Sembene is not Joola, and, given the Wolofisation process mentioned in Chapter Two, in Ziguinchor, the capital of Casamance where he spent most of his Casamance time, many people could speak Wolof, and Sembene did not learn Joola. He lived his life in Casamance as a Lebu-Wolof, and not as an indigene. But the twelve years he had spent there, compared to nine in Dakar before leaving for France, must have had an impact, and I feel that his early contact with this egalitarian, fighting culture must have

offered him a cultural and ideological alternative, and may have diluted his Lebu identity and the hold of the Lebu-Wolof hegemony over him.

Similarly, I feel Casamance may have diluted the hegemonic hold of Islam over Sembene. As Lebus, the Sembene family were almost automatically Muslim, and Sembene was brought up as a Muslim and attended a madrassa as a child. In addition, his years with his Islamic scholar uncle would have furthered his Islamic education. In his teens, he even went through what Vieyra calls a '*crise de mysticisme*' (Vieyra 1972, 13), which seems to situate him squarely, at this stage, within the Sufi, maraboutic tradition, and we saw in Chapter Two what that meant in ideological terms in the colonial context. But the strong animist presence in Casamance, added to Sembene's constant running up and down between Casamance and Dakar as a child, which would have had a disruptive effect on his Islamic education, may mean that Islam was less of a fundamental part of his identity than it was for the average Lebu.

Can we now, therefore, if not draw conclusions about the Lebu factor, at least suggest why it might, as we proceed, be important to bear it in mind?

Being a Lebu from Dakar obviously does not mean that Sembene must follow the path of his forefathers. Though they colluded, he does not have to, and, though they did not fight, he may. His incomplete Lebu identity, thanks to the Casamance factor, may help him to distance himself from the Lebu hegemony. Indeed, if the novels of the 1950s are anything to go by, his disgust with his own people as the anti-imperialist movement develops momentum lends vehemence to his attack on all that they represent: the *Sérigne N'Dakarou*, the religious leader with the colonial medals shining on his *grand boubou*, who reminds the strikers in *God's Bits of Wood* that without France Africa cannot manufacture even a needle is, in real life, the head of the Lebu community. And the Lebu are part of the Wolof, whom, as we saw in Chapter Two, a Malian character in *God's Bits of Wood* calls 'the white man's slaves'.

The Lebu identity is important, then, in that it is what Sembene the anti-imperialist distances himself from. But it is also important in that, however Sembene may feel about this later, he is much closer to the colonial enterprise as a child than I had originally grasped. He has a habit of intimacy with the French which will not leave him, however he may feel about it as he goes through life, and whatever form it may take in the future.

The citizenship-*Assimilation* factor and school play an even more direct role in bringing

the young Sembene closer to the French than I had realised. Of the three hegemonies of colonial Senegal, the Wolof, Muslim and French, it would seem that the French is, if not the dominant, at least the rising one for the young Sembene. I confess my own surprise to discover that my anti-imperialist Sembene, far from rejecting the French Empire in his youth, embraced it with enthusiasm. At a time when other young Senegalese, early Pan-Africanists like Mamadou Dia and Abdoulaye Sadi, were throwing their colonial *casques* in the river Senegal and praying the Germans would win the war (Mamadou Dia 1985, 35; Ndiaye et al, 137), Sembene was actually fighting to partake of the benefits of Empire more fully, and living according to the gospel of fellow-*citoyen* Lamine Guèye's words, 'We can do everything if France is with us, nothing at all without France' (Milcent, 44-5).

But before we start looking for a repressed Francophile lurking beneath the veneer of the man who gave us the great Anti-imperialist novels, let us remember three things.

First, Sembene had a taste of the colonial school, but did not swallow as much of it as the likes of a Senghor who remained forever locked within the French hegemony as a result. As with the other hegemonic forces, school is incomplete in Sembene's case.

Secondly, we need to bear in mind what we said about the *citoyens* in Chapter Two: that they fought for equality in their relationship with the Empire, as opposed to the subordination and dependence which was the lot of the *sujets*. Most important, the *citoyens* were the only group in French colonial Africa in Sembene's youth in a position to fight at all. We should remember Klein's comments on their exceptional spirit of initiative, cited in Chapter Two. The Lebus had allowed themselves to be colonised without a murmur, but the *citoyens* fought tooth and nail through Sembene's youth in the 1930s and early 1940s for what the French had promised and were failing to deliver. Looked at from this angle, the *citoyens'* struggle for *Assimilation*, with which the young Sembene identified, could be seen as the dominant oppositional force in the AOF throughout his youth.

Thirdly, we need to try to imagine the essence of the appeal of *Assimilation* for the young Sembene. I can see several factors at work here. *Assimilation*, the foreign way, was appealing to one for whom the alternative, the tradition, had not delivered much: in Sembene's case, it had delivered a wicked step-mother and a family solidarity which stopped short at paying school fees. Then, Sembene had never been a peasant: he was an urban product: Ziguinchor was already

a large town, and Dakar must have been overwhelmingly impressive, as a symbol of power and modernity. The young Sembene, very naturally, wanted to be identified with such a world.

Who, then, is the young man of twenty-five who sets out for France in 1948? Socially, he has grown up, not at the cutting edge of colonial privilege, but not at the bottom of the colonial heap either. He is not the young man of my original legend, but someone, I suggest, who, through the Lebu-*citoyen*-education factor, has more confidence in himself and in his ability to cope with the colonial world than most inhabitants of French West Africa, and who has had enough of a taste of the good things of colonial life to make him want to fulfil his aspirations within the colonial system.

On the other hand, his 'poor fisherman' father and his truncated education prevent him from realising these aspirations. He therefore does not have so much stake in the colonial system that he will not be able to recognise something better, should circumstances present this - which they will, because by the mid-1940s, *Assimilation* and the status of *citoyen* will be no more.

In terms of the ruling hegemonies, the new Sembene is much closer to the French than I thought, through being Lebu/Wolof, through Dakar, through the colonial school. He also belongs to the dominant ethnic group and has been raised in the dominant religion, both incorporating him into the colonial world. On the other hand, as I have tried to show, the hegemonic hold of all of these is incomplete, thanks to Casamance, to the instability of his childhood, and to expulsion from the colonial school.

This could mean that, far from being disqualified in terms of the model, he is already in a position of peculiar strength. Should history provide a space for him to turn on and attack these hegemonic forces, he will do so with the power of the insider, or the semi-insider. He will, for example, attack the use of Islam by imperialism, or the collusion of the Lebu-Wolof, in a way that a Sereer and Christian Senghor never could. Looked at from this angle, at twenty-five, he is already, in the making, the man who will write the novels.

On the other hand, feeling you were part of an elite, albeit a cheated part, and feeling you were French, for the first twenty-five odd years of your life, could linger in the psyche in the form of an unfulfilled desire. We could bear this in mind.

We have tried to contextualise Sembene in social, historic, economic terms. It is easy, so doing, to lose sight of the peculiarly individual aspects. I will mention just three which I feel are

significant.

The young Sembene is in many ways an angry young man. He has been in total rebellion against all agents of injustice since infancy, starting with his step-mother, going on to the school principal that he butted in the stomach, and finally the French army where, alone in his battalion, he was refused the certificate of good conduct (Vieyra 1972, 16).

On the other hand, the young rebel is also determined to be a success in life. His educational battle in itself bears witness to that. He is bright, and in congenial circumstances, as under his enlightened uncle's supervision, he works hard and makes rapid progress. This drive and determination, partly perhaps a result of the spectre of his father's failure, will be with him throughout the period of our study.

Thirdly, and finally, this is a young man with an unusual degree of independence and street-wisdom, a *débrouillardise* or *goorgoorlu*, to use the Wolof term, acquired as he travelled back and forth between Dakar and Ziguinchor as a youngster, and on the streets of Dakar while others sat docilely on school benches. He knows how to get the most out of situations: to get into cinemas free by convincing the managers that they have more to gain than lose by letting this street-urchin, this *boy Dakar*, have his way (Vieyra 1972, 12). These qualities will be useful not only in France but throughout his life.

The Sembene legend Part 2: France 1948-63

In 1948, Sembene sets sail for France. He stows away on board a French liner, and, landing in Marseilles, gets a job as a docker. He gets involved in the trade union movement and joins the French Communist Party (PCF). Fifteen years later, he will leave for home again, with four novels and a collection of short stories to his name. One of these novels, *God's Bits of Wood*, will become a world classic, a model of Marxist and Anti-imperialist art. Yet Sembene's agenda, as he returns to Senegal in 1963, is to switch his attention from literature to film, the better to reach and influence his compatriots, most of whom cannot read and many of whom do not speak French.

My Sembene legend in this section centres around the image of the docker, man of the masses, the Marxism-Leninism which enables Sembene to see colonial ideology as a smokescreen camouflaging colonial economic exploitation, the commitment as an artist which prompts him to move to film in order to reach the masses who did not speak French and could

not read, and the political commitment which run hand-in-hand with and fuels the artistic one. All of these elements made Sembene the artist of the model par excellence, and explained the power of the novels of the 1950s. I now want to take a closer look at the ideological, artistic and political development of the young man of the previous section in the context of the 1950s in France.

From Assimilation to Marxism-Leninism

When Sembene arrives in France in 1948, he still sees *Assimilation* as the way forward. It is in 1950 that what he calls the *déclat* occurs as he is participating in demonstrations in favour of Vietnamese Independence. In other words, he ‘saw the light’, he ‘got it’. He is won over to Marxism-Leninism, and joins the French Communist Party (Hennebelle 1978, 115). At first glance, the ideological journey from the seemingly elitist, pro-imperialist world view of *Assimilation* to one based on equality and opposition to the global designs of Western capital would seem very radical. On closer examination, I feel that, in the France of 1950, and given who he was, Sembene could hardly have been anything else but a Marxist-Leninist. Let me explain.

First of all, as we saw in Chapter Two, since 1946 the bottom had fallen out of the *Assimilation* dream. The Fourth Republic constitution had turned all the inhabitants of the French African colonies into second-class members of the French Union. The fundamental contradiction - that the equality of the colonised and the essence of imperialism are mutually exclusive - had been exposed. *Assimilation* was a spent force and the fact that Sembene continued to believe in it for another four years is perhaps evidence of how considerable its hold on him had been.

Secondly, we need to bear in mind that Marxism was enormously popular and powerful, internationally and especially in France, in 1950. It is hard to remember this, given its demonised, then marginalised fate in the West since the 1980s. In 1950s France, Marxism was on everybody's agenda, from Sembene's fellow-dockers to intellectual giants like Sartre. Even Senghor, the pathological anti-Communist, had to admit that the principal debate of the 20th century was between Marx and Jesus (Hyman, 189). In France in 1950, Marxism was a powerful counter-hegemonic force.

Thirdly, as we mentioned in Chapter Two, there was a new rising intellectual and political force: anti-imperialism. Thanks to Lenin's work on imperialism, Marxism-Leninism was

also popular with many of the Anti-imperialist writers. Reading Fanon and Césaire, the influence is unquestionable.

It is not difficult to see the attraction of Marxism-Leninism for young African intellectuals in France at this stage. Marx's insistence on the primacy of economic relations and his theory of ideology enabled them to see through the racism of colonialism to the underlying economic motive, and thereby to combat the myth of their own inferiority. Historical materialism showed that there was nothing essential or eternal about stages of development, and that Africa's current technological lag could be overcome. Lenin showed colonialism to be, not the only hope for progress, but the cause of underdevelopment. The USSR which, with its peasant majority and multiple nationalities, had much in common with Africa, provided a concrete example of the rapid development of productive forces outside of the context of Western capitalism. With an anti-imperialist foreign policy since the 1920s, it held out a promise that Africa could relate to the world independently of the second-rate power that France had become.

In Sembene's case, with *Assimilation* no longer an option, the appeal of Marxism-Leninism, first encountered in the evening classes of the main trade union, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), is no less obvious. *Assimilation*, as I suggested in the previous section, was not as bad a preparation for Marxism-Leninism as it might initially appear. *Assimilation* had meant being associated with modernity, progress, a powerful international movement. In France in 1950, only Marxism could offer anything similar. Marxism-Leninism was the best of both worlds for the ex-*assimilé* Sembene; it allowed him to keep his links with France, while promising the equality for Africans that *Assimilation* had failed to deliver.

In addition, several aspects of Sembene's background mentioned in the previous section must have made Marxism-Leninism particularly appealing. For example, Sembene's identity, incompletely defined, as I suggested in the previous section, on the ethnic and religious fronts, had perhaps more room than most for a philosophy based on a New Man and Woman which only the future could create. Sembene, with his wicked step-mother and parsimonious family, would not have as many hang-ups as some about letting the tradition go. The less than total hold of Islam over him would distinguish him from, for example, his compatriot Mamadou Dia who could never get beyond a 'Marxism without the atheism' (F.Ndiaye, 142). Sembene's stake in the colonial system could not be compared to that of the ruling families, or even certain members of the petty-bourgeoisie: the idea of the class struggle - especially since he had just witnessed the

strike - would not seem alien to him. In terms of education, he arrived in France with enough to be able to make better use than his fellow dockers of the CGT workers' education programmes, yet not so blinkered by the ideology dispensed by the colonial educational system to be unable to appreciate a different world-view. Finally, Sembene the rebel against injustice, the Sembene who had head-butted the school principal when accused unfairly of cheating (Vieyra 1972, 11) must have felt, when he encountered Marxism, that he had come home. Sembene's Marxism, I would say, at this stage, is not just intellectual, it is a personal and deeply felt belief that has given us a novel of the stature of *God's Bits of Wood*.

And what, after all, were the alternatives to Marxism-Leninism for an African in France in the 1950s? Senghorian *Négritude* fell short, for one raised as a *citoyen*, on several counts. It was too narrowly race-based to satisfy the internationalism of an *ex-assimilé*. Secondly, it was not about equality for Africans, but about perpetuating the imperialist relationship which left the West a monopoly of technology, and Africa the joy of continuing to provide the raw materials: as Senghor put it, the West was to be the conductor of the orchestra, Africa to beat the drums (Hyman 87-8, 107, 164). *Négritude* was, as Depestre would say much later, 'a myth made to under-develop' (Depestre, 63). Already by the early 1950s, *Négritude* was under heavy fire from African students in France (Ki-Zerbo, 479).

The other alternative was Pan-Africanism. Though anti-Communist like *Négritude*, it was to some extent derived from Marxism, and incorporated Marxist methodology as well as Lenin's analysis of imperialism (Mouralis, 400). Unlike *Négritude*, it had the advantage of wanting an Africa that was a fully-fledged equal member of a modern international world. But I would suggest that in terms of Sembene's needs in France in 1950, Pan-Africanism fell short on three counts. It was too elitist for Sembene the docker without a CEP, it was not French enough for the *ex-assimilé* for whom, disappointments notwithstanding, complete rupture with France was inconceivable, and, like *Négritude*, it was not internationalist enough.

From docker to writer

(i) How did Sembene become a writer?

Sembene landed in Marseille in 1948 at the age of twenty-five without a Primary Certificate, got a job on the docks, and eight years later this obscure immigrant worker had published his first novel, and, in the following seven years, would publish three more, as well as

a collection of short-stories. The third novel, *God's Bits of Wood*, would become a world classic. In this section, I would like to situate Sembene's huge achievement in the literary context of France in the 1950s, in terms of three basic questions: how he became a writer, why he became a writer, and what effect his becoming a writer might have on his class perspective.

How did Sembene the docker become a prolific, high-profile novelist? The question is usually asked in a tone of fascinated incredulity: the feat is seen as virtually impossible, that a complete nobody could rise from the depths of social and psychic deprivation of a colonised Africa and force recognition from a reluctant imperialist France. As Césaire says, all creativity by the colonised is disturbing to the coloniser (Césaire 1959, 118). Sembene is seen to embody this 'disturbance' in an extreme form.

My purpose is not to invalidate this approach. No amount of deconstruction can delete the fact that there is something miraculous in *God's Bits of Wood* being written by a man for whom French was at best a second language and who did not have a Primary Certificate, and above all in the colonial context. To an extent, the Sembene miracle has to be put down to genius. We cannot measure and discuss genius. All we can do here is look at the more mundane aspects of the transformation, at some of the psychological and social factors which helped the miracle to happen.

The legend emphasises Sembene the docker. But, if we are to grasp the Sembene phenomenon, it is important to bear in mind that Sembene, on arrival in France, is not, in terms of his social and educational background, and of his sense of himself and his aspirations, to be equated with the illiterate immigrant worker image that this emphasis calls up. He worked as a docker to subsist, but his mental horizon was, from the start, thanks to his social background, much wider than that of the 'real' dockers. The transformation is therefore minimally less dramatic than it initially looks.

Both Sembene and Vieyra, I feel, do encourage us to construct the story in terms of the illiterate immigrant. Vieyra, for example, tells us that Sembene travelled to France as a stowaway, and Sembene says he 'learned to write' when he got to France (Vieyra 1972, 187). But when one looks more closely at the stowaway story, one discovers that it is evidence, less of Sembene's illiterate immigrant status than of his social hybridity and characteristic *débrouillardise*. All the other young stowaways were caught and deported. Sembene made it,

says Vieyra, by passing himself off as a regular passenger, thanks to a suit his people had bought him before he left (Vieyra 1972, 16). While a suit helps, it surely needs the relative confidence and competence in French of *citoyen* Sembene to carry it off. And as for 'learning to write' in France, we have seen that Sembene was already literate before leaving Senegal: the proof of his head-start over the 'real' dockers is that, after two years in France, he was already in L'Ecole des Cadres, the training school for trade union officials. The evening classes to 'learn to write' may have had more to do with our present discussion – creative writing - than with mere literacy.

Sembene's first novel, *The Black Docker* (1956), perhaps gives a more accurate account than the legend. *The Black Docker*, title notwithstanding, is in fact Sembene's portrait of the artist as a young man. Diaw Falla, the main character, is, like Sembene himself, not a 'real' docker but an aspiring writer. The dockers look up to him, but 'there was a wide gulf between him and his companions ... he did not have any friends in the true sense of the word' (Sembene 1956, 74).

By the early 1950s, Sembene was working as a docker by day and writing by night. I am not for a moment trying to trivialise how difficult this must have been, how much it provides proof of the determination to succeed and self-discipline he had brought with him from Senegal, or, on the other hand, the degree to which it qualifies him more than most for a career as the artist of the masses. But it is also important to recognise that his relatively privileged background enabled him to make use of the educational facilities of the CGT, including its excellent library, in a way the 'real' dockers could not. It enabled him to mix with the writers and artists of the Marseille group publishing *Les Cahiers du Sud*, and to frequent the office of *Présence Africaine* in Paris, where he could rub shoulders with the likes of Senghor and Sartre, Aragon and Richard Wright.

History also played its part, by creating a space for Sembene to become a writer. The anti-imperialist struggle born with the end of the war, like all liberation struggles, as Fanon says, was accompanied by a surge in literary creativity among the Africans and African-Caribbeans in France. Up to that point, on the African side, there had been a handful of poems and a total of three 1930s novels, all by Senegalese.¹⁴ The 1950s would quadruple this output at least. In 1947, *Présence Africaine* was founded, thanks to a combined French and Senegalese initiative, and

¹⁴ Ousmane Socé Diop, *Karim, roman sénégalais* (1935) and *Mirages de Paris* (1937); Abdoulaye Sadjji, *Nini*.

provided a space for both publishing and, with its two major conferences in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959), for literary debate. In 1948, Senghor published his *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, and by the mid-1950s, a series of African novels began to appear, beginning with Mongo Béti's *Ville Cruelle* and Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir* in 1954. The novelists were mainly from the new generation, born in the 1930s, who had benefitted from the educational reforms of 1946. Sembene was a decade older than most of them, a product of the colonial rather than the anti-imperialist world. But, flexible, future-oriented, incompletely integrated into the dominant hegemonies, Sembene transcended the generation gap as he transcended so many other obstacles, and seized the new opportunity with both hands.

Unlike his fictive writer in *The Black Docker*, Sembene did not end up in jail as a result of daring to brave the colonial Establishment, expose their racism and prove his creative ability. But that is not to say that the publication of his first novel was easy. He went unsuccessfully from publisher to publisher, and ended up paying to have it published himself (Vieyra 1972, 19).

Nor was the African Establishment - the budding neo-colonial intelligentsia in Paris - any more welcoming than the French publishers. Lamine Diakhaté, a Senghorite and a minor writer himself, obviously had as much difficulty digesting the nerve of a half-educated Sembene as the early African critics had with Tutuola. His attack, published in *Présence Africaine* as soon as the novel appeared, was on two fronts. Like Tutuola, Sembene was accused of not knowing French (Diakhité refers euphemistically to numerous 'typographical errors!'), and secondly, of plagiarising Birago Diop's recently published *Contes d'Ahmadou Koumba*. This two-pronged attack by the Senegalese Establishment was to become a constant throughout Sembene's writing career. *God's Bits of Wood*, the rumour goes, was written, not by Sembene but by a Danish girlfriend!

(ii) Why did he become a writer?

Let us move on to our second question: why Sembene became a writer. A legend also hangs over this discussion: he wrote to transform the consciousness of the masses, to make them feel they could fight exploitation and oppression and win. He is, in short, the artist par excellence of our model. The shift to film is confirmation of this thesis.

Looked at from this perspective, the question seems to take us straight to the literary

context of France in 1950, where Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (1947) had just come out, and where the anti-imperialist political movement was inspiring the unprecedented wave of poems and novels from African and African-Caribbean writers just mentioned. This new literature, born out of politics, could hardly be anything other than politically committed. As Mouralis has pointed out, *Présence Africaine* is a good barometer for gauging the rising anti-imperialist temperature through the 1950s: its first editorial in 1947 focusses on 'how best to integrate the Black man into Western civilisation' and, singing along with Senghor, emphasises the 'primacy of culture' over politics. But by 1959, keeping pace with the growing pressure for independence, it is insisting on the importance of 'de-Westernisation' and declaring that 'politics is as necessary to culture as the husband is to the wife' (Mouralis, 423).

I think that anybody reading the Anti-imperialist writers of the 1950s could not fail to be convinced of their sincere commitment, not only to freedom from imperialism, but to a social revolution. As Césaire says, 'Our legitimacy comes from the fact that we are up to our necks in our people's struggle for liberation' (Césaire 1959, 122).

Sembene's intellectual and artistic commitment to independence and social revolution cannot be doubted by anybody who has read his four novels. It is increasingly obvious as we read from *The Black Docker* in 1956 through to *L'Harmattan 1: Référendum* in 1963, though it is most perfectly realised in *God's Bits of Wood*, that this man is a writer because he wants to express a Marxist-Leninist vision of the world, feels he can do this from a uniquely authentic angle, that of the exploited, and feels that by so doing he can make a difference. It is unquestionable, reading the novels, that he writes from a position of real solidarity with the exploited - the dockers in the first novel, the peasants in *O Pays mon beau peuple*, the railway workers in *God's Bits of Wood* - and that he is determined, by writing, to attack all forms of domination, from colonialism to patriarchy, feudalism and maraboutic Islam, holding Africa back from realising the dream of the railway workers in *God's Bits of Wood* and the young militants of *L'Harmattan*. Without a Sembene up to his neck in the struggle, none of these novels would have existed.

Have we then answered the question, why did Sembene become a writer? Or have we only suggested why he became a committed writer? Perhaps we need to go back and look at the question again.

Writers, depending on their socially conditioned psyches and on the context, write for various reasons: for example, to create, to change the world, to be famous, to be rich. Obviously, the fact that Sembene's novels up to 1963 display an unquestionable desire to change the world does not rule out the possibility that, in a context different to the all-out anti-imperialist battle of the 1950s, he would not write simply in order to create, to express his feelings about that other context. But since that other context did not exist, we cannot take this discussion any further at this stage.

What can we say about the other two motives? Is there any evidence that Sembene became a writer to be famous or rich?

Writing African novels in the 1950s did not make people rich, and could not, I am convinced, have been a major motivation. Becoming famous, on the other hand, deserves a moment's thought. Sembene, as I have tried to show throughout this chapter, has from childhood been driven by a desire to succeed as an individual, and has had the necessary minimum of encouragement to feel this might be possible. In France in the 1950s, writing must have looked, in some respects, like quite a promising way for a Sembene to achieve this goal. It was a new, though not non-existent, area for an African, and, though it required a mastery of French perhaps beyond what he possessed, this was made up for by a literary climate that seemed to favour the arrival on the scene of a Sembene.

This literary context has already been described to some extent in Chapter One. With its insistence on the need to see the world from the point of view of the oppressed and exploited, its petty-bourgeois intellectual guilt at its own limitations, its self-castigation for describing the masses 'in the third person', it could hardly refuse to make room for somebody who did not have a primary school certificate and worked on the docks in Marseille. Sembene had an authenticity which the Anti-imperialist intellectuals could not claim. I feel he was astute enough to recognise this, and even to play on it to make up for his less-than-perfect French. To an extent, he was the right man in the right place at the right time, and I think he knew it and made the most of it.

The vital question here is not so much whether an element of personal ambition existed, as the relationship between this and political commitment. At this stage, the two aims would seem not in conflict but perfectly compatible: a Sembene who wanted to be somebody by becoming a writer, and who wanted, in the process, to give hope to others like himself and less

fortunate than himself, was not in contradiction with himself. This might not, however, always be the case: this present context is not a good testing ground. That Sembene himself questioned himself very honestly about his personal motivation comes across as one rereads the portrait-of-the-artist *Black Docker*. He subjects the protagonist, the aspiring writer Diaw Falla, who does on the whole seem to be his alter ego, to a range of criticism from other characters. The most significant comes from a Malian docker. It is worth quoting extensively:

You keep telling yourself, if I set foot on that ladder, it's to help those who are steeped in poverty...but once you're there, your comfort and reputation ... take such a hold on you that you forget your comrades in suffering... in your fear of slipping, you are prepared to stoop to the lowest depths... all so that you will never have to eat that bowl of rotten rice again...

A little later, he adds:

You fight alone, nobody can blame you. But morally, it is a betrayal, since you are abandoning your brothers, and it is in their name that you will have raised yourself up.¹⁵

(iii)The writer's class perspective

Is there any sign in the 1950s that Sembene is ignoring the Malian docker's warning to Diaw Falla, and forgetting about the masses who, as subjects of his novels, have helped him up the ladder? The novels of the 1950s, as I have repeatedly said, are resonant with solidarity with the masses. But solidarity - or the type of solidarity which comes from a shared existence - can increase or diminish with a change in context, and Sembene's increasing insertion into petty-bourgeois intellectual culture as the 1950s draws to a close could have several implications for the future in terms of our model.

In the course of the 1950s, the emphasis of Sembene's life shifts from manual to union work. The role he plays as a union representative is significant as we try to situate him between proletarian manual worker and petty-bourgeois intellectual: he was the liaison officer between the African dockers and the students of the FEANF (Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en

¹⁵ My translation from *Le Docker Noir*, 52-3.

France).

Secondly, all his activities outside of working hours are gradually integrating him into a life-style much closer to that of the petty-bourgeois intellectual than to the Sembene of the legend: the CGT library, *Les Cahiers du Sud*, Présence Africaine, and his holidays in Denmark with artist friends (Vieyra 1972, 19). By 1958, with his first two novels already published, he attends the Tashkent African-Asian Writers' Conference.

Clearly, this process does not automatically rule out his stake in a radical transformation of society: Marx, Cabral and all the others who dedicated their lives to the revolution were members of the petty-bourgeoisie. But his shift in objective class position should be borne in mind when we come to study him in neo-colonial Senegal. It could, though does not have to, affect the degree of sacrifice he would be prepared to make to change a system out of which he is now doing quite well. Above all, it could affect his relationship as an artist with the class he is no longer embedded in to the same degree.

A rereading of the novels of the 1950s brought me, for one, to a surprised awareness that this factor was already an issue, in terms of the model, at this stage. My first and greatest love among these novels, *God's Bits of Wood*, had obviously cast its shadow over my reading of the others, and I had initially missed the fact that, in none of the other three are working class characters developed as they are in *God's Bits of Wood*. The title of *The Black Docker*, as already mentioned, is a misnomer, as Senegalese Establishment critic Lamine Diakhaté was quick to point out in the *Présence Africaine* review mentioned earlier: the dockers in the novel are for the most part shadowy, anonymous background figures. In *O Pays mon beau peuple*, the peasants, in the perception of protagonist Oumar Faye, another Sembene alter ego, not only come very close to Marx's rural idiots but actually *smell*, and Oumar Faye himself seems to be a strange mixture of messianic small-time Mao, petty-bourgeois intellectual, and successful national bourgeois. In *L'Harmattan*, the masses are narratively marginalised compared to Tioumbé the teacher and Tangara the doctor. And even in *God's Bits of Wood*, where a supreme effort seems to be made to keep the petty-bourgeoisie in its place, Bakayoko as worker is somewhat unconvincing: in real life, the leader of the strike, Ibrahima Sarr, had left the train-driving stage long behind him. It is as if, right from the start, the petty-bourgeois characters insist on making their way to the centre of Sembene's narrative universe, as if this is already the world he knows best.

From writer to film-maker

Sembene's shift in attention from the novel to film in the early 1960s, just after Independence and before he decided to return home definitively, can be analysed, as we did with his writing, in terms of how and why. And here again, we are dealing with a legend.

The legend this time embraces both the how and the why. It says he went to Moscow because, as a revolutionary artist, he was aware that only film could reach the Senegalese masses and inspire them to action. The Moscow factor seems inextricably tied up with the revolutionary intention.

But both Vieyra and Sembene play down the revolutionary connotations of Moscow. According to both, expressing themselves in quite different contexts, Sembene applied to France, the USA, and the USSR, and the USSR simply happened to be the first to respond. According to another source, Sembene got the Moscow grant under somewhat false, but I feel, in light of his social hybridity, interesting, pretences: though not even a student, he got a FEANF scholarship to Moscow because Senegal was over-represented on the FEANF selection committee (Diané, 165).

A more interesting aspect of the 'how' question concerns Sembene's psychological ability to make the move from novel to film. Other African and African-Caribbean writers had spent a good part of the 1950s confronting the tragic fact that the novel in French could not reach the masses for whom it was intended. Yet they faithfully produced novel after novel expressing their intense commitment to a people who remained unaware of their existence. The most poignant example of all, because more than all the others, it is *the* novel of the people, is *God's Bits of Wood*. Nowhere in Anti-imperialist literature are the painful cultural contradictions of colonial capitalism more glaring than in this beautiful but alienated work, this perfect piece of congruence between an artist, a people, and a moment in history but which the people cannot access.

But the difference between Sembene and all the others was that he made the move to what he hoped would be a less alienated medium. Initially pulled in by the hegemonic force of the French novel, which, thanks to their education, the others could not escape, he alone, with his semi-education and his years spent hanging around Dakar cinemas with his *boys Dakar* friends (Vieyra 1972, 12), while others studied Balzac, perhaps had less stake in the novel, and could think in terms of alternatives.

So much for how Sembene moved to cinema. As for the question of why he shifted, the context, as we have just seen, supports the legend, at least in part: African writers of the 1950s were aware that writing could not reach the masses. Sembene himself explains his move to cinema in exactly these terms: 'When I realised that, because of the low level of literacy in Senegal, I could never reach the masses, I decided to turn to cinema'.¹⁶

Making films to reach the masses, however, is not quite synonymous with making films to raise the masses' revolutionary consciousness: it may mean no more than wanting an audience *tout court*. Did Sembene just want an audience, or did he want to raise their consciousness? I think the evidence weighs in favour of the second interpretation.

First, he has a proven track record of concern, as an artist, for the masses. If he now makes a radical move to make art like *God's Bits of Wood* available to them, it can surely only be to enhance their sense of themselves and convince them of their ability to change their situation as the railway workers did.

Secondly, in the context of the late 1950s, with the growing awareness of the impact of mass culture, Sembene is as conscious as other left intellectuals of the importance of film for ideological purposes. This must have been felt with particular urgency in Sembene's own case, as a member of the PAI whose overwhelming defeat in the 1958 Referendum had demonstrated the immense power of the colonial ideological machine, on which he meditates in *L'Harmattan*, written, as already mentioned, in the evenings in Moscow after film school.

The political activist

Finally, I would like to take a brief look at Sembene's active political involvement in the French context between 1948 and his return home in 1963. Our starting point here is a couple of bare facts: Sembene joined the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1950, and Africa's first Marxist-Leninist party, the Parti Africain de l'Indépendance (PAI), just after it was founded in 1957.

I tried to suggest in Chapter One some of the reasons why the artist's political activism is of interest in terms of the model. An artist with a record of activism will be perceived differently by both power and the people from one who is merely involved in creating revolutions on paper,

¹⁶ *Africasia*, No 52, cited in *Afrique littéraire et artistique*, No 2, 202.

and this will affect what s/he will be allowed to say, how s/he will be allowed to live, and how much impact the work will have. It will affect the work directly at the purely creative level, in that an artist deeply implicated in the struggle will describe that struggle differently from an arm-chair revolutionary. Finally, we need to ask ourselves whether the demands of the struggle and the practice of art might not in some circumstances force the artist to make a choice between art and political involvement, in which case it will be evident which is closer to his/her heart: the Revolution itself, or the love of talking about it.

I think that this last question was at the heart of my own myth of Sembene's political activism. I subconsciously saw Sembene as revolutionary first and artist second. The art was in the service of the revolution, and the art in itself was not enough. The myth had a number of sources: my Irish prototype of the artist-revolutionary Pádraig Pearse, the poet executed by the English government in 1916, and other writer-heroes like Alexis who died fighting Duverger, and Cabral.

Related to this was my myth of Sembene the Communist. Partly thanks to my Irish 1950s and 1960s beginnings and to my years under military rule in Nigeria, my concept of membership of the 'Communist Party' was not based on any lived experience. In my mind, being a Communist automatically had a rare, dangerous, outsider quality: it meant risk, sacrifice, and total commitment to the Revolution. In Sembene's case, I think I subconsciously felt that his Communism came before his art partly because he was a member of the PCF for six good years before he published anything, and partly because I confused him with the heroes of his novels who put the party, the trade union, the Revolution, before everything else.

My myths, in this case, were all my own doing. Vieyra, on the contrary, tries to naturalise Sembene's PCF membership out of existence: as a docker, Sembene was automatically a member of a union, the CGT, and most CGT members were also members of the PCF, and anyway, Sembene stopped being a Communist at Independence (Vieyra 1972, 19). But Vieyra has his own reasons in Senegal in 1972 for down-playing Sembene's Communism. What did Sembene's membership of the PCF really mean in the context of 1950s France?

Communism in France in 1950 was in a vastly different position to the Communism of Ireland in the 1950s or Nigeria in the 1970s. In post-war France, the PCF, the largest Communist party in Western Europe, was more of a force to be reckoned with than ever before or since.

With 25% of the seats, it was the largest single party in the French parliament (Tint, 110). Unable to form a government for lack of viable alliances, it worked hand in hand with the CGT to organise powerful strikes (Tint, 134).

The PCF's credibility with the anti-imperialist movement in France was good at this stage: the Draft Constitution of 1945, which the Communists played a leading role in formulating, was so radical that it had to be rewritten by the centre right, and in 1947 they were thrown out of the government for their stand in favour of the colonies (Tint, 112). We do, however, need to bear in mind the limitations of this stand. The PCF was never in favour of Independence, which it claimed would weaken international Communism: its position was Assimilationist - it stood for equality for the colonies within a French union, and would be accused by the 2nd International of going against official Communist anti-imperialist policy. But when Sembene joined the party in 1950, this fundamental contradiction had not come to a head: the anti-imperialist honeymoon with the PCF continued.

The PCF was in fact the ideal organisation for Sembene in 1950. It was French, so the ex-*assimilé* could feel at ease with it, and it was also on good terms with the anti-imperialist movement with which he was beginning to identify. My myth of danger and sacrifice therefore needs to be nuanced. While it holds for Senegal's first Communist, Lamine Senghor (cousin of Senghor!), who died in a Paris jail during the 1929 repression (Suret-Canale, 562; Hyman, 14), in Sembene's case, joining the PCF in 1950 meant joining a powerful movement which held the weak French state to ransom. It was not about being an outsider on the run, as I had fantasised: it was a passport to an important and powerful sector of French society. And the French Communists welcomed the African docker-with-a-difference, a fact he must have appreciated in a France which grew more racist daily as the anti-imperialist struggle gained momentum.

By the end of the 1950s, Sembene had however left the PCF, which had discredited itself on the anti-imperialist front, and joined the Parti Africain de l'Indépendance (PAI). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the PAI, founded in 1957 was intended as an inter-territorial party, but its activities were centred principally in Senegal and France. Composed mainly of petty-bourgeois elements, with a few workers, it had a double agenda: Independence and Scientific Socialism. It therefore brought together Marxists and nationalists on an anti-imperialist platform. In France, it worked hand in hand with the FEANF, whose agenda was very similar, and with whom Sembene was also connected from the time that he had been liaison officer between the

African dockers and the students (ABD/FNC).

As the hectic struggle between anti-imperialists and budding neo-colonialists intensified in the late 1950s, the PAI, tiny though it was, as the sole advocate of full independence from France, became increasingly important, and more of a focus of attention from imperialist forces. This is the stage where risk, danger, and outsiderhood were definitely a part of the picture.

I do not know how involved Sembene was in the PAI struggle at the end of the 1950s. The then leader, Majhemout Diop, was of the opinion that he was not a front-liner (MajD/FNC). In Senegal in 1960, the PAI took briefly to arms, its ring-leaders were arrested, jailed, and exiled, and the party was banned.¹⁷ But by that time, Sembene had gone to Moscow to learn to make films, and to write about the gallant 1958 campaign of the PAI in his fourth novel.

Sembene would therefore take back to Senegal in 1963 the Communist label, which would not endear him to Senghor and the neo-colonial ruling class, but he would not be perceived as one of the 'extremist' perpetrators of the brief PAI armed struggle. We shall see in the next chapter how Sembene, the neo-colonial state and the Senegalese people, would take the situation forward from this point.

¹⁷ Majhemout Diop, original leader of the PAI, denied in an interview he gave me in 1992 that there had been any armed struggle.

CHAPTER FOUR

GETTING STARTED: SEMBENE AND SENEGAL IN THE 1960s

Radical art under neo-colonialism: an anti-climax?

In 1963, after fifteen years abroad, Sembene returns to Senegal to make films for the masses. In 1968, he produces sub-Saharan Africa's first full-length feature film for commercial release, *Mandabi*. It is in Wolof. Long queues form outside cinemas throughout Senegal to see it, and the more it is shown, the longer the queues grow. The dream of a revolutionary art that can reach the masses and raise their consciousness is finally a reality. Or is it?

Mandabi is set in contemporary neo-colonial Dakar. It is the story of the misadventures of an elderly man, with two wives and many children, as he tries to cash a money order¹⁸ sent by his nephew, a street sweeper in France. Blocked by a complicated bureaucracy which makes no effort to cater for 'illiterates' like him, and cheated by a string of petty crooks, he is finally duped by an acquaintance, a local estate agent, who had promised to cash the money order on his behalf. Meanwhile, ignoring the fact that only a small part of the money awaited is for their own use (the elderly man is supposed to pass most of it on to other relatives), his family run up debts, and towards the end, the estate agent is hoping they will be forced to sell their house to pay these off. The old man ends up thoroughly disillusioned, and announces that he too will join the ranks of the rogues, since honesty is meaningless in this society.

Coming to *Mandabi* from *God's Bits of Wood*, my own reaction was less enthusiastic than that of the Senegalese who queued so patiently to see it in 1968. Judged in terms of *God's Bits of Wood*, for me, *Mandabi* fell short. *God's Bits of Wood* sets out the problem in terms of clearly defined classes. It allows us to believe that Africa has a proletariat, and that resistance is both necessary and possible. But in *Mandabi*, gone are the hope, the fighting spirit, the noble ideals of *God's Bits of Wood*, gone the broad sunny fictional world full of optimism and faith in humanity and in the future. Where *God's Bits of Wood*, apart from its inability to reach the people, had been the ideal in terms of my model, *Mandabi* was unlikely, to my mind, to inspire anybody to change anything. In the words of a Wolof proverb, the elephant seemed to have given birth to a mouse (Sembene 1983, 109). Was this, then, what happened when the revolutionary

artist tried to function under neo-colonialism?

Mandabi, whose original text was written at most six years after Sembene finished *God's Bits of Wood*,¹⁹ plunges us into a deeply degraded world. It is hard to believe that this is the same Dakar into which the women marched less than 20 years earlier. Sembene's neo-colonial Dakar is a place of endemic opportunism, where the solidarity that underpinned the society of *God's Bits of Wood* is replaced by parasitism, the resistance by a passive defeatism, and the only future seems to be to join the profiteers. In place of the army of fighting men, women and children, we have a pitiable, almost ridiculous old man who, for lack of the bus fare, flaps his ineffectual way in his best blue brocade - his *baxa* - and his *babouches* through the dusty streets of the Medina in pursuit of the illusive cash from Paris. Where the fighting armies of *God's Bits of Wood* offered inspiration, we laugh at the old man perhaps more than we weep for him. The only fight we encounter is when the cheating photographer gives the old man a bloody nose for daring to assert his right to the photos he has paid for. Patriarchy, far from withering away, is flourishing while Sembene turns a blind eye. Corruption taints all the classes, so it is hard to identify with any. Above all, of the determined proletariat, the class that held the key to revolution in 1947, there is no sign.

This last is not strictly speaking true, however. We do have a postman, who is perhaps a symbol of the proletariat. He is so narratively marginalised and seems so irrelevant to the plot and the spirit - or lack of spirit - of *Mandabi* that I did not mention him earlier. He is seen at the beginning, officially announcing the arrival of the money order at the post office, he passes through casually somewhere in the middle, and he comes back in the last scene and portentously, and, to my mind totally unrealistically, proffers an alternative ending to the narrative. The old man has just announced that the only thing to do is to become a hyena, a sneaky profiteer, like everybody else, and the postman, out of the blue, counters with: 'We will change all that.' The old man could be forgiven for not getting the message and naively asking 'Who?' 'You, me' says the postman, with an all-embracing gesture which includes the wives and children among the miraculous ex-machina agents of social transformation (Sembene 1972, 136-7).

¹⁸ The title of the film, *Mandabi* (*manda bi*) is a Wolofisation of the French *le mandat* (*the money order*).

¹⁹ Sembene finished writing *God's Bits of Wood* in 1959 and the literary version of *Mandabi*, the novella *Le Mandat*, came out in 1966.

The closest this narratively puny postman gets to mobilising anyone or anything is pushing his mobyette complainingly through the sandy streets of the Medina. Why has Sembene given the last word to such a narratively unconvincing character? For me at least, far from symbolising the great fighting proletarian families of *God's Bits of Wood*, he is a parody, calling attention to their absence. He invites me to compare *Mandabi* with its famous predecessor, and to ask what has happened to Sembene or Senegal or both in the interim.

Before embarking on my study of the *Mandabi* context in search of answers to these questions, I did stretch my imagination to see if there might be other readings which would allow the contradictions to dissolve and *Mandabi* to take its logical place as successor to *God's Bits of Wood*. I entertained two other possible interpretations. The first was that *Mandabi* shows us that, under capitalism, all classes are tainted by the oppressive structures. In other words, what we get in *Mandabi* is the woman beating the child and the child kicking the dog: or, in terms of another Wolof proverb, the fish rotting from the head down (Sembene 1983). *Mandabi* is artistically a very powerful expression of the endemic corruption of Dakar, and the fact that the old man himself had, without a second thought, been ready to chop his nephew's savings falls into place (this reading was favoured by a group of Dakar fourteen-year-olds who watched *Mandabi* in 1990 and told me the film says that 'the Senegalese are all crooks'). But it does take the steam out of the old man's pronouncement, at the climax, that he is going over to the hyenas: has he himself not been a small-time hyena from the first scene? And if *Mandabi* is about endemic corruption, then how has the postman miraculously escaped a disease which has even infected the protagonist with whom we are presumably supposed to identify?

The second possibility was to take the postman at face value, and to impose a symbolic reading throughout which would somehow bring the film into line with the expectations set up by *God's Bits of Wood*. Thus, the street-sweeping nephew in Paris who sends the money order represents the continuing imperialist relationship with France, the couple of obstructive little bureaucrats represent the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the old man is the masses in the pre-conscious stage, and the postman is the more conscious and militant proletariat who will radicalise the former. Put like that, it is quite a neat and satisfying formula. We have exposure of the ruling class, a vivid description of the lot of the oppressed, and finally the announcement of salvation in the form of the proletariat we had learned to count on from *God's Bits of Wood*. The only thing missing is any artistic energy to make us believe in such a formula, any build-up in

the text to make the conclusion - 'We shall change all that' - convincing. *Mandabi* may give us symbols of the opposed classes and their antagonistic relationship: it does not give us the experience of, nor therefore the belief in, the struggle.

So we turn to context, to try to find out what the puny postman means. Why is he there, at the critical moment of the text, and only there? His presence calls out to us not to forget the proletariat as we wonder what *Mandabi* means. But do we believe the body of the text and conclude that the proletariat of the 1947 strike have indeed vanished by the 1960s, or do we listen to the postman at the end and conclude that they are still there, but that Sembene, in neo-colonial Senegal, cannot express their existence except by symbols, symbols which, for me at least, reared on the realism of *God's Bits of Wood*, are a poor substitute, preaching to the converted rather than raising the consciousness of those who have not read *God's Bits of Wood*, who have never heard of Marxism, those supposedly for whom *Mandabi* was made?

We shall return to *Mandabi*, to its relationship with *Gods Bits of Wood*, and to the problem it seems to pose for revolutionary aesthetics, in the next chapter. This chapter will now focus on Senegalese society as neo-colonialism seeks to entrench itself in the 1960s, and on Sembene's place in it, as he, in turn, seeks to set himself up in his new medium in the neo-colonial context. It is this relationship which will hopefully provide some insights into the mystery of the puny postman.

France and Senegal in the 1960s: new strategic interests

Let us remind ourselves of what we are trying to understand about neo-colonial Senegal. Bearing in mind our discussions in Chapters One and Two, we are looking at context on several levels:

- as that which conditions the artist, providing spaces and setting limits for what he can see, what he can say, what he can make
- as that which provides raw materials to be mediated into the work
- as the social conditioner of the consciousness of the audience.

We are trying to determine

- the degree of exploitation in the society
- the balance between consent and repression which makes this exploitation possible
- the level of consciousness of the exploited
- the forms and levels of resistance.

Military: 'the policeman of Africa'

In Chapter Two, in addition to direct economic exploitation, we saw the key role Senegal played in establishing and consolidating the French imperialist hold over West Africa. Is French imperialism equally interested in 'independent' Senegal from 1960, and if so, in what form?

After 1960, France's economic interest, still strong in the rest of Africa - on which it continues to rely, directly or indirectly, for three quarters of its raw materials (Chaigneau, 75) - is on the wane in Senegal, which, given the fall in groundnut prices on the 'world market', is now almost an economic liability. But on the military front Senegal more than makes up for this.

The military factor is, if anything, more important than the economic one to post-war France which, no longer competitive economically on a world scale, increasingly sees its only claim to world power status in terms of its military role in the Cold War, as the self-appointed policeman of Africa on behalf of Western capitalism (Chaigneau, 81). The French are more conscious than any of the other former colonial powers of the Communist threat, partly because of the power of the PCF. Throughout the 1950s they have clung to their concept of Eurafica, haunted by Lenin's words that he who controls Africa controls Europe (ibid, 15). For France in 1960, Africa is now 'the centre-piece of a world military strategy' (ibid, 12, 16), and Dakar, with its strategic location, and long history of Franco-Senegalese collaboration, in addition to the proven reliability of Senghor (Chaigneau, 54, Makédonsky, 166) becomes one of the four most important of a hundred French bases throughout the continent, making Senegal 'the pillar of French military operations in Africa' (Chaigneau, 33, 71).

In local terms, Senegal's geopolitical position is also very important, given its common frontiers with the notorious Guinea and with Mali, both of which are struggling to set in place socialist states and receiving USSR Aid. Already in 1959, the SDECE (the French equivalent of the CIA) has used Senegal as a base from which to try to topple Sékou Touré (McNamara, 176).

Ideological and political: 'a kid-glove decolonisation'

The other role imperialist France reserves for neo-colonial Senegal from 1960 to 1980 is ideological. As it had been the pilot colony, it now became the pilot 'independent' state (Milcent, 208), the model African democracy *à la française*, with its deputies in the French parliament since 1848, the showcase to prove that the closer you are to the French, and the farther from Communism, the more democracy you will enjoy.

All of this is of interest to us in terms of our understanding of neo-colonial society in

Senegal. The French, for military and ideological purposes, want - and will even pay a certain price for, in Aid - a stable Senegal with an image of democracy, and should this be threatened, their war machine will be at hand, just a few minutes from the Presidential palace.

There was a great appearance of stability, and a down-playing of the military interest, in Senegal's transition to 'Independence'. According to Césaire, 'real decolonisation necessarily involves rupture' (Césaire 1959, 120). Between Senegal and France in 1960, there was no rupture. Indeed, the term used was 'kid-glove decolonisation' - echoing the kid-glove colonisation of Sembene's people the Lebu a century before (Majhemout Diop 1972, 231). 'Not only will I give you Independence', de Gaulle told Senghor, 'I will help you to maintain it hand in hand with France' (Senghor 1980, 125). The dominant image, provided by contemporary French journalist Milcent, is the paternalistic one of the Senegalese canoe gently separating itself from the French steamer and floating happily alongside (Milcent, 215). The image was particularly poetic and felicitous given that many believe that the name Senegal derives from the Wolof *sunu gaal* - our canoe. Senghor rushed to sign the four Coopération agreements (Senghor 1980, 329), and French *coopérants* ('technical assistants') flocked in, increasing the number of French in Senegal from what it had been in the colonial era (R. Cruise O'Brien 1972).

The birth of the neo-colonial state 1963-68

Let us now look at the immediate Senegalese context in which *Mandabi* was produced and consumed. We shall focus on the five-year period 1963-1968, which not only covers Sembene from his return home to the production of *Mandabi*, but also constitutes a unit of Senegalese neo-colonial history, from the voting of a new Senegalese constitution in 1963, instituting Senghor as the head of an increasingly centralised political machine, to the uprising of intellectuals and workers against this machine in 1968.

Economy

Economically, Senegal comes very badly out of the colonial era. Thanks to Dakar's earlier role in the AOF, the neo-colonial state machinery and the capital are oversized and expensive for a country of under three million (Morgenthau, 164). The marketing of the now unprofitable groundnuts has been nationalised without a word of protest from the French capitalists, who have already made their profits. The soil has been so damaged by the mono-crop that alternatives do not seem to be an option, and anyway, the groundnuts are still needed, as

government revenue depends on them and they provide over 40% of the raw materials for the French-owned industries (Fatton, 56). The French have been subsidising the groundnut price since the late 1950s, but membership of the EEC brings an end to this in the 1960s, and the replacement EEC subsidy does not make up the shortfall. The post-war industries, of which Senegal got more than its fair share, are in difficulty due to the balkanisation of the AOF (Morgenthau, 164) and the fact that Senegal's immediate neighbours, Guinea and Mali, have both opted out of the franc zone. Senegal in the 1960s receives more French Aid proportionately than any of the other former colonies (Corbett, 126), but it is still not enough, and by 1970 Senghor is, at least for the gallery, threatening to look for help elsewhere, from the USA or even the USSR (ibid, 97).

Class development under neo-colonialism

(i) The bourgeoisies

As for Senghor's African Socialism, the regime's official doctrine, little apart from the name distinguishes it from the capitalism of the Côte d'Ivoire (Benôt, 180): Hyman calls it 'camouflaged capitalism' (Hyman, xiii). Class contradictions are deepening, despite Senghor's claim that classes do not exist in Senegal (Senghor 1980, 218). The classes benefitting from the neo-colonial order - the French *grande bourgeoisie*, the mainly Lebanese comprador bourgeoisie, and the Senegalese bureaucratic bourgeoisie who run the state on behalf of French capital, do not appear to make up much more than 1% of the population (Majhemout Diop 1972). Of those classes oppressed by neo-colonialism, the peasants, who make up over 80% of the active population (ibid, 254), are hungry. Corrupt bureaucrats, and not the peasants, have benefitted from the nationalisation of groundnut marketing (ibid, 101-4) - indeed, following French advice, the government's answer to falling groundnut revenue is to intensify peasant exploitation, despite the more frequent than usual droughts. The petty-bourgeoisie of the towns, which make up 7% of the active population, and the proletariat (5%), are suffering from galloping inflation and unemployment (ibid, 254). The small weak national bourgeoisie is still blocked from advancement by the French and the Lebanese.

Given the on-going economic crisis, the 1960s is a period of tension which finally explodes in 1968. But, to better understand 1968, we need to look at the levels of consciousness of the various oppressed groups, and at the political expression of the contradictions between

them and the ruling class.

(ii) The peasants

The peasants are not as threatening as their numbers or the intensity of exploitation they suffer might suggest, nor as promising a target for revolutionary art, since they are out in the bush where Sembene's projector will not reach them in his life-time. Still ideologically and economically managed by their *marabouts*, who are as staunch supporters of Senghor as they were of the colonial governments, they do engage in a form of passive resistance, and revert increasingly to subsistence crops: the *malaise paysan* becomes a leitmotif of the 1960s (Diop and Diouf, 37). But when it comes to the crunch, as it does in 1968, the peasants rally to the call of their *marabouts* who are rallying to an SOS of Senghor, and come to Dakar armed with machetes to put down a foreign tribe called Tudian - *étudiant*/student in peasant-speak! (Bathily 1992, 87). That is the level of Senegalese peasant consciousness in the 1960s.

(iii) The proletariat

The urban proletariat and petty-bourgeoisie are the most promising groups in terms of a Sembene aspiring to raise consciousness. They may be Muslim, but the *marabouts'* grip on them will be less complete, and they have an established tradition of cinema-going.

The proletariat, it is interesting to learn in terms of our puny postman, has not vanished; it has grown considerably. With its 100,000 membership, it is six times what it was when Sembene was an apprentice builder in the 1930s, and twice what it was at the time of the *God's Bits of Wood* strike in 1947 (Majhemout Diop 1972, 193, 254). Not only is it proportionately bigger than in the other neo-colonial states, it has the advantage of being the oldest proletariat in the AOF, with a long history of struggle, of which the *God's Bits of Wood* strike is but one example (ibid, 247) and, as Senegalese scholar and leader of the PAI, Majhemout Diop, has pointed out, it is concentrated in one linguistically homogenous area, around Dakar (ibid, 199). On the downside, however, it is held back, in terms of consciousness and ability to resist, by poor or no education (ibid, 202), the fact that it is scattered among small industries, its peasant origins and feudal ties, and its awareness of the existence of a huge labour reserve (PIT, 41). This will not prevent it responding to the intellectuals' initiative in 1968 by a general strike.

(iv) The petty-bourgeoisie

The petty-bourgeoisie, true to form, ranges from a minority who are distantly supportive of the regime, and hoping to work their way into the privileged circle, to another small section who, throughout the Senghor period, form a committed Left anti-imperialist and often Marxist-Leninist opposition to the neo-colonial regime. The majority of these are intellectuals. Their parties banned, they operate underground and through the trade unions, in the university, and in schools, where they have a great deal of influence over the rising generation (Diop and Diouf, 206). It is this group which will spear-head the events of 1968.

Politics: one-party state or model democracy?

Let us now look at how these class interests are expressed politically. Two points are of interest to us. The first is that, democratic image notwithstanding, Senegal in the 1960s is a de facto one-party state like all the other French neo-colonies, and that this monopoly of power is obtained at the price of a good deal of repression. The second is that, though the Senegalese regime is autocratic and can resort to repression, it does rely more on consent and less on force than the majority of other one-party governments. Both of these facts will prove very important in terms of where Sembene will fit, how he will operate, and how his work will be received.

Between 1960 and 1963, Senghor makes three significant moves, all of them expressions of France's need to keep loyal Senegal secure for the West in the Cold War.

First, as we saw at the end of Chapter Two, he gets rid of the Federation of Mali, which might have enabled Senegal to be a viable economic unit and might have led to a real, socialist independence.

Two years later, in 1962, he gets rid of Mamadou Dia, who had been his co-head of government in a bi-cephalous system. Dia, the 'Marxist without the atheism' whom we referred to in Chapter Three, had an agenda which in the final analysis placed him quite a distance from France and Senghor. He wanted a real, as opposed to a nominal socialism, to replace Sufism with orthodox Islam, thus reducing the power of the marabouts, to reduce the French commercial monopoly, and remove the French military base (Mamadou Dia 1985, 124-132). In short, he wanted to cancel the agreements Senegal had signed with the French Ministère de la Coopération (Makédonsky, 176). Senghor, with French encouragement, again cried coup as he had in order to bring down the Mali Federation. The French went so far as to buy off the Senegalese National

Assembly (Vaillant, 313). Dia was tried and jailed at the end of 1962, not to be released until the political liberalisation of the mid-1970s. On his demise, French capitalism in Senegal breathed a sigh of relief that 'the only note of uncertainty' in Senegal had been eliminated, and declared 'Confidence is restored' (R. Cruise O'Brien 1972, 109, 113). The French, up to their necks in the plotting of this coup against a Dia who threatened their interests, spread the story that it was a mere matter of personal rivalry between Senghor and Dia - of two male crocodiles who could not share the same river: to think otherwise would no doubt be to fall victim to conspiracy theory.

Finally, Senghor deals with the PAI, the Marxist-Leninist party which Sembene had joined in 1957 in France. The PAI, according to some accounts, had gone so far as to make an attempt at armed resistance in 1960 (Bathily 1992, 30), which enabled the neo-colonial government to ban it without damaging its own democratic image. The leaders were jailed for a year, then went into exile in neighbouring Mali.

In 1963, with a new constitution written by French *coopérants* (P. Diagne, 106) Senegal adopted presidentialism like all the other members of de Gaulle's 1958 Communauté (Benôt 285).²⁰ Senegal proceeded to import De Gaulle's Jacobin 5th Republic model (Nzouankeu, 15, McNamara, 92-3), with its powerful executive and rubber-stamp legislature centralising power in the hands of a single individual, Senghor. Though Senghor, master of euphemisms, preferred to talk of a 'united' rather than a single party (Senghor 1980, 28), and although the Senegalese constitution, in the interests of the democratic image, theoretically allowed for complete freedom of association and multi-partyism (A. T. Dia, 37), by a mixture of carrot and stick methods all parties other than Senghor's Union Progressiste Sénégalaise (UPS) had been eliminated by 1966 (Nzouankeu, 30).

Hegemony: manufacturing consent

In terms of the prospects of our revolutionary art, there are two things about UPS culture worth noting at this stage. The first is its predilection for incorporation as a means of dealing with opposition. As far back as 1958, it had incorporated its old rival, Lamine Guèye's party, the SFIO. In 1964, it managed to incorporate one section of Cheikh Anta Diop's party, the Bloc des

²⁰ In 1958, de Gaulle, under pressure to decolonise, created the Communauté française, presenting it as an association of about-to-be sovereign former colonies, while in reality denying real sovereignty. This is the context for Sembene's novel, *L'Harmattan 1: Referendum*.

Masses Sénégalaises (BMS), repressing the remainder who refused to be won over. In 1966, a major wave of incorporations brought in the prominent intellectuals, many of them Marxist, of the Parti du Regroupement Africain-Sénégal (PRA-Senegal), originally a Left splinter group from the UPS, rewarding them with an impressive range of ministerial goodies (Diop and Diouf, 43). Incorporation - or *phagocytose*, as it became known - and the UPS by this stage were almost synonymous (I. Fall, 1990).

The second aspect of UPS culture worth noting is its clientelism. The UPS is made up, for the most part, at this stage, not of activists but of clients (Milcent, 130). People joined the party, not out of conviction, but because whoever wanted your vote in a local election was ready to provide a sack of rice in return for it. The party thus further deepened the dependency culture discussed in Chapter Two. As a well-known journalist put it, the unwritten motto of the party activist is *may ma, jox ma, dimbeli ma*: give me, help me, come to my aid (Agboton 1990).

Senghor's régime thus has two main sources of Gramscian consent: the *talibe*'s obedience to his marabout, as in the colonial era, and the clientelism of the UPS. This does not completely rule out the use of force, but reduces it compared to other one-party states. The UPS treatment of the Marxist-Leninist PAI is harsh; there are thirteen dead in 1963 after what Benôt calls a 'bloody repression' of a demonstration by students and workers (Benôt, 39, 177). There is another massive wave of repression, including electric torture perfected by the French in Algeria, against the underground PAI in 1966 (Bathily 1992, 30), and the number of political prisoners is an embarrassment to the government by the mid-1970s. But there is only one execution in Senghor's twenty years as President - that of a man accused of trying to assassinate him in 1967.

Nor does the incorporation or banning of the various opposition parties rule out all opposition. The PAI continues to organise and arm underground throughout the first half of the 1960s, and, even after the 1966 repression, operates through other organisations, and continues to have a good deal of influence. The university students' union is active, and despite an attempt to tame the workers' unions by forcing them into a single organisation in 1964, they manage to maintain a degree of oppositional activity up to 1968.

Freedom of speech is obviously an important question in terms of a Sembene hoping to produce revolutionary films. Talking to people who lived through both the 1960s and the liberalisation which started in the mid-1970s, it is clear that a freedom of speech became possible

from the mid-1970s, when multi-partyism was reintroduced, which was unthinkable in the 1960s. Objectively, this is reflected in the flurry of opposition and independent newspapers that appeared from 1976, where before there had been only the national daily, *Dakar Matin*, which was to all intents and purposes the party paper. The Senegal of the 1960s, like other one-party states, relied on student tracts and foreign media for political information.

On the other hand, there would seem to have been a degree of intellectual debate and cultural expression unheard of in other one-party states. This was certainly thanks to Senghor himself, the poet-president. Intellectuals interviewed in 1990 remember the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in 1966 as an example of the value placed on culture under Senghor, and, in ideological terms, look back with nostalgia on that era as a time of lively confrontation between *Négritude* and Marxism, when student organisations invited famous speakers like Neto and Cabral. Clearly Senghor, himself an addict of the intellectual life, needed intellectual playmates as well as the democratic image their existence projected of the country, and French imperialism had nothing to lose by it, as long as the line was drawn between the airing of ideas as a safety-valve and substitute for action, and on the other hand, debate as a means of raising the masses' consciousness and getting the revolution under way.

1968 à la sénégalaise

The contradictions of the first decade of neo-colonialism in Senegal finally express themselves in 1968. The events of May-June 1968 provide a sort of political barometer for anybody trying to assess issues like democracy, repression, resistance and revolutionary potential in Senegal in the 1960s. Bathily, a student activist participant, has provided a detailed account of the uprising (Bathily 1992), so I shall not go into detail here. From the point of view of the questions we are asking, a number of facts stand out.

May-June 1968 was the culmination of years of political agitation, largely on the part of students and intellectuals, but with support from workers, against the failure of Senghor's regime to decolonise at any level from the economic to the cultural. The Paris May 1968 was at most a catalyst which brought the long Senegalese struggle to a head. After several days of resistance at the university, the army was brought in, and at least one person died. The uprising then spread throughout Dakar and the neighbouring Cap Vert, involving not only students but school-children and lumpen elements, and was crowned by the workers declaring their solidarity with a

general strike. The forces of law and order completely lost control of the situation, and it is said that Senghor even instructed the army, who refused, to shoot at the rioting crowds: this aspect of 1968 is re-enacted fictively in Sembene's *The Last of the Empire*, published in 1981.

It is generally agreed that the level of civil unrest was such that it could have brought down Senghor's government. Just as Sembene describes much later in *The Last of the Empire*, Senghor was ready to take off in a French helicopter, leaving the country to the army (Lô 1987, 55). Given the reluctance of the Senegalese army - well-trained in French military schools (Diop and Diouf, 99) - to get involved in politics, the people themselves could have taken over. Neither of the above happened, and Senghor, almost to his surprise, found the reins handed back to him by those who for weeks had shouted that he must go.

Why was the outcome of what was obviously, objectively, a potentially threatening situation so inconclusive? Several reasons have been advanced. Fougeryollas, French one-time Communist sociologist, later Senghor's ideologue, claims that the lack of democracy in Senegal in the 1960s was not such as to make people really committed to a change of regime (Fougeryollas, 15). Dansokho and Bathily, of the Senegalese Left, feel that the level of consciousness of those involved was inadequate, that there was no real leadership, and that the programme of the insurgents did not extend beyond shouting insults at Senghor (F. Ndiaye et al, 90-91, 114).

In terms of our questions, 1968 is revealing in a number of ways. First, it is, as we said, a barometer of the level of revolutionary consciousness of the decade. The 1960s was a period of constant agitation against the neo-colonial regime, and frustration was high enough to be expressed in a way which almost brought down the state. The puny postman of *Mandabi* is a quite inadequate reflection of the real situation. We have to wait for Bathily's participant account published 25 years later for any real sense of the period. We shall come back to this in Chapter Five.

Secondly, I suggest that the unrest of the 1960s in Senegal, culminating in the failure to overthrow the neo-colonial state when the possibility presented itself, may reveal a profound trait of the Senegalese psyche shaped, as I tried to emphasise in Chapter Two, by centuries of feudalism and colonialism: a tendency to shout at the father - be he the monarch, the marabout, the French governor, or the head of the neo-colonial state - and to threaten him, but, when it

comes to the crunch, to be unable to conceive of life without him. 'Father of the Nation,' a popular title among the heads of the one-party states, is not just empty rhetoric, I suggest, in the case of Senegal. I shall be bearing this in mind, as I look at Sembene's relationship with French imperialism, the state and the people.

Radical artist v. neo-colonial state: clash or compromise?

Before starting to work on this topic, I had a personal legend of Sembene's return to Senegal in 1963: Marxist, atheist, Anti-imperialist, Scientific Socialist artist comes home to newly 'independent' country whose dominant ideologies are Islam, *Négritude* and African Socialism, with a mission to raise the consciousness of the masses and thereby incite them to overthrow the neo-colonial order. It looked like the only outcome would be a dramatic confrontation between polarised forces. Yet there was no such confrontation, there was no revolution, Sembene did not land in jail or exile: he became sub-Saharan Africa's first major film-maker, recognised by all as a revolutionary artist. In the light of a better knowledge of the historical and contemporary context, and hopefully of a better understanding of Sembene, I now want to try to look in a more realistic way at the situation as it presented itself in 1963 and at how it evolved from there to the production of *Mandabi* in 1968.

How has my understanding of Sembene been nuanced by looking at his life in Senegal and France in Chapter Three? His Marxism and anti-imperialism are not in doubt: the *ex-citoyen* and *ex-assimilé* is now secure in the interpretation of the world, and of Africa's place in it, that Marxism-Leninism provides. His profound internalisation of this world view, his commitment as an artist to expressing it, cannot be called into question by anybody who has read *God's Bits of Wood*. We do not need to doubt that a substantial part of this man is coming home with the intention of making revolutionary films to raise the masses' consciousness and over-turn the neo-colonial order.

On the other hand, he is an individual with personal aspirations, and a determination to make his mark, to 'be somebody'. To date, his commitment to a revolutionary art and his personal goal have not been in conflict: if anything, in France he has found the perfect niche for himself, as an ex-semi-proletarian, in the Communist and Anti-imperialist movements of the 1950s. His twin goals - to fight for a better Africa and a fairer world, but also to make his mark as an artist, to 'be somebody' in the existing one - have been complementary. We do not know, at this stage,

what he would do should his personal aspirations and his commitment to revolutionary art come into conflict.

Likewise, the 1950s have not shown us what Sembene is likely to do should the situation require him to make a political stand which might affect his life as an artist. Up to now, his political activism has if anything enhanced his art, enabling him to produce novels that only somebody with a certain political experience could write, and which so clearly matched the mood of the decade.

Chapter Three has also made me adjust my perception of Sembene's relationship with the French. Without calling his anti-imperialism into question, I have had to recognise that he is much closer, culturally and perhaps even emotionally, to the French than I had realised. His Lebu ancestors were hand-in-glove with them, he has spent more than half his life to date feeling he was French, and he has now spent almost fifteen years - again almost half his life - living in France, being treated with racism by some, and welcomed warmly by others - the Communists and his comrades in the CGT, and the left-wing artists. The French are thoroughly familiar to him, their culture is by now an integral part of him. Like his protagonist Oumar Faye in *O Pays mon beau peuple*, there is probably even a sense in which he loves France (Sembene 1957, 185).

Where, on the other hand, does he fit in terms of neo-colonial society in Senegal? He is not a part of the pseudo-feudal *grandes familles*, traditional or maraboutic, who are as prominent in the new Senegal as they were under colonialism. He has transformed himself from semi-educated semi-proletarian into petty-bourgeois intellectual. This class, in Senegal in 1963, is split down the middle, between organic state intellectuals, who, as we already saw, resent him as an up-start, and the radical, often Marxist-Leninist intellectuals who will welcome Sembene as their own artist.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are Sembene's personal qualities, his ways of dealing with context. What I have learned in writing Chapter Three is that this is an extremely astute individual, whose *boy Dakar* street wisdom has been further refined by his political experience in France, who can size up a given situation, identify his opponent's weakness, and turn it to his advantage. This is the troublesome teenager who convinced cinema managers that they had more to gain than lose by giving him and his friends permanent free passes, the youth who persuaded the officials on the boat that he was not a stow-away, and who recently,

according to a new anecdote, has managed to get a free camera and other equipment out of the Soviets by telling them to prove that they are not the racists he claims (Vieyra 1972, 204). Senegalese historian Bathily, who knows Sembene well, has commented on his excellent grasp of what he calls *le rapport des forces* (AB/FNC). A French critic has remarked on his grasp of 'the art of the possible' (Hennebelle 1978, 114). It is this quality, I feel, which will convince me, as I follow his progress through the 1960s, to modify my legend of conflict and confrontation.

The artist's perspective

How will Sembene size up the situation and evaluate the possibilities of creating a revolutionary art in Senegal in 1963? He is already aware that, from now on, he will have to deal with two main forces: neo-colonialism and those it oppresses. The first consists of the political bloc who have a vested interest in perpetuating neo-colonialism: the French, the Senegalese bureaucratic bourgeoisie - in other words, Senghor and the state - and the other sections of the ruling class: the traditional *grandes familles* and the marabouts. These are his opponents. The other group is his target audience, the classes oppressed by neo-colonialism - the peasants, sections of the petty-bourgeoisie and the workers - whose consciousness he hopes to raise.

Looking at this situation, Sembene will immediately recognise an obvious and fundamental contradiction. He has the intellectual, or artistic, means to make films, but the material means of production and distribution are controlled by the bloc he wants to expose and attack. Film may have looked like the ideal medium to reach the masses, but already a major draw-back is evident: the heavy capital outlay right from the point of production, and the need to deal with the neo-colonial state every step of the way, from permission to film on location to approval by the censorship board.

Sembene confronts two problems at this stage. The first has nothing to do with his ideological mission. Like all beginners in the film world, he has no credibility to convince private capitalist investors: to make a film, you must have already made one which has made a profit or been 'successful' in some other way. He must therefore find a way of building up a portfolio which will ultimately make him acceptable to private film companies, as this is the only way to gain access to general distribution, and therefore to the masses. But in 1963, with zero credibility, this is not even an option. I feel that he would therefore, pragmatically, decide to focus, in the first few years, on building up the portfolio, even if this meant, for the meantime,

sacrificing the possibility of the mass audience.

When he looks at other possible funders to make his first films, his second problem arises. In Senegal in 1963, this means the French Ministère de la Coopération. His obvious problem here is that he does not come with good ideological or political credentials.

How can he convince the neo-colonial state and the Ministère de la Coopération to allow him to make films which attack the neo-colonial state? Astute as he is, I feel he will look for a contradiction on the opponents' side, a chink in their armour. The neo-colonial forces in Senegal, as we saw in the previous section, want stability in order to combat Communist influence. They therefore cannot tolerate any form of overt political mobilisation with a Communist or even anti-imperialist label. Sembene knows what they did to the PAI, and to Dia, and soon after he arrives, Cheikh Anta Diop will also become a victim (Nzouankeu, 30). On the other hand, their anti-Communist agenda necessarily involves cultivating an image of democracy. A minimum of intellectual opposition is tolerated. And the state is, after all, at least in name, nationalist and socialist. This, I feel, is the contradiction Sembene is looking for, the margin of manoeuvre he will exploit.

There is also another factor he can exploit. President Senghor is a man who has always insisted on 'the primacy of culture'.²¹ The French, unwilling to do much to repair the colonial damage to the economy, about which Senghor doesn't know much anyway (Diop and Diouf, 40), can at least keep their faithful man of culture happy, by investing generously in cultural Coopération. The Dakar school-children that I mentioned in the Introduction are therefore not so far from the truth as I initially thought. Senghor's preoccupation with culture was significant for Sembene: how could Africa's poet-president be seen to be repressing Africa's first film-maker?

In what I see as this trial period, Sembene must learn to deal with the pressures of the neo-colonial state and French capitalist interests, without however losing sight of his ultimate goal, to create a consciousness-raising cinema that will help the petty-bourgeoisie and proletariat to understand how the dreams of real independence have turned into the reality of neo-colonialism, and to encourage them to keep up the fight. He must try to create a cinematographic language that will not over-stretch the tolerance of the ruling class on the one hand, and, on the other, will not be so diluted that the revolutionary message is lost on his potential target

²¹ *Ethiopiennes, numéro special, 1976*

audience. And he must not forget his comrades in the struggle either, the hard core of left intellectuals and workers (the unofficial/underground PAI): his art must not be so compromised that it causes them to lose faith in him and in themselves. In other words, each step of the way, he must be careful to draw the line between a strategic self-censorship and what could be perceived as the sacrifice of principle.

He must also think in terms of his own image, which is, after all, the palm-oil with which his created images will ultimately be digested by the masses. In this, too, he must look for a balance between the image of the sinister underground operator, who will remind the nervous neo-colonialists of Majhemout Diop with his machine-gun on the streets of St Louis in 1960, and on the other hand, the opportunistic sell-out to the state who disgusts the masses increasingly as neo-colonialism develops in the 1960s.

He also needs to build up a reputation, at home but especially abroad, which will allow him greater freedom to express himself over time: the 'too-famous-to-touch' syndrome which gives some protection to radical artists, especially those working under pseudo-democratic regimes.

The neo-colonial state perspective

So much for how the situation is likely to have appeared to Sembene. How, in turn, will he be perceived by the state and the various neo-colonial forces?

We should begin by reminding ourselves not to exaggerate the importance, for a state in the grips of a chronic economic crisis and just emerging from a political 'coup' (the break-up of the Mali Federation) of a relatively obscure individual who has written a few books, no matter how revolutionary, and who is plotting to revolutionise the masses' consciousness via a medium - the African cinema - which does not yet exist.

On the other hand, we must balance this against the fact that, in a country with under three million people, intellectuals who have written books are relatively visible, especially if they have a Communist/PAI tag attached to them, and are just arriving in from Moscow. The neo-colonial forces will not be unaware of Sembene's return, and the aspect that will interest them most is the Communist/PAI tag. The banned PAI is, after all, rumoured to be currently mobilising in eastern Senegal under its exiled Bamako-based leadership, and, according to several reports, planning an armed insurrection with the support of Che Guevara (Bathily 1992,

30).

What is to be done with Sembene? Refuse to help him to make his films, and you may drive him deeper into the arms of the PAI. A gun-running Sembene, already on speaking terms with Moscow, is a much more threatening prospect than a mere film-maker, no matter how revolutionary. On the other hand, given the on-going agitation by the left intelligentsia, and the growing tension throughout the country, to allow him a free hand to make his revolutionary films might conceivably light fires the government would not be able to put out.

Secondly, should the man miraculously get the project off the ground by other means, and produce his revolutionary films without state aid, repressing him will also create more problems than it will solve. Senegal's towns in the 1960s are full of young Left-inclined Senegalese admirers of Che and Fidel who are hungry for an indigenous hero, and a repressed Sembene, whom this small but active group already admires for having read the novels, would be an immediate candidate for martyrdom, and more of a mobiliser than any film. In addition, repression of an artist would tarnish Senegal's democratic image abroad, and reduce the public's sense of the state's hegemonic confidence at home.

Clearly, the optimal solution is a Sembene 'free' of the Communist/PAI tag, one kept busy and out of mischief making films that, while they don't set light to the tinderbox, still have enough bite to give the lie to those who try to deny Senegal's democratic image: in other words, an incorporated Sembene.

Sembene, we have said, will recognise and exploit the neo-colonial Achilles' heel: the need for a democratic image. Does he in turn have an Achilles' heel the neo-colonial bloc can exploit? Could it be, for example, that, in this new context, a contradiction will arise between his commitment to change and his desire to further his artistic career? Given neo-colonial Senegal's capacity for incorporation, and the fact that Senghor is a master of this art, I feel that the neo-colonial forces, looking at Sembene in 1963, will be bound to hope that, with a bit of encouragement, his personal ambition will take precedence over his commitment to social change, and that when this happens, they will have him where they want him.

We have now come quite some distance from the confrontational and conflict-ridden home-coming of my legendary Sembene. In Senegal in 1963, then, a Sembene with a Marxist/anti-imperialist orientation, but who is ready to dispense with his party connection,

would be more likely to encounter, not the open confrontation and repression I had originally expected, but incorporation overtures by the neo-colonial bloc, who have much more to gain from an incorporated Sembene than a repressed one.

Testing the water: Sembene's early films

Let us now look at how Sembene transforms himself, over a period of five years, from a raw film-school graduate, to the point where he is in a position to make sub-Saharan Africa's first full-length fiction feature for commercial consumption, *Mandabi*.

Let us begin by looking at some of the personal assets he brings to the task. At forty, he is still unmarried: his family commitments amount to one *métis* son, born in Marseilles in 1960, who is still abroad (Vieyra 1972, 22-3). This highly untypical situation for a Senegalese Muslim leaves Sembene free to throw himself whole-heartedly into his new project. As an intellectual, he has a tried and tested philosophy through which to interpret the world, at a moment in history when many must have felt deep ideological confusion at the disappointing turn the anti-imperialist struggle had taken. As an artist, he is an experienced writer with a head-start on other would-be film-makers, many of whom will spend years casting around relatively unsuccessfully among other people's literary works for viable material. Finally, as a budding film-maker about to start producing in an underdeveloped country, he has been to the best school possible - a Soviet one, where, as Sarah Maldoror, Sembene's only Black class-mate at the Moscow Film School says, rather than specialise from the start, you learn all aspects of the trade (SM/FNC).

What kind of institutional framework for film-making exists in neo-colonial Senegal at this stage? In terms of both production and post-production, Sembene, with his usual knack, arrives at a good time. Unlike their somewhat uncivilised and vindictive departure from Guinea, which had voted NO in de Gaulle's 1958 referendum, the French have not taken out the light fittings in their favourite, well-behaved Senegal, and the partial production unit for the making of the colonial weekly newsreel, *Les Actualités françaises*, under its new neo-colonial name *Les Actualités sénégalaises*, is in the hands of the man who was to become Sembene's close friend, Paulin Vieyra, head of the Senegalese Service du Cinéma attached to the Ministry of Information. Sembene, like other aspiring Senegalese film-makers at the time, is able to get free left-over film and access to other production facilities from the Service. At post-production level, through the Coopération agreements, the Senegalese, like other African film-makers, had access

to the facilities of the Consortium Audio-visuel International in Paris. Finally, in 1963, the French Ministère de la Coopération set up the Bureau du Cinéma in Paris, which was ready to support film-makers in the neo-colonies either by financing the entire production and post-production costs of approved scripts, or by buying partial rights to already-made films in need of post-production funding (Diawara, 24).

Between 1963 and 1966, Sembene makes his first three films with the help of all these facilities. I have suggested that this is an experimental, preparatory period, which enables him to build up the credibility with funders which, as we shall see in the next chapter, made *Mandabi* possible. It was also a time for testing the ideological water, in terms of the tolerance threshold of the neo-colonial bloc.

How exactly does Sembene proceed? He sets up his own company, Filmi Doomi Rewmi. Though the name - 'films of the people of the nation' - at this stage expresses a hope more than a reality, it does give him a professional footing on which to deal with the Ministère de la Coopération. He then makes his first film, *Borom Sarret* (1963), a 20-minute short in black-and-white, using left-over film and other facilities provided by Vieyra's Service du Cinéma. At this point, the Ministère de la Coopération takes over, financing post-production costs. The film thus emerges as a Franco-Senegalese co-production, with the Ministère de la Coopération controlling rights of distribution for the first five years.

Borom Sarret does so well financially, paying for itself in a year, that it encourages the Ministère de la Coopération to fund Sembene's next film, *Niaye* (1964), a 35-minute black-and-white film. *Niaye*, which is based on Sembene's novella *White Genesis*, is not as successful as *Borom Sarret*: Vieyra feels that Sembene did not yet have sufficient experience in adapting literary works (Vieyra 1972, 49).

Sembene now submits the script for his third film, *La noire de...* (1966: 60 minutes in black-and-white), based on one of his short stories in the collection *Voltaïque* (1962), to the newly created Bureau du Cinéma in Paris. Director Débrix has a generous budget and has declared his readiness to help anybody 'with a film in their stomach' to make images of themselves for 'image-starved' Africans (Diawara, 26). But according to Diawara, these good intentions do not stretch to funding a script like *La noire de...*, which depicts the racist treatment by a *coopérant* couple of their Senegalese house-girl. Sembene therefore resorts to his original

method, and films *La noire de...* with left-over film and the help of the Senegalese Service du Cinéma. Once filmed, however, the Ministère de la Coopération change their mind, buy the rights and cover post-production costs (Diawara, 26). *La noire de ...* thus becomes Sembene's third Franco-Senegalese co-production.

In a moment I shall attempt to evaluate Sembene's career to date in terms of our model, and of the two different agendas - that of Sembene and that of the neo-colonial bloc - which I have speculated about in this chapter. But the picture is not complete without looking at Sembene's other activities in the 1963-68 period.

The most striking point is that he pulls back from politics and throws himself into culture. Vieyra is our source for the political withdrawal. Describing Sembene in the 1960s, he says: 'although he remains a man with an ideology, he keeps out of all political activity' (Vieyra 1972, 24). On the other hand, Sembene's cultural activism is very visible, even high-profile. In 1966, he is a prominent figure at the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in Dakar, where he wins a number of prizes for literature and film and is referred to on the front page of Senegal's sole daily newspaper as 'the pride of his country' (*Dakar Matin* 11/4/1966). He is to the fore in organising the festival cinema events, and it is his lobbying of the French Minister of Culture, famous author André Malraux, who flies in to open the Festival with Senghor, for funds for African cinema which will prove to be the first step in the making of *Mandabi* (*Dakar Matin* 4/12/1968).

Conclusion

What, then, has Sembene achieved over these five years, and what has been the price?

He has certainly achieved two goals of this preparatory period. He has proved that, when funded, he delivers, which will give him credibility with future investors. But he has done more than that: all his films have won prizes at international festivals, including the prestigious Cannes, where *La noire de ...*, already honoured at the Dakar festival in 1966, carried off the *Prix Jean Vigo* in 1967. In terms of being somebody, of his personal career as a film-maker, he is now well on his way. And in terms of his revolutionary agenda, with a small but growing international reputation, the state, if it is to maintain its image, will have to think twice in future in terms of how it will deal with him.

He has also tested the ideological water and obtained some results. The various lobbies within the neo-colonial bloc have reacted in their different ways, and relatively predictably, to

the various films. On the French side, the Ministère de la Coopération has had no problem with Niaye, which, with its story of a village elder who rapes his own daughter, focuses its attack on the decadence of the Senegalese pseudo-feudal class. The pseudo-feudalists themselves have been outraged, declaring incest un-African and un-Islamic (AS/FNC). The Senegalese Minister of Information, Fofana, objects that Sembene is 'exposing the decadence of our society to foreigners' (Vieyra 1983, 62-3). We here witness the birth of the 'we-are-not-like-that' school of criticism which will also have difficulty digesting *Mandabi*, as we shall see in the next chapter. On the other hand, the Coopération people, for their part, have proved incapable, at least in the first instance, of coping with the attack on French racism in *La noire de...*, but, significantly, as Diawara has pointed out, were quick to engage in a damage-limitation exercise by buying the rights once Sembene had proved capable of going half-way without them (Diawara, 34).

A major question remains: given the preparatory nature of this period, as I see it, has Sembene created, if not thorough-going revolutionary films, at least works which, in terms of the fine line between strategic self-censorship and incorporation, can be seen to be part of a long-term revolutionary agenda?

Looked at from this angle, the three films are very similar. On the positive side, they put the oppressed of the neo-colonial order on the agenda, at a moment in Senegalese artistic history when other budding film-makers were preoccupied with petty-bourgeois concerns of the culture-conflict type²² and dramatists, writing for the new national theatre, were principally engaged with historical material.²³ Sembene's humble *borom sarret* - owner of a horse-and-cart - and his house-girl in *La noire de...*, were to set a trend for Senegalese cinema which would dominate it throughout its heyday in the 1970s.

One can take this further: in all three films, but especially in *Borom Sarret* and *La noire de...*, Sembene already shows what will be his most striking trade-mark as a filmmaker: the ability to capture the world in a small, seemingly insignificant situation, and thereby to reveal the underlying structures of the system. The fate of the *borom sarret* is neo-colonialism in a nutshell, and, as Vieyra says, 'the apparent simplicity of the house-girl's story expresses the hidden depth of Sembene's feelings about social conditions in Africa' (Vieyra 1975, 163). In terms of our

²² For example, Momar Thiam's *Sarzan* (1963), adapted from Birago Diop's short story, and Ababacar Samb's *Et si la neige n'était plus* (1964).

model, the system is certainly captured in these early films, at least for those, like Vieyra, who can see beyond the surface simplicity.

On the other hand, *Borom Sarret* is not *God's Bits of Wood* on celluloid. This is really brought home to me in the last minutes of the film where, the carter having returned empty-handed after a day's work, his wife hands him the child and says she is going out 'to bring back something to eat', and we know that what she has in mind is not a heroic struggle with her brother's ram, à la Ramatoulaye in *God's Bits of Wood*, but a more pragmatic and humiliating solution. *Borom Sarret* is a beautiful work of art - Vieyra correctly calls it 'one of the most perfect shorts of African cinema' (Vieyra 1975, 160). But it is an example, not of the Socialist Realism which makes *God's Bits of Wood* a potential political mobiliser, but of an Italian Neo-realism which, born in the fascist Italy of the 1940s, exposes the problem to those who have eyes to see, but stops short of showing the possibility of a revolutionary way of dealing with it. And this could be said of all three films. The result is that, in place of the fighting oppressed of *God's Bits of Wood*, we are left with images of victims: a poor man deprived by the neo-colonial police of his means of livelihood, a young girl raped by her respected patriarch of a father and forced, with her new-born child, to leave home with nowhere to go, and another young girl, a Black girl in France losing her mind in an alien culture, with her life blood oozing into a symbolically white bath. These are films that are more likely to make the neo-colonial bloc uncomfortable than to provoke the masses, beyond their undoubted anger, to action. We shall come back to this victim question when we discuss *Mandabi* in the next chapter. But for the moment, this victim cinema, which clearly does not reflect the level of resistance of the 1960s we described at the beginning of this chapter, would seem to be evidence of fairly radical self-censorship.

Whose agenda, then, is being followed in these films, that of Sembene who wants them to be revolutionary but not too obviously so for those who own the means of material production to kill them in the bud, or that of the neo-colonial bloc which wants them radical enough to bring credit to Senegal and France for their liberalism, but not so radical that they could potentially destabilise? I am asking two fundamental questions here, which this chapter can only raise, not answer. The first is whether Sembene underestimated what he could have got away with at this stage. The second is whether there is any sign that he is beginning to put his desire to be a filmmaker before his commitment to revolutionary art, and allowing himself to be incorporated.

²³ For example, Cheikh Aliou Ndao's *L'Exil d'Alboury*.

I do not think that anybody who has seen *La noire de...* would see it is an example of playing safe. I feel that this was definitely the film where Sembene tested to see how far he could go. The price he paid was in having to make an ambitious film (in its original version it ran to almost full feature length) with left-overs. He himself has referred to this process as '*mégotage*' (Pâquet and Borremans, viii) - the salvaging of cigarette butts - and while it might have been adequate for a twenty-minute film like *Borom Sarret*, it is far from ideal for the more ambitious work he has in mind. What we need to ask, in terms of his future work, is what he might have learned from this water-testing experience: to be more cautious and ensure French Aid from the outset, or, seeing that they ultimately took on board what they had initially rejected, that he can, if determined, get away with more? Only time - and his later films - will tell. It has been suggested that the French, for their part, learned their lesson, and were much more forthcoming when it came to funding *Mandabi* (Vieyra 1972, 203).

On the other hand, daring though *La noire de...* is, Sembene's total silence with respect to the real resistance to neo-colonialism taking place in the society has to be faced. Has he done this for strategic reasons, or to avoid jeopardising his own budding career? Should he have to continue along this line, his future films will have difficulty inspiring the masses to believe that the revolution is necessary and possible.

I have two more reservations. The first is that, although Sembene could be said to have put the Senegalese cinema on the international map and to have made it, in the 1960s and well into the 1970s, the undisputed leader of cinema in sub-Saharan Africa, his typically Senegalese willingness to deal with the French led in the long term to a cinema of dependency, if we define independence in terms of control of the means of material production. Diawara has pointed out that, while those states outside the French orbit, like Ghana and Guinea, developed full production units, elsewhere the French nurtured individual directors at the expense of the development of both technicians and technical production and post-production units (Diawara 33, 57). Sembene was one of the directors who, wittingly or unwittingly, was part of this under-development package.

My second question concerns Sembene's withdrawal from politics. How do we evaluate this complex issue? I admit that I had difficulty coming to terms with a Sembene who was busy receiving prizes and lobbying for aid at the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres at the very moment in April 1966 when, according to Bathily, his old comrades of the PAI were the objects of a 'real

festival of torture' in police-stations throughout Senegal (F. Ndiaye et al, 118), and with the fact that he did not even attempt to use the festival as an international platform to speak out against this. Instead, in the days that follow, the state daily, *Dakar Matin*, carries a front-page interview with Sembene bearing the title 'I am not active in any party', and in which he explains that he has not renounced any of his principles, since, as he says 'my activism is in my art' (*Dakar Matin* 11/4/66). Is this a man in the process of allowing himself to be incorporated because he wants to make films and be famous, or is it a revolutionary giving a stealthy state journalist the slip and living to fight for the cause another day?

CHAPTER FIVE

***MANDABI*: HAS THE ELEPHANT GIVEN BIRTH TO A MOUSE?**

At the beginning of Chapter Four, I introduced Sembene's best-known film of the 1960s, *Mandabi*, and explained how, before I embarked on this study, it symbolised for me the central question this study asks: what happens when a radical artist attempts to create under the conditions of neo-colonialism? I pointed out that for me, *Mandabi* fell short in terms of two things that Sembene's greatest work of the 1950s, *God's Bits of Wood*, did so well: exposing how imperialism works, and inspiring those it oppresses to fight back. Before I embarked on this study, then, I saw *Mandabi* as a great paradox: designed, as Sembene's first film to gain access to the commercial cinema network and hence to the masses, to overcome the impotence of *God's Bits of Wood*, it was itself impotent in essential respects where *God's Bits of Wood* had been so powerful.

In the remainder of Chapter Four, I tried to describe Senegal in the 1960s in terms of how the neo-colonial hegemony functioned, and of the nature and degree of resistance. I focussed on Sembene's efforts to get started as a film-maker in this context, and tried to show some of the contradictions of film-making under neo-colonialism, and how Sembene, balancing between the pressures of the neo-colonial state and the French Ministère de la Coopération on the one hand, and his desire to raise the consciousness of the masses on the other, had managed to produce three short films, all of which could be described as Neo-realist, in that they focus on the fate of the oppressed in colonial/neo-colonial society, but none of which had indicated the level of resistance present in the society or hinted that it was possible for people to fight back. I saw this period as a sort of apprenticeship for Sembene, where he developed the necessary credibility as a film-maker to equip him for the financial struggle, and where he tested the political water to see how much he could say in the neo-colonial context. *Mandabi*, I felt, would be the real test, to see whether it would be possible not only to dissect oppression but to show that it could be resisted. But all that *Mandabi* had provided in terms of resistance was an absurd, deus-ex-machina postman.

In this chapter I have two related aims: to examine the production and reception of *Mandabi*, and to discuss further my original description of its relationship with *God's Bits of*

Wood in terms of the elephant giving birth to a mouse. Before embarking on the making of *Mandabi*, I therefore want to clarify a few of the issues this unflattering comparison raises.

For me, *God's Bits of Wood* did a number of things that, had it been able to reach the masses, could not have failed to raise their consciousness and contributed to mobilising them against oppression. For one, it identified the oppressors clearly in class terms, providing an unambiguous target: 'Treat as a friend who treats you as a friend, treat your boss as an enemy' (Sembene 1973, 20). Secondly, it provided characters with whom the masses could identify, characters who were very real, very ordinary and at the same time very heroic, people with values and ideals. Thirdly, it provided a successful struggle which was all the more convincing for being based on a real historic strike in the recent past: it said that if it was possible to fight in 1947, it was still possible to fight now. In a word, it was the realism of *God's Bits of Wood* which lent it its power, both to expose and to raise consciousness and mobilise.

Mandabi, for me, was unlikely to do either. In terms of exposing the system, I admitted in Chapter Four that it could be read symbolically, and seen to present the two opposed classes of neo-colonialism and that one could, following this interpretation, see the bureaucratic bourgeoisie as the target, and the postman as the representative of the proletariat. But I felt it required Marxist tools to read it in this way, and even then, it was stretching it slightly to go looking for a fat bureaucratic bourgeois behind every petty obstructive clerk. For the masses, unexposed to Marxist theory, I felt the enemy in *Mandabi* would look confusing and elusive, presenting itself in such a variety of forms, from government clerk to businessman to small photographer to beggar, that they were as likely to come away with the message that you should not give to beggars, who might be imposters, than they were to identify the real enemy, the wealthy bureaucratic bourgeoisie we never see and the French imperialists, so visible in *God's Bits of Wood*, but nowhere to be found in the world of *Mandabi*.

There were no characters with unambivalent values and ideals with whom the masses could identify positively in *Mandabi*. Everybody in the society was tainted with the general all-pervasive corruption, right down to the protagonist who seemed to consider the money his nephew had asked him to save on his behalf as his own. Imagine in *God's Bits of Wood* a Ramatoulaye who, rather than killing the ram of her colonial collaborator brother to feed her strike-hungry children and her neighbour's children, sneaks a quiet meal for herself on the sly in her brother's house, and you have the *Mandabi* world. To make matters worse, old Dieng, the

protagonist, who, lacking as he did the inspiring probity of a Ramatoulaye, was still the only character qualifying for any form of identification, and whose fate in the novella version elicits a degree of pity and anger, in the film is turned into a comic figure that I was convinced mass audiences would laugh at as much as with.

Thirdly, there was no convincing resistance to provide the masses with a model of fighting back. Initially, not knowing enough about the Senegalese context in the 1960s, I had had to allow for the possibility that, in reality, virtually all resistance had died under Senghor. If it had, fair enough, the Realist artist would not be serving the revolution by fabricating a fictive resistance that the society itself was incapable of producing: as Engels told Margaret Harkness, he could not expect her to depict her East End workers as revolutionaries, given the unimpressive record of East Enders in this domain (Marx and Engels 1976, 91).

But if the Senegalese in the 1960s were in reality at the same stage as the East Enders in the 1890s, then how was one to explain the postman? In any case, my exploration of Senegal in the 1960s, described in Chapter Four, had led me to the conclusion that the resistance picture at that stage was a very complex one. There had been a sufficient degree of actively expressed dissatisfaction throughout the decade to almost bring down the regime in 1968, but no leadership and clear agenda to carry this through to completion. The general tone of passive acceptance permeating *Mandabi* did not to my mind do any justice to this complex situation, and the postman was no help at all in understanding it.

I could not see what Sembene had hoped to do to the masses' consciousness via this postman, coming as he did at the end of a narrative which I felt had prepared the audience for nothing except more corruption, fatalism and parasitism. Omit him, and the film at least has a unity (albeit an uninspiring one and one which does not do justice to the reality): it depicts a society devoid of the will to fight back, and Dieng's final words, 'I too will become a hyena' bring it to a fitting close. I wondered what the Senegalese masses had made of the postman, and why Sembene had not described in a straight-forward realistic way what had really become of the fighting workers of *God's Bits of Wood*.

From cigarette butts to Cinéma Liberté: making *Mandabi*

In 1968, Sembene is no longer the apprentice film-maker who arrived in Senegal five years earlier. His apprentice works have not reached the masses but they have won him a string

of prizes at home and abroad. He has a promise from the French Minister of Culture, André Malraux, that further help will be given to African cinema. In 1967, he is on the panel of judges at Cannes and Moscow (Vieyra 1972, 22).

In 1968, Sembene, who had applied to the Centre National de Cinématographie française for a box-office advance, received 300,000 francs CFA to help with making *Mandabi* (*Dakar-Matin* 4/12/1968). This French government body normally dealt only with applications from French nationals, but Malraux had instructed them to make an exception for Sembene (Diawara, 32). With the 300,000 francs in hand, Sembene was in a position to do what he could not do earlier: submit his film script to commercial film companies. As he himself puts it: 'Cinema people don't trust Africans but they do trust money' (Vieyra 1972, 175). He shopped around until he got the best deal. The company he chose, Les Comptoirs français du film, agreed to co-produce the film with him, with a budget of 1,500,000 francs, which was 15 times what his previous film, *La noire de...*, had cost (Hennebelle 1969, 76). Les Comptoirs in turn had links with the two French companies who controlled distribution throughout francophone Africa in the 1960s, the SECMA and the COMACICO (Vieyra 1975, 243-4).

The contradictions of commercial production

Sembene's previous collaboration with the Ministère de la Coopération, as I tried to show in Chapter Four, had fallen short in terms of his revolutionary aims on two counts: it had restricted the distribution of his films to relatively elitist circles, and it had produced a typically Neo-realist critical but 'victim' cinema rather than a cinema of resistance. We now need to examine the new set of contradictions which his move into commercial production is likely to engender. How compatible can a revolutionary artistic agenda be with the goals of French capitalist production and distribution companies, and where does the Senegalese neo-colonial bloc described in Chapter Four fit into the new scenario?

In light of the theory that capitalism is inherently hostile to art, one might be tempted to write off the venture at this point. But paradoxically Sembene and the commercial companies have one major point in common: they both want to see the masses on cinema seats. While on one level - that of the need to raise consciousness - Sembene's agenda differs from the profit-orientation of the companies, on another, he too wants profit in order to make his next revolutionary film. Even their artistic agenda may not be in total contradiction, since both want

to actually bring the crowds into the cinema, before asking what else they want to do with them. Overall, Sembene and the companies can go some distance together.

It is when we come to consider what Sembene wants to do with his mass audience once he gets them into the cinema that the problem obviously arises. The companies in their own right are not particularly interested in the content and possible impact of a film, beyond its crowd-pulling ability. On the other hand, they are very aware of the profit-endangering problem of censorship, especially in one-party states. Vieyra has pointed out that they favour film scripts 'that will not make trouble' (Vieyra 1975, 335). But trouble is what Sembene ultimately needs to create. Yet in terms of self-censorship, he now has to assess not only the state's tolerance threshold - which is likely to drop in face of the added threat of a cinema accessible to the masses, but his commercial partners' paranoia about state censorship.

Is *Mandabi* therefore fated, in the commercial context, to be less bold, and not bolder, than *La noire de..*? Is Sembene, far from building himself up into a position where he will at last be able to carry out his revolutionary agenda, now locking himself into a deeper contradiction than before?

The new mass audience

So much for the entry of the commercial companies into the game. The other new player who has to be built into our calculations with *Mandabi* is the Senegalese masses, who up to this point have never heard of Sembene, much less seen a Sembene film.

There is evidence that Sembene himself made some practical calculations in the 1960s in terms of the ability of the cinema to reach the Senegalese masses. His figures and his conclusion - that the average Senegalese went to the cinema eight or nine times a year and that the cinema therefore had more attraction for people than the mosque, the church or the political party (Vieyra 1972, 177) - are questionable in light of the fact that 80% of the population, the peasants, never set foot in a cinema and most of these were devoted to their marabout. On the other hand, if we focus on urban Senegal, and after all this is where, as we tried to show in Chapter Four, the level of consciousness is likely to be most receptive to radical ideas, we find that, in comparative African terms, Senegal in 1968 is well-endowed with cinemas and has a long tradition of cinema-going. The first cinema opened in Dakar in 1900, almost as soon as cinema was born, and in 1968, Senegal has 70 odd cinemas for a population of three million, as against, for

example, Nigeria, with 110 cinemas for 58 million (Vieyra 1975, 400-420), and there are more cinema tickets sold per year in Senegal than in the rest of francophone Africa put together (Vieyra 1975, 264). Up to 1973, there is no competition from TV.

The cinema-going population in this semi-traditional and largely Muslim society is made up for the most part of young men and women of all classes under the age of 35 (after this, one is expected to turn to more serious pursuits). They are used to the cheap, bulk-bought programmes supplied by the SECMA and the COMACICO: American, French and Indian films (Diawara, 106). The emphasis is on action, since most of the audience is not expected to understand the dialogue (Vieyra 1975, 241). The distributors have projected onto the African audience their own concept of mass cinema as bland entertainment.

But it should not be forgotten that this audience also has a capacity for, and an expectation of, a more serious message, inherited from their traditional literature, in which laughing at the antics of Buki the hyena did not prevent one learning something valuable about human beings and society. This is what Notcutt and Latham, in the earliest study of African cinema audiences, refers to as the Swahili *faida*, the expectation of intellectual gain from art (Notcutt and Latham, 107).

Sembene's target audience has also brought from traditional literature a sense of involvement and identification with the characters: people told me over and over how they used to come out of the cinema still talking and strutting like the hero of the Western they had just seen. Telling other people about films one has seen, and hearing about films from others, is a real part of the culture, a legacy, presumably, of traditional story-telling. People go back again and again to see the same film until they know it by heart. They have even been known to master Hindi from watching Indian films.

So much for theory. How does the new mode of production work out in practice, between Sembene, the Comptoirs and distributors, and the neo-colonial bloc? There does not seem to have been any major conflict at any point, from the drawing up of the contract right through to distribution and consumption.

In the production contract, the Comptoirs retained financial control, having put up 80% of the capital, while Sembene had full artistic control (Diawara, 32). The Comptoirs supplied four French technicians to work with the core Senegalese technical team. The Comptoirs insisted

on colour, in the interests of crowd-pulling, and Sembene conceded, despite his artistic preference for the black-and-white of his first three films (Vieyra 1972, 205). The Comptoirs wanted to add more sex, and here, according to Vieyra, Sembene refused to pander to what he saw as Western tastes (Vieyra 1972, 177). Was the astute, pragmatic Sembene, with his deep knowledge of his people, also wary of putting off the multi-generational family groups which would make up much of his audience? For either reason or both, Sembene won the battle, and the sex scenes were not over-done. The language discussion resulted in a compromise: every sequence in the film would be shot twice, providing two independent versions, in Wolof and French respectively (Hennebelle 1969, 80). Casting does not appear to have been an issue: Sembene, as artistic director, would appear to have had a free hand. As for the censorship concern, it was not even raised: both Sembene and Vieyra, who was involved in production, say that the Comptoirs did not even attempt to modify the script with the Senegalese censorship board in mind (Hennebelle 1969, 76; Vieyra 1972, 95).

Gains and losses: language, self-censorship

Let us look briefly at some of the implications of Sembene's apparent honeymoon with his commercial partners in terms of a revolutionary cinema.

His most obvious victory was in terms of language. Here, *Mandabi* was an advance on Sembene's previous films on two counts. First, it had directly recorded dialogue - Sembene's first three films, due to technical constraints, had had post-synchronised voice-overs made in Paris (Vieyra 1972, 157). Better still, this time, the dialogue was in a language the Senegalese masses could understand: at last, the mass audience would be able to go beyond mere watching of the action, and engage with the film on a completely different level from that to which their regular American, French and Indian diet had accustomed them. It may seem difficult to imagine how Sembene managed in 1968 to convince the Comptoirs to agree to the cost of a Wolof version, given that Wolof was spoken by less than three million people, 80% of them peasants who did not frequent cinemas. But on the other hand, Senegal at this stage, as we have just seen, had the most developed cinema infrastructure in francophone Africa, and accounted for over 50% of the profits of the distribution companies (Vieyra 1975, 264). Sembene won his case, and, when the crowds rolled in, proved that African languages were a commercially viable proposition, making *Mandabi* a historic turning point for African cinema. With regard to language, commercial and

revolutionary agendas proved completely compatible.

Where language was a victory, the self-censorship issue remains a thorny one. Sembene presents the fact that his script was not tampered with by his commercial partners as evidence of his relative independence in his dealings with them (Hennebelle 1969, 76). I am inclined to see it more as evidence that, in selecting *Mandabi*, a script which was less rather than more daring than his previous ones, for his first commercial venture, he was not even testing what the new mode of production would allow, he was playing doubly cautious from the outset.

Casting a comedian: a serious compromise

Sembene's other major concession to the commercial mode of production was in his casting, where he had a free hand and where he proved himself as keen as his commercial partners to pull the crowds, even at the risk of reducing his revolutionary impact. In all his earlier films, he had used non-professional actors, in the Neo-realist tradition: the heroine of *La noire de...* was an unknown seamstress until Sembene spotted her photo on Vieyra's office wall (TMB/FNC). But for *Mandabi*, he cast a 'star' in the lead, and one whose name was synonymous with comedy: Mamadou Guèye, alias Makhourédia, famous all over Senegal for his enormously popular comic radio series *Makhourédia chauffeur de taxi*. The tone of the novella *The Money Order* is serious, and Sembene's first three films are similar. Comedy pervades *Mandabi* the film. Makhourédia could be guaranteed to draw the Senegalese masses, but how compatible would his reputation, and his handling of the role, prove in terms of Sembene's consciousness-raising agenda? One does not have to agree with Fanon on the incompatibility of comedy and revolutionary art (Fanon, 194), but watching *Mandabi*, I cannot help feeling that comedy and mild reformism are better bed-mates.

Filming and Distribution

Filming of *Mandabi* began in February 1968 and ended in April. Both events were accompanied by press conferences in Dakar, and comprehensively covered in *Dakar-Matin* (7/3/1968 and 9/4/1968). The film was taken to Paris for editing, where it was delayed by the student uprising in May. It was completed in July. In September, it was entered at the Venice Film Festival, and won an award. In November, like its predecessor, *La noire de ...*, it was shown in Paris, at the Luxembourg in the Latin Quarter, and ran for two weeks, receiving enthusiastic reviews from the entire French press, from the Communist *Humanité* to the satirical *Canard*

Enchaîné to the right-wing *Figaro* (Vieyra 1975, 165-6). In December, it came to Senegal, and, after an initial hiccup with the censors, who, according to Vieyra, were over-ridden by Senghor (Vieyra 1972, 93), was honoured with an official state gala premiere, followed by a debate: the front page of *Dakar-Matin* the following day (4/12/1968) carried a large photo of Sembene, Senghor, the French ambassador and their respective wives (Sembene had married his first cousin, following Wolof tradition, in 1967). *Dakar Matin* also carried a speech given by Vieyra, as production manager, at the premiere (4/12/1968), a lengthy review of the film by one of the state's organic intellectuals (B. Diouf, 2), and a report on the debate (Vieyra 1972, 180). Shortly after, the film went into general release: contrary to Diawara's claim (Diawara, 36), *Mandabi*, unlike all sub-Saharan African films up to that point, was shown commercially all over the country, thanks to the *Comptoirs'* agreement with the French distribution companies.

Ceeb u jen hits the commercial screens: reception of *Mandabi*

My discussion of the reception of *Mandabi* in 1968 falls into two sections. In the first, I intend to cover the published reception, while in the second I focus on responses recorded during my field-work.

Mandabi through French eyes

Mandabi, as we saw, appeared in France before it reached Senegalese screens. The response of the French press was resoundingly enthusiastic: *Le Canard Enchaîné* called it 'The film that must be seen' and *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* said all other recent films paled into insignificance beside it.²⁴ To understand why *Mandabi* appealed so universally to the French critical world, one needs to situate it in the French cinema context of the 1960s. What one discovers is that, just as Sembene was the right man in the right place at the right time in France politically in the 1950s, he was absolutely in tune with the French intellectual cinema of the 1960s: the era of the New Wave, of Italian Neo-realism (several of the reviews situate *Mandabi* within this tradition), the era of *Cinéma Vérité*, which, in reaction to Hollywood, favoured films made with small budgets, non-professional actors, on location, and which gave the audience access to other cultures and classes and to the marginalised of society.²⁵ Jean Rouch had already

²⁴ There is a comprehensive collection of contemporary French press reactions to *Mandabi* in Vieyra 1972, 193-236. References are to this collection rather than directly to the articles.

²⁵ Marie-Claire Wulleumier, "Naissance d'un cinéma" in Vieyra 1972, 194-201.

attracted a lot of interest with his ethnographic films made in Africa, but in *Mandabi*, the French found something more than Rouch could offer: *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* called *Mandabi* 'the story of an African told by an African for Africans'. *Télérama* called it 'the first film made by an independent people daring to look at themselves and seeing themselves as they are'.

The French praised *Mandabi* for its realism, its depiction of poverty, its humanism, honesty and courage. The French critics penetrated *Mandabi*'s symbolism and came out calling spades spades where Sembene himself, to my mind, had buried much of the message in the sands of self-censorship. They talked about neo-colonialism (*Humanité Dimanche*, *Le Monde*, *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*), they admitted French responsibility for the present 'dreadful state of affairs' (*La Croix*), they castigated the bureaucratic bourgeoisie (*Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*), and one, an old friend of Sembene, even called *Mandabi* a 'remarkable revolutionary film' (Vieyra 1972, 204). Best of all, they nearly all referred to the 'nice, positive left-wing postman' (Vieyra 1972, 205). The French critics, in short, came close to being Sembene's ideal audience.

Mandabi and the Senegalese press

The published Senegalese reaction was a great deal more mixed. I shall focus on three major samples: a long article by *Dakar-Matin* critic, Bara Diouf, a member of the political bureau of the *UPS*, an anonymous piece in the Establishment revue *Bingo*²⁶ in which Sembene is given a chance to respond to some of the negative criticisms raised at the debate after the gala performance, and an article by a non-Establishment journalist, Jacques André.

Although André, like the French, praised Sembene's realism, calling *Mandabi* 'so true to life it makes you grind your teeth' (André, 37), the Establishment, on the contrary, complained about exaggeration. They complained that *Mandabi* turned the whole of Dakar into a shanty town (Vieyra 1972, 180), and gave the impression that the entire society contained nothing but crooks (B. Diouf, 8). Sembene, baptising his critics the 'we-are-not-like-that school', replied promptly: what was scandalous about the shanty towns was not the fact that he had put them on the screen but that they existed in the first place, and crime was on the increase because 'a starving stomach does not hear' (Vieyra 1972, 181).

²⁶ The *Bingo* article, "Un film dont on parle et donc on parlera longtemps: *Le Mandat*" is reproduced in Vieyra 1972, 180-186 (*Bingo*, No 195, April 1969).

Where the French praised the realistic portrayal of poverty, the Senegalese Establishment, typically out of touch with the plight of the masses, expressed surprise at such a fuss over the paltry sum the money order contained. Where the French loved Sembene's attention to 'everyday existence: the acts of eating, drinking, sleeping' (Vieyra 1972, 236), the Senegalese Establishment protested that Dieng's table manners were appalling and unrepresentative (Hennebelle 1969, 82). Where the French said the film was 'full of soul' (Vieyra 1972, 229), the Establishment complained that 'it lacked generosity and faith in human nature' (B. Diouf, 8). Where the French called neo-colonial and bureaucratic spades by their name, the Establishment talked of the need for 'a change of mentality' (ibid, 1). The 'remarkable revolutionary film' of Sembene's French friend became 'a plea for progress and development' (ibid, 8).

Bara Diouf's article is already an example of how Senegalese organic intellectuals would deal with Sembene throughout the period of this study. It contains a number of what would become classic moves. One is to appear to praise with one hand, while making sure to condemn with the other: Bara Diouf, after calling Sembene 'the best director of the young African cinema and perhaps the Third World', adds that it's a good thing Sembene has moved to cinema, since his written French was so 'unwieldy' (B. Diouf, 1). A second classic move is to refuse to recognise the symbolic layer of meaning in the work, on which the revolutionary impact depends, reducing it to a 'banal' anecdote. A third move involves questioning the work's realism, and hence its entire credibility, on grounds of some petty inaccuracy of detail: Diouf points out that Dieng did not need to chase all over Dakar - his problem with the bureaucrats could have been solved by bringing in two witnesses (ibid). A fourth move accuses Sembene's apparent pessimism in *Mandabi* as having 'foreign' (no doubt Marxist) origins. A final move incorporates Sembene's attack on the system as a 'plea for progress and development' which is shared by all (especially the Establishment itself).

In terms of the 'foreign' tag which the African Establishment frequently uses in an attempt to brand and isolate Marxists, in my fieldwork I came across two responses which I feel fit better here than in the next section, as they are more typical of the Establishment attitude, of the annoyance, as Vieyra puts it, that 'strangers had been allowed to see inside the house' (Vieyra 1975, 161) than of the bulk of the reactions I encountered. Aram Fall Diop, linguist and sister of writer Aminata Sow Fall, had not liked *Mandabi* when she saw it in 1968:

I remember thinking it was a caricature - the way he ate, the way he belched. I sensed the presence of a foreign gaze. I remember thinking it was made for foreigners, that this was how a European saw Africa (AFD/FNC).

Philosopher Assane Sylla, a devout Muslim, had not liked *Mandabi* either. Already shocked by the incest in *Niaye* in 1964, which he had found completely atypical, he was similarly disgusted by *Mandabi*:

He could at least have given us one single honest character. I liked the Italian films: they were realistic. But a whole string of crooks - that is too shocking. And a family man into the bargain...Sembene lived in France a long time, cut off from his people... people see him as someone who has marginalised himself, who tramples on values we respect (AS/FNC).

In contrast to the French, the Senegalese critics who saw the film at the premiere did not grasp the postman factor at all. People expressed confusion about the final moments of the film. The anonymous *Bingo* writer attributes the postman's declaration 'We will change all that' to Dieng, and naturally finds such a statement illogical, given Dieng's lack of revolutionary credentials up to that point. Bara Diouf, who reacted similarly, remarked sardonically that Dieng was 'unlikely to take up the mantle of Che Guevara'. I shall come back to this confusion presently.

Sembene: pioneer of popular African cinema?

Let us look now at some of the responses of the 'ordinary' Senegalese - technicians, teachers, students, messengers, night-watchmen - who saw *Mandabi* in local cinemas in 1968, and could still remember it well enough to talk to me about their experience in 1990.²⁷

The 'ordinary' Senegalese voted for *Mandabi* with their feet, and what they got out of it was slightly different not only from the issues that preoccupied the Establishment, but from what I had predicted. Twenty odd years on, the remembered excitement and enthusiasm was still palpable. A smile would break across people's faces as they told me how they came to see the film in 1968. In a culture where respectable mature married people do not frequent the cinema,

²⁷ Sample of 50 people interviewed in Dakar 1990-92.

'they took the whole family to see it, even the babies and the grand-mothers' (AT/FNC). In the Medina, where the fictive Ibrahima Dieng lived and much of the film was shot, an old man told me in 1991:

I went down to the cinema out of curiosity, because people had been saying it's no good someone telling you the story, you have to see it with your own eyes. So I went down there, and the first day, there were hundreds of people. The second day was almost as bad. A friend says, we're too old to be pushing and shoving, let's come back tomorrow. But the third day, the queues were still too long, so we had to pay a kid to stand in line for us and get our tickets.

How did the film pull the crowds to such an extent, regardless of class, age, religion? They went, it would appear, less to have their consciousness raised, than as Débrix's 'image-starved Africans', to see themselves on the screen for the very first time. According to Pape Seck, a teenager in 1968, and later to become a film-maker himself, 'I was fascinated to see black people on the screen, to see my own culture. I never forgot the experience. That's why I can't be objective about *Mandabi*, because every time I watch it, I remember how I felt that first time' (PS/FNC). Alioune Tine, who went on to write a thesis on Sembene's use of language, said simply, 'We went to hear the Wolof talking Wolof, we went to see ourselves, we went to see *ceeb u jen*. It was the first time we had seen anything like this, that was what mattered!' (AT/FNC). Penda Djigo Fall, now a teacher, who was a child at the time, remembered:

When we came out, everybody was talking about it, even people who didn't know each other. We were happy, because it was something new, something good. We liked the way Isseu Niang sang the song about the money order, my sister liked the way she carried herself, my brother preferred the scene when the aunt arrived and started shouting that the money was for her (PDF/FNC).

The 'ordinary' Senegalese, unlike the Establishment, agreed with the French about the realism of *Mandabi*. They saw no foreign gaze. 'The film is too Senegalese', a cinema security man told me. The teacher added, 'In reality, things like that happen all the time, but they don't want people to know about it' (PDF/FNC).

My fear that people would not be able to identify with any of the characters, given that

even Dieng's own hands were dirty, was unfounded. People either did not know or did not care that he was ready to chop his nephew's money: they saw the film in terms of a clear class divide, Dieng representing the exploited, while Mbaye, the business-man who tricks Dieng and tries to dispossess him, was the exploiter. They were neither particularly interested in the real representatives of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, nor were they distracted by small-time crooks like the photographer or the beggar: their target was Mbaye and only Mbaye. They referred to him as 'the intellectual' and identified Western education as the key to his ability to exploit. As an old night-watchman I spoke with put it: 'Makhourédia, he's like me. Mbaye, he's educated. Me, I'm not educated'. The likes of Mbaye are to be recognised by the collar and tie: 'When you have a tie, and wear nice clothes, you can cheat people like us' (ibid). This 'uniform' was so powerful as a visual symbol that most people thought Mbaye and Dieng's nephew (who is actually a good guy and helps Dieng) were the same person, and many went on to extrapolate that the film shows how one's own relatives, once educated, become exploiters like all the rest. The scenes involving the bureaucracy and the obstructive attitude of the civil servants seemed to take second place to this central focus on Mbaye. But the bureaucrats were implicitly implicated, in that they too were 'intellectuals' wearing suits and ties.

Those of my interviewees who were Western educated themselves had a protective attitude towards Dieng. A technician who had been a schoolboy in Kaolack in 1968 told me: 'I kept saying to myself, *wallahi*, he doesn't have a clue. I wanted to advise him, tell him, listen, do this, don't do that' (MN/FNC).

On the other hand, out of over fifty people interviewed, only one had noticed the postman. Unemployed himself, clearly identifying with Dieng and admitting that he had seen the film six times, he quoted the postman's words verbatim, but said he had never been able to make out what they meant (HC/FNC). When I tried to remind others of the postman's existence, some deduced that, with his privileged access to the Post Office, he must have been in league with Mbaye to steal the money! My tentative suggestion that he might represent the proletariat, the class that leads revolutions, met with a complete lack of concern.

So, if we eliminate the postman and his message of change, what was the message of *Mandabi* for the 'ordinary' Senegalese in 1968? It was crystal clear, it seems. Alioune Tine, who went as a teenager with his 'illiterate' aunt to see *Mandabi* in Kaolack in 1968, expresses the feelings of nearly everybody I interviewed:

When people were coming home after the film, they kept on talking about it, and there was one sentence - the last sentence - that had a huge impact: 'Gor lagoo la ci rewmi' ('Honesty is a crime in this country'). Everybody was repeating this sentence, because that was what they were seeing all around them every day. This was when there was so much mismanagement, so much embezzlement, when corruption was the order of the day, and people knew it. 'Honesty is a crime in this country'. I remember my aunt saying it, and she had never been to school (AT/FNC).

A revolutionary message or preaching to the converted?

To say that the film had a message for the masses is not, however, to say that the message was received as a revolutionary one. While it is clear that people identified the source of the problem in the class who used Western education to exploit others, did *Mandabi* make people feel they could fight back?

I had originally wondered what the relationship of *Mandabi* had been to the events of 1968. But, as we have seen, the film, though shot before the May-June up-rising, did not come out until December. The most I could gather from people was that it did not teach them anything they did not already know, it simply expressed how they already felt. There seems to be therefore a sense in which *Mandabi*, instead of transforming consciousness, preaches to the converted. The French critics recognised the Marxist symbolism because they were familiar with it and with Sembene. The Senegalese masses recognised the exploiter in the person of Mbaye, but they had already done what they could to deal with him in the Senegalese 1968 in May, so for them, too, there was nothing new. For once I find myself in agreement with the Establishment, whose anonymous critic in *Bingo* expresses the problem as follows:

Who in the audience will be able to identify with the words 'We will change all that'? Precisely those who are not in the position of the hero, those who are familiar enough already with how the system works to be able to think about transforming it radically. As for the others, will this film enable them to break out of the vicious circle of ignorance and impotence in which they are trapped? (Vieyra 1972, 185-6).

When we find Establishment critics sounding deceptively Marxist, we need to bear in

mind that the official ideology of Senegal, African Socialism, was, after all, an attempt to incorporate the threat of Marxism.

Sembene himself has provided one piece of clear evidence that the film had some impact: 'the *Mandabi* trick', according to him, became a weapon for the masses in dealing with obstructive civil servants. 'Don't play the *Mandabi* trick on me' quickly brought these to heel (Kassé, 10). My own interviewees were less convinced. A technician echoed my own misgivings about the comic aspect:

It made me laugh a lot. I didn't learn anything from it. That's the paradox of a film like *Mandabi*, it talks about things we've all experienced, and that we'd all like to change, but the problems remain and when we see them in the film, at a distance, they just make us laugh' (MN/FNC).

The elderly night-watchman I mentioned earlier, asked if he felt there was anything people like him could do about the likes of Mbaye, echoed the words of the main character, Ibrahima Dieng, whom he had so obviously identified with: 'Who? Me? It's the police who should do something about them, the police and the government. What can someone like me do about a fellow in a nice tie? What can I do?'

A retired messenger who had worked with Sembene at the national film unit in the 1980s, and who expressed a preference for what he called Che Guevara films, said that *Mandabi* was not a Che Guevara film, it was more in the 'crime' category. But the real problem, he said, was not with the film but with Senegal: 'Senegal is not a Che Guevara country.' Is this, then, a case of people getting the cinema they deserve? Were *Mandabi* and the Senegalese made for each other?

Conclusion

Mandabi identifies the source of oppression in Senegalese society as that of a class who use their access to Western education to exploit the majority, deprived of such access. On the other hand, it fails to recognise the level of popular resistance to oppression, which, for all its short-comings, did exist in various forms in the Senegal of the 1960s. It fails to do this because Sembene was even more cautious in this film than in previous ones. His venture into commercial cinema therefore to some extent defeated its own purpose: his film reached the masses, it told them what they already knew - that the suit-and-tie classes were very corrupt - but it also left

them with the conviction that nothing much could be done about this – something they had felt anyway, before they saw the film. Is that really all we can conclude from this exercise?

Not quite. Several questions remain. What about the postman? And what about *God's Bits of Wood*?

Let us finally lay the postman to rest. Sembene has clearly decided, in *Mandabi*, that he cannot show the level of real resistance to oppression - the strikes and demonstrations - that punctuated the 1960s. Why did he bother with this ridiculous *deux-ex-machina*, with his call for mobilisation in a fictive world where 'struggle' has never meant anything more militant than trekking from government office to office in pursuit of money that does not belong to you because you lack the 50 centimes for the *car rapide*?

As we have seen, Sembene might well have omitted the postman entirely, for all the notice the Senegalese took of him, and for whom the film ended, not with 'We will change all that' but with Makhourédia's pronouncement that honesty is a crime in Senegal and that he is going to become a hyena like everybody else.

One reason nobody in Senegal noticed the postman, but only one, given his marginality throughout the narrative, is that the ending of the film is different from the novella. In the novella, the postman gets the last word. In the film, part of his final speech is disembodied - it comes in the form of a voice off - and the film ends, not with the postman, but with a series of flashbacks, the last showing Dieng declaring his intention to become a crook. In short, whatever minimal weight the postman had in the novella, he has even less in the film. I had not noticed this until the conviction of the people I interviewed about the meaning of *Mandabi* - the I-too-will-become-a-crook meaning - sent me back to compare book and film.

Vieyra provides an explanation. Confirming the symbolic interpretation that only the French seem to talk about, and telling us that 'in this honest worker, we see the proletariat rising up, brandishing the sword of the revolution', Vieyra indicates that Sembene actually wanted to give the 'revolutionary' postman a stronger role in the film than he had in the novella, by allocating him some extra lines in the final scene. Unfortunately, the actor concerned failed to show up for the shoot (Vieyra 1972, 110-1). What can one say to this? Only that such absenteeism is rare on Sembene's sets, where he has always been known for rigorous discipline (IN/FNC). The outcome - less resistance rather than more - is completely in keeping with the

over-all cautious approach that seems to characterise the making of *Mandabi*.

So why create the 'revolutionary' postman at all? I feel he has two *raison d'être*. First, he is a key to the symbolic interpretation of *Mandabi*. Without the revolutionary postman, the symbolic representative of the proletariat, we may not see the bureaucracy as a class - we may see only incidental obstructive clerks and dishonest photographers and extortionate shopkeepers, and we will certainly miss the confrontation between the two classes - bureaucracy and proletariat - that Sembene wants us to believe to be the subject of *Mandabi*. It is unfortunate that, thanks to the fear of the neo-colonial censor, only French intellectuals - who perhaps had also read the book - really saw what it was all about.

Another way of interpreting the postman's peripheral presence is as a secret password, not for the 'ordinary' Senegalese, but for Sembene's special constituency: the Senegalese Marxist comrades who were keeping up the struggle while he made films that couldn't do them justice (and perhaps, though to a lesser degree, the old French Communist friends). Is the postman Sembene's way of saying that he has not forgotten them in his ascent?

What, then, is the postman's relationship with the real world, the real Senegalese struggle in the 1960s? He is a reflection of that reality: not a direct reflection, in that he does not do justice to the complexity of the real struggle, but a mediated reflection, that of the artist's struggle to do justice to that struggle, to make a revolutionary cinema in a one-party neo-colonial state. He points us not towards the PAI and its allies, but to what Sembene feels he cannot risk saying about the PAI. He tells us that, in Senegal in the 1960s, precisely because there is resistance and the one-party state represses it, the artist can only talk about politics in parables.

We should not forget the huge claim the puny postman makes: 'We will change all that.' What has this to do with the real, problematic resistance of the 1960s, that could bring the regime to its knees, yet not take over power? I see it as a reminder of the existence of a dream that the world of *Mandabi* has all but stifled: the dream that was 'realised' in *God's Bits of Wood*.

What is the real relationship between *God's Bits of Wood* and *Mandabi*? How did the same man create both, in the short space of seven years?²⁸ How do we get from the beautiful big world of Bakayoko to the mean little world of Ibrahima Dieng? Is the journey one from Realism

²⁸ Sembene finished writing *God's Bits of Wood* in February 1959 and *Le Mandat*, essentially *Mandabi* in novella form, was first published in 1966.

to self-censorship, from genuine revolutionary art to a pessimism that fails the masses?

The journey passes through context. What is the context of *God's Bits of Wood*? It has two contexts: that of its content - the 1947 strike - and the context of its making, the Anti-imperialist movement in France in 1957-8. The experience of *Mandabi* has made me return to *God's Bits of Wood* and re-examine my almost unconscious assumption that it was a realistic description of 1947, that the strike somehow 'proves' the rise of a revolutionary African proletariat who will lead the rest of society out of colonisation and into socialism.

Certainly, the 1947 strike was fought and won, and at one level, Sembene uses it, not to distort reality, but to do all that we have claimed for him: expose the colonial system, and show that it is possible to fight it. On the other hand, the strike did not occur in the gloriously dramatic way Sembene says: there was no woman's march, and Penda did not die. The Senegalese proletariat, as we saw in Chapter Two, far from leading the other classes in the ensuing Anti-imperialist struggle, allowed themselves to be used in the petty-bourgeois-led pseudo-nationalist movement which was the dominant form of the 1950s struggle in Senegal.

The second context that *God's Bits of Wood* reflects is the context of its making: France in the 1950s, with its Communist counter-hegemony, and the bubbling optimism of the petty-bourgeois Anti-imperialist movement of the Fanons and Césaires. This world, perhaps even more than the reality of the African proletariat in 1947, is responsible, I suggest, for the optimism and faith in the future of *God's Bits of Wood*.

And there is a third context: the context of Sembene himself. The sunshine of *God's Bits of Wood* is also the sunshine of Sembene's remembered youth, written far away from home in France ten years on. I never thought I would find myself saying this, but *God's Bits of Wood*, in its own way, and while still remaining a great exposing and inspiring novel, is closer to Camara Laye's *The African Child* than Mongo Béti would ever have admitted (Beti, 133-140).

To get from *God's Bits of Wood* to *Mandabi*, we have to pass through the context of 1958, and through *L'Harmattan*. This unread and unsung novel tells us how Sembene felt about the 1958 Referendum: Africa betrayed the cause, and sold out to neo-colonialism, to more exploitation and greater dependence. The artist Leye in the novel says it all in the title of his poem: *Garce d'Afrique* (This Prostitute of an Africa). *L'Harmattan* is written in France and Moscow in 1961-2, *Mandabi* in Senegal a couple of years later. *Mandabi* is the reflection on the

garce d'Afrique, in its extreme Senegalese form, by an older Sembene than the one who wrote *God's Bits of Wood*, a Sembene who has come back home, a Sembene staring Senegalese reality in the face. The great wide world of the Pan-African dream has been turned by 1958 - and by the demise of the Mali Federation - into the narrow confines of a disabled Senegal more dependent on France than ever. And since the 1958 Referendum was a democratic process, Sembene's condemnation in *Mandabi* is democratic - nobody, even the beggar, escapes.

So has the elephant given birth to a mouse? *God's Bits of Wood* will always be a mighty novel for me, exposing and inspiring. I am still convinced that one of the best ways to make people conscious of the possibility of resistance is to show it actually happening, in a believable way. It is not enough just to create a space in which people can get angry: they need examples of ways to express their anger effectively, and *Mandabi* does not provide any.

But other ways of raising consciousness do exist. The elephant has not given birth to a mouse. Where *God's Bits of Wood* was revolutionary in content, *Mandabi* is revolutionary in form, or rather, in medium: in giving the neo-colonised masses images of themselves, in showing them that their lives are worth looking at, their language worth listening to, their *ceeb u jen* worth lingering over. Sembene does for the real Senegalese masses what the bureaucrats in *Mandabi* refused to do for Dieng: integrates them, through film, into the modern world. The famous Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres had failed to do that. It had been elitist from start to finish. The masses do not frequent the National Theatre. With *Mandabi*, what the Head of State watches tonight in Sorano, the masses enjoy tomorrow in Cinéma Liberté.

Mandabi did something else to change the masses' way of thinking which again had nothing to do with its content, indeed, ran counter to it. Where Dieng projects the much criticised image of passivity, Sembene, the ordinary Senegalese guy that nobody had heard of, the fellow just like themselves, by making *Mandabi*, projected an image of initiative and dynamism that gave the masses hope that they could do the same. This is how Pape Seck describes the effect of *Mandabi* on him as a teenager in 1968:

He was the first one who got up and said, OK, I'm going to make films. Suddenly, everybody was talking about him: Sembene, Sembene, Sembene, and when you're young, that does something to you. I said hey, he's got guts, he got up and did something (PS/FNC).

So Pape Seck too got up and struggled, and in his time, he too made films. Another 1968 teenager told me very simply what she had liked about Sembene: 'the fact that he made it' (PDF/FNC). In other words, the role-model missing inside the film was provided by the film's existence: a role-model, not of revolution, but at least, in a country whose hall-mark is dependence, of personal effort and determination to succeed.

My final point concerns the problem of incorporation. One way to read *Mandabi* is as a reflection of a society whose dominant mode is incorporation. In this reading, Sembene's conscious mind produces the postman, but his subconscious rejects him, and the hyena, stealing at the last minute the little bit of limelight Sembene had tried to give the postman, completely fills the final frame, like some sort of national emblem of a Senegal which cannot think in terms of its own destiny, cannot plan or fight, can only pick up the crumbs that France leaves for it. In this reading, the relationship between Dieng and Mbaye the businessman/'intellectual' expresses the paradigmatic Senegalese relationship I tried to describe in Chapter Two, the relationship binding person of caste to free person, *baadoolo* to *grande famille*, Senegal to France: I exploit you under the guise of helping you, and expect your gratitude for the little bag of rice which bears no resemblance to what I have stolen from you. In this reading, *Mandabi* becomes a great Realist work in the Lukácsian sense, in which Sembene has placed his finger on the pulse of Senegal and exposed what, through history, has made Senegal tick.

CHAPTER SIX

THE 1970S: THE STATE TURNED ENTREPRENEUR, 'DEMOCRACY' AND A CULTURAL REVOLUTION?

In the Introduction, I indicated some of the problems Sembene's films of the 1970s had presented for me as a reader of *God's Bits of Wood*. His 1974 film, *Xala*, which deals with the contradictions of the commercial bourgeoisie under neo-colonialism, had, in showing so clearly how the beggar was a product of El Hadj's expropriation of his clansmen, clearly exposed the primitive accumulation process and the dialectical relationship between the two classes. But it had nevertheless left doubts in terms of my model of revolutionary art. It had presented three basic problems for me. First, its narrative focus was almost entirely on the oppressors rather than the oppressed: the beggars were mere symbols compared to the intimacy of the portrayal of businessman El Hadj. Secondly, it seemed to present a bunch of beggars as last-minute symbols of the revolutionary class. Finally, the supernatural, so systematically demystified in *God's Bits of Wood*, where Awa's accusations of witchcraft are narratively corrected by the voice of the rational and much more sympathetic Penda (Sembene 1973, 265-272), now, with Sembene's endorsement, had become the key weapon of the oppressed in the class struggle. The Dakar women of *God's Bits of Wood*, confronting the alcatis with their bottles of sand, had vanished and in their place was a little fellow in a blue boubou sitting on the ground singing a haunting song and casting spells on his brother, an alhaji responsible for his destitution.

Ceddo, for its part, not only focussed narrative attention on the oppressors - in this case the traditional feudal aristocracy - but went even further than *Xala* in that it seemed to be celebrating this class, presenting it as some sort of model of resistance: as the princess shoots the marabout, Sembene the Marxist seems to give way to Sembene the cultural nationalist: are we now just a step away from Senghor's *primateur de la culture*? Secondly, *Ceddo* had been banned. Why had Senghor, in his last years in power, done what he had so carefully avoided doing in all the previous years?

In Chapters Seven and Eight respectively, I will look at *Xala* and *Ceddo* in terms of these questions. In this chapter, I want to look first at the context in which the films were produced, the Senegal of the 1970s. Secondly, I shall take a brief look at the shape of Sembene's life in the

1970s, and examine his involvement, through the language movement, in the attempted Cultural Revolution.

Managing the hegemonic crisis

We pick up the story where we left it in Chapter Four, with the explosion of 1968. In the rest of this section, we shall look at how the Senegalese ruling class, on behalf, and with the aid, of Western imperialism, 'managed' the post-1968 situation, and at the resistance their efforts encountered. How does the situation in the 1970s differ from that of the 1960s? How stable or unstable is the state and the ruling class? How effective is its effort to regain the consent of the majority? Does incorporation work, or does the state have to resort to repression? How does the level of consciousness of the classes who are not benefitting from neo-colonialism evolve? How significant are the efforts of the opposition? As we explore these questions, we shall be bearing in mind our basic preoccupation: how possible will it be for Sembene, in the conditions of the 1970s, to produce a revolutionary cinema, and how much impact can such a cinema expect to have?

Root of the hegemonic crisis: 'incomplete decolonisation'

It is generally agreed that 1968 presented a crisis of hegemony which the imperialists and the Senegalese state and ruling class would spend the 1970s trying to manage (Fatton; Diop and Diouf). The core of the problem, as seen by the three classes who had led the 1968 uprising - the commercial bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie and the workers - was 'incomplete decolonisation' (Bathily 1992, 25): the French still controlled Senegal after a decade of autonomy/Independence, distorting development on all levels from the economic to the cultural. As Bathily, a student participant in 1968, says, 'Senegalisation had become the war-cry of the commercial bourgeoisie and the nationalist intelligentsia' (Bathily 1992, 147). The workers too cried out for 'Senegalisation of enterprises and the work force' (ibid, 25).

Economically, the neo-colonial policies of the 1960s had failed woefully. The nationalised agricultural sector, with falling groundnuts prices and consistent drought, was in decline: groundnut production halved between 1960 and 1970 (Diop and Diouf, 82). The fall in state revenue this implied, together with the huge cost of the bloated bureaucracy, rendered national savings impossible (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1979, 22), and the franc made diversification difficult (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 115). The import substitution policy which had dominated the

1960s had turned out to be merely a more efficient form of imperialist exploitation: it was really a substitution of the export of capital for the export of goods, resulting for the Senegalese state in decreased revenue from imports (Fatton 60-1), and for the top French firms, like Peyrissac, in a doubling of profits (R. Cruise O'Brien 1972, 119-124).

(i) Bureaucratic v. commercial bourgeoisie

Let us look briefly at how the failure to decolonise, to Senegalise, had affected the various classes by the end of the 1960s. Unlike the English, the French had been notoriously slow to train Africans for the public sector in the 1950s. This, however, did not prevent the bureaucratic bourgeoisie from looking after their own interests at Independence: the one sector to be rapidly Senegalised in 1960 was the civil service (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1979, 114). This stood in sharp contrast to the situation in the private sector. Typically, Senghor had signed an international convention on Senegalisation of the private sector in 1960 (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 147), while simultaneously declaring himself against any type of 'cut-price Africanisation' (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1979, 113).

The fate of the Senegalese commercial bourgeoisie is of central interest in terms of understanding Senegal at this stage. This was a potentially powerful class, which at the beginning of the 20th century had a head-start on all the bourgeoisies of the other French colonies. The early Senegalese bourgeoisie was characterised by a budding culture of initiative very different from the dominant dependency culture which has been fostered in Senegal since. Samir Amin's book, *Le monde des affaires sénégalaises*, describing the crushing of this promising national bourgeoisie by the colonial state on behalf of French capital, came out in 1969. Amin describes the classic colonial measures taken to ensure the collapse of the Senegalese bourgeoisie from 1900: refusal of credit and import licences, and encouragement of Lebanese immigration (the Lebanese numbered 100 in 1900, 8000 at Independence). By the end of the 1929 Depression, the Senegalese commercial bourgeoisie had been virtually wiped out. By 1960, as Amin points out, the few who had managed to survive had lost their confidence, and were unused to taking risks or to handling large amounts of capital (Amin 1969, 26).

Independence had not changed the fate of the commercial bourgeoisie radically. Though the 1960s had provided a few openings in transport, and in collection and distribution of the nationalised groundnuts and rice, they were blocked from direct importation as in the colonial

era and had no foothold at all in industry. Their major problem, again as in the colonial era, was lack of credit facilities: in Independent Senegal, 47 out of 49 financial institutions were in European hands (Berry, 131). French banks actively discriminated against Senegalese entrepreneurs (Amin 1969, 173). The Senegalese thus had to resort to the financial market-place, and their profits were eaten up by debt-servicing (ibid, 75).

Politically, Independence had not brought any form of representation to the Senegalese commercial bourgeoisie. French capitalist interests had supported Senghor's BDS in the 1950s, and were well represented in the Conseil Économique et Social, an influential advisory group (R.Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 109). The French also controlled the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The neo-colonial state and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie were no keener than their colonial predecessors on supporting the development of a commercial bourgeoisie which might turn into a real national bourgeoisie and prove a consequent threat to themselves (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1979, 108).

In protest against their own political under-representation, the Senegalese commercial bourgeoisie formed the Union des Groupements Économiques du Sénégal (UNIGES), which in 1968 published a manifesto of nationalist economics, pointing out that the French in Senegal, who were less than 1% of the population, earned 58,000 million francs per annum, while the Senegalese earned 13,000 million, and calling for a 'courageous Africanisation', for access to direct importation and to industry and better credit facilities (Bathily 1992, 22-4), and for preferential treatment in the allocation of government contracts and a monopoly of some commercial sectors (Fatton, 60).

I have dwelt at length on the commercial bourgeoisie for a number of reasons. They do, in 1968, seem to represent a flicker of hope, of potential resistance to the French and the neo-colonial bureaucratic bourgeoisie. Secondly, an understanding of this class is central to an appreciation of the realism and symbolism of *Xala*.

(ii) Petty-bourgeoisie v. *coopérants*

Anti-French sentiments also ran high among the petty-bourgeoisie in 1968. Here again, the problem goes back a long way. The Senegalese had had a relatively educated work force, in terms of Western education, compared to the other colonies throughout the colonial era. Already in the 1930s, there were complaints by Western educated St Louisians about the employment of

French wives (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 60). And, as Rita Cruise-O'Brien has pointed out, it was not merely a matter of 'intellectual' posts: Dakar in the 1930s had French butcher boys and waitresses (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1979, 103). In the 1940s and 1950s, there was a further invasion of *petits blancs*, most of whom had nothing more than a primary certificate, but whom the French in Senegal preferred to employ. This had left Senegal with a 25% unemployment rate in the 1950s, at a time when the British colonies were Africanising more radically (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 85).

The Senegalese petty-bourgeoisie was infuriated by the continued domination of not only economics but politics, education and culture by the ubiquitous French 'technical assistants' - *coopérants* - and the consequent 'weighty influence of France in all national decision-making' (Diop and Diouf, 37). Senghor was surrounded by French advisors: in a cabinet of 17, 6 were French, some in key positions (Bathily 1992, 26). Throughout the 1960s, the Ministers of Finance were French: first Peytavin, awarded for supporting the BDS in the 1950s, then, at his death in 1964, Jean Collin, a colonial administrator who took Senegalese nationality and became Senghor's *éminence grise* (Diop and Diouf, 108) and of whom many said, when he was finally retired by Abdou Diouf in the 1990s, that he had run the country for 30 years. The French *coopérants* formed 'a government within the government' (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1979, 31), and were able to make themselves appear indispensable given the complicated bureaucratic legacy of the Fourth Republic, which neo-colonial Senegal had done nothing to change (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 165).

In education, similarly, *coopérants* were still prominent in 1968 from university level down to secondary and technical school. Although Senegal had less need for *coopérants* in education in 1960 than other colonies, they received more than their share. The university, founded in 1957, though officially 'in the service of Africa', was in reality the 18th French university and one of the least Africanised on the continent. Up to 1970, its syllabus was identical to that of French universities, to suit the needs of the French nationals who made up one third of its student population (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 165-70), and to guarantee that its African students would be moulded to reproduce the neo-colonial system.

Restoring neo-colonial hegemony

So much for the ingredients of the hegemonic crisis of 1968. Let us now look at the

measures taken by imperialism and the ruling class in the 1970s to regain control of the situation and at the responses of the other classes, economically, politically and culturally.

(i) Proletariat and commercial bourgeoisie incorporated

Senghor and his imperialist team went to work quickly, using similar incorporation techniques to pacify all dissident classes, Senegalising on the surface while trying to ensure that the underlying imperialist structures remained intact.

Among the workers, divisions were created by the state-inspired setting-up of a second union, tame and loyalist, whose motto was 'responsible participation' (Diop and Diouf, 39; Lô 1987, *passim*). This, added to a salary rise of 15% after a wage freeze throughout the 1960s, and the fear of the ever-present labour reserve (Fougeyrollas, 14-17), went a long way to ensuring the good behaviour of the workers.

The commercial bourgeoisie was similarly won over, though this took longer. A rival, loyalist group, the Conseil fédéral des groupements économiques du Sénégal (COFEGES), was formed to take the wind out of the sails of the original UNIGES: Senghor then suggested a merger, and promised to deal with all the problems UNIGES had been agitating about (Fougeyrollas 19). Once the businessmen's successful incorporation was ensured, they were allowed to take over the Chamber of Commerce (Bathily 1992, 146). Thus, in 1969, Amadou Sow, Director of the Union Sénégalaise des Banques, became the first Senegalese President of the Chamber. This event, like much of what follows, will provide Sembene with raw materials for *Xala*.

(ii) Rule of the technocrats: Goodbye nationalisation, hello 'statism'

More important than the take-over of the Chamber of Commerce was the constitutional change which created a post of Prime Minister in 1970, and the appointment to this post of Abdou Diouf, with a clause which enabled him to succeed the President, similar to the USA system (Hesseling 268, 275). In retrospect, it is clear that this marked the beginning of the end of the Senghor era, African Socialism à la Senghor, and the one-party state de Gaulle style. De Gaulle was now dead, and Diouf represented a new breed of politician, a new generation, a technocrat. His major role in the 1970s was to introduce a different economics from the pseudo-socialism of Senghor. Nationalisation had been abandoned in 1965 (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 114). The economic buzz-word of the 1970s would be 'statism': the state was to become a profit-

oriented capitalist, a super-entrepreneur which would act as god-father to frustrated Senegalese enterprise (Fatton; Diop and Diouf). This move would kill two birds with one stone, making an unviable state solvent, and building an alliance between the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, loyal to imperialism, and the originally somewhat less loyal 'national' or commercial bourgeoisie. As we shall see, not only businessmen but film producers like Sembene would temporarily benefit from the brief boom which accompanied this major shift in economic policy!

The Senegalese commercial bourgeoisie, availing themselves of a reformed banking system, became joint shareholders with the state in the newly nationalised utilities and various industrial and mining ventures (Bathily 1992, 147). The necessary capital came from a temporary hike in world prices for groundnuts and phosphates (Fatton, 73), and from heavy state borrowing. In this short-lived boom, the first Senegalese millionaires were born. Commercial houses flourished. The infamous K2 Account was opened, and Senegalese businessmen could avail themselves of enormous sums by a simple phone-call to the bank. Bathily has described the mid-1970s as an era of 'generalised kleptocracy' (Bathily 1992, 147).

Thus the 1968 call by the budding national bourgeoisie for Senegalisation 'had been incorporated by a parasitic minority' (Bathily 1992, 149). By the end of the 1970s, the foreign debt had trebled (R. Cruise-O'Brien 1979, 21). The entrepreneurial state collapsed, dragging the commercial bourgeoisie down with it, and the way was clear for the IMF to take over (Diop and Diouf 27, 155).

(iii) The petty-bourgeoisie: incomplete incorporation?

The petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, the ring-leaders of 1968, traditionally anti-imperialist and the most vehemently opposed to continued French domination and to Senghor, proved the most recalcitrant of the three classes. Senghor set in place various mechanisms to win them over, to create a body of organic intellectuals loyal to the state (Diop and Diouf, 27; Fatton, 55). Club Nation et Développement was founded, based on similar initiatives in post-1968 France. But though some intellectuals were successfully incorporated as a result (Fougeyrollas, 19), the majority remained adamantly outside the fold (Bathily 1992, 144). There was increasing repression of students and teachers. The intimidating Minister of Finance, Jean Collin, had been moved to the Ministry of the Interior in 1971 (Diop and Diouf 107-8). A campus police force was created, the distribution of political leaflets became an offence, the students' union was

banned in 1971 and the teachers' union in 1973. Large numbers of students were refused registration at the university and drafted into the army throughout the early 1970s, as a result of which one died in 1972, and another 'committed suicide' in jail in 1973. But the Left intellectuals kept up the pressure, even attempting to burn down the French Cultural Centre in symbolic protest in 1971, and organising a successful international campaign to discredit the regime after the 1973 'suicide' (Diop and Diouf, 207-9).

(iv) A teleguided democracy?

In 1974, the first step in the introduction of a teleguided pseudo-democracy was taken. The first 'opposition' party came into existence, under the leadership of millionaire Abdoulaye Wade, who assured everybody that it was a 'contribution' party as much as an opposition party. The idea of the 'three tendencies' - a precocious version of Babangida's 'a little to the right, a little to the left' - was decreed: social-democrat, liberal-democrat, and Marxist-Leninist (Nzouankeu, 32). The UPS re-baptised itself Parti Socialiste and appropriated social democracy while Wade's newly formed Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS) took up the liberal-democrat label. The exiled leader of the original PAI, the Marxist-Leninist party which Sembene had joined in 1957, Majhemout Diop, was allowed home from exile (Nzouankeu, 39), and the words 'in the presence of God' were removed from the oath of allegiance to make room for him to lead Senegal's new official Communist party (Hesseling, 275). But Diop had not been the recognised leader of the PAI since 1967, and had little credibility. The teleguided PAI did not get a single seat in the 1978 elections.

Why did Senegal experiment with multipartyism from 1974, ahead of all the other African states? Was this an indication of the threat the opposition continued to pose, an attempt 'to decapitate the revolutionary potential of the left', as Fatton says (Fatton, 53)? Or was it evidence that the opposition was now so weak that Senghor could afford democracy? Had the hegemonisation attempt of the 1970s been a 'success story' and did the opposition by now consist of no more than 'very sketchily organised ... semi-clandestine extremist groupuscules' (D. Cruise-O'Brien, 1978, 182)? Landing Savané, leader of the Maoist And-Jef, seems to confirm this pessimistic view: 'By 1974-5 the pressure for change by the masses had died down. Senghor's regime had finished off all democratic organisations, dissolving them or banning them. The opposition seemed to be at a loss' (Diop and Diouf, 210). Yet it looks as if the regime did not

underestimate the opposition to the same extent, as Savané found out when its representatives raided his party's office in 1975, seizing the printing press, and arresting the editors of the party paper, *Xarebi*, whom they tried to buy off in the subsequent trial (Diop and Diouf, 211).

The 1970s story so far

How, then, do we sum up the 1970s? The incorporation which characterised the 1960s has continued apace, and two of the three groups who led the opposition in 1968 have been at least temporarily tamed. The ruling class is in the process of abandoning even the rhetoric of socialism, and getting what it can for itself before the boat it has been unable to steer successfully sinks. The opposition has not been completely wiped out: it consists mainly of anti-imperialist intellectuals who continue to yap at the heels of the state, never making a radical impact, but never showing signs of going away either, and forcing the ruling class to keep on the alert, and to continue to deal with harassment on a daily basis.

One thing has certainly not changed: the Senegalese need for a father figure. When Senghor stepped down in 1980, he left Senegal to the mercy of the IMF. And, just as in 1960 he had pleaded with France not to withdraw too many of her experts (R.Cruise-O'Brien 1972, 167) and leave Senegal to its own devices, now again the Senegalese government requested the World Bank to agree to an unprecedented promise of 30 man years of advisers and consultancy services. Rita Cruise O'Brien's comment that this shows the Senegalese 'readiness to seek outside assistance for the resolution of internal problems' is surely an understatement (R. Cruise O'Brien 1979, 123).

The revolutionary struggle shifts: culture as politics

One area of the Senegalese anti-imperialist struggle of the 1970s has not been included in the above discussion: culture. But it is central to an understanding of Senegal, and of Sembene's place in it, throughout the decade. Let us look at some of the complexities of the culture question in Senegal in 1970.

The cultural struggle at this stage is essentially one between the petty-bourgeois intellectual opposition, which is made up of Marxists and Pan-Africanists/Nationalists, and the ruling class led by Senghor. As we look at it, knowing that we must ultimately situate Sembene the Marxist within it, we need to bear in mind certain questions concerning the relationship between Marxism and Pan-Africanism/Nationalism in the Senegalese context, and especially

concerning the interface of culture and class.

Nationalism and Marxism v. Négritude

As far as I can see, there are three main strands in intellectual cultural discourse in Senegal in 1970, all with historic roots in the anti-imperialist struggle of the 1940s and 1950s.

The first is *Négritude*. It is distinguished by its assertion of a biologically-based African pseudo-identity which, in political terms, serves to camouflage both the on-going imperialist exploitation and the dominance of the ruling class thanks to their own exclusive mastery of the French language and French culture.

The second strand is Pan-Africanism, or, in the context of the balkanised Africa of 1970, the Nationalism it has been forced to become. Cheikh Anta Diop is the father of Senegalese cultural nationalism. But one is careful to distinguish his brand of cultural nationalism from that of a Senghor. Cheikh Anta's Nationalism has a historical-materialist rather than a biological base, and he has been devotedly anti-imperialist from the 1940s.

The third strand is Marxism. It shares with Cheikh Anta's Nationalism a materialist theory of culture and a recognition of the importance of culture in the struggle against imperialism. It distinguishes itself from him in its emphasis on class. Recognising how imperialism has used culture to divide the society into privileged assimilated elite and exploited 'African' masses, the Marxist interest in culture is inseparable from its commitment to the class struggle and socialism.

In practical and political terms, the PAI, when it was formed in 1957, with its minimum programme of immediate Independence and maximum programme of Scientific Socialism, can be seen as an attempt to bring together Marxists and Nationalists on a common anti-imperialist platform. The PAI had a very different position with respect to the national cultures of the ex-colonies from that of the French Communist Party, from which many of its members, like Sembene, had been drawn. Where the PCF had remained unrepentantly Assimilationist, the PAI had a dynamic cultural policy from its inception, placing emphasis especially on the importance of the national languages. And, as Pathé Diagne, a founding member of the PAI, pointed out to me, the Marxists, Sembene included, were, even at that stage, the dominant force behind this cultural policy (PD/FNC). This is not, however, to imply that Marxism and Nationalism were to become synonymous in the Senegal of the 1960s and 1970s: politically, Cheikh Anta drew the

Nationalists increasingly into his camp once he founded his party in 1963, while the Marxist hard core remained in the PAI, continuing to emphasise the importance of the class struggle and socialism.

Throughout the 1960s, the ruling class, led by Senghor and the UPS, had used *Négritude* to kill several birds with one stone. Through their occupation of the cultural terrain and subsequent monopoly of Africanness, they had hoped to leave the Nationalists with nothing to say. Through this cultural monopoly, combined with the attempt to project the UPS as the party of the masses, they had hoped to counter the Marxist monopoly on class and to project Marxism as a foreign, imported ideology - a tactic also designed to divert attention from their own obsession with the alien French culture.

But the contradictions of Senghor's cultural discourse had become increasingly apparent throughout the 1960s, and the pro-imperialist position that *Négritude* sought to camouflage increasingly exposed. Cheikh Anta had come home in the early 1960s and, his international reputation notwithstanding, had found himself barred, on grounds of inadequate French qualifications,²⁹ from lecturing to the students of what Senghor himself had called a 'university at the service of Africa' (Senghor 1964, 294). At the famous Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in Dakar in 1966, French celebrities had been prominent, but there was no sign of Cabral, Neto, or Fidel. Above all, this manifestation of the so-called culture of the people had proved to be an elitist affair in which the Senegalese masses played no part. In 1969, the contradiction became even more glaring when the Father of *Négritude* also became the Father of *Francophonie*, using the French culture of the elite to reinforce the relationship between France and the ex-French colonies, in the face of the efforts of the OAU to keep alive the Pan-African aspiration. The attempt by Senegalese students to burn down the French Cultural Centre in Dakar in 1971 (F. Ndiaye et al, 174) must be read in this context.

In 1970, then, Marxists, as much as Nationalists, were determined to take on Senghor, the man of culture, on what he had been determined to show was his own ground. They were

²⁹ Mohamadou Kane explained to me that Cheikh Anta could not be employed by the University of Dakar at the time because the grade he had finally received for his PhD did not entitle him to a lectureship. This anomalous situation was rectified at the end of the 1970s when the University was no longer ruled by French university statutes. This was not of course the real reason for shutting Cheikh Anta out of the amphitheatres: his nationalism, his party, and Senghor's personal jealousy of him all contributed, and his academic grade was a transparent cover-up.

determined to call the *Négritude* bluff, to wrench the monopoly of the cultural terrain back from Senghor, and expose the pseudo-traditionalism of a class which, while paying lip-service to African culture and exploiting it ideologically, in reality monopolised power through their mastery of French culture and collusion with the French. For the Marxists, to occupy the cultural ground was to occupy it for and with the masses, for an education accessible to all, a decolonised system that even an Ibrahima Dieng could cope with.

The cultural struggle of the 1970s was therefore profoundly political in nature. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that it was the political expression of an opposition to which the one-party state had refused a legal voice throughout the previous decade.

International Influences

The shift onto the cultural terrain at this stage must also be situated in the international context. Mao's Cultural Revolution, emphasising the role of culture in national liberation and in the class struggle, had been sweeping through all parts of the world under imperialist domination since the mid-1960s. In 1967, the year I left for Nigeria, Mao's influence reached Dublin, and the tide began to turn from that moment in favour of the Irish language which had struggled against external and internal hostility for centuries. Simultaneously, in Senegal, young people who through the 1960s had danced to the Latin beat and sung in Spanish and Portuguese in honour of Fidel, Che and Cabral, now began to sing in Wolof and Sereer (PD/FNC).

There was also the influence of Cabral himself, and of Sékou Touré. It should not be forgotten that Guinea-Bissau, where Cabral was Africanising Mao's cultural theories and putting them into practice with the peasants in the struggle against the Portuguese, has a common border with Senegal, and that the PAIGC had a base in Dakar at this point (Cabral, 82). Meanwhile, in neighbouring Guinea, Sékou Touré was leading the way with a cultural policy that gave the national languages unprecedented prominence: Sékou was a focal point in the early 1970s for Senegalese anti-imperialist sentiments, as Senghor persisted in colluding with the French in trying to bring him down.³⁰

Cultural decolonisation: some gains

³⁰ In 1971, the French made a fresh attempt to bring Sékou Touré down, using Dakar as a base, with Senghor's blessing. Sékou used the media to retaliate in the famous 'war of the air-waves'. This was one of a number of such efforts by the French, in all of which the Senegalese government collaborated, and which Sembene refers to in *The*

What form did the cultural struggle take in the 1970s? Remembering again that this struggle had its base in the intelligentsia, it is hardly surprising that it remained an urban phenomenon, centred on education and the arts. In education, there was a clamour for a long-overdue decolonisation of the syllabus of the existing institutions, from primary to university, satisfying the nationalist strand, while the Marxists demanded literacy programmes in the national languages and a people's university. At the University of Dakar, African literature was taught for the first time, and students abandoned the French options with such fervour and in such numbers that ways had to be found to discourage them (MD/FNC). The first Masters thesis on Sembene made its appearance, written by a young Ibrahima Ndiaye, a future member of Sembene's old party, a future leader of the most radical teachers' union, a committed Marxist, but in a language so cautious that Marxism is never mentioned.³¹ At secondary level, the educational reforms of 1972 brought *God's Bits of Wood* onto the French *baccalauréat* syllabus, where it was read in an atmosphere initially fraught with racist tension, as the French *coopérants* who continued, thanks to Senghor, to man the schools, and who were quite hostile to these African intrusions into their domain, confronted angry, frustrated young pupils who had at last found a space within the neo-colonial institutions in which to let loose their bottled-up 'xenophobia': a Ministry report of this era uses the term '*classes-émeutes*' ('riot-classes').³²

Other institutions of the state, like the Maisons des Jeunes et de la Culture, were subverted by young people tired of imperialism. Plays like Guinean Keita Fodéba's *African Dawn*³³ were performed, poems written and recited in Wolof, songs sung about legendary heroes and heroines like Aline Sitoe Diatta. Students free during university closures actually set up a people's university (Bathily 1972, 133) in which they taught everything from Marx and Mao to birth control (BBD/FNC). This pressure on the state resulted, among other things, in the setting up of a Directorate of Literacy in 1972 (Ndeikounda et al).

The focal point of the struggle was inevitably language. But given the level of Sembene's involvement in this, and the price he may eventually have paid for it, we cannot talk of the

Last of the Empire.

³¹ Ndiaye, Ibrahima. "La critique sociale dans l'oeuvre romanesque d'Ousmane Sembene du Docker Noir à Xala". MA thesis, Lettres Modernes, University of Dakar, 1975. The author, now known as Ibrahima Ndiaye Djadji, has since written a number of interesting articles on culture and ideology in the PIT research revue, *Gestu*.

³² République du Sénégal, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, Lomé, 28 February, 1974, p. 13.

³³ Reproduced in Fanon, 183-6.

language struggle without him. Let us pick up his story where we left it in 1968.

Sembene in the 1970s: portrait of a radical artist

At the personal level, Sembene was forty-seven and a family man by 1970. He had married his first cousin, a mid-wife, following Wolof tradition, in 1967. In 1969, he had finished his beautiful bungalow by the sea in Yoff, just outside Dakar, and moved in with his wife and nine-year-old half-French son from a previous relationship. As Vieyra puts it, he had 'settled down' (Vieyra 1972, 22-3). But by 1973, he had another son by a woman from Upper Volta, had divorced his cousin, and married the African-American Carrie Dailey, whom he had met when she interviewed him for a PhD thesis she was writing on him, who was twenty years his junior, and with whom he and his two sons lived until he divorced her in 1986 (CDS/FNC).

In terms of political involvement, we have already seen that Sembene had drawn back from formal politics in the early 1960s. He appears to have maintained this distance throughout the 1970s. As we have seen, active politics in the early part of the 1970s was mainly in the hands of students and teachers: though Sembene had increasing links with intellectuals at the university (PD/FNC), and although, as Pathé Diagne says, 'he signed every petition', he obviously could not participate directly at this level. With the introduction of teleguided democracy from 1974 on, equally obviously he was very unlikely to join the official PAI.

Talking to people who grew up in the late 1960s and 1970s, it is obvious that Sembene's lack of formal attachment to a radical party throughout this period did nothing to damage his image as a radical artist with the youth or the Left. I had wondered about Sembene's image, especially when I stumbled upon the large photo of Sembene, Senghor, the French ambassador and their respective spouses at the 1968 gala premiere of *Mandabi* in an old copy of *Dakar Matin* in the National Archives: imagine Ngugi rubbing shoulders with Arap Moi and the British Ambassador on the stage at Kamiriithu! But Abdoulaye Bathily, who was a student throughout this period and whose admiration for Sembene never wavered, assured me that it was only a photo, and that Sembene had not gone to dinner with Senghor and the Ambassador that evening (AB/FNC). In a country where incorporation of the Left happened with depressing frequency, and whose rumour-industry is so productive, there was never a hint in the 1970s that Sembene had sold out.

On the contrary, throughout the 1970s, Sembene was a symbol of resistance, almost an

icon, a vehicle for the young people to express all their resentment against the francophile Senghor. This is how one of the young men of the 1970s described his feelings:

We were looking for a role model and we found one in Sembene, who was like a Senegalese Che to us. All the young people knew Sembene. I wept when I read his books. Everybody wanted to have a Sembene book, you had to have a Sembene something, either the beret, or the pipe, or to carry yourself like him. Even if you didn't know who he was, you had to pretend you did (C/FNC).

Sembene's image was anti-imperialist in the first instance, Marxist in the second. The films were partly responsible - he showed them himself to young people at the Maisons des Jeunes - but the books, as my interviewee implies, were also important. Young people had been reading Sembene's novels long before these appeared officially in school: radical teachers would recommend them, and school-children formed little reading groups and read them in their lunch break (BK/FNC). Now, with *God's Bits of Wood* on the syllabus, young people, in search of role models, got two for the price of one, Sembene and Bakayoko, and for many there does not seem to have been much distinction between the two.

Paying the price for one's principles was a distinctive element in the Sembene image the young people conjured up for themselves in the 1970s. I was told that he 'could have been part of the system and had everything, instead he made personal sacrifices' (MD/FNC). Sembene is always mentioned in the same breath as Cheikh Anta. Clearly, what the two shared was an anti-imperialist record. But while the objective foundation of Cheikh Anta's martyr image in the 1960s and 1970s is very obvious, both academically, where he was blocked from sharing the fruits of his research with the young intellectuals of the university, and politically in terms of the banning of his party in 1963 and the refusal to recognise it when he revived it in 1976, in Sembene's case, the objective evidence is less direct and obvious. His wife Carrie, on his account, was refused a teaching job at the university (CDS/FNC) but Sembene himself would appear to have suffered a lot less for his anti-imperialism - and in his case his Marxism - than Cheikh Anta. He had had French financial backing, and had not been blocked in any way by the Senegalese state, throughout the 1960s. Now in the 1970s, the state would co-finance two of his

films. To crown it all, one of his books was on the syllabus.³⁴ I can only conclude that, if martyrdom there was, it was in a subtle form, like racism: in terms of the sometimes grudging and tight-lipped recognition by the ruling class of an artist whose merits were so freely recognised abroad. Does the banning of *Ceddo* in 1977 fall into a different category, placing him at last in the same league with Cheikh Anta?

Like many others in the opposition, Sembene in the 1970s turned his attention to culture. Carrie, as a foreigner, gives us some idea of Sembene's level of involvement in the cultural movement:

I was married to a man who dealt with his culture at the roots, which meant that the things that I was forced to absorb quickly about this culture, some people take years to grasp. We lived the language, we lived the culture, we lived the environment: I had an encyclopaedia around me all the time (CDS/FNC).

A very subsidiary concern in *Mandabi*, culture is a central preoccupation in his three features of the 1970s: *Emitai*, *Xala* and *Ceddo*.

Language as revolution: Sembene the activist

This brings us to Sembene's involvement with the language movement. I will deal with this in detail because, just as an understanding of the fate of the commercial bourgeoisie in the 1970s as described above lends depth to one's grasp of *Xala*, the intricacies of 1970s Senegalese language politics is required reading when it comes to the banning of *Ceddo*.

Why did Sembene, who was consistent in not joining any political party once he returned to Senegal, lend his name to this movement, thereby, as his friend and collaborator Pathé Diagne pointed out to me, guaranteeing the movement a high profile at home and abroad (PD/FNC)? And not just lend his name to it: devote time to it on a hands-on basis? And what, if anything, did the language movement and his involvement achieve in terms of combatting the forces of neo-colonialism?

³⁴ In an amusing exchange between Sembene and writer Abdou Anta Ka as they arrived for a Writers' Association dinner hosted by Senghor in 1975, Sembene said, 'Are we the Tabaski rams being led to the slaughter?' to which Ka responded that it was all right for 'those of us whose books are on the syllabus and whose films are co-produced by the state' but that most writers were too underfed to be much use for Tabaski (*Le Soleil*, 21/11/1975).

Language and power

If culture in the 1970s was a political battle-ground, then the focal point of the struggle was language. The language contradictions crystallised the anti-French feelings described in the first part of this chapter. In a country where, after 300 years of French presence, and over a century of colonisation, only 11% of the people could read and write French, the first article of the Senegalese constitution proclaimed French the sole official language (Dumont, 23). In a country where, even in the capital, French was a language of social intercourse for less than 1% of schoolchildren, education from the first day of primary school was in French (Wioland, 230). In a country where 80% of the people could speak Wolof, and where it was, unlike French in the 1960s, a 'rapidly expanding language' (ibid, 239) the familiar French argument about the balkanization effect of African languages did not hold water. Senghor, with his *agrégation* in French grammar, and his references to French as the language 'which lights up our darkness' (Senghor 1964, 226), and with his founding of *La Francophonie* in 1969, incarnated this contradiction: all the anger felt at his pro-imperialist positions in all aspects of life from economics to culture would be expressed in the 1970s through the language struggle.

The politicisation of language obviously has its roots in colonial policy, where the colonial language had been used administratively to create a loyalist elite and to lock the masses out of the institutions of political and civil life, and psychologically, especially in the French colonies, through the systematic denigration and active underdevelopment of the African languages, as one of the principal weapons in the 'inferiorisation' process. Sembene's understanding of the colonial use of language as a means of domination is evident back in the 1950s in *God's Bits of Wood*, where we see the colonised, accustomed to linguistic exclusion, beginning to get their own back: 'If we like, we speak French, and you get what we say. If we no like, you no get to understand.' (Sembene 1973, 248). Bakayoko warns the French bosses that the days of linguistic imperialism are numbered: 'Since your ignorance of any of our languages is a handicap for you, we will use French as a matter of courtesy. But it is a courtesy that will not last for ever' (ibid, 247). In *L'Harmattan*, the writer Leye abandons writing for painting, unwilling to continue to enrich French literature, yet never having been taught to write in Wolof (Sembene 1963, 74).

In Senegal, at Independence, the ruling class had not even paid lip-service to

decolonisation at the language level. While neighbouring Guinea, a historic symbol of anti-imperialism in the opposition's eyes, vigorously pursued a progressive national languages policy (CAN/FNC), in Senegal in 1962 Senghor was proudly affirming that Senegalese newscasters could not be distinguished from their French counterparts (Senghor 1964, 359), and in 1963, with French Aid, the CLAD (Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar) was set up to weed interferences from Senegalese languages out of Senegalese French (Dumont, 216). In Senegal, as novelist-journalist Boris Diop puts it, it was a status symbol to make mistakes when speaking Wolof on public platforms, and people went out of their way to achieve it (BBD/FNC).

The emphasis of the language struggle in Senegal in the 1970s was above all on writing. This too has its roots in colonial society, where writing had been the key to power. The French had not seen the need to stem the tide of oral Wolofisation, but they had systematically crushed attempts to develop the writing of African languages and their use in schools. Back in 1817, one Jean Dard, a French primary teacher working on Gorée Island, who made the unlucky decision to teach through Wolof, was immediately recalled to France (Dumont, 161-2). Over a hundred years later, the Brazzaville conference of 1944, in a last-ditch attempt to stem the anti-imperialist tide, again banned African languages in schools (Morgenthau, 39). Having crushed the development of writing, the French then systematically denigrated African languages - or dialects, as they called them - as inferior because unwritten (Dumont, 217). As French linguist Pierre Dupont puts it, 'they locked these languages up in the ghetto of their orality' (Dumont, 263).

Independence had done nothing to change the colonial equation of writing and power: Ibrahima Dieng in *Mandabi* had brought that home to everybody. Yet in the 1970s, over 80% of the population remained illiterate (Demers, 60), and most of them did not know French. To the opposition, the key to the empowerment of the masses lay necessarily in enabling their own languages to compete with French on the written ground where French had historically entrenched its superiority.

The colonially created and neo-colonially reinforced myth that African languages were not/could not be written was so deeply entrenched that when Sembene and his friend Pathé Diagne brought out the first number of *Kaddu*, a review written in Wolof and other Senegalese languages in 1971, it was a major landmark in the cultural struggle. It was not, however, the complete bolt from the blue that it may have appeared in the context. Wolof had of course been

written in Arabic script before the French started their crusade against African languages in the nineteenth century, and the ill-fated Jean Dard had compiled a Wolof grammar using Roman script (Dumont, 261). More recently, in the Anti-imperialist 1950s, a group of Senegalese students in Grenoble, inspired by Cheikh Anta Diop, and which included future dramatist Cheikh Aliou Ndao, philosopher Assane Sylla and future president Abdoulaye Wade, produced a Wolof reader which was published in 1957 (CAN/FNC). Sembene wrote to them from Marseille, expressing his interest (AS/FNC). He himself, it appears, was working on a translation of the *Communist Manifesto* into Wolof (Vieyra 1972, 204). This was the cultural context of the 1950s which Pathé Diagne described to me, and which I referred to in the previous section, in which Marxists and Pan-Africanists rubbed shoulders, and the Marxists took the cultural lead.

In 1970, the 1950s collaboration between nationalists and Marxists over the language question in Senegal was revived in the persons of Sembene himself and Pathé Diagne. Diagne, more Nationalist than Marxist, had been a founding member of the PAI in 1957, and had returned to Senegal towards the end of the 1960s. He was one of Sembene's closest friends throughout the 1970s, and Sembene spent much of his spare time between films in Diagne's bookshop, the appropriately named Sankoré, which became a meeting ground for Dakar's anti-imperialist intellectuals. Together, in December 1971, Sembene and Diagne launched *Kaddu* (Opinion), which was entirely in Senegalese languages and which, in a rough-and-ready cyclo-styled form - a clue to the limited nature of its Canadian funding - ran to a total of 23 issues over six years, the final issue coinciding with the *Ceddo* ban in February 1977. *Kaddu* had a circulation of 1000 (Hennebelle 1978, 121), and was even distributed in France by student volunteers (AT/FNC). According to Sembene, 60% of its space was given up to peasant concerns (Hennebelle 1978, 121).

Apart from his promotion of Senegalese languages in his films, this unpretentious and irregular little review was the extent of Sembene's contribution to the language movement in the 1970s. On the surface, it may not look like much. To grasp its real significance, one needs to try to evaluate the development of the language struggle throughout the decade.

The language struggle: a revolution contained?

The pattern which emerges as one studies the language struggle through the 1970s is one in which the opposition exerts persistent pressure on the state, and the state responds positively

on the surface, while in fact all its actions are designed to slow down the language movement's momentum.

Thus in 1971, official policy shifted, at least in name, from French to bilingualism (Dumont, 205). A series of commissions was set up, presided over by Senghor himself. Some of the energies of the CLAD, formerly devoted uniquely to purging Senegalese French of its 'Wolofisms', were now directed into drawing up standard written forms for six national languages, and between 1971 and 1978, eight laws were passed on the separation of words, spelling, the introduction of national languages into primary education, etc. (Hesseling, 353). Linguists in the CLAD and also in IFAN (Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire) worked on compiling grammars and readers, and by 1975 a substantial number of basic texts existed for Wolof and Fulfulde (Dumont, 207). Senghor, who in 1971 had declared the use of the national languages in education 'neither possible nor desirable' announced in 1976: 'French ... cannot continue to be the sole means of economic, political and social promotion for our people' (Dumont, 205-7). In 1978, though French remained the sole official language, six national languages - Wolof, Sereer, Joola, Fulfulde, Malinke and Soninke - were officially recognised (Hesseling, 282).

All of this was positive. But looked at more closely, it emerges as a clever political strategy to keep opposition intellectuals busy, while ensuring that the work never went much beyond the theoretical stage. It has now been acknowledged that Senghor, who had declared that practical results would take a hundred years, and who insisted that all the theoretical work on all six languages be completed before there could be any practical application, hoped that by such delaying tactics he could wear out the opposition. Personally, he did not believe that the national languages could express modern realities (Dumont, 264; le Brun, 188).

It is in light of Senghor's strategy that *Kaddu*'s full importance comes into view: *Kaddu* was the practical application that Senghor hoped to avert. Writing and reading *Kaddu* was, as Pathé Diagne says, a practical learning experience for all those concerned (PD/FNC).

The treatment of Pathé Diagne by the University of Dakar can be seen from the same perspective. As a lecturer, he had managed in the early 1970 to set up classes where students learned to write Wolof, and which were very popular (AT/FNC; BBD/FNC). But when he wanted to take this further and to introduce a degree in African languages, his contract was not

renewed (FS/FNC).

Senghor's strategy proved effective. With virtually no practical application, doubts about the movement began to develop (Dumont, 209), and when, by the end of the decade, a great deal of propaganda was built up around the supposed failure of the language movement in Guinea, the Senegalese movement lost what was left of its momentum (CAN/FNC). The few token all-Wolof pilot schools set up in 1979 were undersubscribed (CAN/FNC).

How, then, do we evaluate the language movement, and Sembene's involvement in it? Could it be argued that the language movement was a safe option for Sembene compared to politics, one which, while maintaining his political credibility, would not jeopardize his chances of state funds to make more films? I have considered this, but have rejected it. The language struggle of the 1970s was not, at least in the minds of those who fought it, diversionary: the stakes involved were enormous. Pathé Diagne's wife, Fatou Sow, says that, had the movement succeeded, it would have dealt 'a deadly blow' to French hegemony (FS/FNC). Lest such claims appear as the exaggerations of nationalists, let me quote French Director of the CLAD, Pierre Dumont: 'There is no doubt that, if one day education is in Wolof, Fulfulde, Sereer or, Joola, the whole of Senegalese society will be transformed' (Dumont, 206). And, watching the movement fail, he adds:

Through their own language, the Senegalese could really have taken charge of their socio-economic destiny. Inevitably, the concrete and perhaps intentionally limited goals of practical literacy would have been transcended and there would have been what can only be called a Cultural Revolution (Dumont, 284).

On the other hand, in light of its failure, at least at that point in history, it can be seen retrospectively as a movement which the hegemonic forces of imperialism and the neo-colonial state ultimately contained, and which was therefore, from their point of view, a fairly safe way of keeping Marxists and nationalists from more threatening activities.

CHAPTER SEVEN

XALA: CAN THE PEOPLE'S OWN SYMBOLIC FORMS TRANSMIT A REVOLUTIONARY MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE?

In Chapters Four and Five, I attempted to define what Sembene would call the *rapport des forces* which determined the working conditions of the revolutionary artist in Senegal in the 1960s, and to examine his efforts to operate within that context. In this chapter, I want to look at *Xala* in terms of our model of revolutionary art and of the *rapports des forces* of the 1970s.

Sembene produced three features in the 1970s: *Emitai* (1971), *Xala* (1975) and *Ceddo* (1977). I have chosen *Xala* to represent the decade for several reasons. *Emitai*, set in a Joola village during the Second World War and filmed in Casamance, is an interesting experiment, but, in terms of both language and location, was one which Sembene did not repeat. *Ceddo* has the particularity of being Sembene's only film to be banned. In terms of our study, it is therefore disabled for our purpose by the absence of any contemporary local audience feedback. On the other hand, the banning is important, as is its approach to culture. We shall therefore look at it briefly in Chapter Eight, in the form of a coda to the 1970s.

Before embarking on *Xala*, let us try to sum up the state of play for the artist working in the neo-colonial state in 1970. In the 1960s, we had been able to identify five players: the French imperialists, the neo-colonial state, the revolutionary artist, the French commercial production and distribution companies, and the 'ordinary' cinema-goers. By 1968, Sembene's shift from production with the aid of the Ministère de la Coopération to commercial production and distribution had made *Mandabi* the first African film accessible to 'ordinary' Senegalese cinema audiences. *Mandabi* had proved popular and commercially successful. It had, to some extent at least, exposed the workings of the local ruling class, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. An attempt had been made to present a form of resistance by means of the postman, Marxist symbol of the proletariat, but, for a number of reasons his significance had been missed by the target audience: the positive impact of the film had been more in terms of the novelty of the 'ordinary' cinema-goers self-image and of the proof it provided, not through content or even form, but through its very existence, of the enterprise and initiative of Sembene himself, who became a role model, especially for younger people.

Does the *rapport des forces* change in the 1970s? Let us reassure ourselves to begin with that the revolutionary agenda is still in place, and that Sembene has not been tempted by the success of *Mandabi* to forget the Revolution and go commercial. Apart from other evidence of his commitment in the 1970s, like his involvement in the language movement, one can cite his role in setting up the FEPACI (Fédération Pan-Africaine des Cinéastes), which would itself become one of the forces determining the fate of African cinema through the decade. The FEPACI, the African film-makers union, has been described as 'a politico-economic movement committed to the total liberation of Africa' (Diawara, 45), and though it would lose its radical edge in the 1980s, this was how it appeared throughout the 1970s. Sembene was Vice-President of the committee which set FEPACI up at the Pan-African Festival in Alger in 1969 (Vieyra 1969). At the festival, he expressed the need for 'a committed cinema, a political cinema, a cinema which questions' and voiced some doubts about the mixture of 'moderates' and 'revolutionaries' in the organisation: 'It's a first step, but we need to go further' (Hennebelle 1969, 78-9). Throughout the 1970s, the 'revolutionaries' would dominate the FEPACI, emphasising the need for a 'didactic' cinema and condemning both a commercial and art-for-art's-sake approach (Diawara, 31). I do not think there is any doubt, therefore, that the revolutionary cinema agenda is still in place for Sembene in 1970.

A new mode of production: the neo-colonial state as producer and distributor

The mode of production does change. The Ministère de la Coopération and French commercial companies, the two options of the 1960s, give way to state production: the state as entrepreneur involves itself in the film industry along with its other enterprises described in Chapter Six. The SNC (Société Nationale du Cinéma) is set up in 1972 (Vieyra 1983, 37-40), and in 1974 *Xala* is co-produced by the SNC and Sembene's own company, Filmi Doomi Rewmi (literally 'films of the nation's children'). Sembene thus benefits from the advantages offered by the state to the national bourgeoisie, as we saw in Chapter Six, and the 'statised' business model which *Xala* satirises is the very mode of production within which *Xala* is itself produced! In 1974 the state also takes over distribution and the cinemas: the SIEDEC (Société d'Importation, de Distribution et d'Exploitation Cinématographique) replaces the French companies (Vieyra 1983, 27).

Since its inception, the FEPACI had put pressure on states to nationalise distribution

(Vieyra 1975, 334) but had opposed the nationalisation of production in the interests of artistic freedom (Diawara, 41). Senegal, in the grip of state-fever in the early 1970s, as we saw in Chapter Six, was the only state to do both (ibid). We will need to monitor how state control of production affects Sembene's chances of producing a more revolutionary cinema than in the 1960s. On the one hand, it will allow for a more inward-looking cinema, more national and African, than that of the 1960s with its dependence on the Ministère de la Coopération and the French companies, and this inward-orientation will be evident in all Sembene's 1970s films. On the other hand, what will state control do to the freedom of the artist? Will Sembene, in these new conditions of production, dare to show the resistance he silenced out in the 1960s: will he dare to speak of '68?

Freedom of Expression: a rising or falling threshold?

How does the state tolerance threshold present itself in the 1970s? On the one hand, it would appear that some things can now be said that could not be said in the 1960s. In 1972, *Emitai*, in which Sembene attacks the viciousness of the French army in Casamance during the Second World War, got through the Senegalese censorship board unscathed.³⁵ Vieyra remarks cryptically that a 'favourable set of circumstances' (*une conjoncture favorable*) presented itself, which I read in terms of the neo-colonial state's anxiety after 1968 to prove its nationalist credentials to an angry anti-French population, as we saw in Chapter Six. Will the birth of the pseudo-democracy in 1974 provide another *conjoncture favorable* for *Xala*?

This hope of a new liberalism must however be balanced against the fact that the cinema is of greater concern to African states in the 1970s, in terms of both propaganda and subversion, than during its infancy in the 1960s. Already in the early 1970s Senegal has half-a-dozen directors with at least one feature to their names, and has taken the lead in film production south of the Sahara: the 1970s is the Golden Age of Senegalese cinema.³⁶ Although none of the films in question could be called revolutionary in terms of our model, Sembene's influence is evident in their focus on the oppressed classes and their critical view of social contradictions. Sembene even has an apparent disciple (or a plagiarist, according to some - a refreshing change for one

³⁵ When *Emitai* was shown in Moscow, however, the French ambassador sent out an SOS which resulted in several African countries banning it (Vieyra 1983, 78).

³⁶ Anonymous report in *Sénégal d'aujourd'hui*, No 14, "Le Cinéma Sénégalais, premier en Afrique noire".

who had so often been accused of plagiarism), in the person of young Johnson Traoré.³⁷

In 1970, a single shot in Djibril Diop Mambety's *Badou Boy* showing Dakar's slums to the accompaniment of the national anthem kept the film out of circulation for over a year (Vieyra 1975, 181). In 1972, Traoré's *Reou Takh* becomes the first film to be completely banned in Senegal, again for its emphasis on Dakar's slums: the censor said it 'should have shown other aspects' (Makédonsky 1, 22; Vieyra 1975, 187). Clearly, the margin of manoeuvre with respect to the French presence from which *Emitai* seems to have benefitted does not apply when it comes to the national image. One wonders, also, if the younger, less known generation of filmmakers is not being made to pay for what Senghor prevented the censors doing to *Mandabi*. Or perhaps the fate of the younger ones is a warning by the censor to Sembene.

Personally, Sembene does seem to judge the margin of manoeuvre to have widened: his three features of the 1970s are all more daring than *Mandabi*. His international reputation is established, and we saw in Chapter Six that he has a significant political following among the young people at home. The censor must therefore walk a tightrope between the dangers of creating a martyr through censorship on the one hand, and the direct impact of a revolutionary film on the other.

Traditional norms and forms meet revolutionary content

There is one more factor which comes to the fore in the 1970s: culture. Culture, in a self-conscious way, had not been an issue in *Mandabi*. In one form or another, it is a major feature of *Emitai*, *Xala* and *Ceddo*.

What is at stake for the Marxist artist confronting her/his people's culture? Clearly, as I tried to show in Chapter Two, s/he cannot communicate a revolutionary message unless s/he speaks the people's language and understands their view of the world. Culture, therefore, is inseparable from the problem of communication. Culture is also increasingly seen in the 1970s as a weapon of resistance rather than a mere super-structural reflection of the base: it is both 'the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history' (Cabral, 141). On the other hand, the

³⁷ Traoré was accused of plagiarising Sembene by the *Soleil* film reviewer, *Le Cyclope* (*Le Soleil* 16/4/71) and again by Aly Kheury Ndaw (*Le Soleil* 3/2/71). In 1972, his *Lambaaye* and the banned *Reou Takh* led Vieyra to say somewhat reluctantly that he was moving in an 'ideologically progressive' direction (Vieyra 1975), and in his interview in Vieyra 1983, he sounds like Sembene's double.

people's culture, a mixture of tradition and Islam, carries within it certain values which the historical materialist is trying to transcend: class values imbibed from the feudal monarchies, a relationship with nature - due to a low level of development of the productive forces - which privileges the supernatural, the passivity and fatalism of maraboutic Islam. Imperialism, for its part, aided and abetted by *Négritude*, had always encouraged precisely these aspects of traditional culture - the feudalism and the metaphysics - using them as part of an ideological package which denounced Marx for his atheism, and discouraged the development of science in Africa (Sarr, 30).

How does the revolutionary artist meet the people on their present level, and manage, while using their language, to encourage them to transcend the limitations of their present value system? Gramsci merely states the problem: revolutionary art must 'sink its roots into the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies and its moral and intellectual world, even if it is backward and conventional' (Forgacs, 397). Fanon echoes him: 'It is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come' (Fanon, 183). Cabral, recognising the weight of culture in the struggle - 'when Goebbels heard the word culture, he reached for his gun' - warns that, while the traditional culture can be a great source of courage, it also transmits an 'erroneous concept of reality' (Cabral, 150-2). Alexis, writing in the 1950s, had said something similar, appealing to artists to 'be faithful to the people's symbolic world' but warning of the need to 'rid the myths of their metaphysical content' and recreate them from a 'materialist, humanist, progressive point of view' (Alexis, 97-8).

To date, Sembene, dealing admittedly with culture as theme rather than symbolic form, had managed to present a very clear and balanced picture in which the people's culture was recognized as a vital social force and the materially-based aspects and the social aspects compatible with Marxism were stamped with authorial approval, while the metaphysics was systematically demystified. In *O Pays, mon beau peuple*, Oumar Faye had consented to the use of the Joola masquerade, the *Cangourang*, to mobilise the peasants, while retaining his own anti-metaphysical world-view, much as Cabral allowed his soldiers to wear amulets, but did not wear one himself (Cabral, 58). In *God's Bits of Wood*, on the women's march, the *jinns* were demystified, while the traditional, materially-based cure for fainting - inhaling urine - was retained. In *Emitai*, the gods were shown to have failed the men of the village, while the women's courage came from their traditional role as custodians of the rice (Hennebelle 1978,

119).

But in 1970s Senegal, Sembene is no longer confronting culture simply as theme, but as communicative weapon, as language and symbolic form. As we look at *Xala*, we shall be asking whether he has succeeded in reaching into the people's symbolic world for something which will have more impact on them than that postman in *Mandabi*, and yet which will not reinforce the traditional feudal values of the monarchies, still deeply ingrained in the language, nor the belief in the supernatural bred of centuries of animism, nor yet the fatalism and messianism of maraboutic Islam.

***Xala*: a revolutionary cinema at last?**

On the surface, *Xala* is the story of El Hadj Abdou Kader Bèye, a Senegalese businessman who marries a third wife thirty years his junior only to find he is impotent and cannot consummate the marriage. Convinced that he has the *xala* - that his impotence is the result of a spell - he spends all his time and money on consultations with various marabouts, in search of a cure. In the process, he loses his business and two of his three wives. Finally, a beggar who has a pitch outside El Hadj's office, and whom El Hadj has unsuccessfully tried to have permanently removed by the police, declares that he can remove the spell, on condition that El Hadj do his bidding. Arriving at El Hadj's house in a privileged residential area, accompanied by a band of Dakar's down-and-outs and disabled, the beggar announces that he is responsible for the *xala*. He turns out to be a relative of El Hadj, rendered destitute when El Hadj fraudulently appropriated the communal land of their clan. In the final scene, El Hadj, obeying the beggar's orders, stands naked to the waist before his family and the beggars, and the beggars spit on him to remove the curse.

How does *Xala* measure up in terms of our model of a revolutionary cinema? Not at all badly, it would seem, at least according to one level of interpretation. Let us look briefly at *Xala* in terms of the various criteria: exposure of the exploitative system, evidence that resistance is possible, and a language/artistic form accessible to the masses. It is possible to show that *Xala* fulfils all of these.

Exposing the exploitative system

(i)The two bourgeoisies

Let us begin with our first criterion: exposure of the system. We saw in Chapter Six the importance of the 'national' or commercial bourgeoisie in both the 1968 uprising and Senghor's management of the post-1968 period. In *Xala*, Sembene has captured this class very realistically and recognisably, at a moment when the eyes of Senegal are upon them as never before. El Hadj is a member of a Businessmen's Group reminiscent of the UNIGES-COFEGES mentioned in Chapter 6, and the film opens with the triumphant inauguration of a Senegalese President in the Chamber of Commerce, which, as we saw, actually took place in 1969, and is filmed at the actual Chamber of Commerce in Dakar. Sembene has captured the commercial bourgeoisie, not during their moment of genuine nationalism in 1968, but in the early 1970s when, still full of pseudo-nationalist rhetoric but now incorporated and pampered by the neo-colonial state, they are sitting down with the bureaucratic bourgeoisie to chop the spoils of the groundnut and phosphate windfall, described by Bathily as 'this manna used to create a business-bourgeoisie whose extreme opulence was reflected in a sharp rise in the consumption of luxury goods' (Bathily 1992, 147). What Bathily describes is certainly Sembene's Xalaland (the term is mine, not Sembene's), with its pretty little be-ribboned cars as wedding presents for third wives.

Fanon had described this bourgeoisie in 1961, their strident calls for a nationalisation from which they alone would benefit, their aping of the superficial aspects of European culture, their residual tribalism, their conspicuous consumption, their 'scandalous self-enrichment, speedy and pitiless' (Fanon, 134): *Xala* reads almost like a frame-by-frame illustration of 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', and it is difficult to look at the Businessmen's Group in *Xala* without seeing Fanon's 'greedy little caste, avid and voracious, with the mind of a huckster' (Fanon, 141), or to listen to El Hadj's confession towards the end of the film: 'What are we? Miserable commission-mongers, sub-contractors, businessmen from the bush redistributing the leftovers they throw to us' without remembering the sarcastic reference to the bourgeoisie's 'historic mission, that of intermediary' (Fanon, 122).

The essence of this comprador class, in Senegal as in all neo-colonies, is the contradiction between their flashy pseudo-powerful exterior and their vulnerable underbelly, their dependence on the foreign capital which exploits them. Fanon has described this too, but, when it comes to

this aspect, it is above all Samir Amin's voice I hear in *Xala*. Amin's book, *Le Monde des affaires sénégalaises*, had come out in 1969, and Sembene reads Amin. Xalaland is never far from the capital-and-credit nightmare of the commercial bourgeoisie described by Amin. The paranoia bred in such a context is captured in *Xala* in the brutal expulsion of El Hadj from the Businessmen's Group. And as the bailiffs lock up El Hadj's shop and push his Mercedes away, we hear Samir Amin's warning: 'They are extremely vulnerable: the tiniest mistake ... and the creditors - the banks, for example - can wipe the business out' (Amin 1969, 75).

Sembene's originality does not lie in identifying the economic impotence of the bourgeoisie or even in the use of the word 'impotence': Fanon had already labelled them 'powerless economically' (Fanon, 132), and the words 'acute impotence' were actually used by Senghor's organic intellectuals to describe the state of the economy in 1972 (Fatton, 66), when Sembene was already studying this class with *Xala* in mind (Chériaa, 15). Sembene's originality lies rather in returning the metaphor to its literal, sexual meaning. The notion of the *xala* could be seen as a stroke of real genius, marvellous in its artistic economy, killing at least three important revolutionary birds with one stone. What better way than this mysterious Wolof word, spoken only in whispers, to meet the people on their own ground, to indigenise Fanon and Amin for them, what better way than this 'innocent' metaphor to dodge the censor, and what more powerful, more deeply 'intimate' way to cut down to size this big-for-nothing pseudo-bourgeoisie than to portray it crawling on its knees to the bride, a juju between its teeth, and in the final scene, naked before the oppressed as they take their revenge? In Sembene's own words: 'precisely where they should be able to make life, to renew life, to "create"... they are unable - pardon the expression! - to draw their bow: they are impotent' (Chériaa, 13).

So *Xala*, on one level, is a masterly exposure of the impotence of the commercial bourgeoisie and, as we saw in Chapter Six, this class is important in its own right in the history of neo-colonial Senegal. But, in terms of exposure of the system in *Xala*, this is just a starting point. From the first scene, where the triumphant occupation of the Chamber of Commerce by the Businessmen's Group is accompanied by the hugely ironic voice-off parody of Senghor droning on about the 'African Socialist Path',³⁸ Sembene invites us to see the businessmen simultaneously as themselves and as symbols of the other sector of the bourgeoisie, the

³⁸ Hennebelle has pointed out that this device was not original to Sembene – it had already been exploited by one of the younger generation of Senegalese film-makers, Djibril Diop Mambéty, in *Contrast City* (Hennebelle 1968, 68)

bureaucrats who manage the neo-colonial state on behalf of imperialism, and most especially those who run the government. He thus exposes both bourgeoisies in one go. This is cleverly done, so that on one level, reading realistically, we see the commercial bourgeoisie in their actual relationship with the bureaucratic bourgeoisie - the infamous alliance of the early 1970s - encapsulated in the scene at the wedding where the Minister, for a commission, does a deal with a businessman to accelerate the latter's tourist proposal through the state machinery. But on another level, Sembene, following Brecht, purposely obstructs a realist reading - a mere President of the Chamber of Commerce would not, for example, have had a French advisor permanently in tow - and through the crack thus created we see the businessmen as symbols of the other class: in other words, the commercial bourgeoisie serves as a mask which now conceals, now reveals the politicians. All that Sembene cannot say about the politicians he suggests through the businessmen (even he, it would seem, sees them as intermediaries!). As Vieyra puts it: 'The film is intentionally ambiguous ... The plight of the businessman is also that of the country's rulers, who, like him, are impotent and unable to take charge of the country's economy' (Vieyra 1983, 87-8).

Thus, for the Senegalese take-over of the Chamber of Commerce we must read Independence and the *Chambre des Députés* respectively, a mental adjustment facilitated by the aforementioned voice-off parody of Senghor, and also by the physical resemblance between the President of the Chamber in the film (played by our friend Makhourédia Guèye of *Mandabi* fame) and the real-life President of the Republic.

Better still, through the crack we see the real puppet-master responsible for the impotence of both bourgeoisies: the infamous French *Ministère de la Coopération*. In the film, the French advisor to the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Durand-Dupont, in his ubiquitous self-effacing pseudo-obsequiousness, is a symbol of the dissimulated power of the battalions of so-called 'we-are-here-to-serve' *coopérants*, led by ex-Communist Dresch, who peopled Senghor's world throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In the franc-filled brief-cases Durand-Dupont distributes to the members of the Chamber in the first scene, we see how the bureaucratic bourgeoisie was bought by imperialism at Independence. Finally, we see the repressive flip-side of the imperialist relationship, in the caricature of the real-life Minister of the Interior, the redoubtable Jean Collin, which portrays him, appropriately enough, as the superintendent of the particularly vicious police force which arrive to remove the beggars from El Hadj's 'private property'.

(ii)The wretched of the earth

So much for the exposure of the ruling class and its relationship with imperialism: *Xala*, on this level, is already a much more daring work than *Mandabi*. But *Xala* does not stop short at the exposure of the ruling class. True to the dialectical method, Sembene also shows us the opposite class, the oppressed, in the form of the beggars, and the dialectical relationship between the two classes.

As with the commercial bourgeoisie, Sembene's interest in the beggars has an immediate, topical source. The disastrous economic situation of 1970 has led the Senegalese government, with the blessing of the World Bank, to the classic solution: tourism (shades of Fanon again, and the 'brothel of Europe' (Fanon, 123). In the interests of tourism, it is essential to eliminate the lumpen hordes driven into the city by the increasingly unviable rural conditions mentioned in Chapter Four. The policy of forcibly removing the lumpen from the city goes back to colonial times, when it was applied to what were known as 'useless natives': labourers no longer needed once the construction of Dakar was completed (Seck, 38). Now, at a 1972 UPS conference, Senghor himself uses the even less friendly term '*déchets humains*' (human debris), a bit of a scandal in the mouth of Senghor the humanist, as Collignon has pointed out (Collignon, 574). When the President of the Chamber of Commerce in *Xala*, in his phone call to the police removal squad, repeats Senghor's term, Sembene is sailing very close to the wind indeed.

The relationship between the beggar in *Xala* and El Hadj is presented in classical Marxist language. The poor are poor not by some act of God but by the human actions which make the rich rich: by the pauperisation which is an integral part of the early stages of capitalism. 'What I am is your fault' says the beggar, as he explains how he and his clan were fraudulently expropriated from their land by El Hadj. In Sembene's own words, El Hadj's action is part of the classic process of 'primitive accumulation' (Hennebelle 1978, 120). In the background once more we hear Fanon denouncing the 'organized protected robbery' on which the bourgeoisie has constructed itself (Fanon, 154).

Resistance

So, it would seem, full marks to *Xala* for exposure of how the system works. But *Xala* goes further again: it provides us with at least a semblance of resistance. The beggars, brutally removed from Dakar and abandoned in the bush, come back. As Fanon says, 'this lumpen-

proletariat is like a horde of rats: you may kick them and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts, they go on gnawing at the roots of the tree' (Fanon, 103). And at the end of the story, we see Sembene's beggars marching through the rich residential area of Dakar in the dawn, and taking over El Hadj's house. In spitting on him, they vent their disgust with him and his class, and El Hadj is in no position to stop them. We end with a victory for the oppressed.

A message for the people via the people's cultural forms

Finally, how does the new focus on culture come into play in *Xala*? Once again, Sembene would seem to have carried it off: to have used the people's culture in the interests of a revolutionary cinema. What better title than this intriguing Wolof word *xala*, what better way than a wedding - culture at its most concentrated, culture shot through with sex - to engage with the people's culture, to meet the people on their own ground? We remember that Sembene had refused to yield to the commercial company's pressure for more sex in *Mandabi*. But in 1970, Sembene's young colleague Traoré, Sembene's disciple/plagiarist, had beaten *Mandabi* at the box-office with *Diègue-bi*, which explores the evolution of traditional gender relations in urban Senegal (Hennebelle 1970, 70). Did Sembene, in whom the revolutionary artist has always walked hand-in-hand with the astute businessman, see that Traoré held a key to the people's hearts and decide to plagiarise his plagiarist?

And then, there is the beggar's song. The beggar's leader, in a genre traditionally used to expose despotic rulers, sings out compellingly over the entire film, attacking the 'king of the lizards' for oppressing his subjects. His song is a form of meta-commentary on what Sembene himself is doing in *Xala*.

In 1979, in the Aziza interviews, Senghor mentions Sembene: 'He says he's a Marxist-Leninist. As democrats, we helped him. Only, we wished his films had been less political, more cultural' (Senghor 1980, 231). *Xala* provides all the culture even a Senghor could ask for - but in the interest of a political agenda Senghor had battled throughout his entire career to suppress. Are we, then, with *Xala*, dealing at last with the real revolutionary cinema Sembene denied us in the 1960s?

Some Reservations

A narrative shift of class emphasis

I have three main reservations about this reading, all clustered around the beggars.

My first problem is the lack of narrative weight accorded to the bourgeoisie's 'opposite class', compared to the gigantic revolutionary task that the beggars are supposed to perform. In all Sembene's previous films, the narrative emphasis had been on the oppressed: in *Xala*, it is on El Hadj. We see him with his wives, his children, his employees, in his houses, his office, the Chamber, the village, and we are allowed to share his most intimate experiences. The oppressed, on the other hand, are as peripheral in Sembene's narrative as they are in life. Apart from their leader, Gorgui, the beggars have no names - they do not even feature on the credits - they are extras. We never follow them home. The film is minimally better than the book, in that it gives them a couple of extra scenes: we see them in the bush where the police have abandoned them, and having breakfast in Dakar on their return next morning. But for real personalised beggars, we have to wait for Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* in 1979 which, while it betrays a large debt to Sembene, also has something to teach him, or to remind him about. A revolutionary art rejects society's marginalisation of the oppressed, placing them in the centre, reflecting their struggle back to them: will we never shake off the shadow of *God's Bits of Wood*?

The foregrounding of El Hadj, on the other hand, makes one wonder how Sembene really feels about the bourgeoisie at this stage. What does the final scene really signify in the Senegalese context where being spat upon, while it can mean rejection, is also a means of religious redemption (Binet 1977, 76)? In interviews, Sembene has expressed perfectly orthodox Marxist views on this: 'This new bourgeoisie must be spat out' (Hennebelle 1979, 120). But he also says: 'They can be active and valuable when they have been re-educated by the masses' (ibid) and 'I never said they were beyond redemption' (Chériaa, 17). But even allowing for the redemption theory, this does not explain the degree of empathy with El Hadj the narrative seems to elicit: the universality of his 'problem', the fact that he is, after all, also a victim, and finally, his heroic speech to the Chamber. Is this a much more conciliatory Sembene, ready for dialogue with those in power?

The lumpen as revolutionary class

My second reservation concerns the choice of beggars as opposite class. Sembene

himself suggests that they are to be read symbolically: 'Through the beggars I salute all the oppressed, the workers in the towns as well as the peasants' (Hennebelle 1949, 121). He therefore expects us to look over the beggars' shoulders to see the peasants, the workers and the petty bourgeoisie much as he asks us to look over the businessmen's shoulders to see the politicians and the French. He has even provided a clue in the scene in which the beggars are bundled away by the police, and bundled along with them, flying in the face of the laws of realism, is a virtual delegation of the oppressed, a symbolic Brechtian army: the student selling *Kaddu*, the peasant who has just been robbed by the pickpocket, and even the little car-wash boy (far-fetched symbol of the proletariat?!)?

My problem with this is two-fold. First, in a country where beggars are a prominent fact of everyday life, there is no guarantee that the audience will opt for the symbolic reading. Secondly, while the beggars are likely victim-symbols, they are too unlikely for words as figures of resistance. And whereas, in the 'victim' scene - the police raid - the other classes are symbolically represented, as we just saw, in the 'resistance' scene - the take-over of El Hadj's house - the beggars 'fight' alone.

We could read the beggars realistically, as representing the lumpen. The lumpen, as Samir Amin reminds us, is the only class that grows and develops under neo-colonialism, as the proletariat stagnates or withers (Amin 1973, 23-4). Fanon referred to the lumpen as 'one of the most spontaneous and radically revolutionary forces of a colonised people' (Fanon 103), and this is how Jeyifo reads them in *The Road* (Jeyifo, 11-17). But there is a vast difference between the youth and energy of Soyinka's touts and Sembene's beggars, whose leader is blind and all of whom are disabled in one way or another.

If we read the beggars as representing not the lumpen but the disabled, then they are a tiny minority group rather than a rapidly-growing class, and have very different ideological and artistic connotations. Will the Senegalese audience not be more likely to fit the beggar into an Islamic frame of reference, reformist rather than revolutionary, which says that beggars have a right to their *zakkat*, rather than that they should not exist at all? This could be damaging to a revolutionary interpretation, when Sembene has made so much depend in *Xala* on people grasping that the beggar is not Allah's will but the direct product of expropriation by the ruling class.

Xala places the resistance in the hands of beggars. The classes involved in the real-life resistance are marginalized by Sembene and even disabled in revolutionary terms. The only workers in *Xala* work for El Hadj and are devoted to him - his driver Modu is such an example of feudal allegiance that he almost seems like a viewer's role model, inviting us to empathise with El Hadj, and El Hadj's secretary determination in the novella to take him to court when her wages are not paid does not feature in the film. El Hadj's daughter, Rama, who seems to represent the students, is a feminist who stands up to her father, and a nationalist who speaks Wolof when addressed in French, but when it comes to the crunch and the beggars invade her house, her Wolof deserts her and it is clear that her level of consciousness does not stretch to transcending her class origins: hardly fair to Ousmane Blondin Diop, a radical student who died in a neo-colonial prison on Gorée island in 1973, when Sembene was already working on *Xala*, the year that Cabral, who had come to Casamance to see *Emitai* in 1971 (Hennebelle 1978, 112), was assassinated.

The weapons of resistance: metaphysics, fairy tales and a song?

My third reservation concerns the portrayal of resistance in *Xala*. What do the beggars actually do? The main beggar secretly casts a spell on El Hadj and sings a song which runs like a leitmotif through the film. At the end of the film, having declared that he can remove the spell on condition that El Hadj 'obey' him, he and his friends march to and 'occupy' El Hadj's house, where they spit on the naked El Hadj.

My main problem with this 'resistance' is the role of the supernatural: the spell, which gives the film its title and is the central mechanism of the plot. Is this use of the people's language not something of a double-edged sword, in terms of the non-liberating aspects of traditional culture discussed at the beginning of this chapter?

On other levels, Sembene's treatment of culture in *Xala* is what we had come to expect from his previous works: he uses, not the over-worked and inadequate tradition- versus-modernity model, but a theory of culture which dramatises its ideological role in reproducing the neo-colonial ruling class, and conversely in the struggle against imperialism.

El Hadj in *Xala*, like Fanon's bourgeoisie, apes the West to which he owes his comprador status, drinks only imported water and refuses to speak Wolof, while simultaneously clinging to all aspects of African culture - like patriarchy and polygamy - which legitimise his privilege and

power to exploit. As Sembene himself puts it: 'Our bourgeoisie exploit all that is useful to them in our traditions .. all the reactionary aspects' (J. and G. Delmas, 15-6). The result, in Sembene's words, is a class which is master of neither 'the technical fetishism of Europe' nor 'the maraboutic fetishism of Africa' (Cheriaa, 16), a class which, in the more down-to-earth terminology of Yay Bineta, El Hadj's new bride's maternal aunt, is 'neither fish nor fowl'.

To El Hadj, Sembene opposes his daughter Rama whose limitations we have already suggested but who, on the cultural level, in Sembene's own words, is 'a step in the right direction in a society in search of a synthesis' (J. and G. Delmas, 15-16). She insists on speaking Wolof, she plaits her hair and wears African clothes, but she resolutely opposes those oppressive aspects of the tradition her father cherishes: its polygamy and patriarchy. Rama denounces her father's polygamy in Wolof: this sums up her progressive stance.

The spell, on the other hand, would be classified among those metaphysical aspects of culture whose existence a Marxist artist working in a realist mode might acknowledge but would not wish to reinforce. Alternately, in a work like *Xala* where symbolism plays such an important role, the beggar's ability to cast the spell on El Hadj can be read as a symbolic substitute for a real class struggle which Sembene does not dare to portray. In this light, the condition set by the beggar for removal of the spell: 'He must obey me' translates easily back, for the Marxist viewer, into the dictatorship of the proletariat.

My quarrel with this is that, while such symbolism and such a translation process would be unproblematic in a cultural context where science has for centuries been beating metaphysics into retreat, Sembene's target audience inhabits a society whose ability to control nature has been historically short-circuited, and where, as a result, Marxists carry on an ideological struggle daily to combat the persistent predominance of metaphysics over science.³⁹ In such a context, El Hadj's *xala* is unlikely to be interpreted by the target audience as a 'mere' symbol, and will not be helpful in this struggle.

If we put aside the symbolic interpretation and look at the *xala* within the framework of Realism, which is how Sembene's target audience may view it, then we have to ask whether, as a Marxist, Sembene at least demystifies and debunks the *xala* in favour of a scientific approach. It

³⁹ For an interesting discussion on the discouragement of science in Senegal by the colonial and neo-colonial state, see Raphael Sarr, "Contradictions et ambiguïtés des intellectuels sénégalais", *Gestu*, No 16, April 1985.

seems to me, on the contrary, that, mistakenly placing his faith in the ability of his audience to read the *xala* as pure symbol, and to translate it back into materialist language as representative of the class struggle, he has done nothing to counter its ideological effect within a Realist reading. On the contrary, the *xala*'s own peculiar logic pervades the narrative, and its reality seems to be authorially underwritten at every step. Where one marabout fails to cure El Hadj, another succeeds. At no point is the beggar's bluff called. In the novella, Sembene has included a conversation between two doctors, in which a psychological explanation for El Hadj's impotence is at least suggested.⁴⁰ But the impact of the film seems to depend on the audience's acceptance of the mysterious, magical powers of the beggar.

Those who take the beggar's magic powers at face value are likely to read *Xala* through a very different artistic grid from the Marxist one we have used in most of this chapter, and also from the moralistic Muslim one suggested in our discussion of the beggars. This third interpretative grid presents a world where poor men have magical power over rich men and can bring them to their knees, a delightful, inverted, fairy-tale, wish-fulfilment world where, inter alia, the Frenchman whom your ancestors have cow-towed to for centuries now cow-tows to you (as Durand Dupont seems to do in the film) - a world familiar to the traditional story-teller.

For Pfaff, this story-teller approach gives a more satisfactory interpretation of *Xala* than 'Marxist dialectics' (Pfaff, 36-7). But it is rather Sembene's attempt to translate the one into the other which concerns me here.

What are the ideological implications of this third, 'traditional' interpretation, with respect to our model of revolutionary art? We seem to be dealing with a case of total incompatibility. In this fairy-tale world, the oppressed turn the tables on the oppressor, not through their united and mobilised force and the withdrawal of their labour as in *God's Bits of Wood*, but by magic. Watching the spell work may bring a momentary sense of satisfaction that justice has been done, at least in fiction, but the most it will inspire in terms of action, I feel, will be a trip to the marabout the next time something goes wrong. At worst, such fairy-tales are examples of art at its most ideological: an art which uses fiction not to expose oppression and inspire change but to offer imaginary solutions to contradictions which have proved intractable in real life.

⁴⁰ Similarly, Sembene makes it clear that the effectiveness of a spell in *L'Harmattan* depends on the psychological relationship between Bita Hien and his victim.

This brings me to the beggar's song, and to my final reservation. The song is about the despotic king of the lizards: if you walk behind him, he kills you, saying you are trying to bite him, if you walk beside him he kills you, saying you are trying to be his equal and if you walk in front of him, he kills you saying you are trying to take advantage of his position.

With the song, as with so much else in *Xala*, Sembene has reached out to meet the people in their own language: in traditional society, songs are a well-known vehicle for expressing the veiled criticism of people in power that the powerless dare not express openly. I can see this song, like the *xala* itself, causing some of the Senegalese bourgeoisie a few moments of unease.

Sembene, who wrote the song himself, describes it as 'a call to revolt, to join the struggle against injustice' (Ghali, 90). That is a quite different matter. Such songs are traditionally not so much rallying calls to the oppressed as a form of pressure on the powerful to mend their ways. Unlike the revolutionary song, which does not need the ear of the despot it seeks to remove, their effect depends absolutely on the accused - the ruling class - being part of the audience. Like the beggar, they have reformist rather than revolutionary connotations.

So is the bourgeoisie Sembene's new target audience? Is he more interested in speaking truth to power than in empowering the dis-empowered to fight back?

We suggested earlier that the question that must be asked about the 1970s is whether Sembene would dare to speak of '68, to meditate with the people on this key moment of their history when they came so close to seizing power, yet failed. Or will he instigate a collective meditation on all that has happened since: the incorporation of the national bourgeoisie, the silencing of the workers, the dogged on-going resistance of the Marxist and nationalist intellectuals? Will *Xala* speak to the masses about all of this, help them to digest it and turn it into revolutionary capital?

Xala's audiences

The censorship board

Any study of national reception must begin with the censor, the first national reader/viewer. With the state advancing 60% of the finance for *Xala* (Vieyra 1983, 87), I had wondered how a script which opens with a parody of Senghor and contains a blatant reference - the franc-filled briefcases - to the buying off of the ruling class by French imperialism, and a

caricature of the terrifying real-life Minister of the Interior, the Frenchman Jean Collin, as a police bully had not been blocked by the SNC board at the application-for-funding stage. *Xala* is an exception to the rule that literature can afford to be more daring than film: none of these daring, directly political elements exists in the literary version, which Sembene had produced while awaiting funding (Vieyra 1983, 87). I had come to the conclusion that he must also have omitted them in the script he submitted to the SNC. But Vieyra provides a simpler explanation: Sembene's status was such by the 1970s that it would have been inconceivable for him not to have been among the beneficiaries of the SNC funding package: 'The idea that the *Xala* scenario should be vetted by the SNC reading committee was not even raised' (ibid).

At the point of distribution, however, *Xala* did come up against the censor. It was not banned, as Traoré's *Reou Takh* had been in 1972 (after all, its focus is the nice residential areas of Dakar, not the slums!): it was cut. Vieyra, in his usual cryptic way refers to 'about ten cuts' (Vieyra 1975, 172). The real question for us, of course, is not the number of cuts but whether they were of a nature to affect the film's revolutionary potential.

In my fieldwork, the Establishment appeared determined to convince me that only explicit sex had been removed. My attention was drawn to the problem sex had caused during filming, when the family of the actress who originally played El Hadj's new bride, '*une grande famille maraboutique*', had withdrawn her in mid-shoot, with the result that the original fair-skinned bride acquires very black buttocks in subsequent scenes (MK/FNC). Certainly there is a well-established anti-explicit-sex lobby in Senegal: in 1990, sex in *Dallas* and *Dynasty* was discussed at the National Assembly. On the other hand, the Establishment also tends to wave the puritan banner to divert attention from politics.

Pfaff mentions two political cuts: the brutal removal of the beggars by the police, and the scene in which the beggar declares that prisoners have a better deal than peasants (Pfaff, 46). Our next question must obviously be whether the vital keys to the symbolic world of *Xala* were removed.

It is possible to deduce from contemporary published material and oral feedback that some of the most likely candidates for removal must have escaped, as these scenes are explicitly referred by those who saw the film when it first appeared. The *Soleil* cinema columnist, writing under the pseudonym *Le Cyclope*, refers to the opening parody of Senghor's voice, and here, the

original parody in Djibril Diop's *Contrast City*, had set a precedent for a ban not just of the scene but of the entire film (*Cyclope* 1975). The scenes featuring the French *coopérant*, Durand Dupont, are also referred to in *Le Soleil* and in *Afrique Nouvelle* (Sané, 17). Sembene himself, normally the first to hit back by making capital out of such issues, has said that while the cuts did not help, they were only one aspect of *Xala*'s communication problem (Hennebelle 1978, 123). And, like Djibril Diop with *Badou Boy*, he did have the option of withholding the film had the cuts been too damaging: obviously, he did not feel they were.

Finally, why was *Xala* cut, and not banned outright like Traoré's *Reou Takh* in 1972, or Safi Faye's *Kaddu Beykat* (A Letter from the Peasants), which was unable to obtain a licence to be shown in Senegal in 1975⁴¹ the year *Xala* was released? I have already suggested that banning Traoré did not present the same political risk as banning Sembene in the 1970s, and may even have served as a warning to Sembene. Safi Faye's case is different: comparing *Kaddu Beykat* to *Xala*, one sees that while *Xala* exposes the system in symbols, Safi Faye, an ethnologist, exposes the plight of the peasants with a realism that leaves nothing unsaid. Sembene's solitary symbolic peasant curses the drought, Safi Faye's entire Sereer village complains bitterly about the neo-colonial groundnut policy and names the human, class agents of their misery, the state officials, the bureaucrats, who cheat them. That same year, the popular peasants' radio programme, *Dissóo*, equally outspoken, was also banned (Makédonsky, 21). As Hennebelle has pointed out, Safi Faye living abroad, did not have to pay the same price for her boldness (Hennebelle 1978, 90).

Written reception

Our discussion of reception involves contemporary written material, and 1990s oral feedback. I approach this material from the point of view of my own appreciation of and reservations about *Xala* spelt out in this chapter. I have tried to suggest that the consciousness-raising ability of *Xala* depends on a central cluster of concerns, all hinging on the audience's ability to translate the traditional forms and symbols into a Marxist worldview. I have suggested that, for the film to have maximum impact, the audience must be able to see through El Hadj to the politicians and the French Ministère de la Coopération, through the beggar to all the

⁴¹ Safi Faye explains in this interview that she received no answer to her application for several years, until she announced this on French radio. The Senegalese censorship board then contacted her asking her to submit her film, so that 'the necessary cuts could be made'. She refused.

oppressed. They must see the beggar's relationship with El Hadj as symbolic of the expropriation of the masses by the ruling class and the *xala* and occupation of El Hadj's house by the beggars as the re-appropriation which class struggle will ultimately achieve.

Looking first at the written material, we must bear in mind that we are confronting a compound question: not just what impact *Xala* had, but rather whether we can separate out how the film was really understood from how much or little of this impact could be published in 1975. We also need to bear in mind that this material is itself a potential constituent force affecting impact positively or negatively: the national press can help or hinder the public in its grasp of the revolutionary message. In the neo-colonial context, in Senegal of the 1970s, which role will it play?

The written material falls into two categories. First, there is a handful of articles by local Dakar-based reviewers, some Senegalese, some French, including a long, thoughtful piece by the regular anonymous *Soleil* columnist, *Le Cyclope*. I also include here a report a year later on the reaction of the Senegalese diplomatic corps, who were shown the film during a conference (d'Ermeville, 42).

The second category consists of a debate published in *Le Soleil*⁴² in the form of readers' responses to the three SNC films which were released in the first quarter of 1975 - Momar Thiam's *Baks*, Sembene's *Xala*, and Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki*. This correspondence - part of the paper's promotion of the new state film industry - was spread over six weeks in April-May 1975, allowing for discussion between contributors.

One point stands out: self-censorship is still the order of the day. The journalist reviewers are generally as cagey as they were in the 1960s: the pseudo-democracy has not given anybody illusions about a new freedom of speech. The *Soleil* debate, in which readers' aired their views, also requires a lot of reading between the lines. Its tone is seemingly more forthright, but there is a clear discrepancy, on the one hand, between the relatively few contributions on *Xala*, compared, for example to Momar Thiam's *Baks*, and on the other hand the strong support for *Xala* and Sembene which comes through even where neither is mentioned by name.

Neither the reviews nor the discussion spells out the full revolutionary potential of *Xala*.

⁴² *Dakar Matin* changed its name to *Le Soleil* in 1970.

The nearest we get to this is the article by a regular columnist writing under the pseudonym *Le Cyclope*, who praises Sembene for his courage, and then goes on to enumerate the ways in which s/he feels the film falls short of being revolutionary, raising many of my own reservations: the narrative focus on El Hadj, the 'disturbing ambivalence' of his daughter Rama, whom s/he calls an 'arm-chair intellectual', the narrative marginalisation of the workers and peasants (*Le Cyclope* 1975). In all the other reviews and readers' contributions, there are only fragmented references to various aspects of Sembene's attack on the state and the neo-colonial system. As an aid to the public in terms of a revolutionary interpretation, this written coverage is something of a non-starter.

Let us look nevertheless at how it deals with some of the key issues. The first is the role of the French in the neo-colonial context. For me, *Xala*, through the character Durand Dupont, the French right-hand-man of the first Senegalese President of the Chamber of Commerce, had captured perfectly the characteristically self-effacing exterior which dissimulates the all-powerful role of the *assistants techniques* provided by the French *Ministère de la Coopération*, and which is so characteristic of neo-colonialism. It was the self-effacement, rather than the dissimulated power, that reviewers focussed on. They saw only the apparent self-effacement of Durand Dupont, and were puzzled by it: 'They are never that passive or that unobstructive' (Sané, 17). *Le Cyclope* provided an original, pragmatic explanation: Sembene has a complex when dealing with French actors, and the apparent self-effacement is really a helplessness experienced by the French actors in front of the camera which in turn is an unintentional result of under-direction by an insecure Sembene (certainly an intriguing example of mediation, and of the inverted relationship between content and the conditions of production!).

The sole reference to the French in the readers' contributions in *Le Soleil* is by a well-known French *coopérant*, who introduces himself as a personal friend of Sembene, says how much the dignified Awa Astou reminds him of his own mother, and appeals with a touching disingenuousness to the Senegalese masses to make their needs known to the *Ministère de la Coopération* so that the latter can play a more meaningful role! (10/4/1975).⁴³

Is it not significant that it is only a Frenchman who can really confront - in his own inimitable way - the issue of the French role in Senegal in the 1970s? Why this squeamishness

⁴³ References here to the *Soleil* debate will appear as dates: dd/mm/yyyy.

on the part of the Senegalese in a decade when the national blood pressure had been on a constant rise against the continued French presence, as we saw in Chapter Six? Are the Senegalese still afraid in 1975 to say on public what they mutter about in private? If this is the case, then it gives us a gauge with which to judge the daring of Sembene's portrayal of the French *coopérants/assistants techniques* through his character Durand-Dupont, and his caricature of the actual Minister of the Interior, Jean Collin.

The second major issue in *Xala* is whether people have seen the politicians over the shoulders of El Hadj and the other businessmen. Here, the written responses were even more guarded. Apart from *Le Cyclope* (a French socialist?) who alludes fleetingly to the parody of Senghor's voice, there is no allusion to the other overtly political references in *Xala* - the physical resemblance between Makhourédia Guèye the actor playing the President of the Chamber of Commerce, and Senghor, the satirical digs at *Négritude* and *La Francophonie*.⁴⁴ A few guarded references to *Xala* as a 'political satire' (Cyclope 1975), and to 'politico-social problems' (Gbonlonfoun, 17), make it clear that the point was not missed. But reviewers and reader-contributors alike, out-doing Sembene in caution, take refuge in safer terminology like 'the African bourgeoisie' and 'the Senegalese business world'.

Having thus covered their backs, and ensured that Senghor will not take it personally, Senegalese contributors feel free to vent their disgust with the 'African bourgeoisie' whom they describe as a 'stupid caste of nouveau riche', 'greedy for luxury', 'determined to ape the West' and characterised by 'institutionalised corruption' (Sané, 17) - they too, it would seem, have read their Fanon. A correspondent mentions the bourgeois 'thirst for power, dishonesty, shameless extravagance'. A student contributor, obviously fresh from her/his *Terminale* philosophy lesson, derides what he sees as the motto of the El Hadjs: 'I drink Evian, therefore I am' (28/4/75). The mineral water and the Mercedes, powerful visual emblems of the bourgeoisie in the film, are constantly mentioned and appreciated. The Evian allusions were particularly topical, as Evian had recently run a massive advertising campaign in Senegal.

Compared to the Senegalese, the French locally-based reviewers and correspondents

⁴⁴ At the wedding, the comment, 'There are too many niggers in Spain - *Négritude* gets around!' is surely a reference to the fact that Senghor was perceived as nearly always out of the country. At the second Chamber of Commerce meeting, the President insists that El Hadj speak French only, 'in the purest tradition of *Francophonie*', another obvious dig at Senghor.

clearly did not feel that a vague terminology offered adequate protection. Conscious of the need for a three-way balancing act between Senghor, Sembene and the people, they work hard at a conciliatory approach. They emphasise El Hadj's human face. The bourgeoisie (= government), they feel, is depicted by Sembene as 'more ridiculous than hateful' (*Le Cyclope* 1975), *Xala* is 'a respectful caricature, with no ill intent' (Souillac), and the 'country's leaders will be grateful to Sembene in the long run' (ibid).

The *xala* as symbol of political impotence was grasped and expressed by all - the bourgeoisie was described as 'incapable of taking responsibility' (Sané and *Le Cyclope*), and even as 'babies', a direct reference to the President's speech at the Chamber of Commerce meeting where El Hadj is expelled (28/4/95). But since they were, as we saw, shy about tackling the French presence, the reason for the impotence was nowhere made explicit, as it is in the film. Once again, Sembene comes across as more daring than the people who watch his films in Senegal.

References to the beggars confirmed my reservations. Only one critic referred, and very obtusely, to the essential Marxist dialectical relationship between El Hadj's wealth and the beggar's poverty (Gbonlonfoun, 18). *Le Cyclope* rejected the beggars as symbols of all the oppressed classes, concluding that there was no viable resistance in the film. There were two moral/religious references to the beggars: a Senegalese journalist deplored 'the wholesale contempt of those who have nothing' (Sané, 17) while a French *coopérant*, calling himself a friend of Sembene, and 'speaking as a Catholic', said how much he admired Sembene's portrayal of 'the admirable patience of the poor' (10/4/1975)!

It was the members of the Senegalese diplomatic corps mentioned above, meeting at a conference in 1976 (d'Ermeville, 42), who made the most noise about the beggars, a clear indication that, while the response of the 'ordinary' Senegalese cinema goer to Sembene is complex, he unfailingly upsets the ruling class. The ambassadors, predictably enough, did not say anything about the portrayal of the French or the bourgeoisie, but wondered how the 'intolerable horde of beggars, invalids and cripples' and the 'spitting whose only point seems to be to shock' could be shown to foreign audiences during their embassy cultural weeks (d'Ermeville, 42-3). They even challenged Sembene to tell them where in Senegal such spitting was practised, which he could not do (Pfaff, 47). The Minister of Foreign Affairs had to console

them that showing the film was a glowing reflection of Senegalese democracy (d'Ermeville, 43).

The written material, and especially the *Soleil* debate, reveals some of the ideological tensions which Sembene's cinema was creating in the 1970s, and some of the attempts by the Establishment to deal with these. I can identify two principal hegemonic strategies at work: Sembene's revolutionary cinema was to be incorporated under the theme of 'development' and his uncomfortable, exposing/revealing realism to be neutralised as 'everyday anecdote'.

The *Soleil* debate crystallised rapidly into two opposing discourses. On the one hand, the supporters of a politically committed cinema emphasised the importance of realism and mass accessibility: cinema was described as 'an invaluable weapon in the decolonisation process' (12/4/1975) with a 'historic mission to be useful' (28/4/1975) and to 'shake up and educate people' (16/4/1975). This discourse, while it contains some diluting agents, reflects the radical FEPACI agenda (the 1975 FEPACI resolutions are referred to directly in the course of the argument), is clearly pro-Sembene, and for the most part is in tune with the ideas on revolutionary cinema expressed in this study.

The opposite camp, united in the defence of Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki*, attacked the concepts of art as commitment and realism in the name of the filmmaker's 'freedom to dream' (16/5/1975). *Touki Bouki*, the story of a young man and woman who dream of escaping from Senegal to an Eldorado which seems to be a cross between Paris and the USA, is a film-makers' film full of esoteric symbolism which rendered it inaccessible to the majority of Senegalese cinema-goers in 1975. Djibril Diop Mambéty, more than twenty years Sembene's junior, and a self-confessed 'dilettante' (Hennebelle 1968, 67), when accused on national radio of having made a film 'without head or tail', had declared that that was how he felt films should be (*Soleil* 17/5/75), and that what the Senegalese cinema needed was a 'revolution in form' (Hennebelle 1979, 43). We could not be much further from the aims of FEPACI or our revolutionary model.

The argument, thus structured, was useful to the state ideological apparatus on two levels. I mentioned that the political commitment discourse contained some 'diluting agents'. The SNC, from its inception, had encouraged film-makers to submit scripts on development issues: juvenile delinquency, urban problems, literacy (Diawara, 60). While this could be seen as perhaps an expression of a genuine desire for a 'relevant', non-commercial cinema, it was also a convenient

way of incorporating and diluting the revolutionary FEPACI agenda, and of removing the 'committed cinema' monopoly from Sembene and 're-contextualising' him in a sea of films that seem, on the surface, to resemble his, but lack his intellectual grasp of the system as a whole and his revolutionary sting: they attack aspects of the system, not the system itself. Thus, in the *Soleil* debate, *Xala*, the only Senegalese film at that stage with any claim to the revolutionary label, finds itself under a vague, general state-subsidised 'committed cinema' umbrella with *Baks*.

Momar Thiam's *Baks* would appear to have been initially intended as a typical SNC 'development' film, warning young people against drugs. In the process of getting filmed, it had somehow gone off the development rails and ended up celebrating the young *yamba* smokers. But as such it proved even more useful as the main representative of the 'committed cinema' side of the debate. Pages and pages of *Le Soleil* were covered by readers deploring the impact of this development film gone wrong - this 'dangerous' work - while *Xala*, the other 'committed cinema' contender, the really potentially dangerous film, hardly got a look-in.

Meanwhile, *Touki Bouki*, the film with 'neither head nor tail', the 'revolution in form' which was no threat whatsoever to the state and which nobody apart from a couple of French contributors had understood, became the sole legitimate occupant of the 'artistic freedom' space, a space which Sembene needed much more than Djibril Diop. The freedom to expose the system, which FEPACI had constantly defended, was thus redefined as the freedom to escape and dream.

Realism was also redefined. The *Touki Bouki* camp declared war on an art which provided nothing more than 'pale copies of a reality we all know inside-out' (14/4/1975). They cited Parisian audiences walking out of *Mandabi* in boredom (9/4/1975), and declared themselves tired of a cinema 'incapable of innovation and imagination' (14/4/1975). That all of this was a veiled personal attack by organic state intellectuals on Sembene is hinted at by journalist Ibrahima Gaye who retorts: '*Xala* is a great success whether they like it or not' (6/5/1975).

Sembene supporters - obviously the Marxist and nationalist intellectuals who were still struggling against Senghor and for whom Sembene's name, as we saw in Chapter Six, was synonymous with that struggle - hit back, in a language which makes it clear that they were well equipped to grasp a film like *Xala*: they insisted on the need for a Realist cinema that would 'speak about what is happening and why' (11/4/1975) and that would 'put everyday life under a

microscope, as *Xala* does' (11/4/1975). They acclaimed *Xala* for 'laying bare the truth' (28/4/1975), and, referring to *Touki Bouki*, declared that 'a bad Sembene is a thousand times better than this stupid pretentious trash' (ibid).⁴⁵ That *Le Soleil* permitted them to have their say is evidence of how hegemony works, allowing steam to be let off as long as the basic hegemonic mechanisms remain in place.

The premises of the argument are of course false. Realism is not about making pale copies of reality, but about distilling its essential features. And Realist artists, as much as anyone, need the freedom to invent and dream, without which there would have been no *God's Bits of Wood*.

Even more significant in the discourse of the anti-Realism camp is the equation of Realism, represented by *Xala*, with superficiality, while *Touki Bouki* stands for symbolism and depth. In his review in *Voix d'Afrique*, d'Orsinville comments on *Xala*:

There is no attempt to plumb the depths, no attempt to use the image to reveal anything other than movement and colour. We remain on this side of the image, we don't pass through it to that place where participation begins' (d'Orsinville, 49).

He opposes this to Djibril Diop's procedure in which

For the first time, to our knowledge, an African filmmaker transports us behind each image and beyond every situation towards a dimension which the images merely hint at, symbolise...Simultaneously witness and participant, the viewer cannot escape Djibril Diop (ibid).

Apart from d'Orsinville's inaccuracy (in reality, the Senegalese cinema-goer and Djibril Diop escaped each other completely!), the ideological implications of this WYSIWYG approach to Sembene, and especially to a film like *Xala* which so obviously calls for an understanding of symbolism and a beneath-the-surface approach, are glaring. But they are not new: they are part of a general organic intellectual discourse about Sembene's work which had referred to *La noire*

⁴⁵ *Touki Bouki* is an interesting experiment which does not deserve some of the more insulting comments hurled at it by the Sembene fans, but it lacks the intellectual coherence that only Sembene demonstrates at this stage.

de ... as a *fait divers*, and to *Mandabi* as a 'banal little story'.⁴⁶

Oral feedback

By 1975, Senegalese films were becoming something of a commonplace, and the grand-mothers and babies were no longer queuing to see *ceeb u jen* and hear people speaking Wolof (AL/FNC). *Xala* was therefore seen mainly by regular cinema goers, and competed for attention with the other SNC products, all of which had long runs. According to Vieyra, *Xala* beat the Senegalese box-office record for African films held since 1970 by Traoré's *Diègue-bi*, which, in a single year, had brought in twice what it had cost (Vieyra 1975, 185; Vieyra 1983, 38).⁴⁷ Vieyra does not say how *Xala* fared in comparison with *Baks*, but I suspect that *Baks* had the edge: it was *Baks*, rather than *Xala*, which was the talk of the town in 1975 (9/4/1975).

Sembene himself, as usual, provides us with some practical examples of the impact of *Xala*: in the month after it was first released, the bourgeoisie was terrified of being seen drinking Evian water and walked to work, leaving the Mercedes at home (J. and G. Delmas, 14-5). He also claims that 'an important politician said 'Sembene is right, we all have the *xala*' (Chériaa, 17).

Sembene's examples of impact focus on the ruling class. My own attempt to assess reactions is based on thirty interviews from a social range which included university lecturers, technicians, mechanics and housewives (I regret that my research assistant persuaded me not to interview beggars). All of my interviewees had seen *Xala* when it was first released (and many of them had seen it several times since, as, along with *Mandabi*, it is often shown on television). The feedback yielded interesting but fairly predictable results in terms of the way I have conceptualised the problem throughout this chapter.

Most people were attracted to the film in the first - and perhaps the last - instance by the intriguing phenomenon of the *xala*. Women giggled and referred to it as a '*non-dit*', one of those things that only Sembene dares to talk about. Men, bolder, differed according to their

⁴⁶ An anonymous article reproduced by Vieyra on *La Noire de..* refers to it as a *fait divers* (minor news item) (Vieyra 1972, 201), Bara Diouf referred to *Mandabi* as 'a banal little story', and Aly Kheury Ndaw declared himself tired of 'the everyday' in film in 1971 (*Le Soleil* 3/2/71).

⁴⁷ *Xala* was released in February, and was still running well six months later, having earned back 21m out of the 26m it had cost to make (*Voix d'Afrique*, No 3, 15 August-14 September 1975).

background. The city-born and bred admitted they were fascinated by this mysterious phenomenon: 'I had heard people talking about *xala*, but did not know what it meant' said a representative of SIDECE (Société industrielle d'exploitation cinématographique), the nationalised government outfit in charge of the cinemas. The country-bred, on the other hand, were more blasé: an inspector of education and an electrician, both born and bred in the rural areas, assured me they could cast the spell themselves: I was even provided with a recipe.

Although two among my sample - a university lecturer and a politically committed technician - referred to the *xala* as a symbol of the powerlessness of the bourgeoisie, for most it was a very real manifestation of supernatural power. If anything, the film consolidated this belief, and in some cases even created it: 'Many people who did not know what *xala* was discovered it through Sembene's film. Africa has its mysteries', said a mature law student. A night-watchman pointed out to me that what you learn from *Xala* is that you must protect yourself against such spells: El Hadj's problem stemmed from his refusal to sit on the mortar with the pestle between his legs as tradition required. The psychology lecturer, who began by saying he did not believe in such things, ended up expressing his resentment that Sembene, 'of all people' should have depicted the *xala* so realistically that he now found the idea quite disturbing (AA/FNC).

Focus by viewers on the *xala* cast a shadow over the film. It determined how viewers defined the film's subject from the outset: 'goings-on between couples'. Man-woman relations, as Vieyra had admitted somewhat reluctantly with regard to *Diègue-bi* (Vieyra 1975), have great appeal for Senegalese audiences.⁴⁸ *Diègue-bi* (1970) had not only pandered to this taste but played a role in reproducing it, setting a horizon of expectations which would affect how *Xala* was received. Sembene's attention to the cultural detail of marriage - the protocol between the various wives, the spicy dialogue, and 'all that is said in the unsaid' (BK/FNC) - further encouraged this orientation. While this is good for the box-office and in terms of developing people's taste for indigenous entertainment, from a revolutionary point of view it was counter-productive: apart from a handful of politically conscious intellectuals - the type, no doubt, who

⁴⁸ The *Xala* narrative is very similar to that of *Diègue-bi*, with its three wives, only one of whom stays the course. In 1990, Ivorian Henri Duparc's *Bal Poussière*, another feature with polygamy as theme, broke all box-office records in Dakar.

had formed the backbone of the *Xala* defence in the *Soleil* debate - people tended to see *Xala* for the most part as 'couples stuff' and felt no need to look further for a different set of preoccupations.

The *xala* had further ramifications: it inhibited people's ability to grasp one of the central keys to the Marxist interpretation - the expropriation of the beggar by El Hadj. Traditionally, the *xala* spell is associated with marriage, not with land deals, and has a fixed repertoire of likely agents: a co-wife, a young man who wants the bride for himself, the girl's mother or paternal aunt, intent on further squeezing the bridegroom financially. I found that people tended to be so busy guessing which of the traditional agents was responsible for El Hadj's *xala* that over two-thirds of them completely missed the beggar's revelation, towards the end, of his dialectical relationship with El Hadj and his consequent role in casting the spell.

My suspicion that people - especially men - would identify with El Hadj in his universal male predicament was not confirmed. Only one of my interviewees, the psychology lecturer who had expressed annoyance at being brought face to face with 'superstitions' he thought he had transcended, sided almost unconsciously with El Hadj against the beggar: 'It is terrible to think that one man can have that much power over another' (AA/FNC). But for everybody else, any empathy was overridden by the conviction that El Hadj had got what he deserved for his mistreatment of the disabled beggar.

For the thirty per cent of my sample who were aware of the expropriation factor, El Hadj's misdeeds started there - though the expropriation was seen more in terms of the scandal of a brother cheating his own blood than of class antagonism: a night-watchman pointed out to me that it was basically the same problem as in *Mandabi*, where Mbaye had robbed his uncle, which he put down, once again, to the break-down of traditional moral values due to the influence of '*l'école toubab*' (the white man's school). But for the vast majority, El Hadj's crime was simply his recent brutal treatment of the beggar.

The beggar, obviously, fared better, reception-wise, than the *Mandabi* postman. He had been noticed and was remembered by ninety per cent of my sample, and even acknowledged as having an important role, as a *xala*-curer if not as *xala*-caster. My predictions, however, on the whole proved correct. He was not seen as a symbol of the oppressed in general, but as a member of a disabled minority: people referred unanimously to him as 'the blind man' and to his fellow-

beggars as 'the handicapped'. From that point, it was possible to distinguish two separate emphases: a minority one, which perceived him as a traditional wise man who sees what the sighted cannot see, which explains why he can remove the spell, and a majority version in which he and his friends were viewed with a protective pity for their disabled status. Nobody, obviously, saw him as a figure of resistance.

The anger and disapproval El Hadj's behaviour towards the beggar inspired seemed to be based less on clear-cut class-consciousness than on a sort of Islamic humanism superimposed harmoniously on African communalism. A devout Muslim electrician told me El Hadj had 'broken a taboo: he had despised a beggar' (MN/FNC). A small businessman said: 'You must try to give a beggar something, however small, and even if you give him nothing, you must not disrespect him' (DC/FNC). Others told me: 'We don't have the right to destroy people's dignity, even if they are poor'. Asked about the origins of beggars, a teacher told me, 'God made them like that'. The vital transition to Sembene's Marxist beggar who tells the bourgeois 'What I am is your fault' was never made.

There was a general feeling of satisfaction at the outcome: the failure of El Hadj's business as well as his *xala* and the fact that in the final analysis he was dependent on the poor to cure him. But this was almost taken for granted, as a sort of karma, a fairy tale reversal of fortune, not as the result of human struggle and resistance.

Responses to questions about the meaning and message of *Xala* consequently brought no surprises. One of my interviewees, a politically active technician, one of the young people who worshipped Sembene in the 1970s, was Sembene's ideal viewer: he had seen the politicians, he had grasped the role of the French - nothing had escaped him. But he was a case of preaching to the converted, and quite exceptional. More typical was a computer specialist from Casamance who said unfalteringly: 'It means you must learn to respect your neighbour and share what you have. It's a religious message'. A woman clerk from Sembene's local post-office was equally clear: 'It's an educational film about moral and social problems. A rich man despises a poor man. You see a man in front of you and you think you're more important than he is, whereas you're equal in the eyes of God'. The Muslim electrician concluded, 'It means you are nothing, just as we are nothing' and was echoed by the psychology lecturer: 'Life is nothing'. I, ardent reader of Sembene's novels that I am, found this last particularly ironic, remembering a little exchange between two characters in *White Genesis* talking about poor mad Tanor, ex-soldier whose sanity

has not survived the Europeans' war:

'Eskeiye Yallah! Who could have foreseen this when he left for his military service? Life is nothing!'

'Life is nothing? Life is everything! said Palla' (Sembene 1972, 38).

No need to ask where Sembene the humanist stands in this debate. But many of *Xala*'s viewers would not appear to have heard him.

Conclusion

In *Xala*, Sembene attempted to use the people's traditional forms and symbols to expose the neo-colonial system and inspire the masses to fight against it. What can we conclude about this experiment?

In terms of exposing the system, *Xala* is undoubtedly a scintillating satire of the life-style of the Senegalese ruling class. But rather than exposing a system that people themselves did not understand, it is more an example of daring 'to say out loud what others think to themselves or merely grumble about on the quiet' (Sembene 1972, 67). The finer points of this exposure may have escaped many without a sufficient level of ideological consciousness and film literacy, because Sembene is still being cautious, still talking in parables to avoid the censor. But at the very least, to all who watched *Xala*, El Hadj represented the callous attitude of the rich towards the poor, and elicited from people a response that such behaviour deserved its come-uppance. With *Xala*, he has, at least symbolically, struck out at imperialism and the class which makes it possible. He has touched the censor's tolerance threshold. He could, like others, have gone further, spoken more clearly, risked more, got banned, but it is increasingly obvious that caution and pragmatism are his trademarks.

As for Sembene's willingness to reflect on screen on the society's capacity for resistance, the beggar, in terms of the extent of his physical presence and his narrative role, is a step ahead of the postman in *Mandabi*. Ideologically, however, he is a step behind, as he is perceived by most people, not as symbol of all the oppressed, as Sembene says he intended, but as an unfortunate guy with a disability. Thus Sembene's leading representative of the oppressed is a victim in people's eyes, not a role model.

In handing over responsibility for the resistance to a bunch of beggars, Sembene has once

again self-censored out of existence any reflection of the real, problematic type of resistance which existed in Senegal, and now his silence is even more blatant, as by the time of making *Xala*, he is in a position to look back on 1968. Asked by Hennebelle, when *Xala* was released in France, why he was so squeamish about showing resistance, Sembene is even more elusive and self-contradictory than after *Mandabi*. He again denies there has been any resistance:

Opposing this bourgeoisie, we have for the moment only apathetic, amorphous masses, who watch with relative indifference as the bourgeoisie entrenches itself (Hennebelle 1978, 120)

and

I can't create glowing pictures of popular revolutions which don't exist ...
We are in a period of revolutionary stagnation in West Africa at the moment (ibid, 121).

This raises the same question as *Mandabi*: if there is no resistance, and if he feels that he should only paint what is, why give us the beggar at all? Nobody is asking him to create imaginary resistance, but to identify what resistance exists and help people to analyse it in its strengths and weaknesses. A little later in the same interview, Hennebelle finally gets an admission that self-censorship is at work, and that he feels he could not get away with filming a strike, for example (ibid, 123).

Why is Sembene so uncomfortable around this issue, and why so reluctant to admit to self-censorship? Is it because he has disengaged himself from party politics, he who would say, even in the 1980s, that 'one cannot make a "revolutionary" novel or film if one is not involved in a revolutionary party' (Kassé, 12)? These are rhetorical questions, and will remain as such in this study.

Since the beggar proved no more of a resistance role model than the postman had been, *Xala* left a vacuum. El Hadj's daughter Rama's appeal was too limited: she is a far cry from the Tioumbé of *L'Harmattan*. But the young Senegalese of 1975 were crying out for a role model, and since Sembene did not provide one, the vacuum was filled by another film-maker, Momar Thiam. It was not Rama, and certainly not Sembene's beggar, that the youth of Senegal imitated throughout 1975, but the young actor who led the band of *yamba* smokers in *Baks*. Cinemas rocked with enthusiasm for the young hero of *Baks*, who was referred to as a '*guerrier*' (warrior)

in memory of the ancient military monarchies (25/4/75) and nicknamed Che in honour of the real-life *guerrier* assassinated in 1967 and much admired, along with Sembene, by the young Senegalese. Young people walked like *Baks*, they talked like him, they repeated his defiant war-cry: 'You are neither God nor Prophet! Hey, boy, light up my joint!' (11/4/1975). Everybody was declaring, 'I am Brother Che!' (9/5/75) The young protagonist's nickname brings home to us the extent of the irony, the extent to which Sembene's failure to produce an artistic role model had created a vacuum allowing others to incorporate and dilute the revolutionary potential of the 1970s.

Sembene has used one of the methods of traditional art to attack the ruling class: he has made a fiction about the king of the lizards which is really about Senghor and his team, saying in a symbolic language what he fears to say directly. But the difference between the griot and Sembene is that the griot, the king and the people share a common symbolic system, and the substitution of the despot for the lizard is a simple unambiguous process, just as the *Mandabi* postman poses no problem for a Marxist. Sembene in *Xala* is experimenting with two symbolic systems - traditional and Marxist - and his audience's ability to translate from one to the other, and not to be diverted into a third symbolic field, that of Islam, cannot be taken for granted. The film's ability to raise consciousness depends to a great extent on whether it can persuade people to change their horizon of expectation, on whether the *xala* succeeds in recontextualising itself, taking on a new meaning. But for most people, instead of the film redefining the *xala*, the *xala* redefined the film.

The lesson to be learned from the experiment is perhaps that, if you are asking your viewers to shift paradigms, either there must be a degree of compatibility between the world views involved, or you must give the shift adequate emphasis, if the new message is not to be lost in the old noise. The beggar is too far from the Marxist concept of resistance, the *xala* as resistance weapon too removed from the orthodox class struggle, and the gear-shift - 'What I am is your fault' - comes too late and is too fleeting to challenge the Senegalese masses' habitual ways of seeing the world.

Sembene himself was aware of the problem. At one point he had said blithely, 'It's a kind of metaphor. If I had attacked directly, it might - I said might - have been banned. People are used to this procedure and understand it' (Binet 1979, 10) but later, he reflected that 'even Eisenstein's films in themselves did not constitute packets of dynamite', and that a 'transmission

belt' was needed in the form of organisations which would arrange showings of films followed by debates (Hennebelle 1978, 121, 123). Vieyra also believed that without debates, the revolutionary message escaped (Vieyra 1975, 317). In other words, revolutionary art in the neo-colonial context is caught in a huge contradiction: unable to speak except in parables, it needs a translation service, a type of reception infrastructure which neo-colonialism - if the *Soleil* debate and the discourse of the organic intellectuals is anything to go by - would certainly not provide itself, and would probably do its best to prevent others from providing.

Finally, to whom is *Xala* really addressed? In interviews, Sembene emphatically aligns himself with our model: the masses are his target audience. He wants to convince them that 'the revolution is necessary and possible' (Chériaa, 14), 'to make them discover deep down in themselves that they - and only they - are really capable of changing the situation' (ibid). *Xala* is 'a myth about the class struggle which the masses must carry out to overthrow the bourgeoisie' (J. and G. Delmas, 14-5).

I want to suggest that though he may think this is the case, objectively, the *narrataires*, the implied viewers of *Xala*, are perhaps not so much the mechanics and Medina housewives I interviewed, who do not perform the necessary translation exercises, but the two other classes. This is not to say that the masses missed the point entirely, but that others got it much more as Sembene intended. The petty-bourgeois Marxist and nationalist intellectuals loved and appreciated *Xala*, and savoured the metaphor, the Fanon and Amin resonances: this is obvious in the *Soleil* debate, as it was obvious to me during fieldwork. Like *Mandabi*, *Xala* preaches very well to the converted. Secondly - and I feel this is much less true of *Mandabi* - *Xala* is tailor-made for the ruling class.

Obviously, I do not mean that it was made with the intent to please them. But I want to suggest that *Xala* is the beginning of a shift in emphasis on Sembene's part from the oppressed to the ruling class, a shift which becomes even more marked in *The Last of the Empire* published in 1981 and where, with Senghor gone, what could only be said in parables in *Xala* can now be shouted from the roof-tops. To be sure, studying the ruling class is not incompatible with revolutionary art: you must know the enemy to fight them well. But it is a question of emphasis: we get a good feel for Dejean, the French boss in *God's Bits of Wood*, but Bakayoko, Ramatoulaye and Penda are so much more memorable.

In ways, I cannot help feeling, *Xala* is the beginning of a dialogue between Sembene and the ruling class, which *God's Bits of Wood* never was. It is an acerbic dialogue, full of snide little digs at their expense, but a dialogue nevertheless, in which Sembene seems to be at least as interested in gaining their recognition, be it embarrassed or irritated, as he is in discussing with the masses how to overthrow them. Is it not interesting that so many of the digs at the bourgeoisie in *Xala* are in French rather than Wolof?

The beggars, I suggest, make perhaps more sense when read this way than as symbols of revolutionary resistance. Through the beggars in *Xala*, Sembene does not say to the masses, 'Rise up and fight' as much as he says to the ruling class and to Senghor, who wanted his Senegal to be the 'showcase of Africa' (C/FNC), 'See what a mess you have made, and see how I am going to disgrace you at home and abroad': quite a commendable agenda, but one which is also quite some distance from the model we started with.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CEDDO: THE FISH IS CAUGHT BECAUSE IT OPENS ITS MOUTH

We explained in Chapter Seven why *Xala* was selected to represent the 1970s. But *Ceddo* (1977) introduces two elements in terms of our model which are essential for any sense of completion of the decade, and of the neo-colonial era *à la* Senghor. First, it provides a very dramatic, if ideologically questionable, example of resistance. Secondly, it seems to bring the opposition between Sembene and the state into the open in the drama of the 'ban': in the words of another Wolof proverb from *The Last of the Empire*, the fish is caught because it opens its mouth (Sembene 1983, 142). This chapter is not an in-depth study of *Ceddo*, but more of an endnote: it merely attempts to discuss these two issues and the questions they raise.

Ceddo is set in a Wolof kingdom during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Traditional society and its values are under threat from Islam, propagated by a foreign imam who has become influential in the king's court. The king dies in suspicious circumstances, and the imam usurps the throne. The *ceddo* - those who reject Islam in favour of traditional values - are forced to choose between exile and conversion. Many convert. In the final scene, the princess, daughter of the dead king, shoots the imam.

Ceddo was filmed in 1976. In 1977, the Senegalese censorship board demanded two things in order to release it: that the title be changed to *Cedo*, in conformity with the controversial state-decreed 'standard' spelling, and that a note be introduced at the beginning, specifying that the film was set in the past (Sy, 37). Sembene refused, declaring that *Ceddo* would not be shown until the spelling law was revoked (M.K/FNC). The film, though shown elsewhere, remained out of circulation in Senegal until the standard spelling laws were modified under Diouf in 1984 (AFD/FNC).

Ceddo's main theme seems to be the abuse of religion for political ends. It was read by those who saw it outside Senegal at the time as an attack on the political role of the marabouts in Senegal since the early days of colonialism. We saw some examples of the symbiotic relationship between the colonial state and the marabouts in Chapter Two. We also saw how the Christian Senghor could not have survived the 1950s without the marabouts as mediators between him and the almost entirely Muslim electorate: the 1952 election campaign had been

humorously referred to as 'Sérigne Léopold's jihad' (Behrman, 87), just as de Gaulle's 1958 Referendum on which Sembene's *L'Harmattan* is based was known as 'the marabouts' oui'. After Independence, the marabouts had come out on Senghor's side in all the early crises of the neo-colonial state: against their fellow Muslim, Malian Modibo Keita, Prime Minister of the short-lived Mali Federation in 1960 (Behrman, 98), against Muslim Mamadou Dia, Senghor's Prime Minister, in 1962 (Gellar, 28), and as we saw in Chapter Four, against the students, workers and lumpen of Dakar in 1968.

This is obviously one part of the story. But the marabouts and their historic relationship with the colonial and neo-colonial state is not news in 1976, and, though not irrelevant, it is not the only relevant context for a discussion of *Ceddo*.

That there is more at stake than the old, familiar marabouts argument is obvious from the difference between the way Sembene treats Islam in his earlier works and the way he tackles it in *Ceddo*. In *God's Bits of Wood*, he certainly exposes the *Sérigne Ndakarou*, head of the Dakar Islamic community, for operating as an ideological middleman between the colonial railway management and the strikers in the interest of the former: as Ramatoulaye puts it, 'those guys are ready to lick the white man's ass for the sake of a medal' (Sembene 1973, 198). But in *God's Bits of Wood*, Islam never displaces the class struggle at the centre of the narrative. Sembene navigates carefully between the need to raise consciousness about the abuse of religion on the one hand and the danger of alienating his Muslim readership on the other: you are never asked to reject Islam in favour of the class struggle, only to look with a critical eye on the *Sérigne* who is trying to bamboozle you about both. The treatment of religion in *God's Bits of Wood* is truly Marxist: denounce its abuse for political purposes, but do not challenge, or be diverted by, religion *qua* religion.

In *Ceddo*, religion has been placed right in the centre. The image of Islam is completely negative. The imam, Islam's solitary representative, apart from a few recent converts, is the bad guy. He is a nasty, cold, colourless, plotting little man, a despot forcing a foreign ideology on a reluctant people.

I want to suggest that there are two new contexts in 1976 which explain this change in approach. The first is the rise of fundamentalist Islam. This is 1976, and Khomeiny will not return to Iran until 1979: but already Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise internationally, and it

has reached Senegal, ‘one of the most Islamic countries in Black Africa’ (M. Fall, 24). There is a basic difference between the new Islam and the old, familiar maraboutic one. The marabouts, despite the political role they have played, have not, since the early part of the century, aspired to overthrow the colonial or neo-colonial state, from which they have done well. The new fundamentalism, on the other hand, ultimately aspires to replace the secular state and establish a theocracy. Hence, I believe, one reason why Sembene the Marxist centralises religion in 1976, in an attempt to set the alarm bells ringing.

The second 1976 context is not about religion, but it is, like the marabouts and the fundamentalists, about power. Throughout the 1970s, the one-party state had been under fire from intellectuals. Senghor’s autocracy is deeply resented by the opposition, and he is referred to as a ‘monarch’: in *The Last of the Empire*, published in 1981, just months after Senghor’s departure, Sembene paints a very graphic picture of all of this. The Senegalese are sceptical about the new pseudo-democracy introduced in 1974, where the single-party state gave way to multi-partyism, and suspicious about Senghor’s real agenda. This comes to a head in 1976 with the introduction of the infamous Article 35 into the constitution. This clause set as many alarm bells ringing as did fundamentalist Islam. It made provision for Diouf, the Prime Minister, who was seen as Senghor’s creature, to take over should Senghor step down: in other words, it made Diouf the *dauphin*. With such continuity built into the system, the promised democracy looked anything but promising.

Ceddo is therefore a response to Article 35 as well as to the rise of fundamentalist Islam, and just as in *Xala* we are asked to look over the shoulders of the commercial bourgeoisie and see the politicians, in *Ceddo* Sembene wants us to look over the shoulder of the imam and see Senghor. Critics have tended to miss this dimension of *Ceddo*, though Sembene has pointed towards it in interviews. At the African premiere in Kinshasa in December 1977, he says of the imam:

In his determination to hold both spiritual and temporal power, he commits an act of violence. At present, in our African states, the Head of State is President of the Republic, Secretary General of the Party, Minister of Finance, and so on.... These things are happening right now. Maybe I didn’t dare say what I thought. (Statt, 39).

Referring to the contradiction between the minuscule imam’s physique and the power he

wields, it is clear that behind the imam and his Quran stands another target – Senghor, a minute physical figure like the imam, relying in his own case on his claim to priesthood in the church of Western education, represented by his *agrégation*:

The imam – a tiny imam, a minus figure – has great power.... as a result of a knowledge which has come to be considered sacred, a myth of knowledge that we must be wary of (ibid. 41).

How does all this help us to understand the assassination of the imam by the princess?

The princess is a problem because she seems to be presented as some sort of role model, yet she represents a class – the *ceddo* - renowned for its oppression of the masses. When African Marxists rewrite history, as they have begun to do, they expose the class interests, not only of the European capitalists, but of their own feudal past. They have consistently condemned the *Négritude* history narrative for its anti-historical conflation of communalism and feudalism and denial of the existence of class oppression in feudal contexts. Sembene, true to form, had up to now been as anxious to present history from a class position as he was to expose the political role of the marabouts: in *White Genesis*, written only ten years before *Ceddo*, both feudalism and politicised religion had come under fire. Now, in *Ceddo*, he seems to be using the feudal tradition he had earlier condemned as a weapon to combat politicised Islam.

The question the princess – and the general celebration of a feudal tradition in *Ceddo* – raises, then, is whether, in the heat of the cultural struggle of the 1970s, in his alliance with the nationalists over the language question, Sembene has not decided that a sense of national pride – feudal or not – must take precedence over class in the present struggle against the continued French control of all aspects of national life. Has he abandoned Marxism for nationalism?

There is no doubt, as we saw in Chapter Six, that the 1970s is a period of reflection for all Senegalese intellectuals, nationalist and Marxist, on the continued French domination which they seem unable to shake off. Powerless – the *xala* syndrome again – they look to the past for two things: an explanation for Africa's failure to resist the conquest, and empowering self-images to combat their present impotence.

Senegalese Marxists in the 1970s are caught in an obvious contradiction. On the one hand, they are committed to a class analysis of history and culture: if they dig into the past for role models, for instance, they must be careful to choose the popular resistance strands rather

than identifying with an oppressive/exploitative traditional ruling class: they must not mystify. On the other hand, they share the nationalists' search in history for an Africa that was not always powerless, and the anti-imperialist imperative, as Amuta would say, exercises great pressure on the class dimension. In addition, they have a whole string of reasons for wanting to identify, at this historic juncture, with indigenous culture, warts and all. They are painfully aware of the 'foreign' tag the ruling class – to divert from their own addiction to the West – has pinned on them as Marxists practising and preaching an alien ideology. The Marxists also fear that there may be a grain of truth in the accusation: they know that to date they have not been able to mobilise their own people. They are looking – as Sembene was with *Xala* – for cultural mediators to open up the lines of communication between themselves and the masses. And in terms of the feudalism of the past, they are aware that the said masses, for their part, do not share the Marxist intellectuals' squeamishness: they identify unashamedly with the great heroes of the African empires – with power – oblivious to the fact that in those days they themselves would have been mere *baadoolo*.

It is in light of this contradiction, I feel, that we should situate Sembene's princess and the celebration of *ceddo* culture. We should also relate this to Sembene's *Samory* project. Since the 1960s, Sembene had been researching Samory, the Mande military leader and empire-builder who had put up the most renowned resistance to the French, until he was finally captured and exiled to Gabon in 1898. Samory, as ruler of a military empire, could in ways be classified as a feudalist. But he led a highly disciplined, well-equipped army capable of holding the French at bay for several years. For the Marxist in Sembene, the feudal factor was clearly secondary. Samory is already something of an icon of resistance in Senegal in the 1970s, as his portrait on Rama's wall in *Xala*, alongside that of Cabral, reflects. Samory could have been for Sembene the role model of resistance to foreign power that the 1960s and 1970s lacked. Had the funding been available, it is the long-dreamed of epic *Samory* that Sembene would have been making in the 1970s and not *Ceddo*. He and Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane had already developed the script. When Sembene started work on *Ceddo*, his wife Carrie was so aware of its relationship with the *Samory* project that she warned him 'not to steal from himself' (CDS/FNC).

There is one more reason why the projection of a powerful image of indigenous culture is important in the context of 1976. This has to do with the rise of the new type of Islamic fundamentalism of the 1970s mentioned earlier. The image of this new Islam is very different

from the habitual mainly rural one of the traditional marabouts. The new fundamentalism is a serious threat to the tenuous hold of Marxism over the young people of the 1970s. Like Marxism, it offers membership of a huge international movement, indispensable to the urban Senegalese psyche. Like Marxism, it has good anti-imperialist credentials. And like Marxism, and unlike maraboutic Islam, it appears to be intellectually challenging. But above all, it lays claim to indigenous status (Fall, 28), on grounds of almost a millennium of residence, which makes it appealing to young people tired of foreign domination, and makes it threatening to Marxism, branded by the Establishment as equally foreign. In other words, Marxism in Senegal in the 1970s must indigenise itself or die.

The princess factor in *Ceddo* then – the celebration of what historically was an oppressive feudal culture – is a response to the ideological demands of the mid-1970s. It expresses the country's need for a sense of indigenous empowerment and the Marxists' need, both psychologically and in terms of their image, to be identified with the indigenous: by a curious dialectical twist, the princess can thus be seen to serve, not only the national cause but even the class struggle! But this does not mean that all is ideological harmony between Marxism and feudalism. The contradiction can be felt and Sembene's internal struggle sensed as he works the *ceddo* material.

What kind of *ceddo* culture does Sembene need to create to counter Islamic fundamentalism and the autocracy of Senghor, and in response to the general ideological needs of the 1970s? Clearly, in that order, one which represents democracy and intellectual/spiritual freedom, and one which is proud of itself and can fight.

In producing his own *ceddo*, then, Sembene is working with several layers and categories of material. First there is colonial history - that of the 'civilising mission', the European 'pacification' which rid Africa of its barbaric despots - as taught in the colonial schools in the 1930s. Secondly, there is the current Marxist rewriting of this history, which was just taking off in the 1970s and from which our account of the *ceddo* monarchies in Chapter Two is mainly drawn. In this version, the *ceddo* kingdoms are analysed in terms of their feudal mode of production, and the oppression of the masses is acknowledged: this is, after all, the era which inspires contemporary Wolof philosopher Kocc Barma's famous saying, '*Buur du mbokk*' (a king is not a relative). The Marxist version of history also makes clear that the oppression of the masses was a collaborative venture between the feudal and military aristocracy and the European

slave-traders. The marabouts' role is analysed equally impartially. Their opposition to the monarchies and the Europeans is exposed as a desire to oust the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in favour of the prior trans-Saharan trade which they had controlled. Islam is seen as having been spread in two ways: by the *jihad* and by persuasion. The marabouts appear as liberators to the masses and they lead popular uprisings, but their basic ambition is to substitute one feudalism for another. Their nationalist image, acquired during their active resistance to the French during the conquest, is tarnished by their subsequent collaboration with the colonial state.

Thirdly, Sembene is dealing with Muslim ideology, which throughout centuries of proselytisation has constructed a negative stereotype of the *ceddo*. *Ceddo* - meaning 'outsider' - is *their* word to describe those who rejected Islam. In contrast to an Islam which was determined to present itself as peace-loving and protective, the *ceddo* is described as addicted to violence, alcohol and fornication, despotic, brutal to women and children (Boilat, 309), living off pillage and slave-raiding (ibid, 162). Senegalese Muslims - over 85% of the population - had been taught to think of the *ceddo* as 'trampling on all the values we hold dear', as a 'non-value' (AS/FNC).

Finally, as Sembene enters the ideological fray in 1976, this negative stereotype is also being re-examined from a nationalist perspective, and people are increasingly assuming their *ceddo* past in addition rather than opposition to their Muslim present: this is expressed in the popular phrase 'Scratch any Muslim and you find a *ceddo*' (D/FNC). Alioune Badara Beye's 1975 play, *Le Sacre du Cedo*, is an example of this type of sanguine pluralism. The *ceddo* attributes revalorised by the nationalists were remarkably similar to the self-perception of the *ceddo* aristocracy of the monarchies: 'intellectual finesse, courage, dignity' (A.B. Diop 1981, 159), 'freedom and non-submissiveness' (Beye, 58 and 65).

Sembene takes the historical material and the existing stereotypes and invents, displaces, represses at will to create the *ceddo* he feels Senegal needs in 1976. He endows *ceddo* society with the positive values the marabouts' negative stereotyping denied it, and transfers many of the negative elements of the stereotype from the *ceddo* to the imam - thereby simultaneously implicating Senghor. Let us look briefly at a couple of examples.

Our first example could be the claim of Islam to indigenous status, especially that of the fundamentalists in the anti-French context of the 1970s. In reality, Islam had some right to this,

having been around for a millennium. In addition, at one stage the marabouts had had a good nationalist record, during the resistance to the conquest. But Sembene makes his imam as foreign as possible, is silent on the marabouts' nationalist record, and on the other hand, downplays the historic anti-nationalist collusion between the *ceddo* and the European slave traders. He even uses the Christian missionary, in the face of most of the historic evidence, to take a few swipes at Islam, insinuating that Islam could not match Christian efforts at syncretism. In short, he turns the tables on an Islam which, in creating the *ceddo* label, had branded traditional Africans outsiders in their own home. In *Ceddo*, we are reminded over and over that the real outsider is the imam.

Or we could consider Sembene's treatment of power. Sembene's monarchy in *Ceddo* is a democratic showcase: despotism coincides with the arrival of the imam. It is the imam who bans non-Muslims from the community assembly. And it is he who introduces rule by violence, probably arranging the king's death, usurping the throne, ordering the sacking of the kingdom to bring it to heel. The Islam of *Ceddo* is exclusively the Islam of the *jihad*, imposed by force: there is no sign of the equally historic popular Islam of persuasion.

In reality, as we saw in Chapter Two, there was no democracy under *ceddo* rule: the *baadoolo* majority had no political representation and power and violence went hand in hand, which is why the *baadoolo* took refuge with the marabouts. But Sembene has rebranded the imam, endowing him with the despotism of which the marabouts had spent centuries accusing the monarchies, and thanks to which they had hoped to divert attention from the fact that they too were ultimately despots in their own right.

Were we to judge *Ceddo* in terms of history rather than ideology, then, as Senegalese critic Babacar Diop Buuba has pointed out, Sembene's concept of power in traditional Africa is 'highly questionable' (Sy, 41).⁴⁹ Sembene himself, when he discusses *Ceddo*, does a U-turn worthy of a Senghor. In his lecture, *Man is Culture*, given in the USA in 1975, the year before *Ceddo* was made, he implies, characteristically, that he has no illusions about feudal Africa, any more than about the marabouts, describing the transition from *ceddo* power to marabout power as 'nothing more than the substitution of one monarchy for another' (Sembene 1975, 5). But

⁴⁹ Babacar Diop Buuba acknowledges in his article in *Revue Africaine de Communication* that he has used S.K. Sy (qv) as a pseudonym.

Ceddo is not an academic lecture delivered abroad, it is a political intervention at home. And after *Ceddo*, Sembene defends his 'democratic' monarchy in every interview. In 1979, when the film comes out in Paris, he assures *Le Monde Diplomatique* that in African society 'the collectivity had the last word' (Demers, 58), and in 1984, when *Ceddo* is finally released in Senegal, he waxes almost poetic on the virtues of 'our ancestors' democratic system based on consensus' (Diedhiou, 7). He had described *Ceddo* thus to French critic Guy Hennebelle:

At the beginning there's a traditional chief, but there was little honour and glory attached to his position. It certainly was not totalitarian rule.... he was elected, 'designated' as they called it, and everybody had access to him (Hennebelle 1978, 122).

Senegalese critic Babacar Diop Buuba, who saw *Ceddo* when it was released in Paris in 1979, took Sembene to task from a more-Sembene-than-Sembene position which would become characteristic of young left intellectuals in the 1980s. 'Elected by whom? Designated by whom?' he asks, and continues:

We don't feel a sense of continuity between the Sembene who is critical of tradition (e.g. *Emitai*), and the Sembene who made *Ceddo*. Sembene's concept of power in traditional Africa is highly questionable (Sy, 41).

In his 1984 article, he ascribes Sembene's deviation to the influence of Pathé Diagne, for whom 'negro-African' civilisation was intrinsically pluralist (B.B.Diop, 47).

Thirdly, we might look at Sembene's treatment of class in *Ceddo*. It is here that we see most clearly Sembene the Marxist caught between history and ideology. Sembene the Marxist has difficulty remaking *ceddo* class society to suit the ideological needs of 1976, and it shows.

It is quite difficult to tell who is who class-wise in *Ceddo*: the blurring of the lines bears testimony to Sembene's embarrassment, I feel. In history, it was clear-cut: the aristocracy and the army had a monopoly of arms and power. The *baadoolo* and regular slaves, the producers, had no right to either. In *Ceddo*, the only class that is clearly identifiable is the aristocracy - and aristocracy they certainly are, whatever Sembene may have said about the lack of honour and glory accruing to the position: that princess, with her haughty disdain for her captor, her 'Don't you know who I am?' and her declaration that she will return to the village riding on his back, is

no small-time village headman's daughter.

In terms of the military and *baadoolo*, things are less obvious in the film. To which of these classes, for example, does the princess's captor belong? Is he a soldier or a *baadoolo*? In the filmscript, Sembene refers to him as a 'captive of the crown' (Kakou, 7), suggesting the former, since the army was composed in the main of former captives from other ethnic groups. On the other hand, for the *dénouement* to have maximum effect, for his romantic relationship with the princess to have most ideological impact, he needs to be from the miserable ranks of the *baadoolo*.

The representatives of the *baadoolo* are, presumably, that down-trodden group who are excluded from the assembly by the imam and subsequently hold a meeting among themselves, some of them deciding to go into exile, others to submit to conversion, a final group to buy guns from the European slave-trader and fight. French critics certainly saw this group as the *baadoolo*, as did Senegalese critic Babacar Diop Buuba (Sy, 41). In the film, we are narratively encouraged to think of them as having a monopoly of *ceddo* identity to the exclusion of the rest of the community.

This is interesting, in that Sembene the Marxist would appear to have reasserted himself, and pushed the aristocracy and the military out of the picture. The word *ceddo*, to most Senegalese, is synonymous with the dominant classes, with the self-confidence of the aristocracy, the fearlessness of the military. What it emphatically does not connote, in everyday usage, is the powerless *baadoolo*. But Sembene's *ceddo*, as Babacar Diop Buuba says, is a *baadoolo*. This is Sembene's way of appropriating a feudalism he needs ideologically in 1976, but which goes against his Marxist grain. Sembene's centering of the *baadoolo* in *Ceddo* is as revolutionary a redefinition of the *ceddo* concept as his 'outsidering' of the imam discussed earlier. In turning the imam into the outsider, he recovers *ceddo* for nationalism. In this latest move, he appropriates the tradition for Marxism, the *ceddo* identity for the masses. But does he pay a price for this in terms of his representation of resistance?

This brings us to the question of resistance. Now, the ideological flipside of the Muslim *ceddo*-the-outsider is *ceddo*-the-one-who-refuses. This is the positive redefinition which Sembene takes on board from the nationalists in the 1970s. Sembene's *ceddo* is a symbol, as he says, of 'total liberty', a liberty which he refuses to relinquish. The *ceddo* of the 1970s is resistant

to any attempt to deprive him of his sense of self. As historian Diallo puts it, 'Islam is about obedience. *Ceddo* is about having a high opinion of yourself' (D/FNC). While this is clearly a value of the *ceddo* aristocracy and not the whole society, Sembene takes the *ceddo* concept very personally. He has named his house *Galle Ceddo*, and he has declared that he wants to be buried upright, in the *ceddo* tradition (OS/FNC).

With a title like *Ceddo*, with its connotations of refusal, coupled with the military reputation of the monarchies which have made the word *ceddo*, for many, synonymous with war, and with the ideological arsenal which supports such a mode of production - courage, death before surrender, etc. - Sembene seems to be building up the expectations of his Senegalese audience for a level of resistance never seen in his previous films (many, when they finally saw the film, voiced their disappointment on this score). What he gives them is a final frame in which the *lingeer*, the *ceddo* princess, singlehandedly shoots the imam.

The fact that at long last we see someone taking decisive and unambiguous action against oppression is very welcome. That said, the princess raises questions in terms of both class and gender. What is Sembene the Marxist telling us when he presents a princess as the only one capable of firing a shot against the tyrant? Secondly, why, in a *ceddo* society synonymous with military power, did Sembene decide to present his audience with a solitary woman rather than an army?

What actually happens in the film in terms of resistance? A *ceddo* kidnaps the king's daughter in protest against the imam's increasing power. He manages to kill off the two members of the aristocracy who come to free her. He is then killed by two of the imam's *talibese*. This, in a nutshell, is the extent of *ceddo* resistance against the imam until the princess kills him in the final frame.

At the emergency meeting the *baadoolo* then hold, they opt for exile or conversion. The remaining group who decide to fight have no arms. This certainly fits historically with their *baadoolo* status: we saw in Chapter Two that, having no right to bear arms, their method of survival was flight, not fight. But this means that Sembene has chosen to put the spotlight on, and win the audience's empathy and ideological approval for, a group which, as resistance material, are non-starters: as Babacar Diop Buuba says, he 'omits the masses from the action... they talk - they do nothing but talk' (Sy, 42). The *baadoolo* spend hours deliberating on whether

resistance is worth the price, on 'whether a religion is worth a man's life'. Meanwhile, the imam has no such qualms: he strikes in the night, and it is all over by the next morning. The *baadoolo* are terrified, and we have the mass conversion.

In history, it is Majoor, the dead king's sister's son, heir to the throne in the matrilinear *ceddo* system, who, having most to lose from the new Islamic patrilinear set-up, would have led the army against the imam. But Sembene, after showing us an initial display of fiery resentment on Majoor's part, sells him off as a slave. And it is the princess who does the job.

The princess, as we said, raises questions in terms of both class and gender. Sembene tries to neutralise the class problem by having her fall in love with her *baadoolo* captor, getting her to fantasise that she is kneeling before him offering him water, presumably a symbolic way of declaring herself at the service of the masses. This purification ritual over, Sembene perhaps feels that class is no longer an obstacle to her representing the resistance.

The gender issue is more complex. I can see that if Sembene wants to get his largely Muslim audience to swallow the assassination of an imam - not just any imam but one who is the sole representative of Islam in the film - then a strikingly attractive woman, a representative of traditional Africa, proud of herself and her body - we saw her earlier bathing unselfconsciously in the river - a reminder of all that Islamic fundamentalism will try to repress, is perhaps his best bet. From this angle, the princess is a clever rhetorical device.

I can also see what she means to the Senegalese of 1976, still unable to get rid of the French, still beaten down by centuries of oppression by their own aristocracy, the French and the marabouts. It does not matter that in history she was on the wrong side of the barricades: what matters is that she is African - her proud bearing, her sense of self, her dignity, her decisiveness and courage, right down to her beautiful, richly hued handwoven cloth, are all symbols of empowerment, reminders of what the real Africa, feudal or not, achieved.

But a question remains: why has Sembene given a woman, not just a vital role in resistance, as he did in *God's Bits of Wood*, but a monopoly? In previous chapters, I had tried to explain his general unwillingness or inability to create resistance role models in terms of self-censorship. He himself had added that he could not portray a resistance that did not exist. Neither of these arguments applies to *Ceddo*, where he clearly feels able to depict resistance. What he cannot depict, it would seem, is full-scale realistic resistance, regardless of gender: he cannot

give us a band of fighting men.

Asked why he chose a woman to kill the imam, Sembene said flippantly that he liked women, and more seriously that 'she defended what the men ought to have defended', and cited a Malian saying that when the men are afraid, the women put on their trousers (Statt, 37-38). The princess in *Ceddo*, it would appear, is created to shame the men of Senegal who have done nothing to eliminate the various tyrants who have held it in their grip for centuries. I feel she may also be a distancing device, because to give that gun to a man challenges Sembene himself and his relationship to activism: Sembene who actually appears briefly in the film as 'a *ceddo* rebaptised Ibrahima', a convert for whom religion - or any other belief? - is not worth a man's life.

What is surprising about *Ceddo*, in my opinion, is not the fact that it was banned but that Sembene, to have made it, could have believed it would not be. How could the normally cautious, resistance-shy Sembene have felt he could get away with a final shot in which a woman kills an imam?

One can only assume that he must have felt that 1976 represented some sort of *conjoncture favorable* for a film like *Ceddo* as 1971 had for *Emitai*. But in what way? Perhaps he thought that, as the year the second opposition party was legalised, and with the UPS pushing the democracy image hard in order to acquire membership of the Socialist International, the margin of manoeuvre had widened yet again. Perhaps he felt that the threat of a theocracy, which was already being mentioned (Magassouba, 124) would be one thing on which he and Senghor could agree. Or perhaps he was gambling on the possibility that Senghor, who had been the victim of an attempted assassination by a young marabout in 1967 (ibid, 115) would be happy to see the tables turned in *Ceddo*.

Whatever Sembene's calculations were, for the first time, it would seem that he got it wrong. In addition to Senghor's long-term relationship with the marabouts, in 1977 the President had a topical and urgent reason for not needing a film like *Ceddo*: the first multiparty elections since the early 1960s were due in February 1978, and his rival Wade was wasting no time in reminding all and sundry that, unlike Senghor, he was a devout Mouride *talibe* (Magassouba, 125). My only surprise is that a chess-player like Sembene had not built this obvious point into his calculations.

In this light, the 'spelling' story is straightforward enough. Senghor could not afford *Ceddo*, but neither could he afford an outright ban on religious grounds, first because it would tarnish the democratic image, and secondly because, with fundamentalism on the rise, a rumour about a film might have been as dangerous as the film itself: the *Ebony* affair has not been forgotten⁵⁰. Senghor wriggled out of a tight situation in the Machiavellian style for which he is well-known, diverting attention away from religion towards the already plausibly heated but decidedly less explosive area of language. As French journalist Makédonsky put it, he found 'a piece of strong string' to tie up the dangerous goods. He added one more linguistic decree to the long series of such decrees that had punctuated the 1970s: gemination (doubling) of consonants must be reserved for semantic, as opposed to phonetic, differentiation. The Senegalese woke up one morning in March 1977 to find that not only Sembene's *Ceddo* but several opposition newspapers (the stuffing in the parcel tied with the strong string) were 'banned' for disrespecting the gemination law.

There is no doubt that the reason for the ban was religious: we have this from the horse's mouth.⁵¹ But it is proof of how well the gemination ploy worked that even in 1990, when most of those concerned had seen the film, nobody out of the many intellectuals I questioned believed that anything other than the language quarrel which had crystallised the opposition between Senghor and Sembene throughout the 1970s was at stake. The reaction of Sémou Pathé Guèye, editor of the Marxist revue *Gestu*, is representative:

Religion? No, no, definitely not. *Ceddo* is not against Islam. It was jealousy: Senghor couldn't cope with the idea that this character who didn't even have a school certificate should be able to make his weight felt as an intellectual - that someone could be an intellectual without ever setting foot in the Sorbonne (SPG/FNC).

Even Dutch political analyst Gerti Hesseling, normally very astute, has bought the gemination story, and comments that it says much about the Senegalese way of seeing things that they should get so worked up over spelling (Hesseling, 356).

⁵⁰ The reference is to angry demonstrations by students in Benin City in 1990, sparked by a rumour of an article on corruption in *Ebony* magazine, an article which, it turned out, did not exist.

⁵¹ Sembene told an American journalist that the assassination of the imam by the princess was the 'only reason' *Ceddo* was banned (Pfaff, 174).

The most intriguing contradiction in the *Ceddo* affair is not between the 'real' reason and the one that was fed to the public, but concerns Sembene's behaviour. Not only was Sembene perfectly aware that the 'real' reason was religion, he was, as we can clearly see in *The Last of the Empire*, completely conversant with the government's regular press relations trick of 'diverting attention to secondary issues' (Sembene 1983). Knowing this, why did he not simply call Senghor's bluff, change the spelling and let the film be released? The argument of some Senegalese intellectuals that Sembene was not willing to step down in the language debate does not hold water: Cheikh Anta Diop, whose credentials in terms of the national language struggle are unquestionable, merely changed the name of his paper, *Siggi*, which contained the illegal gemination, to *Taxaw*, which meant more or less the same thing: Arise. Many, from linguist Alioune Tine to Marxist intellectual Iba Ndiaye Djadji, felt Sembene should have found a similar solution and released the film (AT/FNC; IND/FNC). But Sembene refused, and what is even more intriguing is that Senghor, to have risked this method rather than outright censorship, must have known he would.

Not only did Sembene play the gemination game, knowing it to be a diversion, he helped to hype it: it is his behaviour, more than anything, that lent it its cast iron credibility. The *Kaddu* editorial board, including Sembene, met and there was great excitement as they drew up their strategy, which took the form of an orchestrated campaign of protest letters in all the national languages to the various papers. Boubacar Kane, editor of *Kaddu* at the time, told me he had corrected the French in Sembene's letter⁵² (which, as usual, had several mistakes!), then wrote his own in Wolof, while his wife wrote hers in Fulfulde (BK/FNC). Nobody at the meeting - except Sembene - realised for a moment that they were involved in anything other than one more lap of the long language struggle.

What do we conclude? Hesseling is right when she implies that, had Senghor wanted to be sure the film would not be screened, he should logically have called in the censors (Hesseling, 355). How could Senghor have been so sure that Sembene would play the game? This is the same pragmatic Sembene who, if he has proved one thing over the past fourteen years, it is that he wants his films to be shown in Senegal: the revolutionary artist and hard-headed businessman

⁵² *Ande-Sopi* No 1, June 1977.

who, on both counts, has clearly wanted his films to reach his Senegalese audience, even if it meant constant self-censorship and swallowing a few cuts. Yet here Sembene agrees to a situation in which the Senegalese public will not be able to see his film, and which does not even give him the compensation of a proper ban, with all the attendant publicity. The *Ceddo* affair got huge publicity, certainly - Sembene and his team of letter-writers saw to that - but although the 'ban' sold seats abroad, which would have compensated to some degree financially, it did nothing to get the film's fundamental message across at home.

Do we therefore have to conclude that Senghor and Sembene, whether their reasons were the same or different, decided together in 1977 that it would be better if *Ceddo* were not released in Senegal, and, what is more, agreed that it was better if the Senegalese public did not know why? Dare one suggest, very, very tentatively, that Senghor may actually have persuaded Sembene that it was in his interests, in terms of his personal security, as much as the interests of the state, for the screening of *Ceddo*, at that particular *conjoncture religio-politique*, to be suspended? Did he - a dozen years before Rushdie - convince Sembene of the possibility of a *fatwa* against one or both of them, and did Sembene, like the *ceddo* in the film, decide that religion was not worth a man's life? And was that how they came up with the spelling affair as a two-way face-saver?

If this is possibly what happened, then *Ceddo* is perhaps an example of the contradictions of producing art under neo-colonialism at their most intense: you try to mobilise the people, and end up with the possibility of mobilising them against yourself. And when the chips are down, you choose the autocracy that accompanies Western imperialism over a less familiar form of foreign domination.....

CONCLUSION

After so many Dakar miles trekked, so many questions asked and answers recorded, so much time spent trying to convince 'ordinary' Senegalese that it was they, and not the 'experts' who interested me most, so much time willingly given by both the 'ordinary' Senegalese and the experts, for which I am deeply grateful, so many hours in the UCAD library poring over old *Soleils*, so much frustration in the National Archives asking for what could almost never be found, a couple of hours snatched from the busy Sembene himself, and now so many words, words, words about the whole experience, what have I really added to my own understanding of Senegal, Sembene and art in neo-colonial society, what have I been able to demonstrate to others?

It must be apparent to anybody who has had the patience to plough through all the words that I am not offering any profoundly new and revolutionary understanding of any of the areas I set out to explore. I have not shown that Senghor was anything other than a francophile who spent his life working in the service of French imperialism, I have not even hinted that Sembene was not a sincere Marxist struggling against imperialism: both remain intact in their respective places in Senegalese history, and the history of global capitalist imperialism. But I did not set out to prove that they were not, in their broad outlines, who we thought they were: this is not a revisionist work.

What I have done for myself is to provide myself with a much more *concrete* feel than I had at the beginning for Senegal, for the nature of French imperialism and for Sembene. I also have a much clearer picture of *how the various pieces fit together*: of how neo-colonialism works to cripple revolutionary art. Fitting the pieces together has meant that where before I knew, now I am beginning, I hope, to understand. I think I understand why Senegal, more than anywhere else in West Africa, is unlikely to produce a revolution. I understand how, and at what price, Sembene managed to make his films and not get put in jail, and how, precisely, this is a function of Senegal's unrevolutionary relationship with French capital. I can now walk through Dakar and give you a fair idea, merely by looking at most people, of what they have read, seen or know of Sembene - and most of them know something - and where he fits in their daily struggle to survive neo-colonialism. I can tell you not to bother asking the vast peasant majority about Sembene, because the very vast majority of them have never heard of him.

If I have managed, through all the endless weight of detail, to convey to others some of this concreteness and this sense of how the various pieces fit together, then hopefully all the words have not been a waste of time. The response that I hope to have elicited from readers is not one of delight in the unpredicted, but more of a head-nodding, a recognition and remembering: yes, we really are dealing with neo-colonialism and not some post-colonial ideological fog that conceals its hard, objective capitalist purpose from view, and yes, this is why it worked better, and crippled more, in Senegal than in most places, and yes, this is what Sembene's project means in this context, this is what it was and why it could not be different, this is how and where it succeeded, this is where and why it fell short.

In looking at Senegal in such detail in this study, and in coming up with reminders rather than revelations, I make no apology: I feel it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of the workings of the colonial and neo-colonial process at this moment in history, as a century whose fundamental struggle, as Ngugi says, has been between capitalism and socialism draws to a close, and the dominant voice declaring the 'Cold War' 'over' echoes through the 'global' 'free' marketplaces, while all the ideological 'posts' encourage us to forget the clear, exposing, demystifying, liberating language of Marx, Fanon, Cabral - and Sembene?

With regard to Sembene, there has been a slightly more radical shift in my perspective than with respect to Senegal. I no longer see him as a strange, anomalous product of France's favourite neo-colony, defying Marx's theory that consciousness is a product of social conditions, but rather as a complex son of a Senegal whose values he opposes and incarnates simultaneously: a man of contradictions. But it is time to look more closely at what this study set out to do, to try to summarise what has been said, and to see what needs to be added.

This study began with my Zaria appreciation of what I saw as the revolutionary quality of Sembene's anti-colonial novels, my appreciation of the incisive exposure of neo-colonial structures in his post-1963 films, and at the same time my questions concerning the change I perceived in the films: no real resistance such as we got in *God's Bits of Wood*, magic and mysticism instead of the class struggle, a gradual shift in attention from the masses to the ruling class, a seeming glorification of a feudalism *God's Bits of Wood* had been determined to transcend. And there were questions about whether Sembene had in fact reached the masses when he moved to cinema, what if anything he had done to their consciousness, and how, in terms of the neo-colonial state, he had managed to say as much as he did without getting locked

up.

This led to a reformulation of the question in more general terms: was it possible to produce revolutionary art in the neo-colonial context? I then proposed a working model of revolutionary art. The model saw revolutionary art as exposing the exploitative system to the masses in a language they could understand and inspiring them to fight back. By these criteria, *God's Bits of Wood* exposed and was inspiring, but in a language which by-passed the target audience. Sembene's move to cinema should theoretically have solved this problem, but it had been noted that the films under neo-colonialism fell short in terms of inspiration to resist.

The model called for an examination of the interaction between four fundamental elements: the artist, the neo-colonial state, the mode of production and conditions of consumption, and the audience. It emphasised the direct and indirect role of the state, through repression or incorporation, and the power of ideology, seen in terms of hegemonic forces saturating the whole of society, artist as well as audience. It saw the artist struggle's as an internal one to transcend the power of ideology and culture over her/himself as well as an external one against the obstacles set in her/his path by the state, and reminded us that the communication problem between 'intellectual' petty-bourgeois artist and her/his target audience does not end with the substitution of Wolof for French.

Above all, the model emphasised how important it is, for an understanding of how art functions in neo-colonial society, to contextualise and connect everything - to situate the socially produced artist and her/his audience in a concrete society at a given moment in the historic process. The model also reminded us that if the society itself is not ripe for revolution, no art can make it revolutionary.

Armed with these concepts, the study then embarked on an examination of Sembene's work in Senegal under Senghor, in the first two decades of neo-colonialism. It could not, of course, plunge directly into neo-colonial Senegal or Sembene's life in 1963, without a clearer idea of where both were coming from. This involved two preliminary chapters, one looking at the development of Senegal from the early days of its relationship with Western capitalism, the second looking at Sembene in the context of colonial Senegal, and also at his years in post-war France. Both Senegal and Sembene were examined in this preliminary study in terms of their respective prevailing myths.

The Senegal myth projects Senegal - especially Senghor's Senegal - as the country most completely under the French thumb, the one which is guaranteed to vote against African interests at the OAU. My attempt to understand how the relationship between France and Senegal had developed from the days of the Joloff Empire merely filled in the gaps in this picture, showing that Senghor, far from being responsible for the situation, was a product of it. Three things emerged. The first was the eminent usefulness of Senegal to the development of French capital over three centuries, and the intense degree to which it had been exploited: the supply of slaves, of soldiers for the conquest, of Dakar as capital of the AOF, and the massive groundnut profits. The second was the means whereby such a high level of exploitation had been made possible: a mixture of repression and incorporation. The monarchies had been weakened by guns and alcohol, the marabouts co-opted to contain peasant resistance, the rising national bourgeoisie brutally crushed, Senghor created to hi-jack the anti-imperialist movement.

Thirdly, ideology had played a significant role. France had nurtured every oppressive element in the culture, from patriarchy and the caste system to the class divisions of the monarchies to the messianism of sufi Islam. *Assimilation* had turned the ruling class into head prefects of imperialism: Western democracy in the Quatre Communes had produced a class of palaver-mongers⁵³ while privileged early access to French education had produced grammarians. The originally militant *Négritude* was enlisted, via Senghor, to combat Pan-Africanism and Communism. The exploited classes in turn had been socialised, through feudalism and sufi Islam, into a culture of obedience and clientelism: the sack of rice was received with gratitude, the fight for a fair price for labour nipped in the bud. The common essence of the various ideologies, from the caste system to *Assimilation* to sufism, was an inversion in which exploitation appeared as dependency - and this was internalised by all classes, whether it was a Lamine Guèye promising the *citoyens*, 'We can do anything with France, nothing without it', or a Senghor proposing that the French should lead the orchestra while the Africans beat the drums, or an Amadu Bamba exhorting the Mourides *talibese* to look upon themselves in their relationship with the marabout as 'corpses in the hands of the undertaker'. Senegal came out of the preliminary study as a country with an overwhelming respect for authority, where knowing

⁵³ A journalist of the satirical weekly, *Le Cafard Libéré*, told travel writer Peter Biddlecombe, 'Wherever two or three people in other parts of francophone Africa gather together, they start plotting a coup. In Senegal, they start forming another political party' (Biddlecombe, 327-8).

the rules replaces thinking, and a lack of initiative and inventiveness which makes Césaire's colonial scenario look like a huge understatement.

This filling in of the Senegal picture had extensive ramifications in terms of the fundamental question: how does revolutionary art fare under neo-colonialism. The intensity of French interest in Senegal, matched by the weight of the hegemonic forces, meant that one now approached the period of the study wondering how a revolutionary art could exist, not to mention what it might achieve, in such a context.

It also made one wonder more, rather than less, than before where the bold, brave Sembene of the legend could possibly have come from.

What exactly was this legend? According to the legend, the bold, brave Sembene was a committed writer and activist, his Communism and *God's Bits of Wood* reinforcing each other, and both reinforced by the humble Casamance fisherman father, the defiant attack on the unfair school principal, the aborted education, the 'participation' in the 1947 strike, the rise from dock work on the greasy quays of Marseille to the writing of a masterpiece, the Moscow film apprenticeship - in short, this Sembene had all the ingredients to be a full-blown revolutionary, and I was convinced, quite unrealistically, that he had served as a model for his own revolutionary creations, Bakayoko and, to a lesser extent, Oumar Faye.

Contextualising Sembene in colonial Senegal and post-war France did not do away with all the elements of the legend, but it did produce a more complex and contradictory picture. Yes, his father had been a fisherman, no, they were not rich and yes his childhood was unstable, and yes, he was thrown out of school at fourteen, and worked on the docks in France, and yes, there was ultimately something miraculous about the writing of *God's Bits of Wood*, even in the encouraging context of the PCF and the anti-imperialist movement in France, where the 'proletarian' Sembene was the right man in the right place at the right time, and he was able, as was often to be the case, to turn a liability into an asset.

Above all, in revisiting the legend, Sembene's relationship with Marxism as a way of understanding reality remained intact. The combination of his ideological availability, product of an unstable childhood which had not allowed the various hegemonic forces of colonial Senegal - Wolof, Islamic and French - to completely occupy his consciousness, together with certain not so

obvious affinities between *Assimilation* and Marxism, as well, of course, as his burning sense of injustice at a system that had reduced him to manual labour, and a solidarity with his co-dockers, made for a Marxism that ran deeper than in many 'pure' intellectuals, and abundantly informed all his creative work.

On the other hand, a second picture emerged alongside that of the committed Marxist writer, a picture which demanded that several elements of the legend - class, Communism, and committed art - be nuanced.

In terms of class, Sembene the child of the poor fisherman was also a *citoyen*, an *assimilé*, and a Lebu-Wolof from the heartland rather than the fringe of the colonial enterprise. At fourteen, he was already better educated than 99% of the AOF at the time. From his first day on the Marseille docks, his aspirations and mental horizon set him apart from his co-workers: his misnamed novel, *The Black Docker*, bears testimony to this. And, already a proletarian with a difference on arrival in France, by 1960 his life-style was much closer to that of the left-wing petty-bourgeois artist/intellectual than to that of his former docker mates.

Secondly, Sembene's membership of the PCF, when looked at more closely, had produced, not perhaps an outright denial of his activism, but more of a footnote on the powerful, popular, confident Communism of post-war France, which welcomed Sembene and if anything meant protection for the 'immigrant' 'docker' rather than the risk and sacrifice I had associated with being a Communist. Sembene's Communism in France was therefore no proof of a general commitment to activism, or of the degree of sacrifice he would be ready to make.

Thirdly, in looking at Sembene's early writing career, the question arose whether he had not one, but two agendas: a sincere commitment to raising the consciousness of the masses, but also a personal determination to succeed as an artist, to exact recognition from a system which had excluded him. Up to this point there was no incompatibility between the two agendas, and no indication of the outcome should conflict arise. Sembene's move to cinema was similarly seen as dually motivated: to reach the masses, but also to move into a more pioneering, less densely inhabited artistic area.

Sembene at forty therefore appeared, on the one hand as a man who had known injustice personally, whose Marxism enabled him to grasp the system which produced it, whose artistic talent was committed to the struggle against capitalism and colonialism, and on the other as the

gifted young *ex-citoyen* with aspirations to 'be somebody', shut out of the system at fourteen, driven by frustration and perhaps the memory of his father's failure, determined to use all his talent, wits and street wisdom to prove to those who had shut him out that he could still make it within the system whether they liked it or not.

The return of this Sembene in 1963 would clearly be a somewhat different affair from the heated confrontation which was the inevitable outcome I had originally imagined between a state manned by pathological anti-Communist Senghor and a Sembene with what I had assumed was a blatantly revolutionary agenda. The Sembene my preliminary study had found was not the revolutionary of the legend, but neither was he a rule-follower, a grammarian or an obedient *talibe*: at the very least he was a 'rude boy', a '*boy Dakar*', lacking the overweening respect for authority characteristic of the Senegalese, and at best a Marxist undeterred by ideological smokescreens in his determination to grasp and denounce neo-colonialism. But he had also learned his lesson, and would now be looking for a way to deal with the Principal without getting shut out of school, and had also proved in France how well he could use existing systems to his advantage.

This brings us to the core period of our study: from 1963 when Sembene arrives back in Senegal to 1977 when *Ceddo*, his last film produced under Senghor, is banned. To understand Sembene's conditions of artistic production, it was necessary to grasp a very fundamental contradiction in neo-colonialism *à la sénégalaise*.

The contradiction sprang from France's self-assigned role throughout the Cold War - the anti-Communist policing of Africa - and from the double part assigned to neo-colonial Senegal in this project: as one of France's most important military bases, and as an ideological weapon - a showcase of democracy - in the anti-Communist offensive. This means that, on the one hand, anything resembling Communism, or indeed, any threat to French capitalist hegemony in Senegal, would not be tolerated: by 1963, the Mali Federation had been dismantled, the bicephalous system outlawed, the PAI banned, other parties repressed, and the loyal Senghor was ruling alone over a one-party system, with instructions from de Gaulle 'to build a strong state'. On the other hand, an image of democracy had to be projected, so, where possible, an incorporated Communist was preferable to a repressed one. This is the margin of manoeuvre within which Sembene operated throughout the two decades, the fundamental contradiction which is inscribed, imprinted in the films. The irony is that the neo-colonial state and the French

'helped' the artist, in this case, not because he was not a Communist but precisely because he was.

Sembene produced his films by using the existing neo-colonial structures: in the 1960s, unofficially exploiting the resources of the Senegalese state, and officially the services and financial aid of the French Ministère de la Coopération which at this stage had a proactive approach to film-making by Africans. At the end of the 1960s, he did one experiment with a French commercial company. In the 1970s, his films were co-produced by the Senegalese state which had 'statified' the film industry.

His technique in the early films has been described as Italian Neo-realist: he uses the story of a single oppressed individual to expose the class contradictions of neo-colonial society, but does not show resistance. In the later features, exposure of the system is multi-layered, and requires some decoding. There is an effort to indigenise the Marxist social analysis by using African symbols. There is some token resistance, but it is unrealistic and unconvincing, until we reach *Ceddo*, where the oppressor is assassinated in the final scene, which led to the film being kept out of circulation. There is also a switch in focus away from the oppressed as protagonist (and as target audience?) towards the ruling class.

In terms of distribution, the early shorts had limited distribution, but both the 1968 commercial feature and the 1970s state co-productions were shown in most cinemas throughout Senegal.

The features therefore did reach the urban cinema-going masses, their accessibility enhanced by their extensive use of Senegalese languages. They were enormously popular, in terms of providing people with images of their own lives and culture. People responded to them as echoes of their own frustration with neo-colonialism, expressing the general disgust at the corrupt, callous behaviour of the 'haves' towards the 'have nots'. The real consciousness-raising message - that the rich are rich only because they have stolen from the poor - although tentatively present in the films - was generally missed. The films did not leave people with a feeling that they could do anything to change the situation.

In his personal life, Sembene withdrew from active politics some time after arriving home. His activism was henceforth concentrated in the cultural arena. He was actively involved in the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in 1966, where he won several prizes, he was President

of L'association des cinéastes sénégalais (The Senegalese Filmmakers Association), he was active in the setting up of FEPACI, and throughout the 1970s was involved in the national languages struggle.

What does the study of Sembene in Senegal under Senghor tell us about what neo-colonialism does to revolutionary art and what, if anything, revolutionary art does to neo-colonialism? What has it shown about the nature of the relationship, under neo-colonialism, between the artist, the state, and the people?

I began this study with a narrative because I was having difficulty formulating the question in discursive form. Now, in attempting to arrive at a conclusion, I discover I can only think about the findings in the form of two distinct discourses: it is a matter of emphasis, of whether one sees the glass as half empty or half full. I am not thinking in extreme terms: I do not have one discourse in which my original hard-core revolutionary Sembene remains intact - that Sembene died, as we saw in the preliminary study - and another in which neo-colonialism can only throw up artists who do it for the money (because he didn't). But somewhere between these two extremes, I can see two versions which both take account of much of the reality of Sembene and Senegal, as the study has discovered it, and yet which remain substantially different.

Let us look first at the 'half full' version. The neo-colonial state militates powerfully against the production and consumption of any form of revolutionary art. On the other hand, there are contradictions which the committed artist can successfully exploit. Sembene identifies two sets of contradictions. The state has a need to contain Communism on the one hand, and on the other, to project an image of democracy. Secondly, Senghor's reputation as a man of culture means he cannot be seen to repress Senegal's pioneer of African cinema.

Sembene is uniquely endowed to confront this complex situation. He is that rare combination of the *citoyen* who knows his rights and will not, unlike the *sujet*, kowtow to authority, and the man of the people who knows what it is to suffer. He is committed to anti-imperialism and socialism and to raising the consciousness of the masses, but he is also a pragmatist, a survivor with an excellent grasp of the *rapport des forces*. His background, which means he has one foot inside the system and one outside, means he can fight them because he knows them, yet he is independent enough of the system not to be absorbed. He is streetwise, and knows how to get what he wants out of situations on his terms: he had seen the PCF hold the

French state to ransom after the war, he got a camera out of the Russians by challenging them to prove they were not racist, and the mouse in the story holds the lion's fate between its teeth. The mere fact that the contradictions of colonialism and neo-colonialism can throw up such an individual is reason for hope.

Sembene's behaviour from 1963 is a model in terms of overcoming the obstacles of committed artistic production under neo-colonialism. He identifies the margin of manoeuvre and uses it efficiently and dialectically: cautiously at first, then with increasing daring as new factors come into play, like his own growing international reputation, and the Marxist and nationalist pressure of the 1970s which helped to bring about the pseudo-democracy.

Sembene's move to cinema to reach the masses is evidence of an independence of mind, a flexibility, that years on the benches of French colonial schools reduced to a dormant state in others. In the neo-colonial context, filmmaking presents a glaring contradiction: how to get capital to attack the state, when the state is practically the sole source of capital? He finds his way around this obstacle, exploiting the margin of manoeuvre, testing its width as he goes. When one source refuses - as with *La noire de...* - he finds another (the state left-overs) and warns the French that he can go elsewhere: this quickly brings them to heel.

He then works to create a film language which will get past the censor to the people. The unwritten rule of neo-colonial censorship seems to prohibit two things: overt reference to politics and explicit resistance. Sembene's answer is Realism, and he is a consummate Realist. The most insignificant and apparently innocent everyday situation is recreated in such a way that it expresses the core of Senegalese neo-colonialism: the rule of the bureaucrats in *Mandabi*, the impotence of the entire ruling class in *Xala*, the political grip of the marabouts in *Ceddo*. Sembene's brand of Realism turns a political necessity into an aesthetic virtue. He has two basic methods. In the relatively simple *Mandabi*, the individual is made to symbolise the entire class - Lukács's typicality - thereby defeating the censor: Sembene can deny the general dimension. Later, still dodging the censor, he develops a layered symbolic language, half-hiding the more pointed attacks behind the more general ones. The result is a still apparently simple exterior, but one which is laden with consciousness-raising messages: the censor stands by helplessly as Sembene openly says much of what he wants to say, hiding the rest in the seams of the film. At times he seems to almost taunt the censor: implicitly warned to keep off politics and stick to culture, his response amounts to: 'Ban politics, and I will reintroduce it through the cultural side-

door'. Sembene's cultural struggle is not a substitute for politics and class struggle, it is an expression of them in defiance of the boundaries set by the neo-colonial state.

Having made his films to raise consciousness, he makes sure they get to the masses. Given that his original mode of production – via the Ministère de la Coopération - limits distribution, he uses his credibility with them to gain access to commercial production, and via that to the general distribution network. The French agenda had set its limits at the level of the cinemathèque, so this is a major break-through. But getting the films into the cinemas is not enough. Having started out timidly in French, by 1968 Sembene is in a position to prove the financial viability of Wolof to the French commercial production and distribution companies. Again, he takes it gradually. *Mandabi* is in both languages: risks are minimised. But *Xala* flows unselfconsciously back and forth between Wolof and French, reflecting its urban neo-colonial context, and *Ceddo* is almost exclusively in Wolof.

When it becomes obvious that the people, given their cultural and ideological background, have difficulty with some of Sembene's Marxist symbols, he works to indigenise them: the postman of *Mandabi* becomes the *xala*-casting beggar. Even if he does not perfect this process, he has shown the need for it, and pointed the way forward.

He does not show explicit resistance in the films. But here perhaps we need a redefinition of 'revolutionary' and 'resistance' as used in the original model. The lack of resistance is partly on account of the censor's unwritten prohibition. But it is also because the 1960s and 1970s are not, in resistance terms, the anti-colonialist 1950s: they are the days of Adotevi's 'pathetic little independences' and the Realist artist that Sembene is does not provide, as he himself says, 'revolutions by proxy' to be enjoyed from the safety of cinema seats. Revolution and resistance come in a different form in the neo-colonial era. Merely to give people images of themselves after decades of American, French and Indian films is revolutionary. Secondly, merely speaking out, exposing, in a culture where the *non-dit* has become the emblem of neo-colonial national identity, is revolutionary: and he does more than that - he cuts the ruling class down to size at home and disgraces them abroad. Finally, if Sembene does not provide resistance role models inside the films, he is himself, through his life, a role model. He shows that a Senegalese can be creative and can master a modern technological medium, that a Senegalese who is not a member of the ruling class and does not have god-fathers, in a culture where to date these have been the exclusive passports to success, can become known all over the world. In a culture riddled with

messianism and ruled by clientelism, he stands on his own feet and dares to say no: more could not be asked of a Senegalese under neo-colonialism.

The state and the ruling class would like to make people believe that they have incorporated him along with so many other Marxists: this would compensate for the insults he has showered on them. Sembene, with a *Schweikian* attitude worthy of the Brecht he admires, plays along with them, standing on public platforms with Senghor and the French Ambassador, not caring if the world knows that it is they who finance his films: he, they and the people know that Sembene has not been bought. He shares platforms with Senghor because it gives him publicity (important in a one-party state where the party controls the media), and because he knows that his target audience will not misread him: if anything, they will be happy to see that someone just like themselves can rub shoulders with the mighty of the land. And standing on platforms does not make him any the less their own indigenous Che.

Sembene's withdrawal from politics - his shedding of the PAI label - should also be read in this way. It does not mean he is less committed than before. It means two things. First, to declare oneself PAI in the 1960s and early 1970s was to play into the hands of the state - to give them a blank cheque to jail, exile or torture him: Sembene is a survivor, he lives to fight another day. Secondly, with all the parties repressed, he stands a far better chance of raising the masses' consciousness by accepting a division of labour, letting others engage in whatever little underground activism is possible in the neo-colonial context, while he contributes in the way he knows and does best: art.

His involvement in the cultural struggle - in FEPACI and *Kaddu* - is characteristic of the Marxist that he is. In giving sub-Saharan Africa a cinema, and a radical cinema organisation which stood for commitment throughout the 1970s, in making Senegal its number one film producer, his contribution was invaluable. In paving the way for an African cinema in African languages, he not only solved a communication problem, but created new cultural expectations in the masses - the expectation to understand replacing the habit of being excluded - and gave them back a pride in what was their own, and what the French had denigrated for over a century.

In this version, the contradictions of colonialism and neo-colonialism produce their own cultural grave-diggers, and Sembene is a prime example. There is much that a committed artist can do, by operating dialectically, to raise consciousness in the neo-colonial context, and the

wider the margin of manoeuvre, the greater the chance of success.

In the second version, much of the positive achievement of the first is assumed: the glass is not empty, it is only half empty. The focus here is on what has prevented it from being full. In looking at the artist in the neo-colonial state, what is emphasised now is not the artist's ability to hold the state to ransom, but the state's ability to identify and exploit the artist's weak spots; not the faultlines in the hegemonic glue, but hegemony's ability to saturate. This version sees the so-called margin of manoeuvre not as something which Sembene successfully exploits and widens, but as a trap.

What do we mean by Sembene's weak spots? The earlier version focussed on his special qualifications for the role of revolutionary artist. This version highlights those aspects of his ideological and cultural make-up which get in the way of a really revolutionary art. Often, in this version, we are dealing with the flipside of the elements cited in the previous version. For example, where Sembene's closeness to the colonial enterprise was looked at in its positive aspects earlier, in this version it is looked at as a factor limiting his conceptualisation of the problem as well as his search for solutions. Even at his most oppositional, Sembene will be seen to be doing battle with the system on the system's own terms.

The personal factor also takes on a more important role in this version. Where the first version sees Sembene's personal ambition and his consciousness-raising agenda in their compatibility, this one focusses on their points of conflict. This of course is an effect of colonial and neo-colonial capitalist hegemony: to drive a wedge between individual ambitions and communal goals.

Where to begin? This version takes us back to fundamentals: is Sembene a revolutionary who is also an artist, or is he an artist first and last, with commitment to consciousness-raising an integral part, but only part, of a complex agenda? In this version, the latter seems to deal more satisfactorily with more of the evidence: Sembene's central drive is to make films, not to make the revolution and let the songs come by themselves. This is not a moral judgement, but a statement of fact: this is who Sembene is, this is what the combination of growing up in colonial Senegal and becoming an adult in post-war France has produced.

This explains his shedding of the PAI label on his return to Senegal: had he retained it, he would have been blocked from making films by the state, much as they blocked Cheikh Anta,

who insisted on remaining politically active. The other option - of abandoning the film project and throwing himself wholeheartedly into underground activities - simply did not suggest itself to him. Deep down, Sembene is too much of an individualist - 'too jealous of his individual freedom' as Pathé Diagne says, to be a party man. This does not mean that he was not determined to align his art with the goals of the underground: he did not opt, for example, for an escapist or commercial cinema, but for a committed one. But what we are seeing is somebody who is, in the first and last instance, committed to making films. He cannot, should the obstacles to a committed cinema prove too great, leave the camera and walk away: this would be to walk away from himself. He will self-censor more, make more concessions, than someone who has other seriously competing items on her/his agenda, who is as fulfilled mobilising the masses as managing a film crew. The state knows this: they know he will not, in the final analysis, go so far as to get himself expelled from school. The moment this seems to be happening - with *Ceddo* - an accommodation is quickly and quietly reached.

This version casts light into a number of corners of the Sembene story. It shifts the emphasis somewhat, for example, in the interpretation of his decision to turn to film. Looked at more closely, if one's sole - or even principal - purpose was to raise the masses' consciousness, one would think twice before opting for film as a medium in the neo-colonial context. Why, to fight capitalism, did Sembene choose the most capital-dependent medium, the medium which makes capitalism most nervous, where self-censorship would mean that the message had to be so overwrapped as to be almost completely hidden from the masses' view, and where the mode of consumption - mass cinema - leaves no room for the sort of post-consumption follow-up which might have compensated for the work's lack of transparency? On the other hand, in terms of a personal career, of becoming somebody not just at home but abroad, film in Senghor's Senegal was a relatively good bet. What better way to show the people who are laughing at one's French that one can make it than this modern, technologically sophisticated medium they cannot but respect but cannot handle themselves?

Analysing the shift from literature to film in a way that leaves quite a lot of room for Sembene's personal agenda takes better account, this version says, of the contradictory reality of his neo-colonial films. What these films do to perfection is marry Marxism to aesthetics. Sembene cannot - nor is he really required to by the neo-colonial state - see the world through anything other than a Marxist lens. Neither, given the power of the personal agenda, can he

compromise on aesthetics. The only compromise - and this one *is* required by the state - is on the communication of a revolutionary message to the masses. That is where the glass, though it is not empty, is half empty rather than half full. Recognising the weight of the personal agenda explains why he didn't look for other alternatives to literature which would have tied him less firmly to the state: like, for example, a travelling theatre - he had, after all, been involved in a theatre group in his youth. But a travelling theatre, though it reaches the masses, is perhaps appropriated and internalised by them in a way the film is not, and is less under the eye of the neo-colonial state, is perhaps a bit bush for an *ex-citoyen*, *ex-assimilé* who has grown into adulthood with the PCF, modern and scientific, not in a village in faraway Casamance.

Having opted for film, Sembene found himself co-producing with the enemy: first the Ministère de la Coopération, then the neo-colonial state. This unquestioning willingness to work within existing structures had implications. As Diawara says, the French had their own agenda when they encouraged African cinema: to lionise a few chosen African directors, and create a dependent industry for which they could take credit. Sembene was one of the chosen. The result, as sociologist Fatou Sow says, is that Senegalese cinema is virtually synonymous with Sembene's heyday: 'Sembene opened a gap, but it closed behind him' (FS/FNC). Twenty years on, Senegal, unlike Guinea, unlike Ghana, still depends on France for post-production facilities, and unlike Burkina Faso, has no film school. And in the 1980s and 1990s, Senegal is nowhere at all in the league tables of African cinema.

Having opted for film, did Sembene, as he says, really have no alternative to the existing structures? He says he did not: 'no money (from the state), no film, it's as simple as two and two are four' (Hennebelle 1969). But was it? Two margins of manoeuvre which he did not exploit suggest themselves. First, he could, as Diawara has pointed out, have extricated himself from the need for large capital outlays by filming in 16m rather than the 35m he consistently used. This would not only have reduced production costs, it would also have made distribution more flexible: 16m projection equipment is cheaper and more portable. Sembene could have worked in a team with other like-minded filmmakers in Dakar, to form a mobile cinema unit that would have paid for itself. This is what Notcutt and Latham were pioneering in East Africa in the 1930s. Like the travelling theatre, it would have reached the peasants, it could have carried a radical message concealed beneath a veneer of culture, education or 'development'.

Why did Sembene not think in these terms? In this version, four reasons come to mind.

The first is habit: Sembene is used to dealing with the French, they are the cousins he may not love but has lived with all his life. The second is how satisfactorily the French catered for the demands of the personal agenda: even in 1988, I witnessed an argument between Sembene and a Ghanaian producer, where Sembene the pragmatist spelled out the convenience, speed and efficiency of the French post-production arrangement (OS/FNC). Thirdly, 16m gives a slightly inferior print, and as my Black daughter reminds me, Black people cannot afford to be associated with anything that smells of the inferior: this is not the place for the sustainable development debate. Finally, the journey around Senegal with a 16m projector does not lead very directly to the international glamour of Cannes: and Sembene was perhaps not ready for a project which put the masses' consciousness so far in front of his personal programme.

The other margin of manoeuvre within film that Sembene did not exploit is the revolutionising of the structures of production themselves. The state may control what you say, but it is less likely to attempt to control how you run your set, as long as it gets its money back. This is where Sembene did not follow Brecht, who saw that one way around the constraints of censorship was to concentrate on raising the consciousness of those involved in the production process. Sembene's film sets, and indeed his whole approach to production, according to Vieyra, are highly conservative. As Vieyra says, if Sembene could produce his films without people, he would be much more at ease. Unlike Safi Faye sitting happily among her peasants, Sembene the *ex-citoyen*, the *ex-assimilé*, had great difficulty coping with the Casamance peasants in *Emitai*, and never repeated the experiment (Vieyra 1972, 138-9). Unlike Brecht who sat among the workers, modifying his script according to their suggestions, Sembene the mythical 'man of the people' is in reality a loner, caught in a crack between classes, between cultures, preparing his script in the greatest detail in the quiet of his room, and sticking religiously to it (ibid): his concept of the artist is highly individualistic, and he does not seem to have the self-confidence to really let the people into his creative space.

This inability to decolonise, to decapitalise the process of production is even more glaring when it comes to finance: as a producer, Sembene is an outright capitalist.⁵⁴ Of course, the first

⁵⁴ This was brought home to me personally when I encountered Sembene's hostile reaction on my mentioning to him that I had shown a video of *Camp de Thiaroye*, long after it had been on general release in Senegalese cinemas, to a group of students and workers at the École Normale Supérieure in 1992.

version says, what else can he be, working in a capitalist context? But this is not how his extras responded on the set of *Camp de Thiaroye* in 1987, where the contradiction came to a head when he reproduced within his production unit the very problem - racist pay discrimination - the film itself attacked: his Senegalese extras went on strike when they discovered he was paying them less than half the rate he paid their White counterparts! (AK/FNC).

One could go on. One could point out the artistic ramifications of Sembene's withdrawal from politics: had he been involved with grass-roots mobilisation, he might have found the indigenisation of Marx easier. One could point out that his increasing immersion in petty-bourgeois intellectual circles turns his face increasingly away from the people and towards power, even if it is to insult the ruling class. Or we could show that the neat division of labour between committed art and politics is not that neat: if you are out of the country editing your film in Paris in 1968, you will never really know what 1968 in Dakar was all about, and this will have repercussions in terms of creating revolutionary art. And one could emphasise the diversionary side of the cultural struggle of the 1970s: culture, in the final analysis was not a successful bringing back of politics and the class struggle through the side door, it was a field which, when it came to the crunch, was much easier for the state to fence in, one into which Sembene allowed himself to be diverted.

We could also, as we have tended to do throughout this study, look at the absence of images of resistance in the post-1963 works in a negative way. We could focus on Sembene's ambivalence with regard to resistance: his inability to confront the level of resistance in the society, and his inability, on the other hand, to let it go completely - the phantom postman, the magical beggars, the sharp-shooting princess, and, through all the years, the promise of *Samory*. In the course of this study, several explanations were suggested: self-censorship, guilt about his own withdrawal from activism, inability to portray what he had not directly experienced. This version would add one more suggestion: part of Sembene ardently desires the revolution, but part of him, once he returns home to Senegal, cannot face the blood and violence it would entail. This is the Sembene who, the year after *God's Bits of Wood* was published, was in the Congo when Lumumba was assassinated and who commemorated him in his preface to *L'Harmattan* a couple of years later with the words, 'I don't like heroes. They die an early death'. This is the Sembene who says of his character Ibrahima Dieng in *Mandabi*, 'At the end of the film he has a clear choice: but the bottom line is that he has to survive' (Hennbelle 1969). Sembene is the *ceddo*

who chooses conversion rather than exile or an armed struggle because, when the chips are down, 'a religion is not worth a man's life'.

In all of this, Sembene is very Senegalese. Senegal, as journalist Milcent said in 1965, is a country which 'lacks revolutionary fervour' (Milcent, 49). As left-wing politician Babacar Niang puts it, it is 'a land of *maslaa*⁵⁵ where in the final analysis accommodation will be reached because real confrontation is not in the national psychological make-up. Marxist intellectual Maguèye Kassé calls Senegal a country 'with a great capacity for "dedramatisation"' (M.K/FNC). Tsabedze, whom we mentioned in the Introduction, opposes Kenya and Senegal, Ngugi and Sembene in this respect, seeing Sembene's preoccupation with culture, rather than more militant forms of resistance, in the context of a Senegal which could not produce a Mau Mau. Hopefully, some of the reasons for the lack of 'revolutionary fervour' in Senegal have been made clearer in the course of this study.

In this version, then, are we saying that Sembene has effectively been incorporated? Are we saying that the combination of self-censorship, the cultural and ideological gap between artist and masses, the contradictions of the mass mode of production, effectively disables art: as a mischievous Senegalese friend suggested - does Sembene, like El Hadj, have the *xala*?

But how can we even think in terms of incorporation, knowing how Sembene yabs the ruling class? Fanon tells us how:

Stinging denunciations, the exposing of distressing conditions ... are in fact assimilated by the occupying power in a cathartic process. To aid such a process is in fact to avoid their dramatisation and to clear the atmosphere. (Fanon, 192).

In this version, Sembene is not a Senegalese Che - he is more of a typical Senegalese Marxist, wearing Che's beard and pulling unforgettable faces at Senghor, but, when it comes to the crunch, pulling back from the brink where the revolution begins.

In this version, then, French capital, the neo-colonial state, the ruling class have ultimately won. They have won because the hegemonic forces in Senegal are powerful, and even

⁵⁵ F. Ndiaye, 182. *Maslaa* - or *sutura* in Arabic - is described by Sylla as 'an important ingredient in social harmony' (Sylla 1994, 89). It consists of not exposing the vices of others openly (the famous *non-dit*), not rushing into action, preferring negotiation to confrontation, etc.

Sembene, who, thanks to his childhood and youth, is half-outside the hegemonies, and thanks to the depth of his Marxism, is a bit more independent than most, is ultimately in their grip. Even that which sets him apart - his loner quality - is incorporated: the sense of himself as an individual artist with an ultimate goal of individual excellence seduces him into less rather than more radical choices, the lack of a sense of completely belonging backfires, and gives us the *citoyen* who cannot be like Ngugi with the peasants of his Casamance birthplace. It is this - the much-mediated grip of the hegemony over the artist himself - which is neo-colonialism's master card, more than their control of the means of production, more even than their grip of the masses. And the bottom line of this version is not that in Senegal the margin of manoeuvre is wider than elsewhere, so we get a more revolutionary art, but that the so-called margin is conditional upon an adequate level of hegemony, and the width of the margin, the degree of freedom of expression, is a function of the powerlessness of art to rock the neo-colonial boat: greater hegemony equals more 'radical' art equals less impact. Only a Senegal can afford a Sembene, because only a Senegal can neutralise him.

Does the second version then incorporate the first one, and is the second bottom line the final one? For me, it is not that straightforward. No sooner do I settle for the second version than I reread a bit of a 1950s Sembene novel, watch a few minutes of a Sembene film from the 60s and 70s, and the half full glass fills my mental horizon again. And then I think of them torturing the PAI in 1966 as Sembene receives his prizes, and I wonder what might have been had all the Sembenes rejected the carrots, cast their lot firmly with the hard-core activists, and linked up with Cabral down the road, rather than merely wearing Che's beard and cap... But, as Sembene himself has pointedly said (Hennebelle 1979), it's all too easy for people 'sitting comfortably in their cinema seats' - or in front of their computers - to criticise those who have at least contributed more than a dust-gathering thesis to changing the world.

EPILOGUE

In 1980, Senghor stepped down. In early 1981, Sembene hurried *The Last of the Empire* onto the presses - with such haste that there were enough spelling mistakes to keep the anti-Sembene grammarians going for years. *The Last of the Empire* was a long, long novel in which all that Sembene had been obliged to self-censor out over two decades was vomited up in front of the nation and the world. And the terrible irony was that hardly anybody - even those who could read a long, long novel in French - read it. This, it seems, is what Collin, the Minister of the Interior - Dumont-Dupont of *Xala* fame - had banked on when he refused to ban it, despite its blatant caricature of himself and the entire Cabinet (BBD/FNC).

It is hard to believe that *The Last of the Empire* comes from the pen of the man who wrote *God's Bits of Wood* twenty years earlier. It is in many ways a mean book, the camera held steady on a mean situation by Sembene at his meanest: an art fit for neo-colonialism.

On the other hand, it is not all mean. At the end of the novel, the beat changes, and we see some real resistance. Real, fictional resistance, that is: an enlightened army, instead of handing power back to Senghor, as in reality in 1968, bundles the little man into the waiting plane and sets about cleaning up the show. Sembene, originally as hostile to the authoritarianism of the army as to the oligarchy of the one-party state, had met the revolutionary young Sankara, before the latter came to power (OS/FNC), and was now willing to include the army as revolutionary actors in the class struggle.

Diouf, with his policy of 'national revival' based on bringing together all 'the live forces of the nation', threw a big year-long party for Sembene in 1984. An adaptation of *God's Bits of Wood* was performed by the National Theatre, *Ceddo* was released without any trouble (the state had worked hard and successfully in the meantime to neutralise the Islamic fundamentalist threat) and debated on national television, a seminar on Sembene was held at the university, and a retrospective of all Sembene's films ran in cinemas throughout the country. *Le Soleil* carried full front-page headlines: '1984: Sembene's Year' (4/7/1984).

Sembene for his part, as President of the Senegalese branch of the PEN, threw a party for Senghor to mark the latter's ascension to the Académie française the same year: the nation applauded as the old adversaries shook hands on National TV, and Sembene respectfully addressed Senghor as 'our elder'. In the meantime, with markedly less publicity, Sembene went

to France to collect his own medal for his contribution to French letters and culture (M.K/FNC).

The following year, the sordid *Thiaroye* business began. Two younger men, men who in the 1970s had been among those who saw Sembene as sitting on the right hand of Che, wrote a filmscript based on the horrific massacre by the French of African soldiers waiting to be demobbed outside Dakar in 1944. The soldiers, in the demobbing process, had merely demanded that they be paid their dues on parity with the French soldiers they had fought alongside throughout World War 2. The two young budding *cinéastes* got some money from the state to make the film and they got together a South-South co-production team, by-passing France for once. But at this point the story line gets fuzzy. Did the neo-colonial state get cold feet, Collin and the French Embassy aiding? Or did some of the money really get chopped, and did it genuinely look as if the younger men were failing to deliver? Either way, the state called Sembene to the rescue. He was appointed head of the new state film production outfit, the SNPC, the original film script was pulled, and Sembene made his own *Camp de Thiaroye*.

The younger men, outraged, had learned from Sembene not to respect taboos, they had learned to say what must not be said, and, in the era of multi-partyism, with their pick of independent and opposition papers, they told the nation their side of the story. Since one of them, Boris Diop, was known for his integrity and independence, many listened. There is nothing wrong with Sembene's *Camp de Thiaroye*: it certainly does not let the French off the hook. I have read the other filmscript, and, on paper at least, it does not appear more radical. But the younger generation won the media war: ask anyone who can read newspapers about Sembene now and they will tell you that after two decades of valiantly opposing Senghor, in the 1980s, he finally 'watered his wine'.

Nobody was sure why he did it. Some said it was to get money to make *Samory* - the *Samory* of which he had said, 'If I die without making it, write on my headstone, here lies a failure' (BBD/FNC).

Sembene is seventy-four now. He divorced his second wife Carrie in 1986, and shortly after had a third son with a minor Senegalese writer. He has not yet made *Samory*. In 1992, he showed me the scenario: three huge tomes, meticulously scripted in Bambara with the help of Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Ndiaye. Instead, in 1992, Sembene made *Guelwaar*.

Guelwaar is perhaps not just a rewriting of *Ceddo* but the only type of *Samory* that Sembene can produce in the 1990s. Its title resonates with traditional heroism in the Samory

tradition: a *guelwaar* is a mandingo *ceddo*. It also opens with an activist, a Bakayoko: but, not liking heroes any more, Sembene martyrs him in the first few minutes. The real hero of the film is the imam: an imam who behaves as all good Muslims know he should - as a model of tolerance and community cohesion. And the resistance asked of the young people at the end is not to fight, but simply to stand on their own feet, work and refuse Western Aid. A mild message, or a very radical one in the context of the Senegal this study has attempted to describe?

As for Senegal, the armed struggle did come, but it came, predictably, from Casamance, which since the mid-1980s has struggled to secede from Senegal. As for the Muslim, Wolof neo-colonial heartland, its precocious multi-partyism, predictably, did not bring any radical change. Parties upon parties were created, alliances upon alliances made and broken, but Diouf has reigned on. On my first trip to Senegal in 1989, I attended a massive opposition rally organised by an alliance which included Sembene's old party, now renamed the PIT, with which he now has a cordial not to say active relationship. A year later, the party had entered government: if Senegal could commoditise its ability to incorporate opposition, it would be a very rich country.

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