

By

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A more meaningful study of Ousmane's novel, Xala, originally published in French in 1974, almost a decade and a half after the Senegalese independence will be based on the theory of archetypes, as a medium of aesthetic foundation. Rituals are strategic to various art forms from the classical to modern times. Metaphysics as a body of knowledge possesses the transmutative power and an aesthetic value of bridging the cosmic world and what Soyinka regards as "Terrestrialism." Elements in the cosmological totality and the chthonic realm such as the supernatural forces, rituals, sacrifices, music, miming and dance serve ornamental and thematic purposes in aesthetics. The interesting works of Maud Bodkin and Northrop Frye, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry and Fables of Identity respectively depict the affinity between ancient traditions and artistic creativity. In the realm of sociopsychology, scholars like Carl Jung, I.G. Frazer, Freud and others have affected and shaped the way in which the traditional rites permeate the area of the unconscious in literature.

The anthropocentric location of man in the hierarchy of values in African cosmology gives credence to the growth and nature of African orature and what is now referred to as "Modern African Literature." When Achebe's Arrow of God was dramatized at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka under the adaptation, The Harvest of the Ants in 1974, almost the whole paraphernalia of African physical and social universe was stretched before us. Wole Soyinka's A Dance of the Forest, performed to commemorate the Nigerian Independence in 1960, was organically a product of this chthonic synthesis, employing the dance medium to depict a new season dogged by the unreliable past and the uncertain present. His attempt to organize the social world into a level of sanity through an artistic canvas of the Pantheon in The Interpreters collapses. Various aspects of African culture and traditions have been transformed by African artists as viable medium of aesthetic communication.

J.P. Clark's The Song of a Goat published in 1861 employs impotency of "Xala" as a literary subject for socialization, normalization and regulation of social values and behaviours. In the same manner, the Ethiopian playwright, Tsegaye-Gabre-Medhin uses "sex embargo" imposed by the supernatural forces in The Oda-Oak Oracle as an aesthetic foundation for exploring profound topical issues. Soyinka succinctly strikes the point when he writes:

When ritual archetypes acquire a new aesthetic characteristics, we may expect re-adjustments of the moral imperatives that brought them into existence in the first place, at the centre of man's efforts to order the universe.¹

Ousmane's Xala, employs ritual archetypes as aesthetic medium of exploring the social physiogonomy of the age of imperialism and at the same time provides a dialectical praxis against the manifest bourgeois culture.

ARCHETYPAL FORMATIONS IN CULTURAL MOTIFS

Ousmane's forte as an artist is the skillful blending and utilization of various cultural motifs within a cosmic functionalist framework, which thus imposes on his creativity the capability of re-ordering the social morass engulfing his social universe. As a revolutionary artist, he perceives culture as a dynamic literary medium because to him "it is nowadays possible to link culture to economic development."² Ousmane's definitions of "xala" provides a more meaningful starting-point for our analysis of the novel:

Etymologically, 'xala' in Wolof means 'temporary sexual impotence'. Here we are in a different 'cultural zone' even if we uphold cultural solidarity as a constant. 'Xala' can be experienced by any man, rich or poor. It can occur as a result of aggressive jealousy or rivalry; it can be the consequence of a vice or something else. In everyday Wolof, 'xala' can also mean a bow, the weapon for shooting arrows.

Now you know of course that when a man's sex is at rest, it is always curve like a bow. It can stretch out and become taut occasionally for a specific purpose, and then it returns to its relaxed position, the curve.... To suffer from 'xala' means to have one's bow down....³

'Xala' which sets the aesthetic unity and dramatic centrality of the novel clothes a variety of contents. The novel derives its force from an assemblage of cultural motifs in the form of marriage customs, sex relationships and religion. The didactic strength of the artist's vision is linked with these ritualistic archetypal subjects, the category which Bodkin regards as "imaginative achievements, having potential social value through influence over group-attitudes toward the unknown forces of reality."⁴ Functionalism attempts the explanation of ritual behaviour in relationship to the needs and maintenance of the society to effect social equilibrium. The rituals that accompany these cultural values are therefore symbolic expressions of actual social relations, status, or

the social role of individuals. Because rituals refer to a transcendent numinous and ultimate values of a community, they give socio-mythical affirmations to people's universe and their cosmological sphere of influence. Ousmane's interpretations of "xala" provide us with a phallic symbol and in a mythologic-philosophic conception, this embraces the ideas of fertility, generative force in nature, birth and seasonal variations. This symbolism is perverted and the exposition of the intense libido in the central figure, Hadji Beye, produces reciprocal unconscious or conscious physical desires, analogous to a cupidity for social and materialistic stimulations. The conflict of Hadji Beye, emanates from such impulsive desires and egoism. All this, to borrow from Bodkin, produces "the senses of guilt which haunts the child whose emerging self-will drives him into collision with his parents."⁵ The analogical inference is that of an individual whose egoism forces him against the social and communal will. The phallic impotency central to the conflict in Xala is a metonymic language of the paralysis of the individual and the social totality.

Hadji Beye's third marriage through which the novelist makes his criticism of the Senegalese bourgeoisie and that of Africa in general has various levels of interpretations. Fransico Adrados's preception of rituals in the Greek theatre is helpful to our analysis. Triumph and wedding types of rituals according to him are difficult to separate from those relative to the worship of Gods; what marks them as social practices is that they are rooted in human realities. Thus, such rituals are conducted with strong conceptualization, and symbolization as a means of concretizing beliefs. The ritualistic relevance of Yay Bineta's intermediary role is belated by the commercialization of the ritual. Even "Sadaka",⁶ the whole essence of religious marriage in Islamic societies is prematurely strangled by Yay Bineta's ill-motivated urge for materialism. This signals a tragic disintegration of a social system in which an absolute sense of communality is expected to prevail.

The socio-mythical stigmatization of Yay Bineta's characterization makes more apparent her anomic inference drawn from her dramatic involvement in N'Gone's marriage - "She was seen as a devourer of men, the promise of an early death." She represents a tragic vision, falling into the varieties Jung regards as "terrible mother." "La femme fatale" is an archetypal character in African traditional folktales. Like Ihuoma, the heroine of ELEchi Amadi's The Concubine, she is identified with fatalism and the collapse of social relations which marriage ritual is supposed to consolidate in this transitional phase. Hadji Beye's refusal to perform the marriage ritual of manhood, intensifies the tragic omen in the process of transition.

The fiasco of the ritual of virginity is still more catastrophic in the seasonal shift from the age of immaturity to maturity and self-fulfillment. Apart from Hadji Beye's "xala", it is even suggestive that N'Gone has lost her virginity, a case of appearance versus reality in this crucial phase. When Yay Bineta comes the following morning to complete the ritual with the totemic sacrifice of the cock, the catastrophe is complete:

N'Gone was in bed in her nightdress. At the foot of the bed sat El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, hunched forward, his head in his hands. Followed by the other women carrying a cock, Yay Bineta entered the room. The Badyen examined the sheets for traces of blood. Then she placed the cock between N'Gone's things ready to kill it in sacrifice. No! No! N'Gone cried, closing her legs like a large pair of scissors.⁷ Sobbing she tried to thrust the cock away from her.

"Blood" in this process is an authentication of innocence and purity and a sacrifice to the mother earth for longevity, fertility and self-realization in the new phase of existence. This is a variation of the theme of "germinatio and growth" in Soyinka's Season of Anomy and "New Earth" recurrent in Ngugi's works.

The de-synchronization of the social rhythm is represented by various symbolisms. Hadji Beye's "head on his hands" and N'Gone's sobbing connote failure and despair. The totemic force "the cock" refuses to be sacrificed for a ritual of insanity. The hanging down of the sex symbol and the drama of the gloom that pervades the ceremony tend towards a process of "diserotization" and the new phase is transformed into a season without harvest. The gloom of the initiation process is compounded further by the tailor's dummy, which symbolically is an adumbration of what should have been the exhilarating spirit and mood of a new season. One should not mistake the erotic flavour of the novel for a total comic vision. Of course Ousmane himself admits that Xala "is neither pronographic nor erotic. The sexual aspect is only a device for reflecting on present-day Senegalese society in general and the problem of her liberation..."⁸

The theme of seasonal shift associated with the rites of passage embraces cultural determinism. The Senegalese setting of the novel is guided by traditional African values and Islamic principles. Ousmane flays institutions such as Polygamy. Retrogressive religious tenets that privatise the existence of wives in Moselm societies and deprive them of total educational freedom constitute a crisis in the initiation into a more dynamic epoch. Ousmane through the

character of Adja Awa depicts how dogmatic adherence to religion can remove the meaning of self in an individual. All the socio-economic problems confronting her are the "will of Yallah" like Ibrahima Dieng in The Money Order. Materialism makes the inherent African philosophy of social harmony degenerate into friction, rivalry and envy. As in God's Bit of Wood, Ousmane prefers women to utilize tradition to a dynamic effect. This is what Rama's characterization represents. She is too impatient with the tradition that employs materialism to suppress the independence of the mind. Ousmane sees radical feminism as a vital force in the transitional epoch. A compromise is difficult between a revolutionary intellectual like Rama and an imposing reactionary life her father. In the conflict between them, she is slapped, a symbolic gesture against the intellectual class. She is told "You can be a revolutionary at the University or in the street, but not in my house." Ousmane, a Moslem converted Marxist is disgusted with the Islamic Culture and his last film, Ceddo is devoted to this theme.

Generally, marriage and wedding falls under the ritual typology of life-crisis and initiation, including other facets such as birth, puberty, conception and death. In Birth and Rebirth, Mircea Eliade's viewpoint on this ritual typology is that they are to be interpreted both historically and existentially. They are related to the history and structure of a particular society and to a sacred experience that is both transcendental and transhistorical of a particular social or cultural context. Culture from this perspective can be viewed as a series of cults and rituals that have dynamic transformational values. The rhythms associated with these rituals have parallelisms with the season of life, knowledge, intellectual and emotional attitudes of a community.

Xala, a novel with a projective social vision depicts such social phenomena in the life of a people and generally the African continent. The socio-political reality of these rites of passage becomes clearer, when we remember that N'Gone is described as the "child of national flags and Hymns" i.e. Independence. "Xala" assumes a parabolic posture of freedom in chains and frustration instead of fulfillment.

THE MASQUERADES AND MOLTEN GODS

The celebrations that grace the traditional rituals are somehow conceptualized, providing the essential lucrative force for the social machinery.

The rituals that accompany the election of an African as the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, the third marriage of Hadji Beye and even the "Moome" are all related to man's adjustive response to his cosmic and social universe and his

behavioural patterns in relation to the needs and maintenance of the society. Paradoxically, the shift is to an epoch of transvaluation of values where the ego or self-will prevails over the popular will of the society. This is the central message of Ousmane in Xala. The thematic emphasis is on the satirical exposure of the errandboy function of those Fanon refers to as "tin-pot bourgeoisie". The mask figure of the national middle class is at the core of the wedding ceremony. His objectivity is realistically dramatized in the scenic presentation of their philistine stance and the fact that their survival and that of the nation is tied to the apron-string of what Ousmane himself terms as the "technical Fetishism of Europe." The worship is now to those the lawyer in Petals of Blood refers to as the "molten gods."

The businessmen who attend both the installation ceremony of the newly elected President of the Chamber of Commerce and Hadji Beye's wedding make conspicuous displays of dresses and cars. Hadji Beye presents a brand new car to N'Gone as a wedding gift, probably as "a shopping basket." The scenic device employed by the novelist evokes the reader's sense of participation and involves him in the dramatization of the social contradictions of his own age. Class distinction is visible at the wedding party - "The Businessmen's Group sat apart. They were engaged in lively discussion jumping from one subject to another from politics to birth control from Communism to Capitalism." This is the hypocrisy of the social class that is supposed to serve the masses. Like Soyinka and Ngugi, Ousmane abhors the vulgar elegance and exhibitionism of this social tribe. The novelist's warning is clear and simple. Celebration without collective mass participation is quite inimical to the process of initiation and transition.

Hadji Beye's crucial moment of crisis aesthetically shows Ousmane at his best. The bankruptcy of Hadji Beye, his lack of support from his colleagues and his being refused loans, illustrate what Fanon regards as the social and mental psychology of the African middle class. The Deputy Manager of the Bank, with its headquarters in Paris treats him as an "economic operator" that he is. Of course, there is a limit to which the Bank can tolerate "an African middle class." Ousmane connects us with the metropolis to show that the African middle class lacks economic independence. We are indirectly introduced to the politics of the Cartel and the International monopoly capital. During his agonizing ordeal, Hadji Beye himself openly criticized "the cheap-Jack function" of the class he represents. He interrogates vehemently with the rhetorical excellence of an ex-trade Unionist, when confronted by his colleague of "the Businessmen's Group":

We are a bunch of clodhoppers. Who run the banks?
The insurance companies? The Factories? The

business? The wholesale trade? The Cinemas? The bookshops? The hotels? All these and more besides are out of our control. We are nothing better than crabs in a basket. We want the exoccupiers' place? We have it. This Chamber is the proof. Yet what change is there really in general or in particular? The colonialist is stronger, more powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place. He promises us the left-overs of the feast if we behave ourselves ... We are Clodhoppers! Agents! Petty traders! In our family we call ourselves businessmen. Businessmen without funds.

Ousmane's artistic strategy is superb, he employs Hadji Beye in a game of self-destruction and self-made caricature. Hadji Beye's realization of the hollowness of their economic position does not improve him. His harangue is a demagogic way of buttressing his primitive capitlaist mind in order to gain the consent of his colleagues. This is an expression of the novelist's dejection and pessimism about the bourgeois values. To him, the class that represents these values cannot give the society a beter outlook. Hence in a Fanonian tradition, he has hope in the oppressed, who having re-asserted themselves can be the author of their fate.

The appalling facet of alienation is the extent to which the rite of initiation is conducted at the superficial level. Hadji Beye's children, who are representative of a new generation are initiated in these "shocking anti-national ways." The traditional communal impulse, the moral accoutrements of the socialization process and humanistic feelings are left out in the initiation process of this budding generation. Like their parents, the children have bourgeois aspirations but lack bourgeois grace. Arrogant, proud and complacent N'Gone's children agitate for a car that will be taking them to school. Their own world is entirely different from that of the poor and to them "all that glitters is gold." The "masquerade motif" becomes apparent when N'Gone deserts Hadji Beye and settles in her parents' house with the children. The children complain of the uncongenial environment - "the parents' slum house, the smallness of the rooms, the sandy yard, the meals taken on a mat." This is a form of alienation that boomerangs on the oppressor. Oumi N'Deye is a further development of N'Deye Touti in God's Bits of Wood. Like Mrs. Koomson in Armah's first novel, she represents acculturation and the artificialities of a materialist culture. Most of her materials are imported from France. This is a category of women, whom we encounter from time to time in the post-independence African fiction and their relevance to a dynamic ideological growth is dubious. For Ousmane, an ideology that will initiate social equilibrium must radicalize the agents of socialization and produce the

sense of historical and critical consciousness in the budding generation. The danger he foresees is a conservative regimentation in the status-quo, with the privileged always serving as the custodian of economic value of the nation.

REBIRTH OR ATONEMENT RITUALS

Archetypal rituals have the philosophical essence of expiation and atonement of sins. Bodkin asserts that the archetypal pattern corresponding to tragedy may be said to be a certain organization of the tendencies of self-assertion and submission. The self which is asserted is magnified by the same collective force to which submission is finally made. The drama in Xala has a strong inner logic of an archetypal search for absolution and sanity. Like a religious hermit searching for a spiritual force of assertion, "xala" forces Hadji Beye into a meditative period of inertia and brooding, propelling him towards what Mareth regards as "the Birth of Humility."

The allegorical nature of Hadji Beye's ordeal is emphasized by the ritualistic performance and significance of the cult of maraboutism in the traditional Moslem setting. By the nature of his engagement, Sereen Mada is transformed into the presiding priest over the fate of "a soulless creature." The ritual makes a social nonentity of Hadji Beye. "A man of honour" like him must be stripped naked in front of countryside folks. Like the tailor's dummy in the bride's chamber, he is reduced to a conspicuous butt. The journey to Sereen Mada's village makes for some symbolic revelations. The tranquil rural setting produces the synchronous harmony which transcends the vulgar elegance of urbanity. The closed-in urban setting of Dakar is a dramatic contrast to the village from which flows hospitality, rectitude and love. But of course in a more philosophical perspective, the ritual drama is an attempt to restore Hadji Beye to the original pristine man's state of innocence. As common in Ousmane's works we are stylistically introduced to the rural-urban contradiction, which leave the ordinary people in the state of abject poverty and social deprivation.

Sereen Mada is able to give his patience, the epitome of social ills a temporary recovery. Ousmane himself admits that the cult of marabout is the traditional semblance in modern times of the "technical Fetishism of Europe" - "There is also the marabout fetishism whereby nothing is deemed to be capable of success unless it has the sanction and support of the marabout."¹⁰ The reactionary posture of the Iman in the anti-imperialist struggle in God's Bits of Wood demonstrates the betrayal of the spiritual trust that the cult represents since the colonial period. In post-colonial Senegal their

role becomes more contradictory in a country that professes socialist principles.¹¹ The atonement and redemption of the society is still a difficult task since Sereen Mada and other marabouts in the novel care for the moneyocrats and their allies. Ousmane's anti-Islamic campaign is strong. He does not see any change with these elements that orchestrate bourgeois ideology. Ousmane's alternative for such change is the masses themselves. This time, it is the lumpen proletariat constituted by assorted categories of beggars and destitutes. It is quite embarrassing when the beggars who usually chant near Hadji Beye's office confidently assure Modu.

For further critical analysis, Ousmane's description of the beggars and the scenario created need to be quoted:

Leading the way, the beggar pushed open the door, followed by his retinue. Some struggled crawling into the verandah. They went into the sitting-room and settled themselves down as if it belonged to them. A legless cripple, his palms and knees covered with black soil from the garden, printed a black trail on the floor like a giant snail. With strong arms he hoisted himself up into a red velvet armchair, where he sat with a foolish, triumphant grin that revealed his broken teeth and his pendulous lower lip. Another with a maggoty face and a hole where his nose had been, his deformed scarred body visible through his rags, grabbed a white shirt and putting it on admired himself in a mirror, roaring with laughter at the reflection of his own antics. A woman with twins emboldened by others, tore open a cushion on the settee and wrapped one of her babies in the material. On the other cushion she rested a foot with a cloven heel and stunted toes. A hunchback walked warily round the tailor's dummy. He undressed it, placing the crown on his flat, rachitic's head...¹²

The novelist's imagery evokes an acrid and odorous symbol of filth and decay, almost analogous to the state of the society. According to their spokesman, they are "people reduced to poverty" by Hadji Beye. They accuse him of robbing them of their land, with all the appearance of legality. Right from the period of colonialism until the present, land has always been the source of class antagonisms in Africa. The ruling classes are always subjected to virulent criticism with the aid of biological metaphors. One of the destitutes tell Hadji Beye "I am a leper! I am a leper to myself alone. To no one else. But you, you are a disease that is infective to everyone. The virus of a collective leprosy." The metaphor of parasitism makes the issue clear.

The beggars' ritual is more assertive and purifying. They insist and tell El Hadji "If you want to be cured, you are going to strip yourself naked, completely naked, El Hadji. Naked before us all. And each of us will spit three times on you. You have the key to your cure. Make up your mind..." Hadji Beye at this juncture becomes what Jung terms as "a symbol" and Frazer "a scapegoat." He faces a rebirth in ignominy and a possibility of "New Life in Death." For El Hadji, this dramatic ritual does not represent the great cathartic moment of suffering and glory, of loss and triumph we attribute to great tragic heroes. He only becomes the summation of the values of appearance and reality, a satire on the bourgeois values he epitomizes. Our recognized hero at this great moment of victory is the collective mass of the beggars, a stylistic and ideological realization of the role of the lumpen proletariat. Within the mode of production praxis, the more rational hero is a collectivity or the society collectivised in an individual. The celebration of individualism in the epic form of the colonial period and the novel of problematic hero is giving way to a sense of mass hero in the age of imperialism.

The cumulative relevance of these rituals of atonement is both symbolic and real. The aesthetic potentials in the ritualistic experiences is the production of a strong verbal arsenal-that is the use of satire. The essence of the psychology in poetic drama which is the insistence upon affinity between man's fate and inward nature, is authenticated by the psychoanalytic effect of satire. The sociological poser of the rituals of atonement and its therapeutic effect of social purgation and repulsion are all elements of Freudian psychology. The subjection of a man of Hadji Beye's status to such scatological examination, implies a moral-cum-spiritual ordeal needed by men of arid conscience like him. After the encounters with the beggars, Hadji Beye in a dramatic version of the confession of the assassin of the Albatross can say that his agony "fell like lead into the sea." Hadji Beye's utterances that Rama's marriage will be conducted in a low profile is a sign of remorse and new sensibility. Of course after the watching of the film, some Senegalese big shots really admit "we are really suffering from xala." One of the characters in his last novel admits that "Ever since Sembene's film, we businessmen have started calling ourselves economic operators."¹³

To view this novel as a total tragic masterpiece through the ordeal and anxious moment of Hadji Beye alone is to undermine the social utility of art in this novel. Although the tragedy of a nation is the main derivation of the catastrophic rites of passage, such tragedy is somehow averted with the novelist's revolutionary optimism. On the symbolic level, victory is recorded to the oppressed class, though in a

more subtle manner as opposed to the combative revolutionary force in God's Bits of Wood. The artist moves out of the gloom of the rites of passage to create a more dynamic projection which is only attainable through the active consciousness of the suffering masses themselves.

FOOTNOTES

¹Wole Soyinka Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976), p. 25.

²"African Cinema Seeks New Language. An Interview with Sembene Ousmane", Nigerian Tribune, Saturday, September 11, 1982, p. 7.

³"The Artist and Revolution" - Excerpt from Cinema - Quebec Nos. 9-10, pp. 12-17. Reproduced in Positive Review: A Review of Society and Culture in Black Africa, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 3.

⁴Maud Bodkin: Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination (Oxford University Press, London 1934), p.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Sadaka," a practice in Moslem Societies that stipulates the free gift of women for marriage or even at the minimum cost.

⁷Sembene Ousmane Xala trans. Olive Wake (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1976), p. 27.

⁸See Positive Review, p. 6.

¹¹Review of Lucy Behrnan's Muslim Brotherhoods and Politics in Senegal by Clement Cottingham in Journal of Modern African Studies 4, 675-81. Also see "Senegal Elections: The Marabout Factor in West Africa 14th March, 1983, p. 644.

¹²Xala, p. 108.

¹³Sembene Ousmane, The Last of the Empire (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1983).